

The BOMBERMAN and the LOCKSMITH

Sauvik Biswas

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SHAKYA Pahaadi

About 35 years old. A god-fearing, traditional *pahaadi* person. He is married to a *pahaadi* woman from a neighbouring village across a pass. He has a 12-year-old daughter whom he considers to be very intelligent. Runs a guest-house-cum-tenting facility during the peak hiking season. He farms vegetables like spinach, potatoes and carrots during good weather.

BAYA Izaadi

45-50 years old. A principled man who makes bombs for a living. He lost his left arm in an explosion. He has never ratted out any of his clients to each other even though he had clients from opposing factions. He doesn't like politicians who switch their allegiance but has never allowed his prejudice to influence his work-ethic. As a self-taught bomb-maker, rooted heavily into the functional school of bomb-making, he is disillusioned to see poor quality bombs and poor work ethic amongst fellow bomb makers. As such, he doesn't want to get in electronics and modern trigger mechanisms.

Lija "LOKYAN" Chabiwala

35-40 years old. He is not as principled as BAYA or as pious as SHAKYA. He makes his living picking locks and putting them back together. He has worked for thieves as well as police and doesn't discriminate. Although he distrusts both of those groups of people. He doesn't trust anyone in his field, either. The only person he trusted and respected was his master *Ustaad-ji*. Even after all those years since his demise, he remembers every phrase that *Ustaad-ji* had ever said.

STAGING

An old wooden kitchen with wooden floors.

Centre back, a large clay oven with two or three stoves on top and a large front-facing opening for feeding fuel and stoking the fire. A long black metal chimney from the oven reaches high up and exits through the wall at the back. The oven doubles up as a heater in the cold winters. There is a medium-sized pot of water on the stove that is closest to stage left. The pot is partially covered with a lid.

Left back, a wooden table with large pots, woks and containers placed on the surface. There is a rack of cups, plates and food containers on the left wall.

Right back, another wooden table with a stack of books, notebooks and a ceramic cup doubling as a pen stand. A couple of framed photographs are also present on the table. The photographs have faded. There is a large window on the wall covered with a curtain.

Centre, a low table big enough for four people. There are carpets on either side with sitting mats placed on them. On the table is a small battery-powered LED array, a half-burnt candle, a jug of water and a couple of empty glasses.

The whole kitchen is illuminated by a large solitary LED lamp hanging right above the central table.

SCENE I

SHAKYA is standing on the left side of the stage in front of the pot of water. SHAKYA slides the lid open, peeks inside and slides it back to its old state.

BAYA is sitting on the right side of the stage in front of the low table. He has a packet of beedi in front of him on the table. BAYA takes a beedi out and clenches it in between his teeth.

BAYA Do you have a lighter?

SHAKYA Sir-ji, no one uses them. It's hard to find gas in the village. Let me help you out.

SHAKYA takes a match out of his pocket, reaches across the table and lights the beedi in BAYA's mouth. BAYA sniffs the small whiff of smoke that comes out of the match.

BAYA Hmm! Reminds me of old days—

BAYA takes the lighted bidi out of his mouth.

(pointing to the matchstick) That smell of ignited phosphorus.

SHAKYA is about to place the matchbox on the oven. SHAKYA looks at BAYA and places it on the table in BAYA's reach. SHAKYA pushes a couple of splinters of wood into the oven with his left hand and drops some kind of powder in the pot with his right.

SHAKYA This is a special *pahaadi chai*. (stirring the pot) These herbs in the water will warm you up in no time. It works better than *beedis*.

BAYA Always in for a good *chai*.

BAYA Looks around.

You've got a nice place here. I did not expect to find a place to stay in the middle of nowhere.

SHAKYA It's just the wrong season *ji*. During spring and autumn, we set tents and hoist prayer flags outside. It's very colourful and people can see it from far away. Hikers and tourists love it. They enjoy the experience.

SHAKYA pauses to stir the pot.

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In winter, it gets dark early.

BAYA You should keep at least a couple of flags. At least for people like me.

SHAKYA Haha. The last time we had a visitor in winter was five years ago. That too, it was my childhood friend. He owns a big business in Dhanpura. Construction materials, pipes, hardware items, and all those things.

BAYA Hey, I used to live in Dhanpura, too. Well, not exactly in the city but in the outskirts. It's dangerous to live in the heart of the capital for people like me.

BAYA takes out the beedi from his mouth. It's extinguished.

Damn! Curse the moisture. Even a *beedi* can't stay lit. Can you please light it once more?

SHAKYA takes the pot off the oven and strains some of the tea in two enamel-coated steel mugs. SHAKYA lights up BAYA's beedi once more, places the matchbox back to where it was and places one of the mugs of tea in front of BAYA.

SHAKYA There you go.

BAYA Thanks. But first let me finish this.

BAYA takes in a couple of long puffs to finish the beedi, crushes the tip in a nearby plate and picks up the mug.

BAYA Cheers.

BAYA takes a sip and then immediately coughs while making a disgusted face.

What is this thing?

SHAKYA *Pahaadi chai, sir-ji.* Have a few more sips. You'll get used to it.

SHAKYA's phone rings. He takes it out of his pocket. It's an old feature phone. He mutters "Hmm", "Yeah", and a "Huh; Ok" while nodding his head. The call is about 10-15 seconds long. Meanwhile, BAYA takes a couple of sips from the mug. SHAKYA is mildly upset once the call is over.

BAYA What happened? You look troubled.

SHAKYA *Mayitei* called. My daughter. She is on her way from the valley market. She said that her mother—my wife—is stuck in the next village. It has started to snow over the pass. She won't be able

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to get back today. *(sighs)* I had told her not to go but she didn't listen.

BAYA I hope she gets a place to rest for the night.

SHAKYA *(chuckles)* In these *pahaadi* villages, there is room for everyone to rest. We don't mind even strangers.

SHAKYA points at BAYA.

Just like you are here.

BAYA *(smiles)* Back in the city, it would be hard to find anyone who would take a stranger in. Although it had happened to me once. *(pauses)* In that case, you shouldn't be worried about it. She can always cross it tomorrow once the snowfall has stopped.

SHAKYA No sir-ji. I am not worried about that. I am sad that you will not be able to taste her excellent cooking. She is a great cook.

SHAKYA places a large pot of water on the stove.

But then don't you worry about that, too. My daughter is also a very good cook. She will be here any minute.

The light suddenly goes out. The stage is almost plunged in darkness.

SHAKYA Don't worry. Looks like a power cut.

SHAKYA sits down, reaches for the LED light array on the table, and connects it to a plug from the solar battery pack. The place lights up. It's not as bright as before but both SHAKYA and BAYA's faces are visible; as is the oven. SHAKYA takes a sip from the mug. Immediately, there is a knock on the door.

BAYA Looks like your daughter is here.

LOKYAN walks into the kitchen from stage left without waiting for the knock to be answered. His silhouette gives the impression that he is a very heavily built man. He has an old, medium-sized backpack on him.

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LOKYAN Do you have a place to stay?

SHAKYA Yes sir-ji. As a matter of fact, I do. It's four-hundred rupees for a night. Dinner and tomorrow's breakfast is extra.

LOKYAN I will take it.

LOKYAN slams the backpack on the kitchen floor. A few metal pieces rattle inside. LOKYAN takes off his jackets one by one. BAYA counts them while LOKYAN places them on the backpack. LOKYAN turns out to be a thin person.

BAYA Six jackets is a lot.

LOKYAN Not if you are walking through a snowfall. I crossed the last pass half-an-hour ago. If it wasn't for some goats who were making their way back, I would have gotten lost—

LOKYAN pauses while he makes himself comfortable in front of the oven and takes a seat. SHAKYA pours some tea in another mug and gives it to LOKYAN.

—or worse, I would have been dead.

BAYA takes out a beedi and offers it to LOKYAN. LOKYAN takes it, picks up the matchbox from the table and lights it up.

BAYA So where are you coming from?

LOKYAN From Dhanpura.

BAYA Ah! I am from Dhanpura, too; Keeriti area. What about you?

LOKYAN Oh! I see. I have lived all over the city. I used to live in Keeriti, too. *(pause)* Near Mandir Chowk. That was five years ago. I see that you are a traveller, too. So where are you headed?

BAYA I am not sure. I need to find some work. *(sighs)* You know, I used to be a bomb-maker. The finest you could find. Here look at this.

BAYA takes out a business card and hands it over to LOKYAN.

LOKYAN *(slowly reading the card)* "BAYA Izaadi: Bombs for all needs."

LOKYAN flips the card, takes a look at the empty reverse-side and hands it over to SHAKYA who is eager to look into it.

Nice to meet you Baya-ji. I am Lija Chabiwala but people usually call me by my nickname—Lokyan.

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SHAKYA *(handing over the card to BAYA)* Bomberman-ji, do you make the crackers that we use during weddings?

BAYA It's my bread and butter. Not only that but the Dhanpura folks use them for New Year. And in *Diwali*. And in the funerals.

LOKYAN *(surprised)* Funerals?

SHAKYA Many of our brethren in cities celebrate death. Just like us. We say that death is a liberation from suffering.

BAYA But I suffer to make those crackers. It's like making toy versions of the real ones. Would you ask Jayamax Ray to colour children's books?

LOKYAN Huh! Comparing oneself to a great painter?

BAYA Really, making bombs is no different from an art. You have bombs for all seasons. Remember the bomb blast near *Mandir Chowk* a couple of years ago? I made that bomb for *One-Eyed Pappu*.

LOKYAN Ah! I see that you have worked with *One-Eyed Pappu*. That bomb-blast caused such a big chaos that my landlord left his house and went home.

BAYA Tell me how many people were killed?

LOKYAN *(thinking hard)* Now that I think about it... *(pauses)* probably none. Heh! But how does it matter?

BAYA Zero casualties. Exactly. It matters for an artist like me. There was one guy who lost a leg and another who became deaf. That's it. I went and checked them out myself in the hospital. Unnecessary collateral but not that I would be worried about.

LOKYAN Are you one of those guys who despises killing?

BAYA No, no. This was a customer requirement. *One-Eyed Pappu* did not want any deaths. I've had customers who wanted me to design stuff that would blow up an entire battalion. Ah! the sweet old days.

SHAKYA and LOKYAN *both fall silent for a while.*

SHAKYA *(picks his phone up)* I'll call my daughter. Please excuse me.

SHAKYA *calls his daughter. He speaks short sentences. It is clear that he is not happy with whatever his daughter is saying. After a while he says "Can't hear... wait... I'll go out." and walks off the stage from the left.*

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LOKYAN Hundred rupees. Bet! His daughter is not coming home.

BAYA Why would I place a pointless bet?

LOKYAN (*Laughs out Loud*) Now that I think about it, you would be getting more and more work. There are hardliners and then there are the up and coming superstars in the mafia machinery.

BAYA No Lokyan *bhai*. The new generation is a disgrace to bomb-making. Look at these neo-politicians like *One-Eyed Pappu*. Show them something fancy and they stray from the path of good art. They want time-bombs. They want remote detonation. They want satellite-controlled explosions. They don't want bomb makers. They want electronics and computer engineers.

LOKYAN *pours some more tea into his mug and refills BAYA's.*

LOKYAN So. What's wrong with that?

BAYA Bomb-making used to be an art. Sulphur, potassium salts, gunpowder, all stuffed in a custom container. That was the art. Explosion was an art. The covert container was an art. The destruction was an art. It's not that I had not updated myself. I have used gels and putty's, too. Remember the riots of '10? (BAYA *pauses*, LOKYAN *nods*) I made the explosives. *Khota Neta* was a true patron of the arts. He wanted different kinds of explosions in different places. It was one of the best works I have done in my career.

LOKYAN Technology has definitely taken away a lot of art forms. It has been the same with me. But if I recall correctly, the police were able to recover a couple of stuffed animals with explosives during the riots.

BAYA That was not me. They arrested the bomb maker. (*thinks hard, taps his forehead*) I can't recall his name. I was able to grab a teddy bear from Old Market. Let me tell you, I have not seen a shabbier job in my life. Loose bindings, bad ratio, bad positioning of explosives, bad quality teddies... These are the kind of people who don't care about the art form and want to enjoy the glory that comes with it. Also it was not *Khota Neta*. Turns out his rival wanted to publicise the destruction and tarnish his name. *Khota Neta* in his lifetime has not worked with anyone other than me. Rest in Peace brother.

LOKYAN Rest in Peace. If I am not mistaken he died of a bomb blast.

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BAYA I made that, too. *Chota-Bhai Durnam* commissioned me. The stuff I made him, I say, was the very best. Have you seen *Khota Neta's* dead body?

LOKYAN No. I don't remember. Did they print it on the newspaper?

BAYA Not a single scratch on his face. I made sure that the shrapnels would not hit his head. *Chota-Bhai Durnam* had carefully carried out my instructions. See, even placement is an art. These long-standing patrons of mine know that. They made sure to consult me and convey the instructions to their underlings. (*pauses, folds his hands in prayer and closes his eyes*) I pray for their long life.

LOKYAN Unless, you are the one who has shortened theirs. (*chuckles*)

BAYA Yeah. Rest in peace.

LOKYAN Rest in peace.

SHAKYA enters the stage. He is calmer than before. He sits besides LOKYAN and places the cell phone on the table.

SHAKYA My daughter won't be coming tonight. The snowfall has intensified into a blizzard. I've asked her to descend to the market and stay with her uncle.

LOKYAN chuckles and places his open palm in front of BAYA.

LOKYAN Hundred rupees? (*chuckles again*)

BAYA I was never in on the bet.

SHAKYA Sorry. Looks like we won't be having the usual three-course dinner. We'll have to make some *khichdi*. I'll charge less for that. Do you both like meat? I have some dried yak meat that we can put in the *khichdi*.

BAYA No problem Shakya *bhai*. I am good.

LOKYAN Ditto.

BAYA So Lokyan *bhai*, what do you do?

LOKYAN (*Looks up from his bowl*) Ah! I used to be a lockpicker. But it's a dying tradition you know.

BAYA I didn't get you. For sure there would be people who would need duplicate keys.

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LOKYAN See, my story is not different from you. Lock picking is an art. I still remember when *Ustaad Rahman Suleimani-ji* first showed me how to copy a key from blank, he said, “Lokyan *beta*, think of yourself like a *hakim*. You must know the pulse of the lock inside out. The lock will tell you how it can be opened. Merely copying the shape of the key is not enough. You need to caress it like a man caresses a woman. Only then will the woman reveal her secrets. Of course I did not understand what he meant until I started to sleep with women and break locks for others.

BAYA Hmm. Judging by your current age, that would be quite some time ago. You would be one of those masters then.

LOKYAN I was. Not anymore. These Dhanpura folks have all moved to computerised locks. Until a few years ago, they had serious mechanical flaws. I was still able to open them up. But nowadays, I find them hard. It’s almost like I need to know how to tickle their electrons instead of their levers. These new kids are doing a better job. (*sighs*) It’s just like *Ustaad-ji* said. You need to caress these locks like a woman until she reveals her secrets. These modern women don’t reveal their secrets to a middle-aged man like me. They want the hip and cool computer kids.

SHAKYA Locksmith-*ji*, what are these computer locks? I have never seen one.

LOKYAN It’s mostly in the city. Most folks have updated their locks to those that use smartphones and fingerprint sensors. They have strange circuits and complicated boards inside. Let me tell you a secret. In most of these houses, it is easy to just break the door hinges. The doors are just cheap sawdust. The hinge iron is also of such poor quality.

BAYA I guess it’s easy to break the hinge. (*pauses*) But why would you leave such a lucrative scenario.

LOKYAN No Baya-*ji*. I think you are mistaken. I am not a thief. I am a lockpicker. Thieves and other groups contacted me to unlock doors, safes and whatnots. I did it for a fixed fee. As soon as I unlocked these, I collected my fee and left. *Ustaad-ji* always told me that a morsel of honest *khichdi* is better than a thali of stolen *biryani*.

SHAKYA Yes bomberman-*ji*, locksmith-*ji*. We will have our *khichdi*.

BAYA And an honest one. (*Laughs*) It is strange that you wouldn’t participate in thieving.

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LOKYAN I am just like you, Baya *bhai*. An artist. And mind you, my clients did not always want to steal things. Of course there were guys like *Eight-finger Chandu* and *One-dimensional Firang*. Their modus operandi was simple—stealing from wealthy homes. The challenging ones were actually the ones where my clients had to plant or remove evidence. I had to lock the door after the work was done.

BAYA I presume that you would have to stay for the entire duration of the work in such a case. Isn't it dangerous?

LOKYAN Exactly! It is.

LOKYAN *reaches into the side-pocket of his backpack and takes out a tattered balaclava.*

LOKYAN I had this balaclava for ages. It was a gift from *Ustaad-ji* after my first successful field work. I also wore a lot of jackets. I used to sweat a lot but the police report made from the security cameras always mentioned a fat lockpicker.

BAYA *looks at the pile of jackets. He lifts a couple of them up and points with his eyes. LOKYAN nods his head in affirmation. BAYA drops them back on LOKYAN's backpack.*

LOKYAN Let me tell you another little secret. It was always the police who called me to plant or remove evidence. Remember the fat constable in Malley Street?

BAYA *Daroga Ghonchu Singh?* That fatso once caught me as a suspect. It was not even for bombing. Some stupid burglary in an Old Market jewellery shop. *Khota Neta* came and bailed me out. I will forever be thankful to his political connections.

LOKYAN *Ghonchu* is not his real name but that's what people called him. I have lost the number of times that I had helped him alter crime scenes. I will tell you guys a funny story. He once asked me to break into his own house so that he could spy on his own wife. He suspected that she was sleeping around with some dude. He did it thrice but never found anyone cheating with his wife. (*Laughs Loudly*)

SHAKYA Not everyone cheats. We should always trust our wives. Tonight my wife is sleeping somewhere else because of the blizzard. I will never doubt her.

LOKYAN That may be true for your wife. *Ghonchu's* wife was a different lady. (*Laughs out Loud*) I told you guys that it's a funny story. It was me with whom she was cheating with *Ghonchu*. (*winks*)

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SHAKYA Here in the mountains it is considered a sin. You'll have to answer to the gods one day.

LOKYAN Don't worry. After a couple of times, I realised that caressing a lock was far more satisfying than caressing *Ghonchu's* wife. Maybe I was trying to read too much into *Ustaad-ji's* teachings. I was trying to caress her like I caressed my locks.

LOKYA laughs out loud. BAYA chuckles. SHAKYA is not amused. In fact, he is visibly annoyed. SHAKYA gets up, walks towards the stack of cooking utensils and takes a large pot out and places it on the table right in the middle.

SHAKYA I don't usually ask my customers but I will need help in making *khichdi*. As promised, I'll give you both a good discount on the dinner price.

BAYA and LOKYAN bang their tea mugs like clinking alcohol glasses to say cheers.

BAYA To yak-meat *khichdi*!

LOKYAN To a hefty discount!

SCENE II

The dinner is over. The table is clean. The LED array connected to a battery pack illuminates the room. The half-burnt candle is untouched. The pack of beedi is still in front of BAYA. There is a wide bowl on the table. There is another backpack—smaller than the one LOKYAN carried—right beside BAYA.

SHAKYA carries the medium-sized chai pot and pours three cups of chai for each of them. BAYA reaches into his bag and takes out a couple of candies and places them in the bowl on the table in front of them.

BAYA *(pointing to the bowl)* Help yourself. A friend's wife made these. She said that they are good for digestion.

LOKYAN hands one candy to SHAKYA and pops another in his mouth.

SHAKYA *(to BAYA, appreciating the candy)* Nice! *(to LOKYAN)* So, where are you planning to go ?

LOKYAN I am not sure. But I intend to move towards the larger villages in the west. Maybe they still use old school locks. Maybe they'll find some use for my skill.

SHAKYA Are you sure locksmith-ji? As far as I know, they don't use locks in villages.

LOKYAN Really?

SHAKYA Seems like you haven't travelled much in these rural places. We *pahaadi* folks generally trust each other. We have to rely on each other for our survival in these mountains. We use latch bolts on our doors to signal fellow *pahaadi* folks that we are not in the house. I don't think you would find any jobs there.

BAYA Now that Shakya *bhai* mentions it, I have not seen any locked doors in the past few days.

LOKYAN What about the tourist season? Surely the *pahaadi* guys would want to protect their belongings from these tourists.

SHAKYA *(chuckles)* No no locksmith-ji. We are too poor for these tourists. Sometimes it is the other way around. Few youngsters stray from god's path and steal stuff from these tourists. I can understand that we *pahaadi* folks are poor and our kids sometimes want the latest things they see with the tourists. In our religion,

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stealing is the gravest sin. Even as we kill an animal for meat, we pray for redemption—for we have stolen a life from a being.

BAYA I do not follow your *pahaadi* religion but I get what you are saying. Each time someone was killed by my creations, I would atone for the death by prostrating and offering to the gods.

LOKYAN To me *Ustaad-ji* was my god. I refrain from stealing stuff because he said so.

BAYA Lokyan *bhai*, maybe you can sell locks to these tourists. Maybe you can teach the *pahaadi* villagers about city life. I am sure there would be city-technologies that they can benefit from.

LOKYAN I don't think I would enjoy doing that. Maybe the villagers don't need to know about the city. It's a godforsaken place anyways—with all its godforsaken technologies and its godforsaken mafias and its godforsaken politicians. What other options do I have? All my life my livelihood has been dependent on darkness. I find it hard to stay awake or work while the Sun is out. You guys really have no idea how difficult it was for me to get up in the morning and traverse these mountains while there was visibility. I've been leaving early every single day, sleeping underneath some tree after lunch, and somehow making it to a village much after the Sun has gone down. Many times I have not slept at night and straightaway left at the break of dawn.

The LED array flickers and goes off.

Speaking of darkness, there you go.

SHAKYA Don't worry, I've got it.

SHAKYA lights up the candle on the table using the same lighter he had used to light BAYA's beedi.

I was hoping that the battery would have enough charge to last through the night. There is a solar panel on the roof but we don't get enough Sun these days.

BAYA Maybe locksmith-*ji* can work as a security guard.

LOKYAN (*Laughs Loudly*) Won't it be ironic? A person who specialises in breaking locks is guarding their door.

BAYA It's not like you don't have the necessary experience. I am sure that you paid enough attention to your thieving clients when unlocking the door. You would have studied their operations well enough to look out for their tricks.

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SHAKYA There is a town on the other side of the pass. If I am not mistaken, they have a small lock-assembly factory. Whatever it is, I am sure they use locks. The town folks could definitely use the help of someone in guarding their doors. Locksmith-ji might be of some help there. Who knows, they might ask you to guard the lock-assembly factory itself.

BAYA takes a beedi out of the packet and this time lights it using the candle before clasping it between his teeth.

BAYA I studied the map before coming here. I didn't see any large towns.

SHAKYA Well it's not exactly on the other side. Locksmith-ji will have to traverse five more passes and then descend down South. It will take him a couple of days.

BAYA *(to SHAKYA)* Ah! I see. *(to both)* Once I read the biography of a foreigner. I don't remember his name. He made tonnes of money forging currency. They caught him and put him in jail. Once he was out, he made money by helping governments print better currency notes. Maybe you can use your locksmithing skills for building better locks. *(pause)* Say, for the lock-assembly factory.

LOKYAN Haven't you heard? The city folks aren't using these old mechanical locks anymore.

BAYA It's a small town; not a city. I am sure they are still using cheaper, mechanical locks in the towns. Last I checked, the electronic locks had not gotten cheap enough for the middle-class and the poor.

LOKYAN Truthfully, the middle-class and the poor don't have stuff that needs lock. *Ustaad-ji* used to say that locks are not for thieves but for civilised people. Thieves will get past any lock anyways. By the way, It's only a matter of time. Soon the prices will come down and they'll move to electronic locks like the city folks. Or maybe they'll stop using them like their village brethren.

BAYA *(chuckles)* No they won't. Trust is a currency that's waning off in this society. Everyone is busy printing counterfeit trust.

LOKYAN pauses for a while with a serious face and bursts out laughing.

LOKYAN For a moment, you started to sound like *Ustaad-ji*.

*SHAKYA picks up his phone and taps it on the back of his hand.
BAYA is busy sipping his cup of chai.*

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SHAKYA There's not much charge left on my phone. No charge in the battery pack either. I am slightly worried. There's still no news of Mayitei. What if she calls and the phone gets switched off?

LOKYAN (to SHAKYA) She is a smart kid. You said so. Don't worry; she'll be fine. (to BAYA) So Baya, what are your plans?

BAYA *Lifts his face up midway through the sip.*

BAYA Huh!

LOKYAN What are your plans? I mean what do you want to do next? I presume your business is also not looking that good.

BAYA I am not sure either. I have been working on some new stuff. I need customers. (*pauses*) I was reading about the group of insurgents up North. They are all gearing up to rebel against our government. I reckon they would be willing to buy my bombs.

SHAKYA (*excited*) Do you mean the *Pahaadi Liberation Front*?

BAYA I believe that's what they are called. Although the newspapers in Dhanpura prefer to call them terrorists.

SHAKYA No, no Bomberman-ji. They are not terrorists. They just want betterment of these mountains and us *pahaadi* people. My brother-in-law is one of the captains there. He trains new recruits.

BAYA Are you involved, too.

SHAKYA No, no. Not at all. Many of my relatives are. The government did nothing for us in the last forty years they have been in power.

LOKYAN I see that they did nothing for power either. (*points at the inactive LED bulb above and chuckles*) Else we wouldn't be sipping *chai* in the candlelight.

BAYA There's not much you can expect from these spineless, untrustworthy politicians like *One-Eyed Pappu*. I have worked for these. I know. They just want money; and power; and big houses; and useless electronics and satellites in their bombs.

SHAKYA For the last two decades we have been asking the government for alternate routes. These roads get blocked by landslides in the monsoon and avalanches in the winter. They did nothing. For the last three decades we have been asking for water reservoirs. They did nothing. Water gushes like a river on these muddy trails

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during monsoon, while there is nothing to drink during the autumn and winter.

BAYA Is it that severe?

SHAKYA We all have to wait for the snow when our condition becomes very bad. We cannot go out for weeks. There are abandoned villages with rows of empty houses.

BAYA I haven't seen any yet.

SHAKYA Bomberman-*ji*, wait until you start heading North. You might have to take shelter in one of them should you get caught in a snowstorm. Make sure to carry food and water. If you are lucky you'll meet some of our brethren taking shelter from snowfall and blizzards.

LOKYAN So this Liberation group—

BAYA *Pahaadi Liberation Front*.

LOKYAN Yeah, yeah; that one. So this *Pahaadi Liberation Front* seems to enjoy a lot of support from *pahaadi* folks like you.

SHAKYA Support? We can't even support ourselves well. Villagers rely on tourist-money during the sunny days. We can only morally support them. We can't even say that out loud. If the politicians and government get to know, they would destroy our livelihood. Us villagers don't have financial means to help them with weapons or training. We only make sure that they don't go hungry. God forbid if there is an insurgency, even the tourists and hikers will turn their backs.

LOKYAN That would be devastating. Wouldn't it destroy your livelihood? Look at us. (*points to himself and BAYA*) I don't know about him (*pointing to BAYA*) but it is surely not a pleasant situation to be in when I have to think hard before buying each meal.

SHAKYA No locksmith-*ji*. The mountains have enough for us. Please don't underestimate the strength of *pahaadi* people. Me and my wife can suffer hardship in exchange for a future that holds sunnier days for my daughter. Bomberman-*ji*, you should really go there.

BAYA Will you write me a letter of recommendation?

SHAKYA Definitely. You may not earn like the city but you'll never go hungry.

BAYA Not that I was earning much in the city anyways.

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SHAKYA's phone rings.

SHAKYA Excuse me.

SHAKYA receives the call and stands up. The call lasts less than half a minute. Both LOKYAN and BAYAN are silent. SHAKYA utters "Hmm", "Ok", sporadically while pacing left and right. Sometime midway through the call, BAYA offers LOKYAN a candy and picks up one for himself. Both pop the candies into their mouths.

LOKYAN If not anything, you can always go back to the city. Make firecrackers—for parties; for funerals.

BAYA I don't think I will be doing that Lokyan *bhai*. The government is cracking down on cracker-makers. They say that it pollutes the air. They talk about sustainable energy and taking care of the environment. These are all empty words. Have you seen the filth in Dhanpura? They don't even care about cleaning the streets.

LOKYAN I know. I am sure that the guys who asked you to make bombs for them would love to buy some crackers for celebrating the demise of their opponent. And the family members of the dead would do the same for their funeral. (*chuckles*) It's like killing three birds with one bomb.

BAYA It's not like that. There are far too many cracker-makers in Dhanpura to supply fireworks for parties and funerals. But there is some truth to what you have said. It has happened to me a couple of times.

The call is over. SHAKYA is visibly upset. He walks up to the widow, pulls the curtain and quickly closes it.

SHAKYA Bomberman-*ji*, Locksmith-*ji*, the situation outside is not that good. A relative near the pass told me that there has been an avalanche. The village on the other side is completely cut off. (*sighs*) I am worried about my wife.

SHAKYA tries to call his wife a couple of times. The phone rings but no one picks it up on the other side.

LOKYAN (*whispering to BAYA while SHAKYA is dialling on his phone*) Seems like both of us are stuck on this side of the pass for the next couple of days.

SHAKYA places another call.

SHAKYA Hello! Hello! *Mayitei?* Can you hear me? Hello? Hello?

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SHAKYA *brings the phone in front, taps it a couple of times and places it back on his ear.*

SHAKYA (*worried*) Hello? *Mayitei?* Can you hear me?

SHAKYA *phone beeps and shuts off. He carelessly throws it in the middle of the table.*

LOKYAN (*picks up the phone*) Do you have a battery pack?

SHAKYA There is no power left in the solar pack. We were using it to light the LED array in the kitchen. It's already exhausted.

BAYA Don't worry. I am sure both your wife and daughter are doing fine.

LOKYAN They are alright. They will be alright. As *Ustaad-ji* used to say, even if you can't keep your faith in god, keep your faith in the levers of time.

LOKYAN *places his hand on SHAKYA's shoulders.*

LOKYAN Let's enjoy each other's company while we are here.

BAYA Speaking of company, was there any company whose locks were impossible to break into.

LOKYAN (*Laughs*) Nothing is impossible. Challenging ones? Definitely a few. Remember Time Locks Private Limited?

BAYA Yeah. I saw them when I was a kid. Now that you mention it, they haven't been around for quite some time. Have they?

LOKYAN They went out of business two decades ago. It's not a good business model when your locks are so good that no one replaces them for decades. As *Ustaad-ji* used to say, even if you can't keep your faith in god, keep your faith in the levers of Time. (*stressing the word "Time" here*)

LOKYAN, BAYA, and SHAKYA *all burst into laughter.*

LOKYAN By the way, you said that you were working on something new.

BAYA Ah! Right. Let me show it to you guys.

BAYA *pulls his bag closer to him.*

Can one of you hold the bag please?

SHAKYA *gets up and holds BAYA's bag open. BAYA takes out a contraption from his bag with his surviving right hand. A hack job with an old-style bomb with a long protruding fuse. The*

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fuse is kept stationary by a frame made of thick wires. BAYA takes out a convex lens. There is a cradle made of the same thick wires right in front of the fuse where the lens can be placed.

BAYA This is one of my finest creations. Just leave it outdoors on a sunny day. This lens focuses all the heat of the Sun onto the detonator fuse.

BAYA shows the lens and places it in the cradle.

BAYA And boom! No complicated circuit boards. No computers. No satellite controllers. The lens has to be correctly chosen. On one hand, it should give ample time for the setter to move far away from the radius of destruction, while on the other hand, it shouldn't take too long to ignite the fuse. Otherwise, the Sun would move too much in the Sky and the focus would shift from the tip of the fuse.

LOKYAN I can't help but admire the contraption. Where did you get that idea from?

BAYA Our politicians. They keep blabbering about sustainable energy and taking care of the environment. They don't know an iota of these things. Did you know that *One-Eyed Pappu* did not even clear his high school examinations. Do you think he would understand? He is busy minting the coal mafia down South. Do you think he would care?

LOKYAN Surely, you don't care. Why would you?

BAYA Actually, I do. I believe that it's our duty as human beings to care for the earth and clean it of scum. Call it my curiosity, or blame it on the scientist in me, but I really want to try it out. Let's wait for the Sun to come up tomorrow.

LOKYAN Let's wait for the Sun. (to SHAKYA) What do you say?

SHAKYA I have been waiting.

Candle flickers and blackout

GLOSSARY

<i>pahaadi:</i>	belonging to the mountains
<i>ustaad:</i>	master
<i>-ji:</i>	suffix similar to “sir”
<i>bhai:</i>	brother, informal way to address someone younger
<i>beedi:</i>	a cheap cigarette made of tobacco rolled in dried leaf
<i>khota:</i>	(slang) defective, bad quality
<i>daroga:</i>	constable
<i>ghonchu:</i>	(slang) dumb
<i>khichdi:</i>	a dish made of rice, lentils, vegetables and meat
