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The Main in a Safari Suit

An elderly gentleman dressed in his signature safari suit, a relic of the babu raj that he had presided over more than two decades ago in India's capital, stood out among the bevy of female shoppers, attired in the latest fashions, alighting from chauffeur-driven cars to enter India's software mecca's first non-airconditioned mall. Half bending, he clicked open his briefcase to slide a sheaf of papers in and shuffled down the road that leads from up-market Safina Plaza to the bustling old bazaar. She wanted to sidle up to him and tell him to hold on till she had picked up odds and ends in the shopping area so that they could take the same auto-rickshaw home. But she checked herself because she knew that he would vehemently object to her suggestion and insist on taking the bus from the central bus terminus. She had dropped him earlier that morning at the turn that led to his state health centre which he religiously visited every Monday and stood in the long queue with other senior and junior bureaucrats to collect prescribed medicines and undergo routine tests. The weekly outing to the state-run dispensary was a refuge for Khera Saab into which he retreated when he felt totally at sea in 'India Shining' where 20 somethings blew up more than his monthly pension on a single weekend. Accustomed to the power of the corridors of Shastri Bhavan in New Delhi where bureaucrats controlled the world's largest democracy and where what mattered was from where you came, who you knew and which seat you occupied, he was totally disoriented in the new India where all that counted was what you owned. Glitzy office complexes and shopping malls, theatres, restaurants, video parlours that he crossed appeared to be screaming 'I buy therefore I am'. Unable to stand against the collective might of India's rising under-30 entrepreneurs and CEOs, he resisted in the only way he could. By not giving in to the pleasures of buying that beckoned him from every street corner and stubbornly clinging to his fading safari suit with two holes below the front pocket.

Every morning he would set out for the city centre on some errand or the other dressed in one of the five safari suits that were in different stages of wear and tear. After reading *The Times of India* from cover to cover, a leisurely bath and a rich Punjabi breakfast, he would stuff papers into his large black bag and make his way to the bus stop outside his gated colony exchanging greetings with other senior citizens. Even as his contemporaries lurched slowly in the elder-friendly walking lanes, he strode down purposefully and crossed the road just in time to catch the 10.30 a.m. bus to the central bus terminus. He repeated the daily ritual imagining that he was on his way to work. But he could spot none of his

former colleagues in the queue. He had left them behind reclining in their cane armchairs in state allotted South Delhi MIG (Middle Income Group) flats or lying supine on cane beds on the verandahs of their bungalows. He would hop onto the bus and occupy the seat closest to the door, his eyes searching for familiar faces. But middle-class bureaucrats no longer commuted by public transport. Except for the odd student and housewife, the 10.30 bus was swarming with friendly neighbourhood domestic helpers.

Long used to his erratic working hours and unaccounted absences, she had reconciled herself to the new routine her husband had fallen into and adjusted her household schedule accordingly. She appeared to be happy to play along by waiting on him and serving him breakfast as she had done for the fifty years of their married life. Although she did not need to pack his lunchbox anymore, she saw him off every morning as if he were still leaving for work sighing with relief at the thought of having the house to herself. With him out of the house, it was like being back in the olden days. She would wait for the young woman who helped her to scour dishes, mop floors and wash clothes. She got her to wash his discarded pair of clothes instructing the girl to take particular care to rub the collar and the bottom, pick up the dry ones from the clothes line and count the number of clothes to be given for ironing to the laundry boy. She noticed the fraying collars and holes in the pockets and often begged her husband to pick up some new clothes. He always found an excuse for holding on to them. They were still good enough for him, he would remonstrate. He would always wear the good ones whenever she accompanied him, he would reason. He could not find the right tailor and so on. Once she hid them at the back of his closet so that he would not be able to find them. On another occasion, she threw them in the pile of old clothes to be donated. But he discovered that they were missing and pulled them out of the bundle she had left to be collected by the sweeper on the weekend.

Khera Saab would quietly retire in the king-size bed in his study or slip in beside her in their bedroom depending on what was on his agenda that day. If he needed to make calls, he preferred to do it from his study since any sounds interfered with her sleep and he had a very loud voice, particularly when he was speaking on the telephone. Habituated to making telephone conversations in an era when telephone lines were particularly bad and one had to shout in order to be heard, he had acquired a particular telephone voice and delivery that made it seem as if he was shouting. Irrespective of the distance between the study and the room she was resting in, his telephone calls did not permit her to sleep. Nor could he watch TV in the room she was sleeping in as those sounds disturbed her as well. On the days, he wished to watch a cricket match he would lounge on the divan in the sitting room with the TV volume turned low. On the days there were no calls to be made or TV to be watched, he would walk in and out of the house several times before tea time. At five, he felt officially entitled to his cup of tea and walked noisily around the house in the hope

that she would wake up to make him his cup of tea with plenty of milk and tea leaves left to simmer for several minutes in the Punjabi style.

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It was the first thought that came to her as she woke up. He was gone. And, soon, this bedroom, the house in whose eastern corner it sat, and the tiny garden outside with its gnarled old red hibiscus and the half-grown mango tree they had planted together, all those would be gone as well. It was the strangest feeling ever.

The strap of her bathroom slippers snapped as she stepped out of the shower and slid her wet feet in. She had no option but drag her way slowly to the kitchen. A pair of blue Hawaii chappals with a broken strap appeared before her in a flash. He would take his shoes off South Indian style religiously these days on entering the house and slip his feet into the same broken pair. They made a snapping sound as he pattered about that irritated her. She had desperately tried to get rid of the worn blue pair with a broken strap before the annual visit of their son's in-laws. Arriving directly from the US and always immaculately groomed, what would they think? But he had ignored the brand new acupressure pair and pulled out the old one from the garbage bag. Just as he had refused to get the two linen safaris she had picked up for him from 'the Complete Man' range with matching pairs of socks and handkerchiefs from the closest Raymond's showroom to give him a complete makeover before the arrival of the NRI in-laws. When she had insisted he had flown into a rage screaming that they could be gifted to the family chauffeur or given away in charity. The in-laws, too, arrived laden with a new safari length, their annual tribute for his hearty acceptance of their plumply pretty daughter in the family. The safaris had been accepted graciously and put away intact in their elaborate gift packing along with kanjivaram silk saris that were dutifully brought for her.

He had welcomed them in his faded safari and broken slippers and they had gone home reassured their son-in-law's dollar earnings were not being squandered away by his Indian family. His pension left him enough after paying his essentials for his few indulgences. Unlike the back-slapping air commodores and naval commanders, he neither smoked nor drank. Nor did he care to dine in fancy restaurants. He occasionally walked into one of those many Udipi chains that had mushroomed all over the city for a quick coffee and a plate of vadas and happily dug into them standing around round table tops with strangers. The vadas were softer and bondas crisper in the Kamaths and MTRs than those in his office canteen. But his cataract-cleared eyes searched for the colleagues he had shared them with in another world along with gossip about the new finance minister who was unanimously feared to usher in monetary reforms that would devalue the rupee.

He fondly reminisced about the days he would keep spice tycoons and cola barons waiting for hours. Rumour had it that his office attendant had made a fortune by selling appointments and sharing tips. “This *Saab* does take *rishwat*,” his peon could be heard whispering to the Gujarati Seths with diamond rings gleaming on each finger, “Just address him as Bhaisaab and he would do your job.” Self-employed entrepreneurs and manufacturers would walk in with their unctuous faces and ingratiating smiles and let themselves be harangued on Government of India rules and regulations pertaining to manufactured products before coming down to business. Forewarned and forearmed, they never made the mistake of offering him a bribe or even a gift. Instead, they would divert the conversation in the direction of family and friends and let Khera Saab hold forth on the pre-partition era when he would assist his ‘almost millionaire’ father in diversifying their family business. The merchants and traders pretended to listen to his yarns in amazement waiting for the moment when he would finally stop and they could get down to business. After an hour of reflecting on past glory, he would have been reasonably mellowed to bestow the desired license and sometimes agree to accept token gifts to seal their relationship. It was they who took upon themselves to spruce up his wardrobe by gifting him a couple of suit lengths in expensive natural and man-made fabrics and getting their personal tailors to custom make his shirts and trousers. He accepted the first few in a spirit of kinship and tried out the first safari sportingly to make a style statement in the fashion of India’s rising textile magnate from a small village in Gujarat. By the time he moved up in the hierarchy, safari suits had closed the yawning economic gap between tycoons and bureaucrats.

Safari suits were created with durability in mind even though Gujarati textile barons had set in the trend for wearing them. If you got half a dozen made, they would last you all your life. Those whose shopping is need-based would start calculating how many years they would be good for. He had clearly decided that the safari suits he possessed would see him through the years that he had left. Safari suit lengths received as ritual gifts at weddings and anniversaries from his relatives remained unopened in their gift boxes marked ‘Mamaji,’ ‘Chachaji,’ ‘Fufaji’ or ‘Dadaji’ waiting for the designated wearer. Each time an occasion arose and he was asked to find something appropriate he would express his intention to get them tailored. But they remained untailored and unworn either because the notice was too short for the tailor to deliver them before the occasion or he did not find time to have them tailored. So he continued to attend all important family and official functions in his vintage collection acquired over two decades of postings in Madras, Bombay, Delhi and overseas travel. But this was one occasion he was ritually banned from attending except in unworn clothes.

The two daughters-in-laws set out to complete the list the priest had hurriedly jotted down for them. This time they would make sure that he would be perfectly groomed and leave home wearing the right cut and accessories. They congratulated themselves that the newly gentrified

neighbourhood now offered a wider shopping experience ranging from international branded wear outlets to swadeshi stores offering exclusive traditional hand-crafted items. They walked in and out of their gleaming glass windows for four hours to find the right texture of white befitting the moment. On the side, they checked out the latest All-White collection being showcased at their favourite haunt and picked up an appropriate outfit for each ceremony carefully coordinating their own with those of their children. After all this was one occasion when his neighbours and friends would see them for the first time and relatives from all over the country congregate to compare notes on their respective daughters-in-law. Unable to find the right shade of white for him, they returned exhausted and armed with jumbo sized shopping bags to find the house brimming with his siblings and their extended families. In the flurry of making the right impression and serving cups of tea to the endless flow of visitors with their heads demurely covered, the unsuccessful shopping expedition was postponed to 11 a.m. the next morning.

He couldn't wait for the hand-picked kurta and was dressed in a light pink one hastily picked up from the store that opened earliest to be in time for the 10.30 ritual. For once he couldn't have his way and was forced to leave home covered in brand new lengths of fabric. His discarded safari suit was returned to her along with his spectacles, watch and the engagement ring. She placed them along the safari lengths in every colour and texture that lay in the corner of his closet.