

MUCHCHAD GADH AND OTHER STORIES

Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>ix</i>
Despicable Man	1
The Irrepressible Mr Phull	17
Game in Gorakhpur	26
The Cabinet Committee Meeting	39
The Power Trip	55
Qaidi No 48	66
Shocking Pink 78	
The Heiress	86
The Pursuit	99
Muchchad Gadh	109
The Time has Come	120
Oshbo	135
The Perfect Suicide	147
Network Junkie	161
The Pirates of Aden	172
The Begum of Ballimaran	190
I wish I Didn't "Knew"	200
No Bad Hair Days	208
Making the Cancer Journey Easier	227

Despicable Man

Kanakpal scratched his face as he waited for his passengers to arrive. He was the conductor of a tourist bus that plied on the roads of Uttaranchal. Today, he was scheduled to go from Ranikhet to Rishikesh, a distance of 305 kilometers. He was a native of the hilly region and had been on buses since he was sixteen. At twenty-four now, he was already a veteran; he knew the roads and the shortcuts, and he was considered an authority on the terrain. Kanakpal was also very superstitious.

His eldest brother-in-law, Sangram, was the driver of the bus; a rather laid-back, quiet man, who listened to local songs on the rickety music system, and swore very little. He smiled easily, as if he had found contentment in almost nothing and indeed everything. He was never in a hurry to get anywhere, and couldn't quite handle the fuss. It was Kanakpal, who was, therefore, in charge of operations. Or, earnings would be meagre, almost shabby.

It was mid-July and the rains had been lashing the region. It was a cruddy time to be moving on the roads. But work had to be done and tourists were aplenty. Kanakpal chewed on a beedi and waited. He was a tad jaded, having spent the last 24 hours getting the fuel tank repaired. The vehicle was anile and hoary but could run a few hundred kilometers every day even now. He called it his caravan—'a home away from home'.

It was nearly 10 am and he wanted to leave by 10.20. Within a few minutes, the passengers arrived, all at once, as if by design. There was a group of fourteen teenagers; boys and girls. They looked like they had been bitten by the city bug although they were locals. The boys wore torn jeans and flashy belts. The girls were in tight t-shirts with corny slogans on them and various shades of jeans—dark blue, indigo, black and light blue. They were mostly carrying backpacks and rucksacks and did not need to put anything in the cargo hold of the bus.

Then came a newly-wed couple; the boy was thin and swarthy but looked visibly plush with marital bliss. His shy bride had probably decided to wear western clothes for the first time. She seemed mighty uncomfortable in her loose, white baggy pants and long, shapeless red shirt. Her bangles made a clunking sound as she hauled herself

into the bus, helped by her eager groom. She sat by the window, and pulled her scarf over her head. “Let it be. No one can see us now. You don’t have to worry,” her husband suggested. But she remained as she was. ‘I must get myself a nice bride, too,’ thought Kanakpal. But he wanted to marry a filmstar. Therefore, marriage had to wait for the moment.

He put away their suitcase in the furthest corner of the baggage hold, and waited for the next lot. Sangram was still at breakfast in the roadside restaurant. He was popular with the lot there; he laughed at every crude joke, and nodded his head deferentially at the seniors. ‘That man will have to be dragged out,’ thought Kanakpal. ‘He is so lost,’ he reiterated. Sangram was indeed a day-dreamer; not the ideal driver for a tourist bus. But he was mellow and easy-going, and he followed orders without complaining. That suited Kanakpal.

This was a 42-seater bus and it had to be full before these two men could pull it out of Ranikhet. Kanakpal’s prayers were soon answered. A large party of revelers, who were probably going to Rishikesh for *darshan* (a pilgrimage) turned up with too many bags and suitcases and trunks and polythene bags, and several children. The trunks had cooking utensils in them; they jingle-jangled, and created a minor racket.

The suitcases were quite heavy, and Kanakpal began shoving them into the baggage hold, without too much care. “Please be careful. There are some items of glass,” said the seniormost member of this group. “Is that so? Do it yourself then, Uncle,” retorted Kanakpal. That shut him up. His family hadn’t heard this. Otherwise, Kanakpal might have had to pay for his tone. Such things can spark off bloody fights.

The old man sighed and said nothing. His family was getting into the bus, two by three, pushing and pulling and generally being very Indian. This meant a lot of talking and shouting; arguing over window and aisle seats; trying to accommodate more bags within the bus, under the seats in front, and being very, very shifty. But this was a group of 25 people. And that meant business. Kanakpal realized his mistake and made up by helping the old passenger into the bus, and helping him with his small polythene bags— one had oranges and the other, peanuts and biscuits and a bottle of water.

The bus was full now. Only one seat remained vacant. It was the last one at the rear end, right in the middle. “Let’s go,” Kanakpal called out to his brother-in-law. Meanwhile, his last passenger boarded the bus. He was an old, dirty man, dressed in rags. His coat might have been dark green, many monsoons ago. Now, it was a strange

combination of black and grey and brown, covered in soot and mud. It was stinking of raw tobacco and cheap liquor.

He was unusually tall and large, and came and threw himself on that last seat. The children sitting beside him on either side withdrew, from fear and awe. He turned to look at them. Two of his lower front teeth were missing and the remaining were completely brown. Had they mustered courage, the young kids could've moved away from their spot but they remained rooted. The move seemed difficult; no picnic by far.

Their parents, who were busy chatting, hadn't noticed their consternation yet. But in a while, when they realized that the chattering had given away to complete silence, a male member turned to look back, and caught sight of this monstrous creature with his ragged looks and dirt and grime. "*Arrey bhai, suno* (Listen! Brother)," called out the man to Kanakpal. And then, he whispered in a hush, "Ask this man to move from here. He is stinking." But the man in the unsightly coat heard him and gave him a cold, menacing look. Neither Kanakpal nor the other man had the guts to say a word. They retreated.

The bus moved. It would go through Chaubattia and Najibabad, and on to Haridwar before getting to Rishikesh. Its journey would take it via the districts of Almora, Nainital, Garhwal and Tehri Garhwal, onto the Badrinath Road. The rains had made all the roads glisten and the region looked fresh and green and breathtakingly beautiful. Some of the passengers had come to Uttaranchal for the first time.

They could not help remembering the sights in and around Ranikhet—the 'Queen's Meadow', particularly their first look at the Himalayan peak, Nanda Devi, which stood tall and majestic at 7,816 metres above sea level. They had also seen the Jhula Devi temple and the Chaubattia orchards, south of the Mall Road, and Bhaludham, an artificial lake about 3 kilometers from Ranikhet.

Their post-mortem of the trip came to a sudden halt when one of the children from the rear seat gave a whelp. He had dozed off on the dirty man's shoulder and had been awoken with a start. That had made him bang his head against the window rather violently. He had suffered a wound. "Look what you have done now," said his father, bold and courageous, for the sake of his offspring. "Couldn't you let him stay like that for a while?" he asked. The man in the ratty coat said nothing. He looked away listlessly, as if he couldn't be bothered. He immediately became unwelcome in that bus. Everyone noticed him and no one endorsed his behavior. The outcaste had become an outcaste, all over again.

He was remorseless. He had been through much worse, and couldn't care less. No one knew that Subedar Baijnath Chand Rawat was an ex-army man; that he had an artificial leg; and that he had lost three fingers and the thumb of his right hand in a needless accident. He had also recently lost his wife to tuberculosis. He was bitter and angry and mostly suicidal after he had been removed from his job on a false molestation charge. He had lost the will to live and who knows why he was on a trip to Rishikesh.

The look on his face must have conveyed his contempt for everything and everyone around him. And when the bus halted for lunch, everyone stayed far away from him. They looked at his disfigured hand secretly as he negotiated some rotis from his coat pocket and ate them. When he bought a fresh pack of beedis from the store, they nodded their head in disapproval. "What a burden on society?" remarked one passenger.

"Why do they let such people board buses?" demanded another.

The child who had banged his head had recovered and was running around, pushing an old tyre with a stick. It rolled up to where the grungy man was seated, far away from the others, and fell at his feet. "Throw it back at the boy," said an old passenger, with a wan smile. The man in the rundown coat ignored that. He got up and made his way back to the bus. This time, he set himself down by the window. When the children got back, they did not dare ask him to move.

It had begun drizzling with a purpose, and the window shutters were being pulled together fiercely. But raindrops lashed at them with sharp intent. The bus moved slowly. It had to be even more careful now. "Do you think this is a great downpour or will it pass?" asked a passenger, of Kanakpal. The conductor looked at the horizon, and at the heavy, grey clouds at a distance. He did not have the heart to share the truth. It was going to be a deluge! They were still far from their destination, and would most definitely be late. They might even have to take a break if the rains did not relent. "It's too early to tell but we'll see," Kanakpal lied.

In time, it dawned upon some passengers that this was going to be a ride that they would not forget easily. The newly-weds huddled up closer; the groom tried to comfort his bride, and looked even more distressed than she did. The group of teenagers was unconcerned. The boys sang popular songs from Hindi films and the girls joined in. With the rain pouring about them, they had decided to restrict their songs to those about the monsoon. It was the romance, the mood. Some of the more adventurous boys looked amorously at the girls, conveying their inglorious intentions with their eyes.

The first strike of thunder rattled the bus and its travellers. And then, a huge bolt of lightning fell. It was visible from a great distance—must have been down in the hills somewhere—far, far away, but Kanakpal asked Sangram to stop the bus and park it by the side of the hilly road. You do remember me telling you that he was superstitious? “We are not moving on,” he announced. There was obvious discontent among the passengers.

“Is it that serious? Other buses are plying,” remarked a young boy from the loud group of crooners.

“Others might take a risk if they want to but I will not,” said Kanakpal. He was adamant. He had heard from his seniors that when you saw lightning strike ahead of you, it was with a reason, with a purpose. “The time has come for someone in this bus. That lightning was meant to strike us,” he declared. The passengers reacted almost unanimously; they held their breath.

“What do you mean? This is all humbug,” shouted a teen. “It isn’t even close to where we are,” he stressed.

The rain was noisy and wild and it was difficult to hear clearly over the ruckus it was creating. Trees swayed about like angry, unruly elephants and lashed their branches at everything coming in their way. “If this sort of thing is true, we must then find out who it is meant for,” suggested a young girl from the group. Some passengers turned to look at the man in the dirty, old coat. He looked like a candidate who fitted the bill.

“But we can’t keep standing by the road. We must move to a safer area,” suggested a passenger. He had already accosted Kanakpal and had begun advising him. The bus remained where it was.

“I am not moving an inch,” Kanakpal insisted.

“But we’ll get really late,” complained the passengers.

They had got up and were standing in the aisle, jostling one another, for no apparent reason. Someone lost his balance, and several people tumbled, one after the other; the last man standing fell with a huge thud on the passenger with the dirty coat. The ‘Despicable Man’ (he had been named so by some ingenious youngster) was probably dozing. He got with a start and gave the fat man who fell on him a resounding slap.

His fellow travellers were shocked. “Someone should get this one off the bus,” one whispered.

“Let me tell you what we’ll do,” Kanakpal announced. “I’m sure that death awaits one of us. A lightning strike just a few kilometers from us is a sure sign of that,” he proclaimed. No one knew any better. So, they did not protest. “Each one of us will get down from the bus, and go and touch that elm tree, yonder. I’m not going to sacrifice all of us for that one unfortunate person,” he said.

A shiver went down every spine in that blessed vehicle. “But this is ridiculous. It is pouring so heavily. We’ll be soaked to our skin. Besides, what if the lightning catches me,” asked a passenger.

“Then, the rest of us will just move on,” joked his friend, and was ribbed in the chest. Sangram spoke for the first time that day. “Please hurry. This is not safe at all. I cannot stay parked here forever,” he implored.

The group of teenagers was the first to volunteer. A boy borrowed a raincoat from Kanakpal and got down from the bus, a little hesitantly. He ran to the large tree. Kanakpal was urging him to go right up to it and touch it. It was obvious that he was petrified. He just stood there, cowering in the rainstorm and not moving an inch. Kanakpal grabbed his umbrella and rushed to the boy. “Just touch it and go back to the bus,” he shouted at the boy.

Shaken by the urgency in that voice, the boy put his hand out and touched the tree. The other passengers watched anxiously from the bus. Nothing transpired. The boy was safe. Jolted back to shape by his good fortune, he began running back to the vehicle. Cars went by in the ferocious rain, and some motorcycles, too, but no bus had overtaken theirs yet. When he finally managed to get in, the boy recovered some of his colour. His friends picked up resolve too, and one by one, they went up to the tree, and touched it. They were all unscathed. Nothing untoward happened.

The groom was trying to convince his wife to let him go. She had begun crying hopelessly. “Please don’t go,” she begged of him. “Why don’t you stay with her a little longer? I’ll ask my family members to go first,” offered the old man, who seemed to be the seniormost in the group of 25 people. “Perhaps we should also follow the routine so that we can be done with it quickly and then move on,” he suggested. His family remained rooted to its spot. No one wanted to be the first to go.

‘Death must be waiting for me,’ thought the old man to himself. “I’ll go,” he said. Still, no one came forward. They were perhaps hoping that he would be proven right. No one wanted to die just yet. They were relatively young. “C’mon! C’mon! We don’t have all day here,” prodded Kanakpal. The old man took one step very gingerly out of the bus. The rain caught him in his jaw and whizzed past his shroud. The ground was

slippery. He walked very, very slowly, with a stick in one hand. Thunder rumbled. Some passengers jumped from their seats.

It was taking very long for the old man to reach the tree. He touched it. There was a loud crackling sound but nothing spectacular happened. The old man returned to the bus. His family members showed respite for him but were frightened for themselves now. Twenty-four people went through the routine, each one losing a little blood on the face, and many, missing heartbeats. Something divine was protecting them, they reckoned.

The big guy in the dirty coat lit up a *beedi* in the bus, and the fumes went up to the passengers. They complained loudly, this time. "Put it out," said one. He did not pay heed. He was seated rather comfortably on the back seat because the children had abandoned it to huddle up to their parents. The lapels of his coat had fallen to one side, showing a hunter's knife, tucked into a belt. He put his dismembered hand on the knife. There wasn't a second appeal or order for the *beedi* to be extinguished.

"Send this one. He must be the person death is looking for," said the man, in a rebound.

"Looks like a small-time crook to me," replied his friend. "More like a thug," pointed out another.

There was some drama in the bus as the bride clung to her husband as he got up to fulfill his part of the responsibility. No one questioned Kanakpal's superstitious assumptions. They presumed that such things were true of the mysterious hills. It was dark by now, and one could not see the tree very clearly. "Let me come with you. We'll die together, if we have to," she beseeched. Dramatic!

Her husband was impressed. "We'll go together," he announced and put the raincoat on her. He himself took refuge under a large multi-coloured umbrella, which was on its last legs. They looked quite pitiable, walking out like that. The bride was still crying. Her *kaajal* had smudged her cheeks and her red *bindi* was all over her forehead. She was holding on to a locket with a picture of a God with one hand, and with the other, she clutched on to her husband.

There was enough slush, and as he dragged her along, she slipped and fell and cut her ankle on a stone. Her Gods were sending her signs; she was sure that they were going to die. Her white trouser got a bit of the blood; he was shaking like a leaf. They touched the tree, and waited for death. Nothing happened. Relieved, and taken aback by this stroke of luck, they scampered back to the bus, like uncaring children. She was limping a bit but quite relieved that they had been saved. Fellow passengers welcomed

her back on board. One said, "See, it was easy." The girl looked at him; she was pale and grimacing with pain. She had also twisted her foot.

The passengers now turned to look at the man in the scummy coat. They were all safe. He would be the last one to go. "C'mon! It is your turn," said Kanakpal. The Despicable Man did not react. He spoke with a slur. "I don't believe in this baloney. I've been watching this circus for so long. Now that you've all had a chance, just move on," he ordered. He had a commanding voice.

"But...but... all of us went up to the tree. You have to do it, too. Otherwise, I'm not going on," muttered Kanakpal with very little force in his voice. He was begging this man to move.

"I don't care what you think. I'm not getting out in this torrid rain. This is the only coat I have," he said. It seemed like a losing battle of wits. The passengers looked at one another; their eyes mirroring their anxiety and their lack of pluck. They knew that no one could take on this man. He seemed too strong for them, and he had a knife. Then, a genial, elderly man got up from his seat, which was right ahead, and wormed his way to the back.

"My son," he began. "Please do this so that the bus can move. We need to get out of this zone. It is dangerous, and we have been parked here for nearly two hours," he said in a soft voice. "Besides, do you want to be blamed for everyone else's misery?" he asked. God only knows what happened when the old man said, 'Blamed'. The Despicable Man moved. He pushed aside the raincoat that he was being offered, and the umbrella; pulled his coat closer to his body, and got out of the bus. "Death, here I come!" he announced.

Everyone was relieved. They were also curious about what they were about to witness. The man in the dirty coat stood by the bus for a while, not moving. He looked here and there. Forty-three pairs of eyes rested on his frame. He began trudging towards the tree, at his own unhurried pace. His coat was soaked already, and the wind tried to tear it off his person. But he was stoic. He moved on languidly. He was a few inches from the tree when he turned to look at the bus. He was about to put his hand on the tree when lightning struck the vehicle. It went up in flames!

The Irrepressible Mr Phull

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hul Saab and Phull Saab were not colleagues. But they ended up spending a lot of time together. It was a quirk of fate. Mr Phul was an engineer with the South-Eastern Railway. A reticent, sober man, he worked hard and spent his free time with his family which consisted of his wife, Kiranjit, and their sons, Ravi and Shashi. The other Mr Phull was a gregarious consultant with an engineering company called Mecon. His wife Gurmeet was equally noisy, and his teenaged sons, Mohinder and Rupinder, incorrigible. A cacophonous lot, they were repeatedly ticked off at school. Prithpal Singh Phul and Jagmandir Singh Phull first met in Ranchi when they were both posted there. The former did not use the surname Phul but Jagmandir found out about it and instantly struck up a blood relation.

Jagmandir was a friend of Prithpal's brother-in-law who worked in the construction sector, and who also participated in the functioning of the local gurdwara. There had been some stories about Jagmandir having had some mishaps at work, but other than that, he was supposed to be a fine fellow—a bit rough around the edges but very helpful and simple.

Soon after they were introduced, Jagmandir declared that Prithpal was a 'good friend'. He sat with him during the prayers in the gurdwara, talking incessantly and making Prithpal very uncomfortable. When the prayers were over, he began walking with Prithpal. "Come! Let's go home and have a nice cup of tea," he offered. Who knew that he was self-inviting himself to Prithpal's home!

The children started playing cricket in the front yard. Gurmeet joined Kiranjit in the kitchen. She began talking about her in-laws, criticizing them, of course. Kiranjit realized that this was going to be a long, tiring afternoon. Both Phulls were very talkative. There were neither commas nor colons in their monologues. And, they always overstayed their welcome. This continued for six months. The Phulls went over to Prithpal's place nearly every evening!

Therefore, it was an enormous relief when Prithpal announced to his family one night that he had been transferred to Jagdalpur, a sleepy town in the Bastar region of central India. Prithpal was going to do a project to enable electric trains to ply there. The children would have to go to a boarding school in Mussoorie and Kiranjit would temporarily shift to her parents' home in Ludhiana. She would take up a job there, teaching English literature to post-graduate students. The family had seen the last of the Phulls. Everyone was thrilled.

Prithpal's work took him to remote areas in Orissa, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Ravi and Shashi were told stories of Baila Dila and Kirandul in Orissa. There were tales from the hill town of Koraput, and from Jharsagoda. Their father had also worked at Khurda and Khurda Road. These last two places were notorious for their bandit attacks and burglaries. The children heard these stories with rapt attention.

In Madhya Pradesh, Prithpal and his team set up the equipment for trains to ply in Dalli Raja Ra and Katni. In Andhra Pradesh, work was done near Arku. Much groundwork also went into Chakradharpur—a municipality in the west Singhbhum district, now in Jharkhand. Located in the Chotanagpur Plateau, it lies 62 kilometres west of Jamshedpur. Finally, there was Jagdalpur, right in the heart of what would later become Chattisgarh—a tribal belt with its mysterious adivasis, “who walked about naked and carried bows and arrows tipped with poison”. At least, that's what the kids were told!

When the summer vacations drew near, Prithpal's family congregated in Jagdalpur. The children were then taken to the Chitrakoot falls, the broadest waterfalls in India, and to the Dandakaranya Forests (Jungles of Punishment). Characters from the Indian epic, Ramayana, are believed to have roamed here during their exile.

The children also spent time near the railway tracks; loitered about the yard and climbed onto stationary engines. Hardly four or five trains passed by each day. Therefore, the catchment area was safe. There was another 'railway family' nearby. This couple from south India, Srividya and Srinivas Reddy, had two children—a boy called Daryao, who was thirteen, and a girl of nine, Samyogita.

They became a gang. Ravi and Daryao hit it off, and Samyogita and Shashi were a team. The older children were both extroverts; out-going, active and innovative. They often went to a shop called the 'Dancing Cactus' that sold wood art. Daryao was an amateur artisan. He'd pick up pieces of wood, discarded by the shop owners for want of perfection, and carve them with remarkable skill.

The kids also watched trains as they went past on the metre gauge. They were particularly fascinated with the 'hoop wheel' ceremony. When a train passed by, the driver tossed out a wheel made of bamboo. A station worker stood on a narrow black slab by the tracks and caught it. He would then exchange a hoop, and the driver was supposed to catch it. "If the hoop isn't caught, the trains cannot move any further," Daryao told the other kids. They believed him.

The children were also particularly fond of a little red train, which they had named the 'Jiggling Jyotilakshmi'. It was tiny, and it moved with a rhythmic, musical spurt, like a dancer. It was so slow that they could get on and off it with absolute ease. They even competed with each other to see who could do it the fastest. 'Jyotilakshmi' sometimes stood in the yard, and the children sat by the engine, and ate chironjee, a dry fruit native to that area.

One July morning, as the children played, they saw some familiar faces in the distance. It had to be a hallucination. Jagmandir Singh Phull had pursued their father and landed up in Jagdalpur. Ravi and Shashi ran home to warn their mother. "Believe it or not, Ma, Mr Phull is here. And, he's headed for our place. Should we warn Papa?" Before she could brace herself, there they were—all four of them, walking into the house, and greeting her with much gusto.

Kiranjit looked for their luggage. They didn't have any. She thanked God for small mercies. At least they weren't going to stay with them. "Hello, Mrs Phul! Isn't this wonderful? How are you? And, how is my favourite pal?" asked Mr Phull. Kiranjit gave Jagmandir her best fake smile and said, "What a surprise! Welcome! Welcome! He'll be out in a minute. He's just writing some letters. Let me inform him."

Phull Saab hugged his 'namesake' with ferocity. He was a large, rugged man, with hairy arms. Prithpal managed to extricate himself from the embrace. He looked desolate at the intrusion and knew that his day was ruined. Had the man been posted here, as well, he wondered. Jagmandir, on the other hand, was overjoyed to see his friend. They had been apart for nearly a year.

He explained the nature of his visit. His seniors had insisted that he take up an assignment in Jagdalpur, and he couldn't refuse. He was going to be there for about two months. He then began advising Prithpal on how the railways ought to handle its project in the region. There was to be no let-up even during lunch. The man could talk!

At 6.30 pm, there was still no sign that Phull Saab would leave. In fact, he had sent word for some other acquaintances of theirs to join in the fun. Lankesh Mishra and Sivamohan Rao, two engineers with a great sense of humour and many redoubtable

anecdotes, turned up. Drinks were brought out and so were the snacks. Kiranjit's feet were killing her and she had a splitting headache. At 7.30 pm, these men got up to leave. Lankesh couldn't be the raconteur that he usually was. Jagmandir had interrupted him throughout the evening, and preempted his jokes.

Prithpal hoped that Jagmandir would get up, too, but he showed no signs of exhaustion. In fact, he was trying to convince the others to hang on for dinner. "Do stay! You must absolutely try Kiranjit's Murg Pulao and Badaami Tangri. I can still remember the flavor of those dishes. And, how could I ever forget that pink coconut burfi," he said with sincerity. His fingers went up to his mouth to show appreciation.

Lankesh seemed tempted. But no invite had been forthcoming from Kiranjit. She smiled apologetically. She hadn't even cooked these things for the night. It was going to be simple fare—dal, rice, vegetables and rotis. And, some Benarasi kheer. "Yes, of course. Do have dinner with us, although I've haven't had time to marinate the chicken," she said. Lankesh was a smart chap. He took the cue, and decided to go home. Sivamohan said something about his wife having made her signature sambar for dinner. He had to leave, as well. But Jagmandir was here for the night. He wasn't budging.

Prithpal's spirits sank. He had spent almost eight hours with this man, and could not last one more minute. He went out to the porch to see off his guests. "He's quite a handful, isn't he?" ribbed Siva. "I have strict orders from the missus to warn her before this one comes home. She still hasn't got over his last visit." He laughed.

"Where was this?" asked Prithpal. "In Ranchi?" Siva nodded. "He just turned up one Sunday morning, and left only at midnight. He also complained about the excessive spice and tamarind in her food, and that didn't go down well with her," he chuckled. "Get him to leave now. Or, you may have to hear him go on and on for the next four hours," he pointed out, before leaving. Prithpal sighed. It was the hapless sigh of the courteous host. He didn't have it in him to be unrefined and direct. He was a gentleman, and he had a great deal of patience. "I wish someone would take him away, for me," he thought before getting back into the house.

He went straight to the kitchen to see if his wife was alright. Dinner had to be made, and he knew that she didn't like to cook such a lot. There was absolutely no sound from the living room. Mr Phull may have gone to the men's room. "I'm so sorry about this, my dear. What can I do?" Prithpal asked his wife.

"Don't worry. We'll manage," she assured him. "Go! Check on Mr Phull," she nudged. Gurmeet had gone to her quarter to take a phone call from her mother. The children were still playing outside.

Prithpal returned to the living room. He couldn't believe his eyes. All four cushions in the room were under Jagminder's body. One under his head, two under his legs and one under his arm. The irrepressible Mr Phull had crashed out on the sofa. He was snoring. The children came in, and began staring at him, as well. They had never seen him so still. Gurmeet returned.

"Listen! My mother was saying that you forgot to leave the spare key to the house with her. How will she get it cleaned before Mamaji arrives? You can be so forgetful," she began. Kiranjit put her forefinger to her lips, motioning her to be quieter. She then took her to Mr Phull. Gurmeet cocked her head to one side, and moved it, not at all surprised.

"So, he dozed off," was her reaction. Kiranjit raised her eyebrows. "He suffers from hypersomnia, you see," explained Gurmeet. "He falls asleep suddenly, sometimes at work, and often when he's reading. Once, he fell asleep at the wheel. My God! That was scary! Anything could've happened. But he told me that his system just shut down. That is why, I think, he tries to remain so active; never ceasing to talk and always so restless." She smiled at her hosts, a little embarrassed but resilient. Kiranjit switched off the ceiling lights in the living room, put her arm around Gurmeet's shoulder, and they walked away towards the kitchen.

It was time for a nice cup of ginger tea, and then, dinner!

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