

**H**e is a man of indefinite age. He could be as young as thirty but he could be sixty just as convincingly well. His wiry, slightly bent body appears quite strong despite its haggard appearance; his thin face, permanently puckered up, more against the world than the sun; his large, dirty pair of buck teeth; his sun-blackened skin; his rough, salt and pepper stubble; nothing about him gives a clue to his exact age. He is more like a hard, old withered root than a man — and an old withered root can be of any age.

It is doubtful whether he has a name, or if he does, it is almost sure that he does not remember it. So let us call him Kalu. A nice, uninteresting, featureless name nobody is likely to lay claim on, and create complications.

Kalu lives, so to speak, on the roads. The roads, not the road, because he does not live on any specific road. He is not a beggar, because beggars have their dirty bundles of belongings, and their little corners in which to stash those belongings, for which they pay rent to the legal owners of those corners — the policemen. Kalu has no belongings, no corner, and nothing to pay by way of rent for the use of a corner.

How he manages to get food is a mystery, probably even to Kalu himself. But evidently, he manages to get enough to remain alive. For clothes he has a knee-length pair of army shorts, too large at his wiry waist, and blackened with age, which have been with him so long that he has forgotten when and where he found them. And since this city is neither too hot nor too cold, Kalu is not likely to trouble himself looking for any additional articles of clothing, apart from a piece of rope now and then, to keep his shorts in place.

As for footwear, time has hardened the soles of his feet to nearly

## SHORT STORY

# The Blanket

○ Aparna Pallavi

the consistency of hooves altogether doing away with the need for any shoes. And he always has a place to stretch his body at night, never mind if it is a different place every night, or, sometimes, two or three places in a single night.

For Kalu, that just about completes the list of things he has, and also the list of things he wants, because, to him, wanting and having are the same things. Kalu has no regrets, no grievances; he wants nothing.

But there was a time when Kalu did want something — something, apart from what he already had. And the funny thing is that he actually got what he wanted. It was getting it that taught him how useless it was to want anything at all.

This is how it happened.

Though the weather in this city is neither too hot nor too cold, it does get a little chilly sometimes, late in the winter nights, or after rains. On such nights, Kalu's way is to gather a small

pile of rubbish and make a little fire. He doesn't need match-sticks — he can always pick up a smoldering cigarette butt off the road-side, or beg a 'current' from one of his better off brethren. Or if he is lucky, he may not have to light his own fire at all, but be allowed to crouch near one made by some of these same brethren.

It was on one such wet night that, hunched up near a fire made by some truck drivers, Kalu saw one of the legal owners of the fire bring out a battered old quilt and wrap himself in it. Kalu had seen the same phenomenon many times before, but that day he noticed it. And scratching his head with his horny nails, he tried to remember if he ever had a quilt. He couldn't. Then he tried to imagine what it would be like to have a quilt in winter to wrap around himself.. It must be nice, he decided, to feel the warm, soft something against his skin, wrapping him in itself, enveloping him. And before he knew it, Kalu had begun to crave for a quilt.

For days, Kalu went about craving a quilt. His eyes, instead of being gainfully employed in looking for things that could be picked up from the roadside and disposed of profitably, or carried around till he lost interest in them, wandered uselessly into shop windows displaying fine clothes, upholstery, mattresses, cosmetics, cushions, shoes, and goodness knows what else. And all the time his heart ached for a quilt.

Kalu never really believed that he would go on craving for a quilt



forever, much less, really get one. Beneath his craving, there was a steady part of him that knew that the quilt business would pass soon, just as the seasons pass every year.

But fate had something else in store for Kalu.

The rains were over, and the temperate months between the rains and winter were also nearly over. Then, one afternoon, when Kalu was in the process of settling down for his daily afternoon nap in a shady spot under one of the city's many fly-overs, he suddenly found a blanket – new, neatly folded and packed in crackling cellophane, dangling over his face.

Partly surprised, partly irritated, Kalu raised his head and stared. A face, in a white Gandhi cap, appeared over the blanket, a black, mean, leering little face with chalk-white eye-balls. 'Can't you lift your hand and take it?' Squeaked the face, shrilly, 'Lazy hog! Do you think *Sethji* has all day to plead with you to accept his gift?'

And the blanket was dumped unceremoniously onto Kalu's lap.

'These *salas!*' grumbled the little mean man as he moved ahead, 'First they get these fine things free, and on top of it they want you to plead with them to take them!'

Kalu sat up and looked at the back of the mean, black little man in a disgusting chalk-white peon's uniform. Walking bent at the back and knees, with an enormous pile of blankets on one arm, he was dumping blankets one by one at the other vagrants who had collected under the fly-over.

Then he looked at the blanket. It was new, with something fine embossed in many colours on the cellophane package. He wondered if the blanket was for him. He had not seen the car that had stopped just a few feet behind him. Nor had he seen that a thing that looked like a mammoth piece of

jelly with the colour of cheese, but, was in fact, a man, dressed in an enormous, jaunty batik *kurta* and white *payjamas*, with rings on every one of his fat, spongy fingers, had waddled out of it and was keeping an eye on the mean little man. And even if he had seen him, Kalu would not have known that he was in the august presence of Seth Bhimdas Ladlamal. Nor could he have known that the reason for the Seth's sudden generosity was a particularly persistent fistula that had resisted medical and all other kinds of treatment for years.

He only looked at the blanket and wondered if it was his.

Then Kalu stole a glance at the others who had had similar bounty bestowed on them, to see what *they* were doing. Some were fingering the cellophane packaging of the blankets, not daring to open them. Others, unable to believe their luck, gathered up their possessions and hurriedly left the place, for fear that the wind that had dropped this bounty on their laps might have made a mistake and want it all back.

Kalu followed the second example and tucking the package under his arm, walked off towards the big temple, where he had a reasonable

chance of finding a little private corner to relish his good luck.

For three days, there was no one as happy as Kalu. Even though it was not that cold yet, out of sheer vanity, he kept the blanket wrapped around himself every night, and in the mornings he folded it neatly and carried it on his shoulder. To ensure that his blanket did not get dirty, he had to look for a clean place to lie down every night, but that was hardly any trouble for the joy of possessing the blanket. In fact, in some secret corner of his uncomplicated little soul, he rather enjoyed the fuss.

Then, on the third night, for no good reason, it rained. Both Kalu and his blanket got a thorough soaking. Kalu did not mind the soaking of his body. Nor did he worry one little bit about his shorts. Both had received so many soakings and other things in the past that it no longer mattered. But the blanket - that was a different matter altogether.

To Kalu, the blanket had become something more than a mere piece of property – it was a warm living companion, that kept its arms around him all night. It was the only thing that resembled a living touch in his meager life. All night, while it rained, Kalu had winced at every merciless drop as it seeped into the body of his beloved, each drop a torture to his very soul.

In the morning, when the rain had stopped and the sun at last came out, Kalu squeezed out the blanket, now heavy with water, as well as he could, and putting it over his shoulder, walked to the bridge, and spread the blanket out on the parapet, to dry. Then he squatted down beside the blanket, waiting for it to dry.

But hardly had an hour passed and hardly had the blanket stopped dripping, when someone shoved him roughly, and cried, 'Hey! What do you think you are doing?'



It turned out that in spreading out his blanket, Kalu had intruded upon the territory of a seller of coloured sunglasses. The latter, a swaggering man clad in cheap figure hugging jeans and a garish T-shirt, with hair oiled and plastered, and one of the cheap specimens of his trade sitting rakishly on the bridge of his nose, had just arrived in person to claim his rightful place.

Without a word, for Kalu's was a world where every enemy was stronger than him, Kalu gathered his very damp blanket and started to go.

'Hey, wait!' cried the sunglass seller suddenly, 'Where did you get this blanket?' For though of the cheap sort, the blanket had an unmistakable look of newness about it.

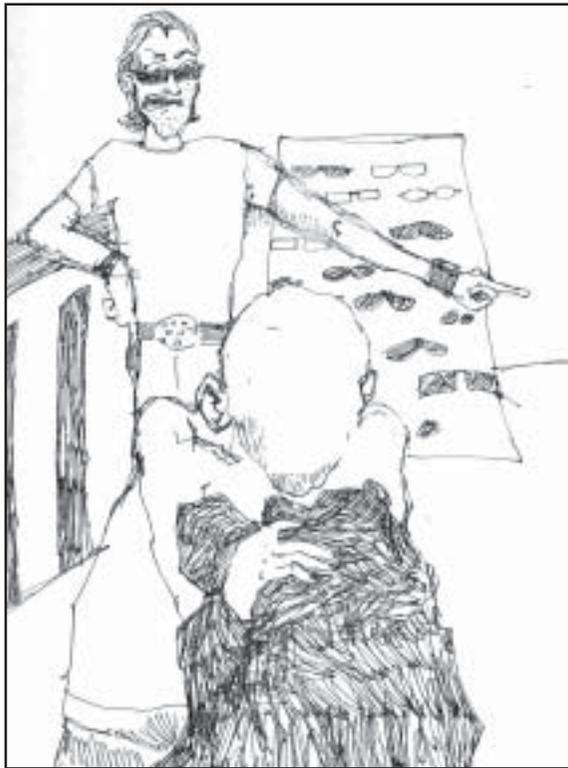
Kalu started, and pressed his blanket to his chest, again, without a word.

'Sell it?' the sunglass seller was now talking business, chest out, chin jutting, two fingers of the left hand dangling a currency note in the direction of the object of his interest, 'I'll give you 20 rupees.'

Without wasting a second, Kalu set off at a trot, away, as far away as he could get from the enemy who wanted to take his blanket.

'Saa...lah!', the sunglass seller laughed in disgust, 'Look at his *nakhra!* 20 rupees is too little for a stolen blanket, eh?' And he spat his malice out on the roadside dust.

Kalu left the bridge, his heart pounding, his hands hugging his wet blanket to his chest with all his strength. While one part of his mind was yet to recover from the shock, another was already feverishly busy thinking of any other possible place to spread out his blanket. For, while Kalu did manage to find a place to lie



down every night, daytime was a different story. There were places where even sitting down could bring someone chasing after you, let alone drying a blanket. He had counted on the bridge and it had let him down.

For a long time Kalu walked around the city looking for a place to spread out his blanket. The sun was quite high and the traffic thick by the time he came upon a section of iron railing along the side of a road, bordering the pavement.

Kalu knew this was a place where there were no hawkers, so he spread out his blanket on the railing. His heart ached to see the pointed spear shapes on the rail prop up his blanket in a series of little pointed tents, but there was no helping it. In the eyes of his heart, Kalu saw the blanket dry and stiffen into the shape given to it by the points. He would, of course, smooth it out, but it would never be the same again.

'Hey...ye....ye....ye!' snarled a uniformed private securityman who came running out of nowhere with a

stick. 'Do you #@#\*\*&## fellows *have to* come just here to die? Can't you find any other place? Always prowling around *Babuji's* house!'

Kalu stared at the man. The latter noticed it, was ashamed, and softened his tone. 'Why do you chaps come here, *baba?*' he wailed, 'Do you want to eat my job? Do I have two kids to feed or no? Please, please go somewhere else. Take that thing of yours and go! If it was my own house I wouldn't mind, but this is *Babuji's* house. Big people keep coming here. Does it look nice, you hanging things here?'

Kalu reached a blind hand to gather the blanket, his suspicious eyes still riveted on the enemy's face.

'Move, move, don't lag!' cried the guard, impatiently tapping the railing with his stick, 'If someone sees you it will cost me my job. Go!'

Kalu's walk, whose direction had been unpremeditated this time, brought him to a large square with a statue in the middle. It was the statue of a tall, thin old man, bent slightly on a stick. The man was bald, and wore what looked like a pair of loose knee-length drawers, only somewhat curiously shaped, and with many folds in them. His upper body was wrapped in something that looked like a blanket.

Kalu had seen that statue many times before he got his blanket, but that day he noticed something new about it. The drawers, the blanket, the lean look, the stoop. Didn't the man look so much like himself? The stick was there, of course, and the glasses, which he did not have, but still....the resemblance was close, wasn't it?

Surely the man who was so much like him would not mind lending him some of his space to spread out his blanket? And Kalu, filled with the

warmth of fellow feeling, spread out his blanket on the railing surrounding the statue, and finally, relieved, sat down to wait for it to dry.

'Hello, my man!' said a sharp, albeit cheerful voice, 'What do you mean by sitting down here?'

Kalu stood up hurriedly and put a protective hand on the blanket. It was his worst nightmare in person – a policeman.

'Oh,' continued the voice, in a tone of mild, cheerful sarcasm, 'So you have not only sat down, but also spread out your blanket here too, have you!

And who told you that you could use this place for your private purposes, and on such a day too!'

Kalu had by now managed to gather his blanket to his chest, and he stood petrified with fear, unable to speak, unable to move.

'Do you know,' the policeman was saying, slowly, menacingly, like a little boy torturing a bug for the fun of it, 'What have you done? Do you know whose statue it is? This is the statue of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. And do you know what day it is today? It is October 2, the birthday of the great man. And on such a day, you had the guts to insult him by hanging your blanket near his statue!'

Kalu hardly understood what the policeman was saying. He only stood, clinging to his blanket, staring at the face of the man, seized with fear.

'Tell me what punishment you should be given,' the policeman continued, at a slow, measured pace, enjoying himself, 'What should be done to you? You tell me.'

Kalu was silent.

A mean glint appeared in the eyes of the policeman, 'That blanket of yours,' he said with a sly smile, 'is the real culprit. Maybe we should confiscate that to teach you a lesson you will remember.'



A hard sun browned claw reached out and grabbed the blanket. For a few seconds, Kalu felt it slide against his fingers, wet and cold, and then they were empty. Kalu only stared blankly at the man.

That was the end of Kalu's romance with the blanket. And that was also the end of his ever wanting

something he did not have. For, he reasoned wisely as he walked away from the policeman and the man who looked so much like him, that it was better not to have a blanket than to have one. Because if you have it, you are likely to need a place to dry it. There is so much heartache in a blanket, isn't there?

So now Kalu wants nothing, nothing whatsoever. Look at him now, sitting on the rails of the bus stand, swinging his legs, butting at the iron pole in front of him softly

with his horny toe. The rail he is sitting on hurts, but he does not long for a softer seat, for he knows that it will come with its own share of heartache. That man, if any, has reached peace, because, as the Buddha said, in that man desire has been burnt out forever. □

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## Roshni

A Street Play in Hindi, Manushi Prakashan, 1987

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