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**THE PATH TO THE MATERNAL HOME: ANNA BHAI SATHE**

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Sona had no idea that the hideout of the two robbers, Gonda and Gana, was in the nearby Kondkhind. She was running fiercely toward that pass, lost in a whirlwind of thoughts. Her body was like a storm, rushing headlong toward a terrible danger.

It was afternoon. The village appeared deserted. The working men had gone to the fields, and the scorching sun had wearied even the chickens. A group of four or five donkeys was rummaging through the garbage heap in front of the community hall.

The village was situated near a river. Under the Chaitra sun, the sand by the riverside was burning hot. The air was still, and the trees by the riverbank stood motionless, their leaves not even rustling.

At the water source, women and children had gathered. The children were splashing around in knee-deep water, diving in and out, while the women sat on rocks, washing clothes and spreading them out on the sand to dry.

On one such rock, Sona was washing clothes. She first washed her new saree and spread it out to dry. She was wearing her old saree, which was torn, faded, and inadequate to cover her youthful and full figure. She looked like an overflowing pot about to topple over. Now, she was beating her mother-in-law's saree on the rock.

Sona was beautiful. Her face was as sculpted as a painting, and her eyes were as enchanting as a doe's. She had blossomed like a wildflower in full bloom. Just as trees sprout fresh buds in the month of Chaitra, her body too had begun to radiate a youthful allure. However, in her marital home, neither her beauty nor her virtues were appreciated. Her mother-in-law harbored a deep dislike for her. For the past two years, she had endured the oppressive treatment of her in-laws, spending her days in tears and anguish.

Despite her remarkable beauty, she was tormented by the thought: *Why am I being treated so cruelly?*

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"I walk the straight path; I conduct myself properly. I eat whatever she gives me, sweep and clean the entire house, and never even glance at anyone else. Then why am I facing such wretched days? My mother-in-law picks on me over trivial matters, grabs my hair, and beats me. My husband simply stands there, watching. He never says a word to his mother, always listens to her, and avoids me. What does this mean?"

These thoughts churned in Sona's young mind, driving her to the brink of despair.

She was silently looking around, adjusting the tattered cloth on her body and dipping the saree back into the water. Suddenly, memories of her maternal home surfaced. She recalled her childhood. Her mind, suffocated by the oppressive atmosphere of her in-laws' home, blended into the joyful environment of her maternal home. For a moment, she forgot everything. "I have a mother. I have a father. I have a maternal home." This thought gave her strength. Her shattered spirit revived. She hung her mother-in-law's saree to dry, removed her blouse, dipped it into the water, and began scrubbing it on a rock. Her free breasts began to tremble with the movement, and she felt a pang of discomfort. She tried to cover her chest with the tattered cloth but found it difficult. Frustrated, she muttered to herself, "What a nuisance this is," and smiled shyly. After hanging her blouse to dry, she sat on a rock, dipping her legs into the water, and moved them. A circular ripple spread and then disappeared. The water became still again.

She gazed at her reflection, noticing her face and well-shaped calves. "I am beautiful," she thought proudly, her face lighting up. Then she looked toward the mountain pass ahead. "The path to my maternal home goes through that pass. Once I climb it, my home comes into view. Just seeing it fills my heart with joy. When will I see my home again? It's been a year; no one has come to take me there. No one from my maternal home visits or brings me back." With this thought, her heart sank. She stared at the pass intently, imagining her home. Her heart filled with happiness, and she forgot everything for a moment.

She hesitantly sat in the water, submerged herself briefly, and came up again to scrub her body. She felt relieved. The tattered saree clung to her wet body, accentuating her figure. Each curve of her body became visible as if outlined, like an impression left on molten gold. Seeing herself like this, she became self-conscious. At that moment, there was a commotion among the women. "Oh, no! Bandits are coming!" someone shouted. All the women by the river grew alarmed. Sona became more flustered. Hearing "men," she got up in a hurry and looked. A group of ten or twelve men was walking in a line, armed. Leading them was Gonda, a burly man with a gun slung over his shoulder. His face was fierce, and his curled moustache gave him an imposing appearance. He seemed to be over fifty years old, walking calmly yet menacingly. After him came Ganya, also armed. He stopped near Sona, and she immediately sat down, folding her arms tightly over her chest.

Ganya looked at her intently and ordered, "Stand up!" Trembling, Sona stood up, shaking with fear. Then Ganya barked another order, "Lower your hands!" Reluctantly, she lowered her hands, her chest exposed. She felt a lump in her throat, looking at them like a frightened deer. She feared what command might come next. Just then, Gonda called out to Ganya from the rock above, "Ganya, move!" Hearing the call, Ganya left, and Sonabai sighed in relief. Ganya went up to



Gonda and stood silently. Gonda, known for his wrath, turned on Ganya. “Why were you standing before her?” he demanded.

“Nothing... just like that,” Ganya stammered.

“Just like that? What do you mean, just like that?” Gonda raged. “You scoundrel, don’t dare ogle at women. She was bathing, and you stood before her—what were you saying to her?”

“I swear by God, I said nothing,” Ganya said, placing a hand over his eyes.

“You’ve done enough wrong. But if you trouble any woman again, I’ll shoot you dead. Remember that!” Gonda warned.

Ganya, scared into silence, walked away. The women by the river returned to the village, where the incident involving Sona became the talk of the town. People whispered about how Ganya had humiliated her, making her stand and lower her hands. The story spread, and Sona felt as if she had died from shame. When she reached home, her heart was heavy, and she broke into uncontrollable sobs. Overcome with grief, she cried her heart out.

When her mother-in-law learned of the incident, she was furious. She stormed into the house, grabbed Sona by her hair, and began beating her ruthlessly, gasping for breath in her anger. Grabbing a burning piece of wood from the hearth, she hit Sona with it until she was exhausted and then sat down, weeping. Just then, Sona’s husband arrived. He calmed his mother, but she was still livid. “This wretch has ruined our family’s honor today! She was stripped and ogled by those men at the river. Don’t you feel any shame?” she shouted.

“Mother, I understand everything,” her son said calmly. He helped Sona stand up and asked,

“What was her fault in this?”

“What fault? Why was she at the river in the first place? Tell me!” the mother demanded.

“She went to wash your saree,” the husband replied, exasperated.

This answer enraged the mother even more, and she resumed beating Sona.

After beating her severely, the mother-in-law became tired and sat down in front of Sona, crying. Sona was writhing on the bed. She couldn’t sleep. She now longed to go back to her maternal home. The injustice from her mother-in-law was unbearable, and she missed her own mother. She sat up quietly, listening for any noise. The house was silent. The old woman was lying still, and her husband was snoring in the front room.

“What should I do?” Sona whispered to herself. “I can’t live in this house anymore. I must go back to my parents’ home. Otherwise, this old woman will kill me.”

Just then, the first rooster crowed. Sona got up and quietly went out into the yard. She started walking and soon picked up speed until she was running. Holding her breath, she headed toward the path to her maternal home. The road under her feet seemed to race with her. She was eager to cross the mountain pass ahead and see her home. This thought gave her strength, and she kept running.





As Sona climbed the hill and neared the pass, the sun began rising, lighting up the world. A new breeze blew, and a fresh light spread everywhere. In the pass, there was a temple where Gonda and Gana, two bandits, had set up camp. At sunrise, Gonda went to bathe. After his bath, he stood with folded hands, offering prayers to the rising sun. Gana sat alone in the temple.

Sona reached the temple while climbing the hill, and Gana froze when he saw her. He didn't stop her but let her pass and then followed her silently. In the dense woods, he caught up with her, standing before her like death itself. Sona was terrified at the sight of Gana. Her heart sank, and she trembled with fear. Her lips quivered, and her mouth went dry.

Gana didn't hesitate. He lunged forward, grabbed her sari, and pulled it violently, yelling, "Sit down!" Helpless, she collapsed to the ground. Just then, Gonda's voice boomed, "Gana, step aside and leave her!" Gonda's eyes burned with rage. He had loaded his gun and pointed it at Gana.

Surprised by Gonda's sudden arrival, Gana hesitated, but he quickly regained his composure. "What will you do?" Gana sneered, "Shoot me? Go ahead, show me your courage."

Gonda didn't wait. He fired the gun. With a loud bang, Gana fell to the ground, writhing like a decapitated chicken. His chest was torn open, and blood spattered everywhere. Seeing this, Sona trembled with fear, unsure of what to do.

Gonda stood motionless. He had just killed his companion, but he felt no remorse. Instead, he felt relief. As Gana's body stilled in death, Gonda confirmed that he was dead and said, "What a vile man. Such people don't deserve to live. It's good he's dead."

Sona stood there, staring alternately at Gana's corpse and Gonda. One crisis was over, but she wondered what lay ahead. She realized she was in grave danger and worried about what Gonda might do next.

"Hey, girl," Gonda said, "go on your way. Don't look at his body, and don't stop until you reach home. No one will stop you now. Run!"

At his command, Sona ran. Like a bird freed from a cage, she ran with all her might. Soon, her maternal home came into view. Thoughts of her mother and father filled her heart, giving her new energy. She forgot everything else as she reached her home and threw herself into her mother's arms.

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