

# HOMESPUN

by *Nilita Vachani*

When Dadaji was shown Mamanji's photograph in 1935, he looked at it for a long time. His parents stood fidgeting before him. Accompanying them was Dadaji's uncle, the bearer of the photograph. Dadaji had said no so many times that it was surprising when he looked up and said "yes", simply, just like that. They were married a month later. Dadaji was 20, Mamanji 17.

According to Mamanji, she was only shown Dadaji's photograph after he had said yes. Babaji brought out Dadaji's picture and said this was the boy she was to marry. He had chosen him from over a score of young men expressly met for the purpose. Babaji prided himself in being able to read a soul like a book and Dadaji's soul, he said, had shone out at him like a flashlight.

"What did you think of his photograph?"

I asked her.

"He was very handsome,"

Mamanji said blushing.

"But what if you hadn't liked him?"

I agitated.

"I did."

In my family album I have that very photograph of Mamanji's that Dadaji fell for. It has a matte finish, it has yellowed over time. There are brown stains on the edge that could be coffee or blood. Gold sleeves tack it onto the thick black page, the kind they don't make anymore. I, like Dadaji, have stared at that photograph for a long time. What is it about this photograph, I have asked myself, that could make an intelligent man commit the gravest mistake of his life?

She looks beautiful in it, yes, and the photograph does not lie. Mamanji was a beautiful woman. I do not think my grandfather would fall for just a beautiful face. I stare at Mamanji's picture and try to see her as he must have. She is strong, her jaw is almost square and sits determinedly on her face. There is nothing coy or apologetic about her. She faces the camera without pretext or falseness, as though she has wasted no time in settling lips or hair. Her hair is pulled back, held with severity yet softness by a string of jasmine flowers. Her eyebrows are unplucked, mannish. And her eyes, they do not look at you. Instead, they look upwards and outwards as if she had been searching for something that day, and found it on the wall of a photographer's studio. Knowing Dadaji as well as I like to think I do, I believe that this is the look he fell for. He must have stared at her and said, this is my life companion, my Kasturba, my Aruna, my Sarojini.

In all the years that I lived with Mamanji I never saw the face in the photograph. Perhaps because she was older then and life had battered out her illusions. Perhaps it was the photograph that bore the false testimony. A moment fleeting in time, had frozen, crystallizing her fate.

What was it that Mamanji saw in the photographer's studio that summer in 1935 that made her ignore his exhortations to look directly at the camera, and lift her eyes instead, to the wall above his head?

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A few days after their marriage, when Dadaji returned to office, Mamanji turned their one room habitation upside down. She opened every drawer and file and took stock of Dadaji's possessions. She counted two sets of khadi kurta-pajamas, three cotton shirts, two cotton pants and five pairs of underwear. She rifled through Dadaji's files and examined every paper in his name. She came to the conclusion that she had married a man with no property, no assets and a total sum of Rupees 4,800 in the Imperial Bank of India. Their room contained a bed, a chair, a desk, a stove, a kettle, a cooking vessel, two steel plates and some spoons. Mamanji was not surprised by the paucity of these possessions. In her Babaji's view, material possessions were encumbrances that cast shadows upon the soul's light. When her marriage had been arranged, Dadaji, true to all his shining, had

refused to entertain the subject of dowry. Which meant, thought Mamanji bitterly, neither did she stand to inherit anything from her family.

Mamanji was a practical woman and she quickly recovered from her disappointment. She appraised the situation and decided there was a lot to be thankful for. Dadaji was a good man, he had a fine education and held a government job. She was naturally ambitious and felt confident that under her tutelage, Dadaji would break through the present poverty of his circumstances. For the moment though, she would have to make some purchases. Mamanji drew up a list of furniture and clothing appropriate for a man headed for a promotion. Her jaw set resolutely and for a second she resembled the girl in the photograph, her face radiant with possibility.

The skirmishes between Dadaji and Mamanji began in their very first week of marriage, the very day, in fact, that they returned newly glowing from a honeymoon in the valley of Kashmir. Mamanji was unpacking her things into a recently acquired chest of drawers. Considering the scarcity of Dadaji's clothing, there was plenty of room in the drawers to accommodate all Mamanji's wardrobe. Yet, Dadaji made the mistake of asking her to jettison her silks.

I imagine how he must have said it, all gentleness and sincerity.

“My dear, you are so beautiful already. What need have you for silk, which is a symbol of our country's subjugation?”

Mamanji drew herself up to her full height, and she was not at all tall. With unwavering firmness she said that she would NOT burn her silks, nor would she donate them to charities. Dadaji fell silent, disappointed with her attitude. But since the Mahatma himself had had little to say on the subject for some time, he let it pass. Mamanji was wearing a look in her eyes that Dadaji did not want to contend with. One day, many years later, he would recognize that look as his permanent fellow, inescapable as a shadow. Mamanji, on her part, was beginning to accost the uncomfortable truth that she had married a Nationalist, one of those badly dressed, sentimental, rabble-rousers who believed that India could run herself

perfectly well without the British.

If it were not for their ongoing Battle of Textile, they might in fact, have gone along quite nicely. Mamanji could have bandaged her marital wounds in soothing satins and silks, Dadaji in cantankerous khadi, and none would have been the worse for it. But when it came to Textile, each interfered infuriatingly with the other. Dadaji never did volunteer to ignite Mamanji's silks again but he continued his attack in subtler ways. When Mamanji wore a drab cotton saree about in their room he made it a point to praise her beauty, but when she dressed for an evening out and simply blazed in her silk and make-up, he never paid her a compliment. While Dadaji's friends ate Mamanji up with their eyes, Dadaji seemed not to notice her at all. Mamanji retaliated by wresting complete control of Dadaji's wardrobe, choosing what he would wear on every occasion. Years later, when I lived with them in New Delhi, I noted how Mamanji laid out Dadaji's office clothes on the bed every morning: undervest, underpants, shirt, trousers, socks, tie. I was only five years old but always chose my own clothes. Dadaji dressed himself silently in whatever Mamanji had laid out for him.

One day, in those early years, Mamanji, who had adopted the habit of going through Dadaji's pockets, found a piece of uneven cloth, some one and a half feet by two feet, loosely woven, its edges undone. She hemmed up the piece and put it to use as a kitchen jharan. Some days later, Dadaji began rummaging about in his drawer and asked Mamanji if she had seen a certain length of cloth. Mamanji pointed in the direction of the kitchen, to a black and stinking object that lay coiled around the kettle. Dadaji fossilized into one of those human statues that tourists stop to stare at in major European cities. Then he leapt at the stove, stammering and shaking, a human statue whose money bag has been flicked.

*"What have you done?"*

Mamanji looked baffled. Dadaji's anger quickly subsided. It was an accident after all. It was his fault for not telling her.

"Gandhiji made this. Gandhiji wove this himself,"

said Dadaji, cradling the filthy cloth.

“He’ll be pleased to know it has been put to some use,”  
said Mamanji calmly.

Mamanji and Dadaji had, as in most things, diametrically opposite opinions on the national contributions of Mahatma Gandhi. Even though it was not the kind of thing you ever said in public, at least in those days, Mamanji did not mince her words. The Mahatma was a lunatic, she declared, who if he could have his way, would keep all India’s able-bodied men at home, spinning yarn. India would become the world’s largest exporter of kitchen jharans. Thank God for Jawaharlal. He was handsome and had some sense in his head. Besides, he knew how to dress and his diction was impeccable. Now if Jawahar was to dress like that “nanga fakir”, at least there’d be something to see, Mamanji liked to say shockingly. When Winston Churchill made his infamous remark about the Mahatma, Mamanji remained certain that he had been quoting her.

By the end of the week the Mahatma’s hand-woven relic had been tossed into the garbage. The rag-picker, who salvaged almost anything, turned up his nose at the shredded bit of rag. It met its end in a feisty bonfire in the colony dump. Mamanji and Dadaji’s marriage survived this incident. They had two daughters born to them, one of them, my mother.

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When World War II broke out, Mahatma Gandhi wrote a letter to Adolf Hitler. The Mahatma had fought in the Boer war but that was a long time ago and since then he had come to abjure all forms of violence. In his letter, Gandhi begged Hitler to renounce his violent ways.

*However, if you consider this letter an impertinence, I seek forgiveness,*

Gandhi ended, clearly foreseeing its reaction on the intractable Adolf. By this time Dadaji had fallen completely under the Mahatma’s spell. Not

only did he carefully underline his copies of the *Harijan*, he transferred some of the Mahatma's sayings into his personal diary. It is from Dadaji's diary that I learnt that the Mahatma, in his efforts to spread ahimsa, had also written an open letter to the British press. This was in July 1940 when France had fallen to the Axis and Britain was next in line for an invasion.

*I appeal to every Briton,*

(Gandhiji had written, and Dadaji had cut and pasted a copy of the letter into his diary)

*wherever he may be, to accept the method of non-violence instead of that of war, for the adjustment of relations between nations and other matters... Your soldiers are doing the same work of destruction as the Germans. The only difference is that perhaps yours are not as thorough as the Germans. If that be so, yours will soon acquire the same thoroughness as theirs, if not greater. On no other condition can you win the war. In other words, you will have to be more ruthless than the Nazis.*

*I hope you do not wish to enter into such an undignified competition with the Nazis. I venture to present you with a nobler and braver way, worthy of the bravest soldier. I want you to fight Nazism without arms, or, if I am to retain the military terminology, with non-violent arms. You will invite Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini to take what they want of the countries you call your possessions. Let them take possession of your beautiful island, with your many beautiful buildings. You will give all these but neither your souls nor your minds. If these gentlemen choose to occupy your homes, you will vacate them. If they do not give you free passage out, you will allow yourself, man, woman and child, to be slaughtered, but you will refuse to owe allegiance to them.*

Dadaji was Gandhiji's bravest soldier. On the home front he resisted Mamanji with the full strength of his non-violent stoicism. He invited her

in. He let her take everything she wanted, and Mamanji took it all, devoured it up, everything except his soul and his mind. Dadaji held on to those for as long as he could.

Despite the Mahatma's efforts, World War II continued and British Indian forces were dispatched to Malaya and Burma, to Iran, Iraq and Egypt. In the autumn of 1940, Gandhi gave the call for 'individual satyagraha', a series of organized protests that would symbolically express resistance to India's inclusion in the war. Dadaji's eventual participation in 'individual satyagraha' had the effect of dislodging the final screw that held Mamanji and Dadaji's marriage in place. It was almost as if Gandhiji had known what Mamanji had done to his homespun, and was determined to pay her back.

The first satyagrahis chosen to defy the British were Vinoba Bhave, a pacifist like Gandhi, Mamanji's favourite Jawaharlal, and an unknown villager by the name of "Brahma" who was to represent 'EveryMan'. The Mahatma said he would not offer civil disobedience himself as he did not wish to unduly embarrass the British government. Dadaji became completely fired up by the choice of the third satyagrahi. If "Brahma" Dutt Sharma could offer satyagraha, decided 25-year-old Dadaji, so could he. He expressed his conviction to the Congress District Office, he wrote off to the Congress High Command, he even wrote to the Mahatma. A veteran Congress leader by the name of Sitaramayya, who was very fond of my young grandfather, advised him to desist. You have a good job, he said, stick with it. Nothing will come of this satyagraha nonsense, he added confidentially. Just because Gandhiji protests, will the British Empire pull out of the war? Besides, the question is, do we want them to pull out and lose to the Fascists?

But as the weeks passed Dadaji became more and more suffused with intent. The British had not taken Gandhi's call of civil disobedience very seriously, they had simply rounded up the Satyagrahis and hauled them off to jail. The Mahatma was forced to widen the scope of satyagraha, calling upon more and more individuals to participate. On a fateful afternoon in September 1941, Dadaji received his written permission: the date, time and venue of his mission, the required words of the proclamation, which he

already knew by heart.

A day before the appointed date and time, Dadaji tendered his resignation to the Home Secretary, citing “personal reasons” for his decision. Then he took a long walk from the Secretariat to Lodhi Gardens, nursing the strange bereavement of his employment. Amidst the ancient tombs, he voicelessly rehearsed his speech. He could hear the rumble of India’s freedom, distant, but distinct, like the sound of an approaching storm. That night, his entry in his diary is jagged and incomplete. Dadaji does not describe what he is about to do, he simply writes that he will be breaking the law for the first time.

The next morning Dadaji boarded a bus for the Central Secretariat dressed in his best pajama and kurta, instead of the suit and tie that Mamanji had appended to his wardrobe. He had told her that he was required to go in late that morning so she mustn’t worry if he was late returning home. Mamanji left for the marketplace and Dadaji dressed and left the room.

In his description of the events of the 13th of September 1941, Dadaji’s handwriting is neat and bunched up as usual and it is clear that the entry was made some months after the incident. Dadaji used his diary sparingly, not being one to be seduced by turn of phrase or personal reminiscence. Nevertheless, he writes feelingly of his act of civil disobedience, as though he has had much occasion to rehearse the account before committing it to paper.

Whether the day was hot or this was only a consequence of my untold nervousness, it is impossible for me to say. I was sweating profusely. CS was teeming with armed constabulary as though a riot was imminent. My courage failed me. I was afraid that in the existing uproar, my proclamation might pass unheard. I was afraid that I might fail the unique opportunity that history had afforded me. I reminded myself that I had nothing to lose. I was now unemployed, a free citizen of an unfree nation. I thought once again of Brahma Dutt Sharma, an illiterate villager who had had the courage to speak out against the power of the British Raj. That gave me the courage to find my voice. I plunged into the very midst

of the crowd and loudly spoke out the words of the proclamation:

*“It is wrong to help the British war effort with men or money. The only worthy effort is to resist all wars with non-violent resistance.”*

I shouted the words out loud, dimly aware of the commotion I was causing. I realized I was not alone. Others were chanting the words too, some clapped as I spoke. Immediately the guards had surrounded me, I was handcuffed. I continued to shout until one of the guards clamped his fist around my mouth.

Dadaji did not return home that evening. He and the other satyagrahis were arrested, sent to jail, and transferred from jail to jail until a general amnesty a month and a half later secured their release.

I put myself squarely in Mamanji’s shoes. Imagine that you have two daughters aged 4 and 2 and one day your husband does not return from work. You wait out the night and the next morning collect the girls and board a bus for the Central Secretariat. You enquire patiently about your husband on every floor of Home Affairs but nobody has seen him for two days. You are directed to his superiors and even though you are a proud woman, you wait around for half the day on a hard bench with an exploding infant wrapped around your neck. The Additional Secretary finally concedes the time to see you. He looks at you with pity and some distaste, as by now your neatly groomed hair and face are speckled with the angry emissions of children.

“But Mrs Mehta, aren’t you aware? Your husband tendered his resignation, let me see, two days ago. I must add we are surprised and very disappointed. He was a dedicated worker, such good prospects. Now why would he go and do something like that?”

The Additional Secretary looked enquiringly at Mamanji but found no explanation forthcoming.

“I am afraid I know nothing of his whereabouts. You had better contact the police station. If there is any salary owed to him you can be sure it will be mailed to your address at the end of the month. As for pension and benefits, those of course, are forfeit.”

I suspect that I would not have been very much in love with Dadaji were I wearing Mamanji’s shoes that afternoon.

September 1941 marked the turning point of Mamanji’s descent into a vicious embitterment. Kasturba, Aruna and Sarojini she was not, had never deigned to be, and no songs are sung of the unwilling wives of freedom fighters. All the freedom that Mamanji had ever wanted was the freedom of a well-padded passbook. That had been denied to her by the two men in her life, a lofty father and a lofty husband.

At the end of the month, Mamanji did receive Dadaji’s remaining salary. Along with the cheque was a letter stating herewith that the inhabited property was in the ownership of the Government of India and since the present occupant of the said property was no longer in the service of the Government of India, he was being informed forthwith to duly vacate said property within two weeks of receipt of the assigned letter and no later than three weeks from the date of its writing. Meanwhile the signator remained truly, and in service, etc.

The letter had arrived so late that Mamanji had no time to indulge in a justified state of shock. Wiping back angry tears, she packed up her silks and her daughters and returned to live in her father’s house. She hired a tonga and the services of a gloating younger brother who had never much cared for her superior attitude. They spent the rest of the day ferrying forth the bed, chairs, stool, chest of drawers, stove, pots, pans and now considerable spoons. In deliberate rage she left behind Dadaji’s khadi pajamas and kurta.

Dadaji, meanwhile, unaware of her present mood, continued to write her long and loving letters from prison, letters which were confiscated and handed to him at the end of his detention, neatly tied up in government laces. By then Gandhi's civil disobedience had run out of steam. Japan was now upon the Indian border, ready to bomb Vizakhapatnam. Gandhiji realized that the answer to the impending disaster did not lie in courting arrest and spouting slogans. He lifted his call, Dadaji was set free, but by then it was all too late.

Dadaji returned home to find his room padlocked. He travelled to his father-in-law's house in Lajpat Nagar and encountered a truculent wife and two daughters.

"I wrote to you every day, unfailingly, from prison,"

he must have said, handing her the packet of letters. That is when Mamanji must have got that look in her eyes, the look that settled in and became Dadaji's shadow.

When I found Dadaji's prison letters I realized that Mamanji had never bothered to read them. Though each of the envelopes was torn open, the entire packet was tied together and sealed with a government stamp. I had been looking through the boxes that contained Dadaji's books and papers when I found the letters and decided not to explicitly ask Mamanji's permission to keep them. She had already said I could have what I wanted. I cracked open the seal and read them greedily, feeling at once investigator and thief.

The first letter was dated 18 September 1941. At the top right hand corner, Dadaji had written in his neat handwriting,

*'Address unknown'*

*My dear wife,*

*I was blindfolded and taken by vehicle some considerable distance. The Secretariat was teeming with satyagrahis that day and I was fortunate not to be alone. We made two stops and some of the prisoners were taken out. We had been told not to talk and we travelled the journey in silence. After some hours on the road, we were transported by rail to our present location. I have no idea where I am except that the small yard outside is covered with semul trees in full bloom and it rains incessantly.*

*There are four men to this cell. Two are young students from Delhi and Bombay, the third is a peasant from Dhanbad, all arrested on charges of civil disobedience like myself. We have been exchanging notes and information since the time we got here and the days have passed quickly. Today is the first day we were given ink and paper so I am able to write to you. I have no complaints other than the food is far from edible and we are already beginning to waste away from stomach disorders. There is some talk of transporting us to a larger facility, which, I hope, will be better equipped to maintain us.*

*I know that you are deeply upset and angry with me. By now you probably know that I have lost my job. Dearest, you must feel betrayed by what you consider to be my treachery. Forgive me for leaving you without word. As God is my witness, I have tried, time and time again, to impress upon you the importance of what it is I must do but you have never had the ears for me. I wanted to take you into confidence, share my doubts and my resolve, but I was afraid you would force me to change my mind. Two weeks ago I did try to share with you the pain and the responsibility that my job thrusts upon me, decisions with which I could not possibly agree, but you were not willing to entertain my concerns.*

*Dearest, the world is at war and I cannot sit safely at my desk and watch India burn to pieces. Now is the time to act, to seize this opportunity by its teeth, to alter the course of our history. How can Empire preach self-determination and freedom from*

*slavery abroad and yet suppress her own subjects on her shores? If England desires India's help in defeating the forces of fascism then India herself must be set free. We too must sacrifice comfort for the sake of our nation's freedom. For your sake, and for the sake of our daughters, I have made myself deaf to my own conscience and have continued to serve a hypocritical government. I can do so no longer.*

*Once India is free, I will return to my desk with a happy heart. I beg for your understanding and support. There will be hard times ahead but if we are together and you share my optimism and belief, our discomfort will be but a small price to pay for India's freedom.*

*I do not know how long I will remain in imprisonment but I pass my days in the happy anticipation of returning home to you.*

*Blessings to our daughters,*

*Your devoted husband.*

I found myself disarmed by Dadaji's passionate plea, but then I wasn't the one to whom the letter was addressed. If only Mamanji had read this letter, it may indeed have altered the course of their history. I debate forcing Mamanji to read the letter now but it does not make sense. Dadaji is long dead and gone, and besides, ever since he left her, Mamanji has forgotten that there was anything wrong between them.

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For the next six years, until India won her independence, Dadaji did not hold a steady job. He immersed himself in party work and his earnings were meagre and irregular. Proud to the last, he refused his father-in-law's offer of a roof over their heads and rented a room instead in a chawl in Karol Bagh. It was in fact half a room, the other half had been inventively

partitioned by the landlord and rented to a family of six. The man on the other side of the partition was loud and given to drunken outbursts. His wife berated him in a high-pitched drill of a voice which he alternately ignored and greeted with howls. They had a regular routine. Pots and pans were thrown around until a terrible crash or a scream led to a deafening silence. Dadaji was always out and didn't have to listen to the sounds from next door, but Mamanji who stayed in with the girls had to reassure them that it was nothing really, nothing, nothing, really.

The toilet was outside in the corridor. It was shared by Mamanji, Dadaji and the two girls, the family of six next door and another family of five that lived on the floor above. When Mamanji had first inspected these living arrangements, she had steadfastly refused to move there. Babaji had reproved her mildly saying her place was by her husband's side. Mamanji, however, remained adamant. Then Babaji said in no uncertain terms that now that her husband had returned, she and the girls were no longer welcome to stay in his house. So Mamaji had no choice and helped Dadaji hire a tonga and transport their belongings to the chawl in Karol Bagh. They left behind the bed, the chairs and the chest of drawers since there was no place in the new half-room. Mamanji left behind all her silks as well and took only her cotton sarees. Dadaji appeared to have won the Battle of Textile as Mamaji now dressed only in her worst raggedy cottons and like Kasturba, cleaned the public toilet, once every three days.

With no regular income coming her way, Mamanji was forced to delve into the passbook savings. Finally, one day, these ran dry as well and Mamanji approached her father for help. For all the years since her marriage, Mamanji had kept her woes strictly to herself, blaming no one but her fate and a photograph. Forced to borrow money for the first time, she flew into a rage and screamed at her father for marrying her off to a lazy and impractical man. All men are selfish and self-serving, she said, and you, Babaji, are no different. If you liked him so much, why didn't you marry him yourself? Her father opened his safe in shocked silence and gave her a wad of notes. Mamaji wept angrily and left, saying that if she could return the money some day, she would, if she could not, well that was just too bad now, wasn't it?

Matters between Mamanji and Dadaji slid to an all time low. Now that the lid of Mamanji's restraint had been lifted, there was no holding her back. Her lips curled into a permanent sneer, her eyebrows arched into mocking hillocks. Dadaji, on his part, withdrew completely into a secret life. He never told her where he was going or when he planned to return. When he earned some money, doing whatever it was he did, he handed the notes to Mamanji and watched the hillocks climb a further notch on her forehead. That is also the way I remember them in the latter part of their life together. Dadaji wore a hangdog expression, the kind of look that Britons might have adopted if they had allowed Herrs Hitler and Mussolini to divest them of their beautiful buildings.

The final straw came in December 1942. In those days Dadaji had found work in a printing shop and spent his nights cyclostyling copies of Gandhi's famous 'Quit India' speech, which he then distributed during the day.

*"We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery."*

Mamanji was headed back from the marketplace when she chanced upon Dadaji deep in conversation with a Mullah some two blocks from the chawl. There was no doubting it. It was a Maulvi all right, with flowing beard and robe, his arm around Dadaji's shoulder. The Muslim League had in those days set up a nationwide agitation calling for the partition of India along communal lines. Mamanji felt herself grow sick to her stomach. Her husband had lost his mind, and now he had gone and lost his faith. She saw the Maulvi pass Dadaji a parcel. Dadaji placed it under his arm and walked briskly in the direction of the chawl. There's no way, no way, she said, setting up a rapid pace after him. There's no way I'm going to keep it in my house, no Quran, none of their inflammatory nonsense, no secret plans to cut up my country. That's where I draw the line.

That night Dadaji put the girls to bed and prepared to go out as usual. The girls slept on a narrow charpai, its feet dipped in tins of water to keep out the ants and the cockroaches that Mamanji insisted came from across the partition.

Mamanji stopped Dadaji in the doorway, her eyes glinting dangerously,

“What are you up to with Maulvis?”

Mamanji always had the habit of multiplying Dadaji’s misdemeanours.

“Maulvis?” queried Dadaji blankly.

“Maulvis. Mullahs. Mussalmaans.  
I saw you this afternoon.”

“Oh,” said Dadaji, unperturbed.  
“He’s not a Maulvi.”

“Oh indeed? I suppose he is caste Hindu?”  
Mamanji said with supreme sarcasm.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” said Dadaji. “Brahmin to be precise.”

Mamanji snorted so loudly that little Amba yelped in her sleep.

“You may have lost your mind but I happen to be perfectly sane. Let me tell you one thing. If I find it in this house, I will throw it in the gutter, that is all.”

Mamanji would not speak the unspeakable word.

Dadaji sighed and left.

The next morning Mamanji searched high and low for the package but could not find it anywhere. He must have taken her threat seriously and removed it himself, she decided.

A week passed. Dadaji came home unexpectedly, in the middle of the afternoon.

“I need your help. For once, don’t say no.”

“What is it?”

said Mamanji suspiciously.

“A friend needs a place for the night. He’ll be no bother. We are working together, we’ll come in late. He’ll sleep in a corner and he’ll be out of here before the crack of dawn. You and the children won’t be disturbed.”

“Who is this? What work are you doing?”

“His name is Sharma. He’s a professor. He may come dressed as a Maulvi or a Sardar but that’s only a disguise.”

*“Have you gone mad?”* screamed Mamanji.

*“My god, the man is mad!”*

she said to the room in general.

The neighbours had also started up their screaming. The wife had called her husband a drunken, no-good bastard. There was a crash followed by a moan, then a loud wailing.

“No,” Mamanji shouted.

“I’ve had enough. Enough, enough. You get out,” she said to Dadaji.

A strange silence fell. Mamanji’s scream seemed to have quietened the neighbours.

Dadaji wrapped a shawl around him and stepped out.

It was quiet the rest of the night. Mamanji decided that the hairy beast next door had murdered his wife and children. She had seen him once on

the landing but had kept her eyes strictly averted. His smell had been unmistakable, a stale ugliness that attached itself to her nostrils and followed her indoors.

Early next morning, Mamanji was awakened by a loud rapping on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Police.”

So he has done them in, she thought calmly, imagining the other side of the partition littered with body parts. The police were regular visitors to the Karol Bagh chawl and had on a couple of occasions questioned her about the neighbours. Mamanji had always maintained that she saw and heard nothing.

Mamanji opened the door, steeling herself for the worst. Two policemen stood there. They were not the usual havaldars who visited the chawl. These were officers.

“Mehta saab hain?”

Mamanji said her husband was out. The officers exchanged a glance.

“He is not in town?”

Mamanji said she didn't know. The first officer hesitated, then said they would have to come in and search the premises.

“What for?” she said. “They live over there.”  
She gestured to the partition.

“Defence of India Rules.” said the officer.

Mamanji let them in. The first officer said to the second,

“Achi tara sarch kar lena.”

He waited by her side, tapping his stick.

The policeman walked over to the open shelves and shook out her neatly folded clothes. He looked at the sleeping children then reached for the trunk under the charpai. The girls stirred. The policeman looked through the contents of the trunk, then shut it again. He moved to the kitchen and started upturning the pots and pans.

Mamanji half expected a severed hand or foot to turn up somewhere.

“What is all this about?” she said, realizing that it was *her* house that was being searched and she hadn’t even seen a warrant.

“Madam, we suspect your husband is in cahoots with a known criminal,” said the police officer sympathetically.

He wondered what this beautiful lady was doing in a place like this. They must have come into bad times. And now there would only be worse.

“A very dangerous man, Madam, by the name of Radhe Shyam. You may know him as Singh. Or Saeed. One day he wears turban. Next day he wears fez. Third day he shaves his head and becomes sadhu. Very slippery fellow. You know this man, Madam?”

Mamanji shook her head.

“We have information that your husband is working as an accomplice.”

“Doing what?”  
said Mamanji faintly.

“Bus, all this terrorism ka kaam, goondagiri, you know. Cutting telegraph lines, telephone lines, burning up godowns, destroying government property,

derailing trains, looting post-offices.”

Mamanji’s knees gave way and she sat down on the stool behind her. She shook her head,

“There is some mistake. My husband... he is... he was... a civil servant.”

The police officer nodded his head knowingly.

“Yes, Madam, but this Mr. Radhe Shyam Sharma, do you believe? He is University Professor.”

“No, you don’t understand,”  
said Mamanji.

“My husband is not a man of action.”  
Her voice rose sharply.

“He cannot even change a light bulb, do you understand?”

*“Sir.”*

They turned to the urgency in the voice. The second officer was dusting off flour from a brown packet. She had seen it before.

“This item was concealed in the barni, sir.”

The police officer walked up and divested his junior of the package. He sniffed at it, ripped it open.

“See Madam, what I am telling you. Gelnite sticks... detonator... switch... fuse... gunpowder... all chemicals, madam, to make bomb. Suno, tum thane laut chalo. Madam, I must wait here for your husband. I apologise for this inconvenience. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Inspector Kalra, 33rd precinct. If I can be of assistance, please do not hesitate.”

Inspector Kalra spoke formally and with the utmost courtesy. He was beginning to encounter the pleasant prospects of a promotion.

Mamanji just sat there.

“Are you going to arrest my husband?”

“I am afraid Madam, there is no recourse. It is as good as being caught red-handed. Defence of India Rules 26, 129, perhaps also 137.”

“How long?”  
said Mamanji.

“Difficult to say, Madam, difficult to say. These are bad times.”

Mamanji walked up to the trunk and started to pack. She would drop Indira off to school and then take Amba directly to Baba’s house. Now with his beloved son-in-law back in jail, Babaji would have no choice but to take her in. Chhote could come and get the rest of her stuff during the day. This time she was not coming back. She would write to the Viceroy if necessary, recommending life imprisonment.

Gently she woke the girls, telling them it was time for Indira’s school.

“You can stay here and wait for my husband,”  
she told Inspector Kalra.

“I have things to do.”

As Mamanji struggled down the steps of the chawl with her over-filled trunk, a gentle voice interrupted her,

“Auntyji, aap kahin jaa raheen hain?”

She looked up to see the miserable little girl from next door. Her hair was

matted and filthy and she had an ugly cut above her left eye. She smiled sweetly as if unaware of her condition. Mamanji felt a sweep of remorse. Maybe she should have done something.

“Hum jaa rahen hain,”  
she said stupidly.

She fumbled in her purse for a coin. Then she changed her mind and pulled out a one-rupee note.

“Jeeti raho beti,” she said, pushing the money into the girl’s hands.  
“God bless you.”

She dragged the trunk down the stairs followed by Indira and Amba.