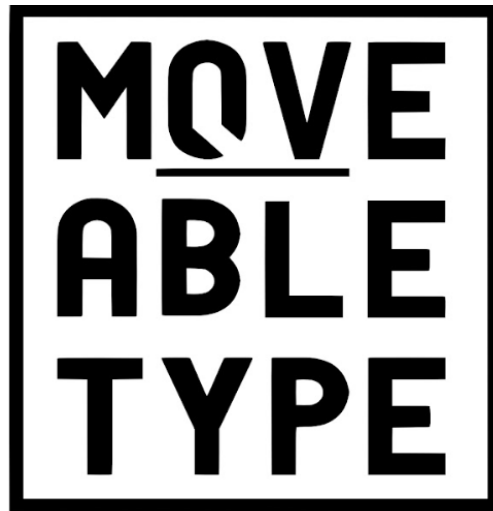




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Translated from Savita Pathak's Hindi story

Besadaa Koi Nahi

Translator: Sonakshi Srivastava

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No One is Voiceless...

Translated from Savita Pathak's Hindi story *Besadaa Koi Nahi*

SONAKSHI SRIVASTAVA

"Aunty, open the door – aunty, open the door!" Morning was yet to mark its arrival when the tapping of little Mannu's hands was heard... "Arre Shubhra, open the door. Mannu is here." "Good morning!" sang a voice from the outside.

Mannu's four-year-old voice seemed no less than a wonder in this lonely place. No matter how hard his mother tried to restrain him, he could not be stopped. The young child was delightfully aware that human responses are not toys. Unlike a remote-controlled car or a Jolly Chimp, these could only secure his heart's affection for a while.

His family had arrived on this particular floor of this particular apartment only a few months ago. The Verma family had been tenants here for a while. The little kid had arrived from the world of mohalla-daarii. Initially, his mother had tried to keep him amused by showing him a crow on some days and a squirrel on the other. In fact, it was because of him that she was able to pay attention to the natural order around her. Saptaparni, Shirish – these were names that had sounded unfamiliar to her ears as well. Little Mannu used to wave "bye-bye" to every passerby from his balcony. His greeting was sometimes reciprocated with a smile and sometimes with contempt – but he stayed unfazed. Nature and Man, they probably cannot inhabit a city together. His apartment building was enveloped in looming silence. Here there was no hullabaloo of the frequenting vehicles – only the rumble of the sky. Since there was an airport nearby, huge airplanes floating in the sky were a common occurrence. The child's mother would tell him the names of the airplanes to fill up the void within herself. And just like those airplanes, his chatter and his questions were boundless. And one cannot really say how, in the midst of it all, little Mannu would manage to get the neighbours to open their doors to him.

Mannu would begin with his usual chirping as soon as the doors were flung open, "Uncle, wake up! You are always dozing away. Arre, morning is for exercising. Aunty, wake uncle up!" And then he would begin with his catalogue of requests – sometimes by swinging from Vermaji's shoulders or jumping on his sofa.

Vermaji's family of three was lonelier than ever on this secluded island. Vermaji used to work on a ship until fifteen years ago. That was a different era. A lot of facilities were not available on board and he was just a labourer anyway. But how would any family know the trouble and toil of working on a ship? They only see the promise of chocolates and money of foreign lands. Away from his family for years, Vermaji measured out half his life counting the tides, memorizing the names of the harbours of various countries. His entire life was exhausted by shouldering the responsibility of his home and in earning the badge of estrangement from his family. During holidays, his time at home was spent more in contention against his wife rather than contending for her affection. Loneliness and deep-seated misunderstandings were at the roots of their discontent. As the body wore down, so did the chance of getting work on the ship. He tried his hands at other menial jobs but found no ready success. He knew how to keep afloat the ship of life on the water but it was here - with the force of life on land - that wearied him.

Anger occasionally tempers to assume the form of irritation. This irritation is so deadly that it often chars everything in its vicinity. A furrowed forehead is like a contagious disease. And like

any contagious disease, it spreads through the house. Vermaji had lost the sight of his eyes due to hypertension. And anyway, this disease was also in the air here – streams of screams and then a sea of silence.

A sharp scream from across the floor would pierce through the air right from four in the morning, “You do not seem to understand anything... Tell me, why can’t you... tell me?” This was the voice of a father from the neighbouring house, one who was always anxious about his daughter’s studies while the daughter seemed more weighed down by the beatings from her father than by her studies.

Little Mannu used to mimic him sometimes too. Vermaji used to break into laughter after listening to him, “Tell me, what do you want to eat? Chicken tikka, paneer tikka, popcorn, Hajmola?” Then he used to reassure him, “Once uncle gets his money, then he will treat Mannu to all these things...”

“Uncle, you will get your money tomorrow!” Little Mannu would quip without hesitation, and Vermaji would bloom with happiness despite the lie.

As a matter of fact, he had taken out an insurance policy and was waiting out his days in the hope of receiving its claim.

“Shubhra, Mannu was saying that we will get the money tomorrow.”

“You are so strange! Why are you so worked up? You will get the money. You spoke to them yesterday only. They have begun processing the documents...” Mrs. Verma replied irritably, her voice at once tinged with faint hope and the ache of splintered optimism.

“You seem to believe these company people a lot. Ask them how long will they take? They have been fooling us for the last four months. Ranjana’s husband is a real thug. He was such a smooth talker when he was getting this policy done...” And thus began his litany of the same age-old grievances.

Ranjana’s husband was the husband of Shubhra’s sister. He had filed a medical policy for Vermaji. It was this policy’s money that had been keeping the entire family on its toes.

The doctors harboured the hope that Vermaji’s eyesight could be restored provided he steered clear from tension. But this was almost like telling a poor man that he needs to stay away from dirt, smoke, and sunlight for his disease to disappear.

His plummeting savings and an escalating medical cost was making him very uneasy about his ailment. Handling the costs of allopathic medication was proving to be difficult. By a turn of luck, he had found some respite in homeopathic medication, or it was totally plausible that a cheap alternative had provided him that respite. Anyway, a sliver of light would sometimes impress itself upon his eyes, lending a ray of hope to his chance of recovery.

“Uncle, how big is a fish in the North Atlantic? Why did the pirates hit you in your eye? Did they want to snatch away some treasure from you...?”

“Yes, they wanted to steal away my treasure. But I beat them to a pulp and threw them into the Pacific.” Vermaji kept on concocting new stories.

The pats of the little child were full of life. In a world that was quick to poke fun at others, they made heroes of each other. Vermaji’s daughter had warmed up to Mannu. She would bring chips for him after school.

Mannu's family was going to Goa on a trip. Mannu had heard lots of stories from Vermaji about his adventures at sea. One fine morning, he became adamant in his demand, "Maa, uncle will also come with us to Goa."

"Which uncle?"

"Arre, the one who stays right across. Maa, I think uncle's eyes have forgotten how to see. Once he catches the sight of the sea, he will remember how to see. Let us take him, please!"

Tears welled up in his mother's eyes. She went to Vermaji's house along with Mannu. "Look at what Mannu is saying, uncle – that you should accompany us to Goa. You will remember how to see after seeing the sea there."

It is difficult to tell if the words of that little boy were a product of some cartoon film or a story or if those were anchored to a sense of concern. Whatever it was, a streak of light really did glimmer in Vermaji's eyes – that is what he told his doctor that evening.

Translator's Note:

Savita Pathak is a contemporary Hindi writer and a professor of English. Published by Rajkamal Prakashan, the leading Hindi publishing house, Pathak's words sear through the very fabric of Indian society to present in minute shreds the various hypocrisies, and the anxieties of inhabiting a patriarchal space. Her stories subtly bring to the fore the real face of contemporary India, jolting the readers to face the various positions of truth and of what it means to be a human in this country.

The story, originally written in Hindi by Dr. Savita Pathak is titled, *Besadaa Koi Nahi*. The story makes for an appropriate fit for translation because of the focus on "new voice" - not only of the author but also the translator. It is a joyful exercise as a woman translator to translate a woman writer, especially someone like Savita Pathak for her erudite examination of the human psyche. It is her attentiveness, her care, and her concern for the everyday that she deftly weaves with her words that also inform my own position as a literary translator. The story, despite being short, offers a promising respite (and perhaps that is the intent in it being short) from the freight of busy-ness that has so come to punctuate our lives that moments of joy have been frisked away from the everyday. It is a tale that prompts us to pay attention to the little things in life as our "endless and proper work" (Mary Oliver) - and how these little things may eventually envelop our lives with warmth and care, offering hope and the ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

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Sonakshi Srivastava is a senior writing fellow (ELT) at Ashoka University, the translations editor at *Usawa Literary Review*, and an educational arm assistant at *Asymptote*. Her writings have generously been supported by the 2024 ASLE Translation Grant, Director's Fellowship (Martha's Vineyards Institute of Creative Writing), Diverse Voices Fellowship, and the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts. Her words may be found at *The Alipore Post*, *ASAP/Art*, *The Bilingual Window*,

Potluck Zine, Hakara, etc. She is a former translation fellow with the South Asia Speaks programme.