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GOING HOME IN THE PANDEMIC

THE PRIME MINISTER GAVE A SPEECH ON TELEVISION, after which everyone had four hours before things shut down all over the country. *Only for three weeks, and by then things will be okay*. The prime minister, and DeMello was no fan, knew everything, especially about this new illness that had closed down so many countries already.

Minutes after the speech, the president of the residents' association in DeMello's building emailed everyone, telling them that after the next morning domestic helpers would not be allowed in. *It is advised that matters with your servants are resolved urgently. We must listen to the prime minister*, the email ended. DeMello knew then he had to urge Diya to leave soon. It was already evening, and by morning things would be different.

From his balcony on the eighth floor, DeMello could see the slum just outside the wall. Diya, his domestic helper for the last three years, lived in one of those shacks. These days, ever since his wife had passed on, Diya was sometimes the only person he spoke to. He told her of things he read from the newspaper, stopping only when he saw the flicker of boredom on her face. But he liked listening to her talk about her life in the slum, the news from her village near Ranchi, and sometimes the WhatsApp forwards that she took very seriously, but these he always dismissed with a brief laugh.

There was a stillness at this time of day. Everyone had returned home from work, and there were lights on in every house. In the slum, he made out the thin high flames of stoves outside, the blue flashes of gasoline lamps. There was every chance that all this would dim the next day, and things would go quiet. He felt the hush of anticipation, the tension of what was to come.

DeMello knew he was stocked up for some days, and the next morning he would call up the pharmacist for his medicines. There were things he could manage on his own. He knew how to rustle up a meal in minutes—some instant noodles, rice, potato curry, or a sandwich. The last time he had

cooked for himself was when his wife was in the hospital, but he had never been much of a foodie.

The doorbell rang, sudden and sharp. Maybe the president of the resident's association had sent out a written note as well, hand-delivered to everyone. He liked being officious that way.

"Coming, coming," DeMello cautiously looked through the peephole. He unlatched the chain and unbolted the door, and Diya quickly stepped in, shut the door, and leaned against the wall. She was panting, and DeMello noted that she still had on the blue and yellow printed *sari* she had worn in the morning when she had come to work.

"You need water," he said over his back, expecting her to follow him.

"It's true?" she asked before she went on. "I was at Mrs. Sen, and she says everything will stop tomorrow. Everything will close."

He sat in the low armchair and invited her to sit on one of the old dining chairs, which were hardly used anymore, but she refused.

"No, *sahib*. I must go," she said, pointing toward the window. "Some of them are already preparing to go. If the buses stop, everything stops, we will die here . . ."

"But it will be only for a short while," DeMello said, wiping his glasses on his sleeve. He hadn't seen any rush, any frenzied activity, but then he hadn't looked very carefully. Most things in the distance appeared blurry, for he had long delayed his cataract operation.

She peered out into the growing darkness behind the window. "I need to go as well. My husband must be waiting."

DeMello had never seen Ravi, Diya's husband. He had been a tailor in a garment shop, but now he worked as a delivery boy. Ravi seemed to be always changing jobs.

"But in three weeks, it'll be over. Won't he lose his job?"

"*Sahib*," he had never heard her so insistent before, "you don't know. Anything can happen. The government can change its mind. Three weeks can become four weeks, then three, four months. We can't live on just anything, *sahib*. There will be no work, no money here."

He was about to say that he would pay her, but she wiped her face with her *sari* end and went on, "and then no food too. We don't stock much beyond two-three days. After that we will starve. And if we fall sick, the hospitals are so expensive. Best never to be sick . . ."

"All right, all right," he was half-laughing now, but he understood her

urgency. "You will rush all the way to your village at the slightest excuse. I will not stop you." He stood up, thinking. "Did you just come to tell me this?"

"Yes, I had to tell you. As soon as the train service starts again, I will come back."

He felt flustered by her kindness and pulled out his wallet. He handed her some notes and then gave her some more.

"The kitchen has all the supplies, *sahib*. You don't have to worry." She opened the wooden cupboards one by one and pointed at the packets of dal, wheat, and rice arranged haphazardly on the shelves.

"You take some. Go on, take some," he said off-handedly.

She looked at him and then hesitantly reached up and took a packet of rice.

"Take a bit more," he urged, and her eyes rounded in disbelief. "It's all right. How much can an old man eat?"

"You don't know how long it will last, *sahib*."

"You have a long journey ahead."

She found a plastic bag rolled up somewhere and wrapped the rice packet in it. Then she stopped at the door, "Your medicines—you haven't ordered them yet, have you?"

Like his wife, she had learned to keep tab of some things. DeMello was surprised and felt the moisture in his eyes. "Yes, I forgot, and the eye drops too."

She bent to touch his feet, surprising them both. He lifted his hand but did not pat her on the head. It had been so long, and he had forgotten the ordinary everyday gestures of affection.

When she was gone, there was that emptiness again. He walked to the balcony and saw a van out in the slum with people clamouring to get in for any small space they could find. He hoped Diya and her husband would make it out easily.

DeMello woke late the next morning, but of course Diya hadn't left him his customary morning cup of tea and two thin cookies. He did not bother to shave and made himself a cup of tea instead. He realized then that he was going to run out of milk in a couple of days, and there might be other things he had forgotten. Perhaps he had let Diya go in too much of a hurry.

DeMello logged onto his computer and chatted with his son and his

family in New York. They had been at home for two weeks already, and he listened to his granddaughter telling him about her online homework. DeMello caught himself talking in a faux American accent. Sometimes when he spoke to her, a little girl of six, he felt embarrassed by his accent. She would often look puzzled at something he said, and it was left to his son to explain and interpret things between them.

DeMello messaged Diya before realizing that perhaps she no longer had connectivity on her phone or could barely hear anything in a crowded minibus. He stopped in the middle of his shave as another thought struck him. There would be too many people in that minibus. He knew how they travelled. There would be three to one seat, many on the floor, and some on the roof, all breathing and coughing on each other. They would have been safer if they had stayed. But how long could they have survived in the city on the measly kindness of a few? DeMello wiped his face and reached for his phone again. When no one answered at the pharmacy, he knew that he would have to venture out. With the doctor's prescription in his pocket, the guards at the gate would let him through.

He lifted his old cloth bag onto his shoulder, slipped his feet into his old sandals, and stepped out into the heat. The high black railed gate came into view, and he saw the two blue-uniformed guards looking through the bars at something outside. They were laughing and bumping fists with each other as he came up.

"You can't go out, *sahib*," one of them said, giving him a half-salute, for his hand flopped down midway.

"But I need my medicines," his voice now quavered, and he stopped abruptly. Quite seamlessly, with little effort, he had become an old man.

One of the guards pointed through the bars and looked back, inviting DeMello to share in something confidential. "The police are catching and beating all those who defy orders and move around," he chuckled and then stopped on seeing DeMello's face.

DeMello looked through the bars and saw the policemen, four or five of them, and a few men squatting on the ground before them, hands on their ears. They were daily wage workers from the area, vendors and construction workers who lived hand-to-mouth and who had to venture out no matter the government's directives. He saw the terrible shabbiness of their clothes, their matted hair, and their sheepish expressions as they rose and then bent again on the orders of a policeman's baton.

"Stop that," DeMello said through the bars to the constable nearest him.

The guard touched him on the arm urgently. "*Sahib*, please. Come away. Let them do their job."

"Their job isn't to harass," DeMello said, turning to the younger man, who stepped back, alarmed. DeMello knew he sounded hysterical and old. There was little he could do except shout through the bars, a prisoner himself to his age, to his dependence on medicines to help him walk, and to his cataract.

The constable walked lazily up to him, pulling his trousers up over a slight paunch, his baton stuck into his armpit.

"Any problem?" he asked. "Is there a show going on?"

"You should not trouble them," DeMello said, his voice now slow and measured. He stood back from the gate and wiped his forehead with a checkered handkerchief he pulled from his cloth bag.

The guard hurriedly opened the gate, and the constable stepped in, pulling down his face mask so that it rested around his chin. He pulled his baton out of his armpit and swung it as he spoke. "See here. We are doing our duty, placing our lives at risk to see everyone is safe. What do these idiots do?" He jerked his head in the direction behind him where the men were still going through their routine punishment. "Disobey rules. Disobey the government. The government wants everyone to be safe."

DeMello felt the sweat on his forehead. He nodded, turned to go, and then remembered something. "What about food for them? And people like me, who need medicine?"

The constable looked at him with a mixture of impatience and pity. "*Arré, sahib*, you are educated. You should know that the government will decide. Just go home, switch on the TV, and you will know what the government's plans are."

The constable walked away, his mask now securely in place, and one of the guards spoke in a low tone to DeMello, "We will let you know if the shops open up here, *sahib*. Please go up."

When he returned to his apartment, he felt the silence inside. Looking out of the window, he confronted a world gone quiet. There was nothing and no one out on the road. The ironing man's cart under the old banyan tree was bare and covered up with cloth. Gone too were the roadside barbers, the fruit and vegetable vendors. No one passed, no one tooted a horn. A gust

of wind blew old yellowing leaves and scraps of paper down the street. It seemed as if the wind had forced everyone off the street.

There was still no message from Diya. He had just turned on his computer when the doorbell rang again—a ringing that sounded demanding and intrusive. Maybe it was the guard come to tell him about the shops, but DeMello opened the door and found himself facing a sea of women, his neighbours in the flats above and below him, all looking very agitated and angry. He smiled hesitantly before Mrs. Sen, who lived a floor below, spoke up.

"Your maid, is she around?"

He screwed up his forehead, as if to remember, and shook his head. "I haven't seen her this morning," he said vaguely. "Why? What's the matter?"

Another woman pushed her way forward and began with an ingratiating smile. "Mr. DeMello, the guard said she was last in your place."

"The guards change in the morning," he said slowly, "but she went to other houses too."

The women, some in *saris*, others in their blousy *kurtas*, jostled around, each one trying to get a word in. DeMello gestured, inviting them in. "It is a mess," he said apologetically, hoping there was space for everyone. He lifted some papers off the old couch and noted how its arms looked slightly blackened.

"Not your fault, Mr. DeMello. Your maid's," said a lady with a soft smooth voice, turning to look at the photos on the sideboard. In response to his neighbour's curiosity, he told her what some of the photos were about. He did not have to look at them through his cataract-blurred eyes to tell her that one dated from a cricket tournament, another from his son's high school science exhibition, and others from his graduation and marriage. The most recent one had DeMello's granddaughter in it.

"She's very lovely," the neighbour said, but the other ladies had now seated themselves wherever they found some empty space—on the long couch, the ottomans on either side, and the dining chairs. They left the big armchair alone, for near it rested the everyday paraphernalia that gave him comfort—an old used towel, the small stool by its side with its jug of cold water.

Mrs. Sen wiped her brow before she began, "Mr. DeMello, we are here because things have been stolen and gone missing, like my son's bicycle that we kept outside the apartment and some t-shirts that we hung out to dry."

The other women piped in, "And there's stuff gone from our homes too."

DeMello looked from one face to another. He sensed their anger, and he thought of Diya headed home somewhere in a crowded, rickety minibus.

"I can't say when I last saw Diya," DeMello said, his brow wrinkling in thought.

"But she hasn't come today, has she?' Another woman asked. "And neither have our maids. Mrs. Sen thinks Diya stole her bicycle, and she works in both your houses."

"That's true," Mrs. Sen had an admonishing note in her voice now, "and these other ladies all have some things missing."

He heard them chant, almost in unison. *A rake, a pair of shoes left outside, a lawn mower, blankets . . .*

"And you say Diya took it all?"

"No, no," Mrs. Sen said, impatient now, "you are not paying attention. Their maids are missing too. It was when they didn't turn up that we realized these things were missing. Who else could have taken them?"

Mrs. Gupta from the second floor finally managed to get a word in as well. "I have some kitchen utensils missing. These maids, they just are not bothered about the instructions. They were told to stay on, and look, like some planned operation, they have all vanished with our things."

"Mr. DeMello, we are here to make a list of all stolen items," said Mrs. Sen. "You must tell us if you have anything missing."

One of the ladies nodded, pulling out a pen and pad from her bag, and they all looked expectantly at him once again. They heard quick tapping footsteps at the door, and the association president walked in, nodding to everyone, a pleasant smile on his face.

"I see, you are already at it," he cleared his throat and held up a long envelope. "Face masks. You have forgotten the rules."

The women sighed, some giggled, and each one took a mask as the packet was passed around. DeMello rose and offered to make tea. It had been a long time since he had had so many people over. Two years ago, when his wife had passed, there had been a big, silent gathering. Everyone had just stood around, clasping his hand and pressing his shoulder. He had felt comforted by that touch, though he hadn't been able to remember all their names, and some of the faces had looked unfamiliar. Now he felt a thudding in his heart, and he leaned against the kitchen window.

"Do not bother about the tea, Mr. DeMello," said a woman, peering through the kitchen door. "There will be too much to clean up then. What's the matter?"

"Err . . . nothing," he held his head and smiled. "I was just thinking . . ." But his mind had gone blank, and he couldn't remember what he had been thinking about.

"You look worried. Come on back with us." She ushered him back as if he were an errant child. He looked abashed in that crowd of women and the association president, who was looking down at a note, an important frown etched on his face.

"I see, quite a lot of items. Very worrying. Mr. DeMello, I don't see your name here."

"You don't have anything missing?" The woman who addressed him had an accusing tone, and her mask slipped off her mouth in agitation.

He smiled in what he hoped was a conciliatory way. "I haven't even looked over this apartment since my wife died." He looked at the glass cabinet where the cutlery and the fancy imported dishware from his son were stored. They used it the time he was there, and since then there hadn't been an occasion to take them out. "I don't think that's been opened in months now," he said. One of the women rose to press open the lever, and the next moment she stepped back, staring at her fingers.

"Your maid never even dusted this," she said triumphantly, lifting her hands and displaying her considerably grey-stained fingers for everyone to see.

"Really, Mr. DeMello, you should be stricter. The maids read every sign of indulgence as weakness and take advantage of it. Now," Mrs. Sen asked, as if she were addressing someone particularly slow-witted, "you must think carefully. What about any jewellery, or your wife's *saris*? She used to wear some lovely ones. Are you sure everything's where they were?"

He had a sudden vision of his wife dressed in the *saris* she had so loved. She liked dressing up for festivals and weddings. The last time she had worn dangling earrings and an intricate gold neckband—an anniversary present from him—at a nephew's wedding. Now, he remembered with relief, they were in the bank. His wife's express wish had been to leave it all for their only grandchild. One day soon, he would do that. As for the *saris*, he laughed shakily, "I haven't checked."

The ladies sighed, "Well, that means for now you can't add any more to

the list of stolen items."

The association president stood up, still frowning, his disapproval evident. "Well, if you do find anything missing, Mr. DeMello, please let Mrs. Sen know. We will keep things ready for the police. It's not a good time to complain right now, for they are busy maintaining law and order, but we intend to do so soon."

He turned and made his way through a path cleared by the ladies. DeMello couldn't help thinking that he had made a political speech of sorts.

He sighed in relief once he had the apartment back to himself. "Of all the silly things to bother one's head about," he muttered to himself as he moved around the living room, lifting the cushions, rearranging them, moving back the table, and shuffling the papers on it once and then again.

He sat in the chair and was oddly comforted by the thought of the city's domestic helpers, everyday workers, and construction labourers—everyone who worked for small wages—leaving the city in droves for their faraway homes. They would be welcomed there, not insulted or turned away. He remembered how he had looked forward to going home from college at the end of every term—the long sleep-ins, his favourite foods, the meetups with old childhood friends. Such thoughts lulled him to sleep, and he awoke much later to the sound of a window slamming shut in the late afternoon breeze.

He called the pharmacist again. The phone rang several times before he reluctantly ended the call. He felt a slight tingle of worry now. He should have asked Diya to get him the medicines before she left. Now he would have to ask if his neighbours knew of any pharmacies still open and making deliveries. There were things he had been careless about. He was going to run out of milk and vegetables in five days' time or a week if he managed to skimp a bit. He dragged his chair to the enclosed balcony to watch the evening sky—he did this as a matter of routine before things got too dark—and then went in to watch TV and have his dinner.

He was just sinking into the quiet when he heard the scraping at his door. At first he thought it was someone with a broom, though the hour was unusual. Then he heard it again, distinctly, followed by a soft knock. He rose to answer, not alarmed or ruffled in any way, for it had been a gentle sound, almost apologetic.

It was Ravi, Diya's husband, and DeMello stepped back startled as the other man raised a finger to his lips. He lifted his other hand to indicate a

plastic packet. “Please, *sahib*, I didn’t want to alert anyone. The doorbell makes a loud noise.”

He was panting by the time he reached the end of his sentence, and DeMello gestured for him to come in. “Do you want water?”

The man managed a lop-sided smile. “Diya says you offer water to everyone.”

“Do I?” DeMello stopped, glass in hand. “Well, things get hot here. And it seems you took the staircase.”

“Yes,” the man said, sitting down now on his haunches, wiping his face. DeMello indicated the chair, and the man folded his hands and continued sitting where he was. “I knew the guards would be watching the main entrance and the elevators, so I took the fire escape on the other side of the building. No one uses those stairs.”

He stopped and abruptly held out the packet. “Diya told me you needed your medicines. I went to the pharmacist last night, and he knew your order. Said I had come in time, for tomorrow nothing would be open.”

DeMello had to sit down then. The man still held the packet in his hand, and through its translucence DeMello could make out the medicine strips. He felt his eyes blur up again and blinked sharply. “I thought you had all left.”

The man threw his head back and laughed softly. But his head struck the wall, and he grimaced ruefully as he explained. “That was the plan, but the minibus was too crowded . . .”

He stumbled, and DeMello looked on encouragingly. “We thought it best not to take risks. I told Diya I would stay on, and she could go. Her father is not well, and she’s been worried.”

“Has she reached him?”

“She’s cycling her way there, *sahib*, with some friends. Now she’s in Asansol. She rode some thirty miles in a day.”

“Ah! That’s why she hasn’t responded to me.” Then another thought struck DeMello, and he exchanged a quick sudden smile with Ravi. “The cycle. It must be one of those new sporty kinds, right?” He had after all seen that bike against Mrs. Sen’s wall several times a day.

The husband scratched his head and smiled abashedly. “Yes, it is. We will return it soon.”

DeMello waved his hand, telling Ravi he didn’t need to explain things to him. Then he folded his hands in a gesture of gratitude. “Thank you for my

medicines. I was getting very worried. If you want to leave, I will come down with you. The guards won't trouble you."

This time, the man nodded, bowed his head, and clasped his own hands in agreement.