Half the Night Is Gone

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juggernaut

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For Indira, Ratika and Kisho

sochta huun ki ab anjaam-e-safar kya hoga
log bhi kaanch ke hain raah bhi pathreeli hai

Sometimes I wonder how this journey will end
People are made of glass and this road is strewn with rocks

Muzaffar Warsi

Prologue

Mange Ram, the son of a tenant farmer who worked on land that Lala Nemichand, a rich trader from Delhi, had inveigled from the indebted zamindar Nawab Mansoor Ali, was a wrestler of some renown in his district. As a young boy Mange Ram had been spotted by a neighbour, Khuda Baksh, who had been a wrestler in the nawab's akhara for several years and now in retirement was struck by the child's natural poise and agility. Khuda Baksh tried to convince Mange Ram's father that the child could develop into a champion wrestler with the proper diet and training, and offered to provide the latter. But Mange Ram's father did not have the resources to invest in the former. Nor did he expect that any child of his, any descendant of his forefathers, would do anything more than till someone else's land, start a family, feed and raise his children, and die.

Setting aside a portion of the pension that came to him from the nawab's haveli every month, Khuda Baksh himself began to feed Mange Ram the required diet of almonds and milk while also starting his training with the exercises that he had learned as a child from his ustad. Even though Mange Ram responded extremely well both to the wrestler's diet and to his ustad's instruction, Khuda Baksh hid his protégé from the world initially, fearing that if Mange Ram did not impress with his skills then his own personal generosity in terms of time and money would be ridiculed by his rivals as an overambitious hankering to return to the limelight which, to some extent, it was. If Mange Ram did prove his worth, all attempts to ridicule a champion's

ustad would themselves be ridiculed. Such was the power of success, the philosopher's stone that could transmute wrong into right, that the attacker became the attacked and the poisoned darts of jealousy reversed their direction and landed on the chests of those who had launched them.

The ustad's fear of his former rivals and his unacknowledged but powerful desire to lay them low trumped the trainer's natural eagerness to unleash a talented ward on the world and, in fact, allowed Mange Ram to develop steadily without the potentially destructive stress of competition. By the time his mentor finally became convinced that he had the skill, the strength and the stamina to develop into a district champion, and maybe even go on to compete at the provincial level, Mange Ram was nineteen. He was more ready than others his age or older, who shouldered the additional burden of nursing ruinous injuries suffered in the ring. These injuries could be suppressed for short periods but would accumulate over time, shortening their lives and making their final years a living hell. Those miserable years would be redeemed only partially by the memory of those few bouts of their youth when they vanquished a worthy rival and won the admiration of an audience that was happy to goad a wrestler into ever greater risks in the ring but would turn around and walk away when the bout was over, leaving him alone to take stock of the damage done to the only body he would ever have.

Hesitantly, even though on his more objective days he felt there was no reason to hesitate, Khuda Baksh entered Mange Ram into the contest that Nawab Mansoor Ali, a patron of wrestlers by birth and an admirer of muscular male bodies by temperament, sponsored every year. The rules were simple: the contestants had to do sit-ups till there were only ten of them left. After that they had to switch to push-ups till there was only one of them left.

The nawab's annual competition, instituted by his father, had become a de facto way of choosing the wrestler who would enjoy the patronage of the noble house and be the ceremonial head of the small army of strongmen that any such house had to maintain even though

Pax Britannica had been brutally imposed in the region after 1857 and had prevailed for the half-century that had passed. This ceremonial head did not debase himself by actually stepping out to collect a debt or to deliver justice in the case of a small dispute. He cared for his body and studied the art of wrestling with a single-mindedness that made him not just a feared figure but also a revered figure for people from miles around. On carefully staged ceremonial occasions, he presented living evidence of the superhuman possibilities of the human body, a body whose presence was an endless source of fascination for the population that lived in the villages in and around the nawab's demesne. Especially since this was a population that sometimes struggled to feed themselves and their children, and were therefore unlikely to ever achieve with their bodies anything approaching what the nawab's champion could achieve with his.

The nawab's father was wise enough to realise that temporal power of all forms must renew its legitimacy at regular intervals, or else, like all other temporal phenomena, it is susceptible to decay and eventual destruction. He had instituted the rule that his champion would have to enter the contest every year to either re-establish his worth or confer legitimacy on his successor if the contest ended in his defeat. This policy meant that often for years on end the same person won this contest and so, although such occasions were not without interest for those who gathered to watch, at the end of the day on the way back to their respective villages after the contest, when everything that could be discussed had been discussed threadbare, someone would say something like: 'But the year when Yusuf Mohammad took the champion's mace from Khuda Baksh, now that was a contest!'

Mange Ram's first appearance in the nawab's contest was fated to be mentioned every year the contest was held, and for years after Mansoor Ali lost the financial wherewithal needed to stage it, not just because the champion's mace changed hands but because of the manner in which this fateful changeover took place. When all other aspects of that day's proceedings had faded from living memory, the last one that remained was this: by six in the evening there were only

two contestants left in the field, Mange Ram and Yusuf Mohammad, the champion who had replaced Khuda Baksh as the primary wrestler of the nawab's court. This was the same Yusuf Mohammad who had, in the moment of his victory several years ago, fallen at Khuda Baksh's feet and begged him to become his teacher. The older wrestler had fulfilled this role for many years before eventually relinquishing it because, although, as a true guru, he had come to love his student with all his heart, he could never completely shake off the memory of the defeat that Yusuf had inflicted on him.

While Mange Ram continued to push his body up with no greater effort than he had applied to the first of the sit-ups of the morning, Yusuf Mohammad's stamina began to flag. His gigantic arms quivered with the strain of each push-up, fluttering like a leaf in a storm moments before it is rent apart from its tree. Sweat poured down from his forehead and into his eyes, mingling with the tears of shame that were beginning to form at the realisation that his short reign as champion – it had lasted almost fifteen years but it is a rare regnant who feels in his last days that his reign was long enough – was near its end. Eventually, the story went, Khuda Baksh took the nawab's permission and spoke: 'Yusuf,' he said, 'you are like my own son. I cannot see you in pain any more so listen to what I have to say. You have been a great champion, but your time is over. Lay your body down on the ground now and give it the rest it so greatly deserves.'

Yusuf raised his head as he struggled to bring his body up and looked into his guru's eyes. There were people who said later that Khuda Baksh said what he did to weaken Yusuf, to break his spirit and hasten his defeat, but those people were not privy to that meeting of eyes. They did not have the generosity to apprehend the current of love that passed from Khuda Baksh to Yusuf in that gaze, nor did those who had not trained under a true teacher understand the nature of the faith that Yusuf placed in Khuda Baksh, a faith that had taken residence in every corner of Yusuf's body, the body that, decades ago, he had entrusted to his guru. Yusuf lay down. Khuda Baksh went up to him and took his head in his arms and consoled him. Most people in the

audience wept at the sight, but the more dry-eyed ones noticed that Mange Ram continued his push-ups, seemingly unaware that the end of Yusuf Mohammad's era was taking place a few feet away from him.

The three years that Mange Ram spent under the loving tutelage of Khuda Baksh – who asked Yusuf Mohammad to assist him in training the boy – fed by Nawab Mansoor Ali, were to be the three happiest years of his life although he did not know that then. Not being one to reflect deeply on his life, he never did realise that the days he spent in the single-minded pursuit of honour in the wrestling pit under the watchful and loving eyes of his two gurus were the only days of his life when his body and his soul, harnessed together by a sense of sporting purpose, would work in tandem to bring out what was noble in him. He had already begun to win competitions at the district level when the news that would change his life decisively and forever came: that a certain Lala Motichand from Delhi, whose father was a long-time creditor of Nawab Mansoor Ali's, was to visit.

Not particularly versed in the ways of the world, Mange Ram ignored the discussions on what this visit potentially meant for nawab sahab's landholdings. They were to be usurped. He focused instead on the tidings that Lala Motichand, a young man of twenty, was an amateur wrestler himself and had expressed an interest in visiting the nawab's wrestling pit and perhaps taking on one of his wrestlers. In fact what had happened was that the young Motichand, who was not much more than an enthusiastic amateur, had heard that the nawab and his family were great patrons of wrestling and that their champion wrestler was known and respected all through the region. He was keen to meet this champion and maybe learn a few holds from him and watch him perform. Somehow in the transmission this modest sentiment got transformed into a desire to fight a bout with the champion, perhaps because the humility inherent in the amateur sportsman's excitement at the prospect of meeting a professional sat ill with the haughtiness inherent in the rich creditor's superciliousness at meeting an impoverished debtor.

Distraught at the thought of losing everything he held dear,

Nawab Mansoor Ali ordered his servants to make preparations for the bout he thought Lala Motichand wanted, although he knew that unless this lala was a master wrestler whose name he had never heard before – an unlikely possibility – there could be only one outcome to the fight. As the lala's visit approached, the bout and the debt chased each other in the echoing chambers of Mansoor Ali's sleep-deprived mind. Eventually, the day before the bout, faced with the prospect of a devastating ruination, in the form of Lala Motichand, already a guest in his house, Nawab Mansoor Ali summoned Mange Ram. His intention was to advise his wrestler to lose to the lala, in the forlorn hope that a victory in the pit would make Motichand a more amenable negotiator. Maybe the haveli and a few acres of land could be salvaged, enough perhaps for the nawab and his family to get by with a somewhat diminished lifestyle. But one look at the young man's sparkling, worshipful eyes, and the nawab realised that it would be easier for him to live in a hovel than to command Mange Ram to lose. 'Fight well,' he said. 'My honour goes into the pit with you.'

What Lala Motichand had probably envisioned as a friendly contest, a quiet turn on the mud during which he would learn a few tricks from a respected professional and also get a chance to show off the skills he had worked very hard, by his own reckoning, at acquiring, took on a different colour by the time the day of the bout arrived. Word having gone around, people from the nearby villages had gathered to watch their local hero take on the rich man from Delhi who had crushed the local nawab under the weight of an unrepayable debt. Food stalls and bangle sellers and other attractions arrived too, giving the appearance of an impromptu mela. When Motichand appeared, his slim, fair body oiled up, his seconds massaging his muscles into readiness, the assembled crowd nodded approval at his handsome face but realised immediately that he was no match for the dark and powerful Mange Ram.

'Ya Ali madad,' Motichand called out, bending down to touch the mud as he entered the ring, prompting a quick-witted member of the audience who had incorrectly assumed, like everyone else, that the

nawab had instructed Mange Ram to lose, to turn to his companion and ask rhetorically: 'Is he asking Hazrat Ali for help or Mansoor Ali?' Slow-witted though he was, Mange Ram had realised that it was probably not a good idea to defeat someone as powerful as Lala Motichand. Just before the bout, Yusuf had said to him: 'Hazrat Ali has said that the strongest is he who subdues himself.' When Mange Ram turned to Khuda Baksh for help in deciphering this cryptic utterance, his senior ustad had looked away in shame. Mange Ram understood then what Yusuf meant to say, and also what the nawab had really wanted to say.

It would be unfair to say that the sight of the crowd milling around the wrestling floor and the sounds of their cheers got the better of Mange Ram, although he did feel a certain ambivalence at having to fail in front of an audience who had only ever seen him succeed. Later, when he tried to explain what happened he would claim strenuously that he had wanted to lose. Although not one person he said this to believed him, he had really wanted to find a way to lose. The truth was that his body, like the bodies of all those who train for a purely physical vocation, followed the logic that long hours of practice had ingrained in it and his mind, which had not then and never would gain control of his body, did not have the time to react. Perhaps in the first moment when they grappled if Motichand had shown even a glimmer of the skill and strength that was needed to make a wrestler of Mange Ram's stature take notice, things might have turned out differently. As it happened, a few seconds after the bout began it ended with Lala Motichand pinned to the floor and Mange Ram sitting atop him.

Gracious in defeat, Lala Motichand awarded Mange Ram a gold coin and told Mansoor Ali before he left: 'If only this boy could come to Delhi, he could become a famous champion.' By this time the terms of Mansoor Ali's debt had been renegotiated, leaving the nawab his haveli and a few fruit orchards whose income could possibly sustain his family unless unseasonal rains destroyed the crops. And so the nawab – whose mind and body were throbbing in a combination of pain and relief, like a man who thought he was to be guillotined but

has only had his arm cut off instead – understood that the speculative statement about Mange Ram's future was actually an order.

Nawab Mansoor Ali sent the boy to Delhi where, rather than being installed in an akhara as was his due, Mange Ram was shown a corner in an outhouse where a few of the unmarried male servants of Lala Motichand's household slept. On orders from Ganeshi, a senior minion of the household, who neither paid much heed to Mange Ram's claims of being an important guest of the master of the house nor seemed to know when that master would grant him an audience, Mange Ram was kept busy from morning to night, either loading and unloading goods at a godown or at one of the lala's shops, or chopping and peeling vegetables for the cooks in the kitchen. Taken by surprise at the changed circumstances of his life, intimidated by the large urban household he suddenly found himself in and by Ganeshi's domineering manner, Mange Ram went through the motions mechanically for the first few days. Then he began to worry about his fitness. He tried a few times to wake up early and go through at least some part of the exercise routines that had earlier lasted the better part of the day, but inevitably one or other of the older servants of the house would spot him and set him some task to do.

Seeing him do his push-ups, the same push-ups for which he had once been celebrated, they would mock him. 'Mange Pehelwan,' one would say, 'these potatoes won't get peeled if you keep bowing to the sun like that.' Another would sneak up behind him and kick him in the ankle, throwing him off balance so he landed flat on his face. Even when he was left alone for an hour or so he found that he was not able to do the exercises that had been second nature to him earlier. The hard labour he was being put through every day had undermined his once legendary endurance and the rigorous and repetitive tasks he was set were wearing down the muscles he had so diligently built. The diet of a few rotis along with occasional oily leavings from the main table was a poor substitute for the milk, dry fruit and eggs that Nawab Mansoor Ali had made available to him in large quantities every day.

For a few weeks Mange Ram struggled through the days, then he gathered up his courage and insisted on an audience with Lala Motichand, refusing to take no for an answer till finally Ganeshi had to relent.

'Pehelwan Mange Ram,' Motichand said, when Mange was ushered into his presence, 'I hope you are being treated well in my house.'

It had been weeks since Mange Ram had heard a kind word. Tears pricked his eyes. 'Huzoor,' he said in a heavy-throated voice, 'huzoor, you are my father and mother. Please do justice by me.'

'Who has done you injustice?' asked Lala Motichand.

A less simple-minded person than Mange Ram would have realised the true wretchedness of his position and used the audience with Lala Motichand to negotiate a slightly better situation. But Mange Ram chose to, or perhaps the hardship that he had been put through without warning forced him to, complain about how the servants had mistreated him, how he got no time to exercise and how his diet was inappropriate for a wrestler of his calibre. He wept and moaned and, taking Lala Motichand's silence for sympathy, ignoring the increasingly dark looks he was getting from Ganeshi, listed in great detail all the ignominies that had been done to him.

Lala Motichand sat and watched the mighty champion who had felled him in one easy move blubbering and weeping like a child, and he felt some remorse. The boy had suffered enough, he thought, and was going to suffer more – he knew that Ganeshi and his men would not let this litany of complaints in front of their master go unpunished. And so, when Mange Ram was done speaking, Motichand turned to Ganeshi and said: 'From tomorrow, Mange Ram will be my personal servant. He will help Kashiram and learn from him.' Then he looked down at the ledgers that were lying open in front of him. Mange Ram stood waiting expectantly until finally Ganeshi had to gesture to him that he should leave.

That night Mange Ram was woken up rudely by four of the household servants, three of whom held him down while the fourth,

Ganeshi, beat him with a cane – 'The next time you complain about us to lalaji, we will kill you' – till he fell unconscious. The next morning he moved to his new quarters inside the main house.

Kashiram, Lala Motichand's personal servant, was a kindly man who had begun his career as a helper in the small provisions store that Lala Nemichand used to run. When Motichand finished his schooling and began working actively with his father, Nemichand had deputed Kashiram to work for him knowing that his trusted servant would keep an eye on the young boy, and also keep the father informed of the son's doings. Motichand loved the old servant like he loved his own father and knew that Kashiram reported back to his father. But not only did he not resent him for this, he actually approved of his father's prudence in this matter and made a note to organise something similar himself as and when he had sons and they grew older. He knew that his father's primary concerns were that he made no foolish business decisions and that he was discreet about his personal misdemeanours. Both these were concerns that were as treasured a part of his legacy from his father as the blood that ran in his veins. But several years had passed since Kashiram had become his valet and, although he still loved the old man, Motichand felt that he was not up to some of the tasks that were part of his duties.

Besides, Mange Ram was an impressive specimen of manhood and, like an expensive watch or a gold-knobbed cane, his presence by Lala Motichand's side would add to the lala's grandeur, with the additional benefit that if a physically threatening situation were to develop, or a weighty message was to be sent to a reluctant recipient, Mange Ram would come in handy in a way that an expensive watch or a gold-knobbed cane could not. For example, when lalaji visited one of the two or three houses in Chawri Bazaar where his favourite whores lived, it was preferable to have a strongman by his side who could deal with the kinds of problems that could arise in a disreputable part of town at night. Sometimes when Motichand called on debtors, especially those who lived outside Delhi, he felt the need for an attendant whose physical presence could act as a deterrent to an unreasonable

act by a desperate man. Neither of these situations had ever turned uncomfortable, but Motichand felt that having someone like Mange Ram by his side would ensure that if they ever did, he had someone to turn to. Kashiram too now required a younger hand to help him in his duties. Moreover, the sight of tears in the poor wrestler's eyes had made him feel something like pity and, for a moment, the vengefulness that had seized hold of him as he lay pinned to the mud in the wrestling ring had abated.

Like Yusuf Mohammad before him Kashiram was not only to be replaced by Mange Ram but was also given the task of training the young man for this role. And like Yusuf Mohammad, who had the example and words of Imam Ali and his ustad to guide him in the noble path of wrestling and to be a worthy ustad when the hallowed portals of ustad-hood opened to him, Kashiram too, who had attended the akhara as a boy, followed the way shown by Hanuman. He worshipped Ram's greatest devotee with a devotion that Mange Ram recognised and immediately warmed to. Through the day Kashiram, as he went about his myriad tasks, kept up a tuneful recitation of the Hanuman Chalisa under his breath. *Buddhiheen tanu janike sumiro pavan kumar, bal buddhi bidya dehu mohi harahu kales bikar* (Knowing my body to be without intelligence, I think of the son of the Wind, Grant me strength, intelligence and knowledge, rid me of ills and impurities) was his favourite doha, which, whenever it came up in the freewheeling schedule that he set for his recitations, was the one fragment that he always said out loud – maintaining his silence only if he was in the presence of Lala Motichand.

Mange Ram who had in his earlier avatar as a wrestler worshipped Hanuman as an embodiment of wisdom and strength – encouraged to do so by his primary ustad who was a Muslim – realised at some level that his own devotion to Hanuman had been merely ritualistic when compared to the old man's. Kashiram's unwavering, and unending, devotion to Hanuman now forced him to confront that aspect of Hanuman's persona that he had so far regarded only as a means to demonstrate his wisdom and strength: the aspect of service. Buoyed

by the kind of elation that often arises when great difficulty appears to have passed, he embraced the notion of service that Kashiram was offering him and, just like that, he stopped thinking of Lala Motichand as the inferior wrestler he had pinned down in seconds, or the possible wealthy patron who could make a famous champion out of him, or the poor loser who was having his revenge on him. He began to think of him as his lord and master, his Ram.

Mange Ram threw himself into his new role with vigour, shining shoes twice as long as they needed to be shined, polishing the golden knob of his master's cane till it gleamed. Riding astride his master's coach, his moustache polished to sharp points on each side, calling out to bystanders to give way to the magnificent pair that the coachman had harnessed, he felt like he would burst with pride. When he went along with Motichand, whether it was to a British officer's bungalow or to a business associate's office or to a brothel, he expected to be treated by the servants he met there with the respect that was due to Lala Motichand's man, an expectation that was rarely belied. Filled with a new sense of power and purpose, Mange Ram willingly and eagerly became an embodiment of his master's prestige. Mange Ram became a servant.

Equipped now with a newly found confidence, and still blessed with an impressive physique, Mange Ram, who had always nodded in agreement when his ustads said that keeping his loincloth tight was critical to success as a wrestler, caught the eye of Sahdeyi, who was the de facto head of the female staff in Lala Motichand's establishment. Since the birth of her second son, Lala Motichand's wife, Ashadevi, had been in poor health, falling ill repeatedly, rarely leaving her room. Sahdeyi, who had come to the house as a nurse for Lala Motichand's older son, had taken advantage of this situation to assert her control over the female quarters, successfully appropriating the authority of her increasingly reclusive mistress, consolidating her primacy by choosing not to squash the rumours – which were, in any case, true – that Lala Motichand occasionally partook of her sexual favours. Her husband had left her soon after their wedding to join a nautanki company where

he performed dressed up in women's clothing on stage and, sometimes, offstage too. And so, being neither unwed, nor married, nor widowed, Sahdeyi found that the rules that constrained most women did not apply to her. She made up rules that suited her and she did it with such authority that even powerful male servants like Ganeshi were unable to take recourse to what should have been her fatal weakness – that she was a woman – to subdue her.

The queen of all she surveyed, Sahdeyi casually swept aside the vestiges of the former wrestler's weakly held celibacy and decided to take Mange Ram as her consort. While Yusuf Mohammad and Khuda Baksh had directed Mange Ram down an exalted path that led to a majestic ideal wherein body and mind came together as one, and Kashiram too, in his way, taught his apprentice to follow a higher calling, Sahdeyi, whose expertise lay mainly in darker arts, trained Mange Ram in the perfidious craft of household politics. She taught him how to undermine a senior servant by innuendo placed in the master's ear at carefully chosen times, how to impress and intimidate new recruits or win them over with flattery or favours before your rivals did, how to use blackmail to make someone do your bidding but not overuse it to the point that the victim loses his fear. 'Our masters need us more than they admit,' she told him. 'Make them realise it without ever saying it. Make them trust that you will never use this power against them. Then you can do whatever you please, get whatever you want.'

Mange Ram wanted two things: revenge against Ganeshi and another attempt at becoming a champion wrestler. The latter being outside her capabilities, Sahdeyi, wise enough to realise that the true recipients of the anger Mange Ram was directing at Ganeshi were Lala Motichand and Fate but too focused on impressing her lover with her powers to dissuade him from pursuing an undeserved vengeance, turned her attention to the former. 'Wait for the right time,' she told Mange Ram, and set her plan in motion the very next day by stealing a bowl of kheer from the kitchen and giving it to Ganeshi's daughter, who was just twelve at the time. Over the years – Sahdeyi had the

patience to wait years to achieve her goal – she slowly won the child over. By the time Ganeshi's daughter turned sixteen, Ashadevi had died of pneumonia and Sahdeyi had become like a second mother to Lala Motichand's children. Lala Motichand, who had cared responsibly for his wife and even, despite occasional indiscretions, loved her in the early years of their marriage, had tired of the long illness that slowly killed Ashadevi. Sahdeyi's efficiency and trustworthiness relieved him of the tiresome prospect of a second marriage and so he happily left his children's upbringing to her, thereby raising her status in the household even further. By this time Ganeshi's daughter had become very attached to Sahdeyi, who showered her with gifts and, through carefully placed casual-sounding remarks, had turned her against her parents. When the girl's parents started talking about getting her married, Sahdeyi made her move. Three months later the household was rocked by the news that Ganeshi's daughter was pregnant.

Sahdeyi, who had had a few abortions herself – 'Why bring bastard children into this cruel world?' – helped Ganeshi have the problem solved. Desperate and embarrassed, Ganeshi had a wedding arranged with a boy from a poor family in a village neighbouring his own. The boy's family were aware of what had happened, but the amount of money Ganeshi paid them, and the promise of more to come, helped them focus on the bride's good qualities and ignore the questionable ones. A few weeks after Ganeshi's daughter moved away from Delhi to begin a life filled with physical hardship and frequent taunts from her in-laws and neighbours, Mange Ram told Ganeshi that he was the one who had impregnated the girl. Every other servant in the house had also suddenly become aware of the parenthood of the aborted fetus.

Ganeshi was furious but he had no recourse: with no proof to offer, Ganeshi could not publicly accuse Lala Motichand's most trusted servant of such a vile crime. Besides, he knew that taking his case to the lala would simply spread the news of his misfortune further, thereby deepening it, and even if the lala did believe him over Mange Ram's denials, Motichand would probably suggest that the matter be hushed up, at most offering Ganeshi some money to ease his pain. Completely

defeated by Sahdeyi's evil scheme, Ganeshi left Lala Motichand's service, saying that his parents were old now and they needed him to be by their side. Lala Motichand, thinking that the shock of his daughter's pregnancy and the hurried and expensive wedding had broken Ganeshi's spirit, gave him a good amount of money and bid him a fond farewell, unaware of the machinations that had conjured this sudden turn in Ganeshi's life and underlined Sahdeyi and Mange Ram's position as the leaders of the servants of his household.

Along the way Mange Ram acquired a wife who lived in the village and served his parents. He impregnated her whenever he visited home and she bore him a string of children of which a few daughters and two sons survived. When he came home to his village from Delhi, bringing with him gifts for all his kin and his neighbours, Mange Ram was treated like a visiting dignitary. People would tell stories of his wrestling prowess and of Lala Motichand's untold wealth. 'Come to the akhara, Mange bhaiyya,' was a regular request, but he always demurred. Since his ascension within Motichand's household his diet had improved and he had found some time to exercise, but he was nowhere near the shape that he needed to be in to enter the ring. Then, one year, a cousin requested Mange Ram to bless his son before he entered the akhara for the first time. Smearing mud on the young body of the twelve-year-old who had been an infant in his arms not so long ago, Mange Ram suddenly felt the rush of time passing him by.

When he returned to Delhi, he had a small mud pit dug in one corner of the courtyard of a small house adjoining Lala Motichand's haveli that was part of the lala's property. Waking much before dawn, he went there every day and tried to build his body back to what it had once been. While the strength was still there, maybe greater than what it had been when he was nineteen, his thirty-four-year-old body had lost its suppleness. And although he knew his body as well as any man can know his own body, he did not know it as well as Khuda Baksh and Yusuf Mohammad had known it. He realised more strongly than he ever had when he was under the tutelage of his ustads that the observant and experienced eye of a teacher can see

a pupil's faults clearly and to their full extent in a way that even the most self-aware and knowledgeable person cannot see his own faults. The teacher's deep and pure love for his pupil ensured that he would keep those shameful shortcomings hidden from the world with as much care as a compromised person would hide his own flaws. And through the force of his wisdom and the power of his objectivity the teacher could help his pupil eliminate faults more effectively than the pupil could do himself.

Each morning in the days that Mange Ram struggled to regain what he had lost he yearned for his two ustads, repeating *bandau guru pad padma paraga, suruchi subaas saras anuraga* (I praise the dust of my guru's feet, the dust that tastes beautiful, smells wonderful and is drenched in love) in the hope that Tulsi's loving and reverent words, if spoken often enough, would make his ustads magically appear or transport him back to the time and place where he was held secure in their benevolence. Although Mange Ram wept for his gurus like he had never wept for the father that he had left behind, all his tears could not moisten the arid plain that time had made of his life. Nonetheless, he toiled on till eventually one day he pulled a muscle in his back and was racked with such terrible pain that he could do little but lie flat on his back for ten days.

When Mange Ram regained his feet, Lala Motichand summoned him and, sending the other servants out of the room, spoke to him gently: 'Look, Mange Ram, our human lives are divided into stages and for each stage there are certain things that are appropriate and certain things that are not. I understand why you did what you did, and although you tried to hide it I knew all along what was going on in that other house. But I did not put an end to it, nor am I putting an end to it now. I only ask you, as a friend and as another former wrestler, a far inferior one to you, to consider if what you are doing is appropriate to your stage in life.' Perhaps if Lala Motichand had flown into a rage and ordered him to put an end to his folly, Mange Ram would have felt like continuing it, but the kind tone of his master's voice, and his reference, for the first time in all the years that had

passed, to that one very short and fateful bout the two of them had fought, demolished whatever resolve the ten days of excruciating pain had left behind. He had the pit covered up.

Mange Ram began to fill the void left by the departure of his misguided anachronistic ambition with food, eating more than he used to when he was an active wrestler. He stole from the kitchen or spent his own money to salve a seemingly insatiable hunger that he initially thought had come about due to the sudden increase in physical activity the renewed training had brought but that he continued to attempt to sate even when this explanation had lost whatever little validity it had. Unable to satisfy his hunger he found himself consumed by an unusually strong urge to have sex, pestering Sahdeyi each night, and Sahdeyi, who was now older and not as inclined to sex as she had once been, found that he would stay inside her longer and longer and often stop without having reached orgasm. When Sahdeyi, exasperated by his continued listlessness and his insatiable need for infructuous intercourse, put an end to their liaison he turned his attentions to the younger recruits of the household.

As the years passed his body became a large and lumpy mockery of what it had once been and his reputation as a lecher grew. His digestion worsened, his liver grew weaker and his knees began to give way. Eventually Lala Motichand decided that the obese libertine Mange Ram, whose liver was keeping him in bed for longer and longer stretches of time, was a liability, and suggested to him that he should go back to his village and send a son to Delhi in his place. Having no option but to accept this suggestion Mange Ram returned home almost three decades after he had left it, his reputation as a champion wrestler of yore still alive in the winding conversations that took place amongst retirees every day in the village chaupal, conversations that ended with someone saying, 'And look at him now, so fat he can't get off his charpai to go to the fields in the morning.'

So it was that Omvati, Mange Ram's younger son Parsadi's wife, arrived as a teenaged bride in her husband's village to find that her husband was to leave for Delhi ten days after they were wed

and although she had no mother-in-law to contend with, Parsadi's mother having quietly passed away some time before Mange Ram's superannuation, she did have a largely bedridden father-in-law whose care was immediately assigned to her by her elder sister-in-law, Radharani. Serving her in-laws, Omvati had been told, was her duty as a wife and, distressed though she was at having been more or less abandoned by her husband within days of being wed, she warmed to the task of looking after her father-in-law uncomplainingly, taking care of Mange Ram's meals, helping him to the bathroom, organizing and administering the various mixtures and potions the village doctor prescribed.

Mange Ram was a most grateful patient, always praising her dedication, occasionally lacing that praise with implicit and explicit criticism of Radharani's cooking, her way of speaking, her laughing and talking with young men around the village, in an attempt to win over his younger daughter-in-law by playing on her sense of rivalry with her elder sister-in-law. This rivalry barely existed in fact but its eventual flowering appeared to be an inevitability for Mange Ram, who had survived, flourished actually, for years in a large, wealthy household that had, nonetheless, rid itself of him once his utility was over.

Then one evening while leaning over Mange Ram to settle his bedclothes, Omvati felt something on her breast. Confused, she tried to flick off the creature that she thought had jumped on to her, only to find that it was her father-in-law's hand. 'Babuji! What are you doing?'

'Sorry, sorry, bahu,' said Mange Ram. 'It happened by accident.'

But the accidents kept repeating and Omvati began to realise the full import of the insinuations that Radharani sometimes made about the old man. He must have done something similar with her, she realised, and this filled her with both a sense of greater connection with the older woman, who had always been kind to her without being overly friendly, and also anger that Radharani had thrown her into this situation without explicitly warning her about it. Finally, one morning when she was sitting in the yard cleaning the rice with

her sister-in-law, Omvati drummed up the courage to say something. 'Babuji's hands wander sometimes,' she said.

Radharani looked up from her task. 'What did you say?' she asked.

'Nothing,' said Omvati.

'Babuji's hands wander sometimes,' repeated Radharani. 'Is that what you said?'

'Yes, didi,' said Omvati.

'What do you do then?' Radharani asked.

'I just remove them,' said Omvati.

'Did you tell him not to do it?'

'I did,' said Omvati. 'He always says it was an accident.'

'That's good,' said Radharani. 'You did the right thing.'

'But, didi, it isn't right what he is doing.'

'Let people who are wiser than you decide what is right and what is wrong,' Radharani said, firmly but not unkindly. 'Don't forget that we eat because that man worked as another man's servant all his life.'

'But now my husband is . . .'

'Oh, I see,' said Radharani, her tone growing harsh. 'You think now that your husband has taken his father's place you will rule this house. Don't forget the land that Lala Motichand gave your father-in-law, the land for which he begged and wheedled for so many years, is tilled by my husband while your husband enjoys the comforts of Delhi.'

'Didi, I didn't mean it that way,' said Omvati.

'Look,' said Radharani, her voice softening again. 'I already told you that you did the right thing by removing his hand. What you are doing wrong is talking about it now. Leave it, let it go. How long does that man have in this world anyway? He goes today, he goes tomorrow. Till then, just keep your mouth shut.'

The next day Omvati took out a coin from her box and went to the post office. But when the writer asked her what she wanted to write in the letter to her husband, she realised that she could not say what she wanted to say in front of this man. So she took her money back and went home.

The occasional accidents turned quotidian. Mange Ram began

to ask Omvati to massage his legs, each time urging her to massage a little further up his thighs, sometimes leaving his dhoti carelessly undone so that she could see his genitals, wrinkled but noticeably tumescent. Every time her hands moved up he would encourage her: 'Very good, bahu, live long, be fortunate.' The unmistakable aura of lust in his voice transformed the traditional blessing, making Omvati's flesh crawl. The sight of his large, flabby thighs, flesh falling over to the sides when he lay flat, his large, distended stomach folding over his dhoti, disgusted Omvati, sometimes almost made her retch. But somehow she went through the ordeal day after day.

Then one evening when Mange Ram took hold of a nipple through her blouse, Omvati felt something that she had not felt in all these days. The sensation swept through her body, running through her mind in a coruscating sweep that left her quivering. She felt arousal. For a moment she was still and Mange Ram, experienced hand that he was, knew instantly that he had her. With an effort he lifted his other hand and grabbed her other breast. 'Come, bahu,' he said. 'Come to me.'

Omvati pulled away from the old man's grasp.

'What happened, bahu?' he asked, his rheumy eyes gleaming at the prospect of imminent victory.

Omvati turned and walked out of the room. She went to the kitchen, picked out the sharpest knife she could find and came back into Mange Ram's room. Before he could realise what was happening she had planted the knife on his stomach and with a quick move made a cut on it about two inches long.

Mange Ram screamed out in pain. 'She has killed me. Oh god, she has killed me. Help me, someone, help me.'

Omvati put one hand over his mouth, pushing his jaw up so that he could not bite her. 'It was an accident, babuji,' she said. 'Forgive me.'

By the time Radharani and her husband came to see what had happened, Omvati had staunched the flow of blood and was bandaging the cut.

The next day Parsadi's brother wrote to Parsadi saying that it was not right to leave a new bride alone for so long, that he should get a

few days' leave as soon as possible and come and take her with him. Radharani is there to look after babuji, he said, and you also need someone to take care of your household.

In the few months that it took Parsadi to get a week off, Omvati barely exchanged a word with her father-in-law. No one mentioned what had happened, and if Mange Ram said anything about it, no one conveyed it back to Omvati. Sometimes when a neighbour or some other villager came to call on Mange Ram he would talk about how his daughters-in-law were scheming to kill him, but they dismissed his talk as part of his growing incoherence.

Perhaps if Lala Motichand had never heard of Mange Ram's wrestling prowess, it is possible that Mange Ram might have suffered through a hard and exacting life. Sooner or later his patron Mansoor Ali's money would have run out and Mange Ram's diet would have reverted to the dry rotis and occasional vegetables that his forefathers, and his own father, had eaten. Slowly, his body would have lost its tone and shape, his wrestler's strength would have declined into the sinewed musculature of a man who worked the fields tilling land owned by someone else. Instead, fate had given him a comfortable life in Delhi, where he had satisfied his appetites more fully than he could ever have imagined.

If it is that a life is evaluated by the extent to which its liver's appetites have been satisfied, Mange Ram would have been forced to admit that, despite his passage into premature old age, he had led a good life, much better than most. If it is that a man's success is to be judged by the power and agency he has possessed, it would have to be said Mange Ram enjoyed great power and agency for several years, even if it was derived from the person of Lala Motichand and buttressed by Sahdeyi's support, and could have enjoyed it for many more years if he had not let the disappointment of a failed ambition destroy him. Despite all this, lying in the courtyard of the house that had been built with the money he had earned and stolen in his years of faithful service to Lala Motichand, awaiting a death that he felt, like almost every person feels, had come before his time, Mange Ram was

tortured by a sense of failure, by a sense that his pitiful state was not due to Lala Motichand's vengeance but due to something he himself had done, by a sense that he had made some kind of mistake.

Some months after Parsadi took Omvati away to Delhi a straight-backed old man with a white beard, smartly dressed in a kurta and dhoti, appeared at the entrance to Mange Ram's courtyard.

'Ustad!' said Mange Ram as he tried to raise himself, pushing on the frame of the charpai his daughter-in-law had dragged out so that he could take some fresh air during the day. Righting his body, he dragged his buttocks on to the bamboo pole that formed one edge of his bed. He was about to hoist himself on to his right foot, something he had not done unsupported for a few months, when a thought struck him: Was he dreaming? Was he hallucinating? How could a man he had not seen for decades now be standing at his door?

'Ustad, is it really you?' he asked.

'Mange Ram,' the man replied, stepping into the courtyard. 'It is I, Yusuf Mohammad.'

'Chhote ustad!' cried Mange Ram, who had, in fact, thought it was Khuda Baksh who had come to see him. 'You should have sent word, I would have come myself.'

'I have been away,' said Yusuf. 'Lucknow, Kanpur, even Calcutta, and Rangoon. I just returned some months ago. But I have kept getting news of you.'

Mange Ram tried to raise his body off the charpai, but his arms, flabby and loose, would not take the weight and he sank back down. The effort made his head spin.

'You are not well,' Yusuf said.

'How is bade ustad?' Mange Ram asked.

'He left us for the other world several years ago,' Yusuf said. 'Did you not hear?'

'Yes,' said Mange Ram, his eyes opening and closing, a sharp pain rising in his right side. 'I had heard. I forgot.'

'Won't you touch your ustad's feet?' Yusuf asked.

'I was just going to, ustad,' said Mange Ram, and once again he

pushed with his arms against the charpai's frame. The pain in his side doubled, then trebled. He pushed down again, but his body would not move. His shoulders quivered with the strain. His wrists felt like they would snap under the pressure. 'Ya Ali madad!' he cried out, and with one final push he rose to his feet.

He stood, swaying from side to side, in front of Yusuf Mohammad. Then he hesitantly took one step forward and began to bend. Before he could reach his ustad's knee, Yusuf had taken hold of him, his arms around Mange Ram's waist like they were both in the mud pit again. Yusuf raised his disciple up, supporting him from below his shoulders.

'You are like my own son,' Yusuf Mohammad said. 'I cannot see you in such pain. So listen to what I have to say. Your time is over. Lay your body down now and give it the rest it so greatly deserves.'

A few weeks after Yusuf Mohammad visited him for the last time, Mange Ram passed away. Omvati gave birth to a son ten months later.