Wordbite

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Hindi original appears on pages 91–99 of the short story collection *Śabdadaṃś* (Delhi: Lipi Prakāśan, 1984).

Just like a lemon drop Baji's face is hard but sweet. He knows selling, despite the fact that because of his old age Amma has taken over that job. All the same, the sweetness of Baji's face affects every customer. Perhaps even to the point of helplessness.

Behind the counter on which the glass jars of candy are set Baji sits in his easy chair such that only the white hair on top of his head is visible, but when he straightens up you can see his eyes. "Amma" is short for some long Madrasi name Baji has never remembered. Amma complains (only to herself!) that nowadays perfumes are very diluted, so in one day her body usually gives off three fragrances.

When she arrives at the shop in the afternoon she fills it with the fragrance of jasmine. Three or four hours later the predominant smell resembles tincture of iodine. By seven or eight in the evening it's the odor of stale onions.

Often a fourth fragrance also arises — one that only Amma herself smells, as if she had pulled open a half-smoken cigarette lengthwise with her fingers and was smelling the tobacco.

Baji sells lemon drops and other flavors of hard candy — individually from glass jars, packaged in large tins or in colorful, decorated canisters — sweet, shiny, hard candy.

His small, drawer-size shop is tucked in among some fruit sellers near Connaught Place, to the right, on the dark road that goes west.

Baji's shop usually attracts a strange sort of clientele. Once a man in ancient homespun bought an entire pound and walked away without taking his candy. One evening a young student came, bought two toffee-flavored candies, said "Good evening," and left — twenty-three times. A middle-aged artist took almost a half hour deciding whether to buy toffee or orange, and when he finally went away all he had in his hand was the naked stick of a lollipop.

Amma had no one but her father. Amma's father's name Baji couldn't remember either.

He comes to Baji's shop. Every week. On Saturday. He takes a few rupees from Amma. He doesn't drink nor does he smoke. He plays neither billiards nor cards. All he does is buy magazines, old ones.

From comics to detective stories to "health" magazine's with photos of naked people — he buys piles upon piles of magazines. Until Amma rips it out of his hand and stuffs it into a drawer, he just keeps staring at his magazine, and then he stares at the wall.

When he comes to Baji's shop, he neither nods his head even a little in greeting nor does he say a word. He sits for about an hour and keeps staring at Baji's collar. Then he takes his money and leaves silently.

If Amma had a mother, then neither she nor her father remembers when she died, and perhaps neither of them remembers anything that would prove she had ever lived.

It is also not known when Amma became Amma. She infers that her father once must have mistakenly began staring at her instead of at the photographs in his magazines, and it was then that she became Amma. But he stared at Amma only once; later, for some time it was Amma who was staring at him.

About Amma there are no rumors. She believes that a piece of hard candy can keep someone's mouth shut for hours.

Do these silent thoughts of Amma ever speak? In an echo? Or in a response? Maybe.

FOR A TIME Amma's father had sold calendars. Sellers constitute their own breed, one could even say their own culture. When his shop was finished, Amma's father kept staring at everything. An eon passed while he kept staring and staring, as if he were memorizing the price of each and every one of his calendars. But before he became bored, the things around him grew bored with him. When the store's empty shell was sold, Amma came to Baji's shop.

Up until Amma's arrival Baji could not figure out why people had stopped enjoying hard candy. After Amma came, he happily kept his shop well-stocked because there were always four or five young men who realized as soon as they entered the shop how crazy they were for the taste of hard candy.

How this whole chapter began is lost forever. Neither Amma nor Baji remem-

bers how their very first customer must have made his purchase. Amma believes that despite his glasses, Baji doesn't see well at all. So it was by mistake that instead of the one pound of hard candy he had purchased, Baji had handed over to him the one hundred pound packet of Amma. (A bald rationalization, no?)

Amma is astonished at how little her father has spoken since his calendar shop failed. And not only that, Baji himself usually communicates with her by hand gestures, so weeks can go by with her carrying out the signification of no other word or sound but a whistle.

AMMA became afraid of the spoken word, a logophobe.

Where words do not exist, there is stability, there is peace, everything is natural. Where words do exist, conflict is born, crises arise.

Amma can prove this. She walks through the crowded streets, observes all the commotion in Connaught Place and becomes terrified.

Everyone is hurrying, rushing around. Each vehicle lurches ahead as quickly as possible. Every thing is racing. Conflict, crisis, perhaps over life itself. Because there are so many words. So much is being said! So much noise!

And then one day even Amma's father blurted out something. Astonished, Amma looked all around, at the walls, the table and chairs, the dirty curtain over the doorway, the pots and pans. What in the world made that sound? She couldn't imagine it had been her father.

But he had spoken. He said that he too wanted to open a hard candy store.

That day Pahwa had had coffee with them both. Since the veranda of the

stairway door was full because it served as the “dining room,” it was not unusual for Amma to see Pahwa to the stairway. She had to open the closed door and close it back up again.

It was strange that Pahwa too did not speak much, at least not in their home.

Pahwa, the teenaged son of the landlord who lived on the lower floor, was in college only so that he wouldn’t have to do anything else. He often borrowed magazines from Amma’s father. Sometimes he he would even sit in a chair on Amma’s veranda and read, and by chance Amma would come by

When Pahwa got up to leave, Amma set his cup and saucer aside and escorted him to the stairway. At the door Pahwa turned around. He looked at Amma’s father, who was staring at the dirty stone of the table, and then he took a few one-rupee notes out of his pocket. He carefully folded them into a packet. With two fingers he carefully pulled back the upper part of Amma’s unusually protruding blouse, and with the fingers of his other hand he slipped the little packet of notes inside as if he were feeding an ill parrot. He hesitated a while until he was satisfied the money was safely secured, and then he let go of her blouse. Other than that he showed no curiosity, no burning desire, not even any haste.

When Amma turned around, she realized her father was not looking at the stone table but at the doorway’s fluttering curtain.

Later, when Amma was spreading out his bedding, her father spoke.

Impossible! Where words are it’s unimaginable there would not be conflict.

The next day only the pornographic pictures in his magazines stared at Amma’s helpless father, and Amma . . . When words are necessary, when sounds

are unavoidable, then why does Amma sell the hard candies of others? Why doesn't she open her own hard candy factory? Amma left. No one knows where.

HOW MUCH FRUSTRATION can one express with hand signals? So Amma's absence caused Baji to start muttering. (A conflict is coming?) Finally, when there was nothing else he could do, he fell ill. At first it was only a light fever, then it got worse.

The problem was that Baji lived entirely alone. Finally, the neighbors helped out. They sent a telegram to Baji's daughter and son-in-law. A reply telegram. The reply came immediately. His son-in-law could not take time off work, but his daughter was on her way. Though he was feverish and his eyes were closed, Baji smiled.

The telegram had come in the evening. In the morning Baji's daughter Rinu arrived. Before waiting for her things that the taxiwalla was getting down, Rinu came running in crying and hugged her father. Baji had become quite thin. For the first time he himself cried. Perhaps it was the weakness that comes with age. From his closed eyes tears rolled down both cheeks — shiny, hot streams of tears. For a long time. With her thin, long fingers Rinu wiped them away. Baji open his eyes a little and looked at her. Then he silently closed his eyes and slept.

It took quite a while for him to get better. Rinu tended to him like a mad woman. She had no concern at all for her own clothes or her own need to eat. If someone has someone, then even outsiders help out, so the saying goes. The person who sent the telegram (never mind that he himself was the telegraph

clerk) looked in every morning and evening. In nursing her father Rinu remained beside herself. One day, while she was bathing, Baji suddenly began moaning. Maybe the telegraph clerk was trying to straighten out his pillow, that's why.

As soon as she heard him moan, Rinu opened the door of the bathroom with a bang, and covering her chest only with a thin dirty towel, she ran to her father's side like a deer. She cradled his head in her arms like a wilted bouquet.

Astonishingly, after that the telegraph clerk went silent.

Rinu dashed back into the bathroom, and the telegraph clerk could do nothing else but stare at the bathroom door. No words, no footsteps. It was as if steam coming out of a distant boiler had suddenly stopped.

That incident was repeated, not at the sound of Baji's moans but at the sound of the telegraph clerk's footsteps. Seeing his daughter like that again and again in the telegraph clerk's lap, Baji's muscles regained their strength as if they had been returned to life by a jolt of low-voltage electricity.

Baji immediately recovered and went back to his shop, behind the glass jars, eyes fixed on a newspaper, in his easy chair.

Sensing someone's approach, he looked up. He took his glasses off so he could see the face clearly. In response to the man's greeting Baji smiled and nodded.

"How are you feeling?" The man asked.

Baji shook his body to indicate he was well and raised both hands skyward in a gesture of gratitude to god.

"That's great but I had heard that you were really quite ill."

Baji smiled and indicated that he had resigned himself to being content even in his helplessness.

"Where is Rinu?"

Baji put on his glasses. He laid the newspaper aside and rose from his chair. From the drawer he took out a fairly large light brown envelope and started filling it with hard candy. He said, "Two pounds!"

"What?"

"You can't buy less than two pounds!" Then Baji stopped and said, "Fifteen rupees."

"But I'm not buying that."

"Okay, but it still won't be less than two pounds."

The man looked at Baji's face closely, and smiling slightly Baji kept looking at him.

"Don't you recognize me?"

"No . . . no, you are mistaken. My memory isn't that bad, but whether you're a new customer or a regular, you still have to take no less than two pounds."

"What's . . . what's happened to you? Where's Rinu?"

Baji filled the envelope and said, "Here, I'll get things set up."

"What are you talking about? Maybe you're still sick. Look at me. . . I'm . . . I'm your son-in-law . . . your son-in-law."

Baji put the packet on the counter. He took off his glasses. The color of his face changed. The smile was gone. In a transparent voice crackling like cellophane he said,"Don't swear! Speak civilly!"

The inner door suddenly opened. A middle-aged man said “good evening,” lifted his hat and went silently down the steps and out the shop.

Baji said, “Put your two pounds worth of money here and go on inside. But remember, instead of all this swearing, when you leave just say ‘good evening’ and go away.”

But the opportunity to say “good evening” never came. When the door opened, Rinu had been able to take a glance outside. Two seconds later she came flying out of the room like a bird freed from her cage and clung fast to her husband. Sobbing loudly she said, “Baji’s the devil! He forced me to do it! He forced me!”

Rinu’s husband went silent. He slowly separated himself from his weeping wife, and flexing his wrists like a professional boxer he turned toward Baji who stood as straight as an idol. The son-in-law did not hit him. Looking the paralyzed Baji straight in the eyes, he stood there as if waiting for Baji to start.

Finally, since Baji did not even blink, the son-in-law grabbed his head. Then he shook him like a bundle of straw and flung him down toward his chair. Baji fell down comfortably into his easy chair.

Then Rinu’s husband turned back toward his wife. As he approached her, Rinu became frightened and backed up. But her husband was quick. He jumped forward and grabbed her by the shoulders. He kissed her, and the two of them slowly went down the steps and away from the shop.

Baji remained seated and stared at the opposite wall. A little later another man like an idol climbed the steps and came into the shop — Amma’s father. As

always, his head shook a little, and he sat down in the chair opposite Baji.

Both, like idols, kept staring and staring at each other, to no purpose. Then Amma's father put his left hand out in front of Baji.

And Baji remembered — today was Saturday.