

change in Nature :

A LONG DRY SUMMER

Winter came and went, without so much as a drizzle. The hillside was brown all summer and the fields were bare. The old plough that was dragged over the hard ground by Bisnu's lean oxen made hardly any impression. Still, Bisnu kept his seeds ready for sowing. A good monsoon, and there would be plenty of maize and rice to see the family through the next winter.

Summer went its scorching way, and a few clouds gathered on the south-western horizon.

'The monsoon is coming,' announced Bisnu.

His sister Puja was at the small stream, washing clothes. 'If it doesn't come soon, the stream will dry up,' she said. (See, it's only a trickle this year. Remember when there were so many different flowers growing here on the banks of the stream? This year there isn't one.)

(3) 'The winter was dry. It did not even snow,' said Bisnu.

'I cannot remember another year when there was no snow,' said his mother. (Last year your father died, there was so much snow that villagers

could not light his funeral pyre for hours . . . And now there are fires everywhere.' She pointed to the next mountain, half hidden by the smoke from a forest fire.)

At night they sat outside their small house, (watching the fire spread. A red line stretched right across the mountain. Thousands of Himalayan trees were perishing in the flames. Oaks, deodars, (5) maples, pines—trees that had taken hundreds of years to grow. And now a fire started carelessly by some woodcutters had been carried up the mountain with the help of the dry grass and a

strong breeze. There was no one to put it out. It would take days to die down.)

‘If the monsoon arrives tomorrow, the fire will go out,’ said Bisnu, ever the optimist. He was only twelve, but he was the man of the house; he had to see that there was enough food for the family and for the oxen, for the big black dog and the hens.

There were clouds the next day, but they brought only a drizzle.

‘It’s just the beginning,’ said Bisnu as he placed a bucket of muddy water on the steps.

‘It usually starts with a heavy downpour,’ said his mother.

Signs of long dry summer.

(1) But there were to be no downpours that year. Clouds gathered on the horizon, but they were white and puffy and soon disappeared. True monsoon clouds would have been dark and heavy with moisture. There were other signs—

or a lack of them—that warned of a long, dry summer.)

(The birds were silent, or simply absent. The Himalayan barbet, who usually heralded the approach of the monsoon with strident calls from ⁽²⁾ the top of a spruce tree, hadn't been seen or heard.)

(And the cicadas, who played a deafening overture in the oaks at the first hint of rain, seemed to be missing altogether.) ⁽³⁾

(Puja's apricot tree usually gave them a basketful of fruit every summer. This year it produced barely a handful of apricots, lacking juice and flavour.) ⁽⁴⁾

The tree looked ready to die, its leaves curled up in despair.) Fortunately there was a store of walnuts and a binful of wheat-grain and another of rice stored from the previous year, so they would not be entirely without food; but it looked as though there would be no fresh fruit or vegetables. And there

would be nothing to store away for the following winter. Money would be needed to buy supplies in Tehri, some thirty miles distant. And there was no money to be earned in the village.

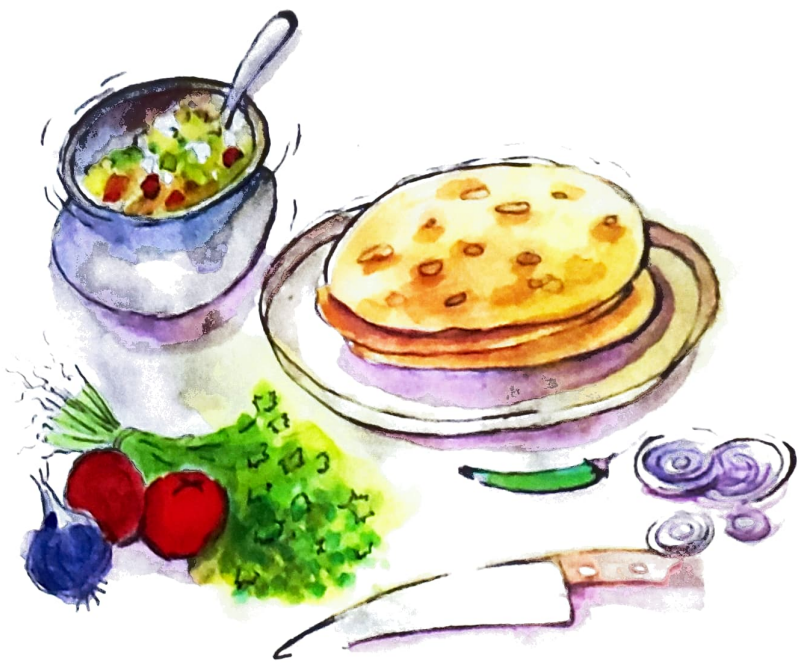
'I will go to Mussoorie and find work,' declared Bisnu. 'I will send you money from there.'

'But Mussoorie is a two-day journey by bus,' said his mother. 'There is no one there who can help you. And you may not get any work.'

'In Mussoorie there is plenty of work during the summer. Rich people come up from the plains for their holidays. It is full of hotels and shops and places where they can spend their money.'

'But they won't spend any money on you.'

'There is money to be made there. And if not, I will come home. I can walk back over the Nag Tibba mountain. It will take only two and a half days, and I will save the bus fare!'



‘Don’t go, bhai,’ pleaded Puja. ‘There will be no one to prepare your food—you will only get sick.’

But Bisnu had made up his mind, so he put a few belongings in a cloth shoulder bag, while his mother prised several rupee-coins out of a cache in the wall of their living room. Puja prepared a special breakfast of parathas and an egg scrambled with onions, the hen having laid just one for the occasion. Bisnu put some of the parathas in his

bag. Then, waving goodbye to his mother and sister, he set off down the road from the village.

After walking for a little over a mile, he reached the main highway where there was a sleepy hamlet and a bus stop. A number of villagers had come here from various directions and were waiting patiently for the bus. It was almost an hour late but they were used to that. As long as it arrived in one piece and got them safely to their destinations, they could put up with it being late. On these rough, dangerous mountain roads, it was better for a bus to be late than for it never to arrive at all. They were patient people. And although Bisnu was less patient than most, he too had learnt how to wait—for late buses and even later monsoons.



THE ROAD TO MUSSOORIE

Along the valley and over the mountains went the little bus with its load of frail humans.

How tiny we are, thought Bisnu, looking up at the towering peaks and the immensity of sky.

Each of us no more than a raindrop . . . and I wish we had a few raindrops!

There were still fires burning to the north but the road went south, where there were no forests anyway, just bare brown hillsides. Down near the river there were small paddy fields, but unfortunately rivers ran downhill and not uphill, and there was no inexpensive way in which the water could be brought up the steep slopes to the fields that depended on rainfall.

You stared out of the bus window at the river running far below. On either bank huge boulders were exposed, for the level of the water had fallen considerably during the past few months.

Deforestation

'Why are there no trees here?' he asked aloud, attracting the attention of a fellow passenger, an old man in the next seat who had been keeping up a relentless dry coughing. Even though it was a warm day, he wore a woollen cap and had wrapped an old ~~muffler~~ about his neck.

Deforestation
meaning

'There were trees here once,' he said, only too glad to talk. 'But the contractors took the deodars to make furniture and doors and beams for houses. And the pines were tapped to death for their resin. And the oaks were stripped of their leaves to feed

the cattle—you can still see a few tree-skeletons if you look hard—and the bushes that remained were finished off by the goats!')



'When did all this happen?' asked Bisnu.

When?

'A few years ago. And it's still happening in other areas, although it's forbidden now to cut down trees. The only forests that remain are in remote places where there are no roads.' A fit of coughing overtook him, but he had found a good listener and was eager to continue. 'The road helps you and me to get about, but it also makes it easier for others to do mischief. Rich men from the cities come here and buy up what they want—land, houses, trees, people!')

'What takes you to Mussoorie, Uncle?' asked Bisnu politely. He always addressed elderly people as uncle or aunt.

'I have a cough that won't go away. Perhaps they can do something for it at the hospital in Mussoorie. Doctors don't like coming to villages, you know—there's no money to be made in villages. So we

to the doctors in the towns. I had a brother who could not be cured in Mussoorie. They told him to go to Delhi. He sold his buffaloes and went to Delhi but there they told him it was too late to do anything. He died on the way back. I won't go to Delhi. I don't wish to die amongst strangers.'

'You'll get well, Uncle,' said Bisnu.

'Bless you for saying so. May you grow strong and tall like a deodar! And you? What takes you to the big town?'

'Looking for work—we need money at home.'

'It is always the same. There are many like you who must go out in search of work. But don't be led astray. Don't let your friends persuade you to go to Bombay to become a film star! It is better to be hungry in your village than to be hungry on the streets of Bombay. I had a nephew who went to Bombay. The smuggler put him to work

selling opium—the drug opium—and now he is in jail. (Keep away from the big cities, boy. Earn your money and go home.)

'I'll do that, Uncle. My mother and sister will expect me to return before the summer season is over.'

The old man nodded vigorously and began coughing again. Presently he dozed off. The interior of the bus smelt of tobacco smoke and petrol fumes, and as a result, Bisnu had a headache. He kept his face near the open window to get as much fresh air as possible, but the dust kept getting into his mouth and eyes.

Several dusty hours later the bus got into Mussoorie, honking its horn furiously at everything in sight. The passengers, looking dazed, got down and went their different ways. The old man blessed Bisnu again and then trudged off to the hospital.

Bisnu had to start looking for a job straightaway. He needed a lodging for the night, and he could not afford the cheapest of the hotels. So he went from one shop to another, and to all the little restaurants and eating places, asking for work—anything in exchange for a bed, a meal and a minimum wage.



A boy at one of the sweet shops told him there was a job at the Picture Palace, one of the town's three cinemas.

The hill station's main road was crowded with people, for the season was just starting. Most of them were tourists who had come up from Delhi and other large towns.

There were hotels everywhere, some built on concrete pillars.

'If you stand still for five minutes,' said an old resident, 'they'll build a hotel on you.'

The street lights had come on, and the shops were lighting up when Bisnu presented himself at the Picture Palace.

THE PICTURE PALACE

The man who ran the cinema's tea stall had just sacked the previous helper for his general clumsiness. Whenever he engaged a new boy (which was fairly often) he started him off with the warning:

'I will be keeping a record of all the cups and plates you break, and their cost will be deducted from your salary at the end of the month.'

As Bisnu's salary had been fixed at fifty rupees a month, he would have to be very careful if he was going to receive any of it.

'In my first month,' said Chittru, one of the three tea-stall boys, 'I broke six cups and five saucers, and my pay came to three rupees! Better be careful!'

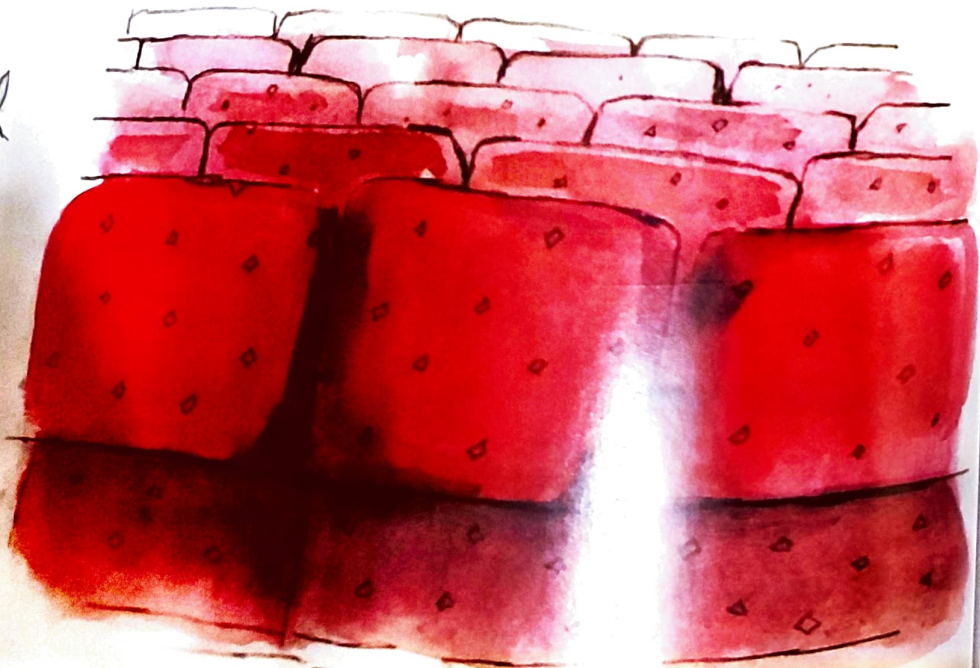


Bisnu's job was to help prepare the tea and samosas, serve these refreshments to the public during intervals in the film and later wash up the dishes. In addition to his salary, he was allowed to drink as much tea as he wanted or could hold in his stomach.

Bisnu went to work immediately, and it was not long before he was as well versed in his duties as the other two tea-boys, Chittru and Bali. Chittru was an easy-going, lazy boy who always tried to place the brunt of his work on someone else's shoulders. But he was generous and lent Bisnu five rupees during the first week. Bali, besides being a tea-boy, had the enviable job of being the poster-boy. As the cinema was closed during the mornings, Bali would be busy either in pushing the big poster board around Mussoorie or sticking posters on convenient walls.

'Posters are very useful,' he claimed. 'They prevent old walls from falling down.'

Chittru had relatives in Mussoorie and slept at their house. But both Bisnu and Bali were on their own and had to (sleep at the cinema.) After the last show the hall was locked up, so they could not settle down in the expensive seats as they would have liked. They had to sleep in the foyer, near the ticket office, where they were often at the mercy of icy winds from Tibet.



Bali made things more comfortable by setting his poster board at an angle to the wall, which gave them a little alcove where they could sleep protected from the wind. As they had only one blanket each, they placed their blankets together and rolled themselves into a tight warm ball.

During shows, when Bisnu took the tea around, there was nearly always someone who would be rude and offensive. Once when he spilt some tea on a college student's shoes, he received a hard kick on the shin. He complained to the tea-stall owner, but his employer said, 'The customer is always right. You should have got out of the way in time!'

As he began to get used to this life, Bisnu found himself taking an interest in some of the regular customers.

There was the large gentleman with the soup-strainer moustache, who drank his tea from the

saucer. As he drank, his lips worked like a suction pump, and the tea, after being stirred into a storm in the saucer, would disappear in a matter of seconds. Bisnu often wondered if there was something lurking in that untidy moustache, something that would suddenly spring out and fall upon him! The



boys took great pleasure in exchanging anecdotes about the peculiarities of some of the customers.

(Bisnu had never seen such bright, painted women before. ^{Women in town} The girls in his village, including his sister Puja, were good-looking and often sturdy; but they did not use perfumes or make-up like these more prosperous women from the towns of the plains. Wearing expensive clothes and jewellery, they never gave Bisnu more than a brief, bored glance. Older women were more inclined to notice him, favouring him with kind words and a small tip when he took away the cups and plates.) He found he could make a few rupees a month in tips; and when he received his first month's pay, he was able to send most of it home.

Chittru accompanied him to the post office and helped him to fill in the money order form. Bisnu had been to the village school, but he wasn't used

to forms and official paperwork. Chittru, a town boy, knew all about these things, even though he could only just read and write.

Walking back to the cinema, Chittru said, 'We can make more money at the limestone quarries.'

'All right, let's try it,' said Bisnu.

Chittru, who enjoyed the busy

But there was still no monsoon to speak of—
just an occasional drizzle which did little to clear
the air of the dust that blew up from the plains.

A gentle breeze brought with it the scent of pines, reminding Bisnu of his village, and he wondered how his mother and sister were faring at home. A wave of homesickness swept over him. [The hill

was just a pretty gift box

One day in the cinema Bisnu saw the old man who had been with him on the bus. He greeted him like a long-lost friend. At first the old man, who was short-sighted, did not recognize the boy, but when Bisnu asked him if he had recovered from his illness, the old man remembered and said, 'So you are still in Mussoorie, boy. That's good. I thought you might have gone down to Delhi to make more



money.' He added that he was a little better and that he was undergoing a course of treatment at the hospital.

Bisnu brought him a cup of tea and refused to take any money for it; it could be included in his own quota of free tea. When the show was over, the old man went his way, and Bisnu did not see him again.

In September the town began to empty. The taps were running dry or giving out just a trickle of muddy water. A thick mist lay over the mountain for days on end, but there was no rain. When the mists cleared, an autumn wind came whispering through the deodars above the town.

At the end of the month the manager of the Picture Palace gave everyone a week's notice and a week's pay and announced that (the cinema would be closing for the winter.)

CLOUDS OF DUST

Bali said, 'I'm going to Delhi to find work. I'll come back next summer. What about you, Bisnu, why don't you come with me? It's easier to find work in Delhi.'

'I'm staying with Chittru,' said Bisnu. 'We may work at the quarries.'

'I like the big towns,' said Bali. 'I like shops and people and lots of noise. I will never go back to my village. There is no money there, no fun.'

Bali made a bundle of his things and set out for the bus stand. Bisnu bought himself a pair of cheap shoes, for the old ones had fallen to pieces. With what was left of his money, he sent another money order home. Then he and Chittru set out for the limestone quarries, an eight-mile walk from Mussoorie.



They knew they were nearing the quarries when they saw clouds of limestone dust hanging in the air. The dust hid the next mountain from view. When they did see the mountain, they found that the top of it was missing—blasted away by dynamite to enable the quarriers to get at the rich strata of limestone rock below the surface.)

(The skeletons of a few trees remained on the lower slopes. Almost everything else had gone—grass, flowers, shrubs, birds, butterflies, grasshoppers, ladybirds. A rock lizard popped its head out of a crevice to look at the intruders. Then, like some prehistoric survivor, it scuttled back into its underground shelter.)

'I used to come here when I was small,' announced Chittru cheerfully.

'Were the quarries here then?'

'Oh, no. My friends and I—we used to come for the strawberries. They grew all over this mountain. Wild strawberries, but very tasty.'

'Where are they now?' asked Bisnu, looking around at the devastated hillside.

'All gone,' said Chittru. 'Maybe there are some on the next mountain.'

Even as they approached the quarries, a blast shook the hillside. Chittru pulled Bisnu under an overhanging rock to avoid the shower of stones that pelted down on the road. As the dust enveloped

Bisnu, he felt a fit of coughing, his eyes smarted

Chittru, who was older and bigger than Bisnu, was immediately taken on as a labourer; but the quarry foreman took one look at Bisnu and said, 'You're too small. You won't be able to break stones or lift those heavy rocks and load them into the trucks. Be off, boy. Find something else to do.'

He was offered a job in the labourer's canteen, but he'd had enough of making tea and washing dishes. He was about to turn around and walk back to Mussoorie when he felt a heavy hand descend on his shoulder; he looked up to find a grey-bearded turbaned Sikh looking down at him in some amusement.

'I need a helper for my truck,' he said. 'The work is easy, but the hours are long!'

Bisnu responded immediately to the man's gruff but jovial manner.

'What will you pay?' he asked.

‘Fifteen rupees a day, and you’ll get food and a bed at the depot.’

‘As long as I don’t have to cook the food,’ said Bisnu.

The truck driver laughed. ‘You might prefer to do so, once you’ve tasted the depot food. Are you coming on my truck? Make up your mind.’

‘I’m your man,’ said Bisnu; and waving goodbye to Chittru he followed the Sikh to his truck.

THE LOUDEST MOTOR HORN

A horn blared, shattering the silence of the mountains, and the truck came round the bend in the road. A herd of goats scattered left and right.

The goatherds cursed as a cloud of dust enveloped them, and then the truck had left them behind and was rattling along the bumpy, unmetalled road to the quarries.

At the wheel of the truck, stroking his grey moustache with one hand, sat Pritam Singh. It was his own truck. He had never allowed anyone else to drive it. (Every day he made two trips to the quarries, carrying truckloads of limestone back to the depot at the bottom of the hill. He was paid by the trip, and he was always anxious to get in two trips every day.)

Sitting beside him was Bisnu, his new cleaner. In less than a month Bisnu had become an experienced hand at looking after trucks, riding

in them, and even sleeping in them. He got on well with Pritam, the grizzled fifty-year-old Sikh, who boasted of two well-off sons—one a farmer in the Punjab, the other a wine merchant in far-off London. He could have gone to live with either of them, but his sturdy independence kept him on the road in his battered old truck.

Pritam pressed hard on his horn. There was no one on the road—neither beast nor man—but Pritam was fond of his horn and liked blowing it. He boasted that it was the loudest horn in northern India. Although it struck terror into the hearts of all who heard it—for it was louder than the trumpeting of an elephant—it was music to Pritam's ears.

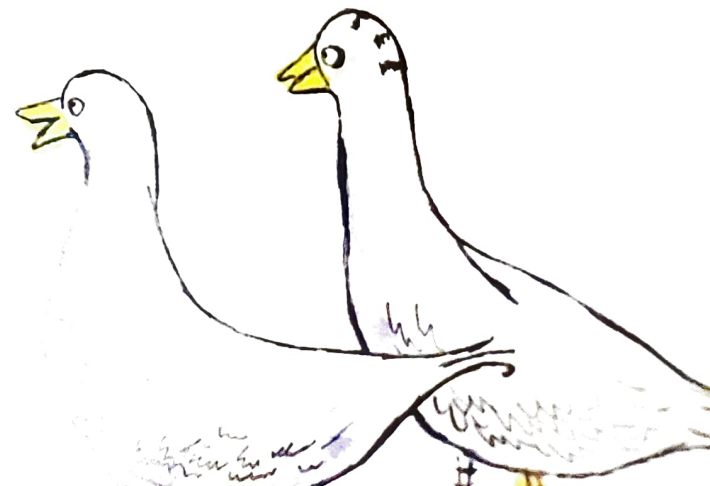
Pritam treated Bisnu as an equal, and a friendly banter had grown between them during their many trips together.

'One more year on this bone-breaking road,' said Pritam, 'and then I'll sell my truck and retire.'

'But who will buy such a shaky old truck?' said Bisnu. 'It will retire before you do!'

'Now don't be insulting, boy. She's only twenty years old—there are still a few years left in her!' And, as though to prove it, he blew the horn again. Its strident sound echoed and re-echoed down the mountain gorge. A pair of wildfowl burst from the bushes and fled to more silent regions.

Pritam's thoughts went to his dinner.



'Haven't had a good meal for days,' he grumbled.

'Haven't had a good meal for weeks,' said Bisnu, although in fact he looked a little healthier than when he had worked at the cinema's tea stall.



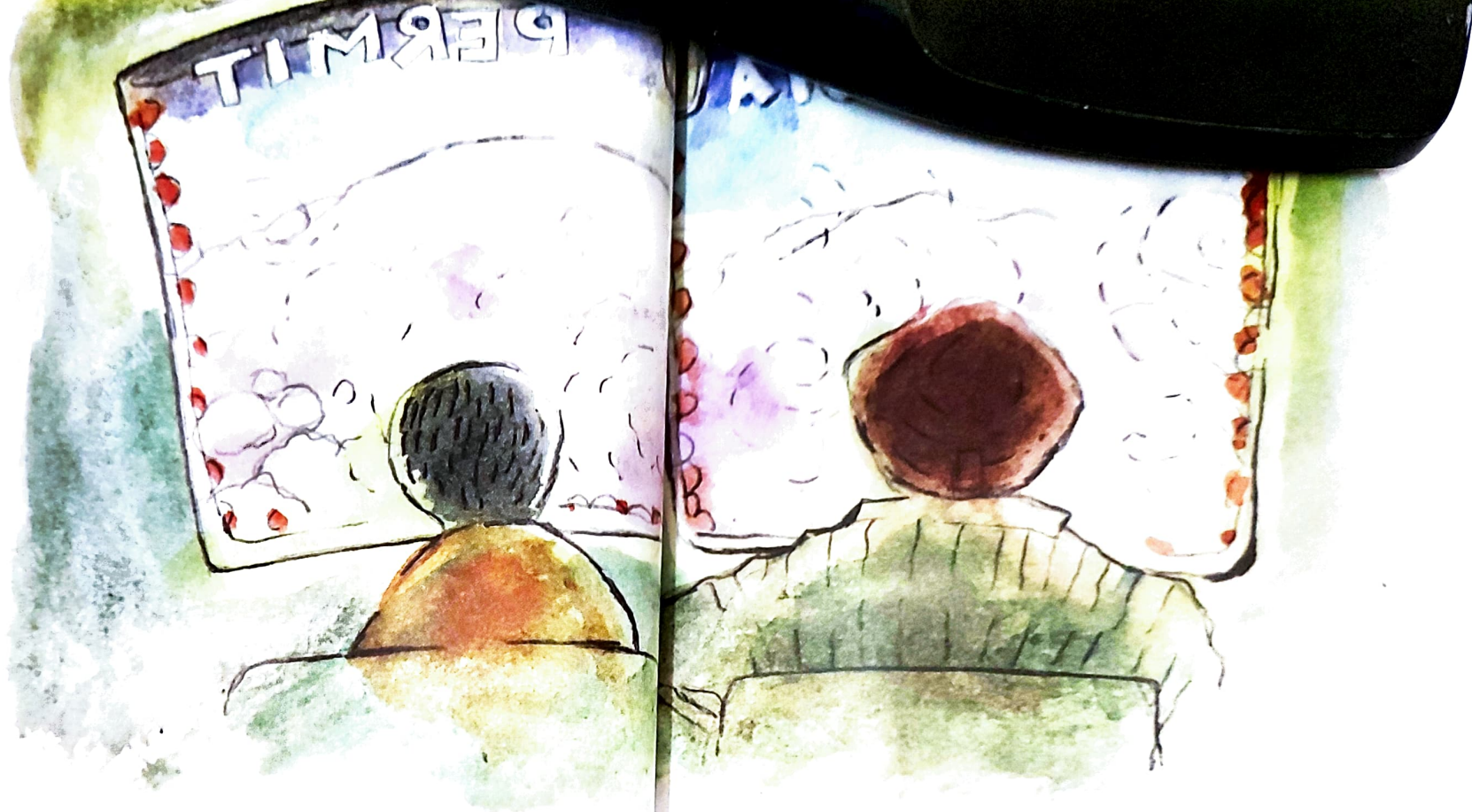
'Tonight I'll give you a meal in a good hotel. Tandoori chicken and pilau rice.' He sounded his horn again as though to put a seal on his promise. Then he slowed down, because the road had become narrow and precipitous, and trotting ahead of them was a train of mules.

As the horn blared, one mule ran forward, another ran backwards. One went uphill, another went downhill. Soon there were mules all over the place. Pritam cursed the mules, and the mule drivers cursed Pritam; but he had soon left them far behind.

Along this range, all the hills were bare and dry. Most of the forest had long since disappeared.

'Are your hills as bare as these?' asked Pritam.

'No, we still have some trees,' said Bisnu. 'Nobody has started blasting the hills as yet. In front of our house there is a walnut tree which gives us



two baskets of walnuts every year. And there are apricot and other fruit trees in the village. But it was a bad year for fruit. There was no rain. And the stream is too far.)

'It will rain soon,' said Pritam. 'I can smell rain.'

It is coming from the north. The winter will be early.'

Dust 'It will settle the dust, I hope. I'm tired of dust.'
(Dust was everywhere. The truck was full of it. The leaves of the shrubs and the few trees were

thick with it. Bisnu could feel the dust under his eyelids and in his mouth. And as they approached the quarries, the dust increased. But it was a different kind of dust now—whiter, stinging the eyes, irritating the nostrils.)

They had been blasting all morning.

'Let's wait here,' said Pritam, bringing the truck to a halt.

They sat in silence, staring through the windscreen at the scarred cliffs only a short distance down the road. There was a sharp crack of explosives, and the hillside blossomed outwards. Earth and rocks hurtled down the mountain.

Blasting the hills

Bisnu watched in awe as shrubs and small trees were flung into the air. It always frightened him—not so much the sight of the rocks bursting asunder, as the trees being flung aside and destroyed. He thought of the trees at home—the walnut, the

chestnuts, the oak
if one day they were
mountain range
particular range
the choking dust



chestnuts, the oaks and pines—and wondered if one day they would suffer the same fate, if his mountain range would become a desert like this particular range. No trees, no grass, no water, only the choking dust of mines and quarries.

