The middle of November reminds everyone of the oncoming winter. The skies are clear, blue and cloudless. The afternoons quickly lead into the evening lying a dying man waiting for his life to be extinguished. The night air becomes cool and often makes one shiver early in the morning. One can feel the nip in the air while lying down in bed, as if it is standing behind you in the dark and taking a deep breath. This onset of winter gives a new look to all the shops in the market - Asha Stores, Ladies Corner, Presentation House and others dress up. The showcases are simply a riot of colours - red, blue, yellow, brown, green, purple, pink and so many others - some bright, some dull. All the shelves of the showcases are packed with balls of wool.

Hiru Nandy, the proprietor of Asha Stores was a bit skeptical. “This year the price of wool is high. I should not have purchased so much stock at the spur of the moment”, he mused. “God knows whether it would sell”. But his apprehension was false. Whatever the price, there was no dearth of customers. Ladies -- young maidens, married ones and widows -- all came in flocks to buy wool. Hiru Nandy would address them according to their age and status. Each lady had different requirements and specifications - some wanted dark red, some looked for the maroon colour. Some needed sky blue coloured wool. Sometimes, in the evening or a little later, even men came in to purchase wool. Mostly bachelors, living in messes or hostels, they would fiddle with various balls of wool, inquire about the price and blurt out the invariable question of an inexperienced man : “How many balls are needed to knit a sweater for myself?” The experienced businessman that he was, Hiru Nandy would look up at his face, guess the obvious and hurl out the oft-repeated question, “Is there no one to knit for you?” The man smiled shyly. “In that case you can even place your knitting order here. The charges are moderate - one rupee fifty paise per ball. You can order according to your choice, either full sleeves or half sleeves and can also choose your own pattern. If you don’t like it, then Sumita will re-knit it for you”.

ARUP RATAN: THE PRECIOUS GEM

-- Debal Debbarma
Sumita meant Sumita Dutta. She knitted all the orders placed here and would also get orders from the nearby shops too. Recently, she’s been an excellent knitter. The quality of her knitting and designs showed that she’d mastered the art well. Everyone wanted to place orders with her, but she remained faithful to Hiru Nandy, the proprietor of Asha Stores. Sumita lived nearby, at 33/2 Satkari Ghoshal lane. Her brother, a post-office clerk and her sister-in-law were the other members of her family. Actually, Sumita began her business through Hiru Nandy. About three years ago, she had gone to Asha Stores. Then she was knitting a sweater for her brother. A glance at the unfinished sweater convinced Hiru Nandy of her potential.

“Excellent! Are you knitting this yourself?”

With a wry smile on her lips, Sumita nodded her head. Literally snatching the pullover, Hiru Nandy examined it meticulously and then suddenly asked her,

“Can you knit a pullover like this for someone else?”

Sumita was taken by surprise.

“Knit a sweater, for whom?” she asked.

“No, I mean no one special. The gentleman is one of my customers. Two days back he had come to the shop and was looking though various kinds of wool. If you knit for him, you will get at least twelve rupees as making charges.

That was the beginning. Within these three years, Sumita had become an expert in her field. Come November and she is flooded with calls from all the nearby shops. Her busy season continues till mid-January and within this time she knits at least ten or twelve sweaters. The rates are fixed - one rupee fifty paise per ball. Hiru Nandy advises her, “Next year you increase your rate by at least twenty-five paise. The prices of all essential commodities are on the rise, then why should you keep your making charge constant?”

Besides this regular income, Sumita of course had found out the means of some additional earnings too. For each accepted order she would demand at least one or two extra balls of wool, convincing the customer that the design was too intricate. So she made some extra profit and easy money. She had made some fixed arrangements with a
small shop at Entally. On some quiet afternoon, she would visit that shop with those extra balls and sell them at half the price.

Sumita’s small room had turned into a small knitting factory, so to say. Needles of all sizes, made of plastic, aluminum and even bamboo; the designs all copied down in a small bound exercise book and even real samples made of various coloured wool were pinned up together in a notebook for the selection of her customers. Hiru Nandy called her whenever there was a prospective customer in his shop. Sumita would enter the shop with a serious professional elan and cater to her customers. Sometimes she had to take great pains in satisfying a fussy customer.

That night, it was quite late when Hiru Nandy summoned her. It was around eight and usually she would never be called that late. Sumita had several household chores to perform at home, and she was also in charge of cooking dinner. The work being just over, she was planning to sit down with her knitting. It was already the beginning of January and she still had two orders in hand. So, quite reluctantly, she got ready to go. Changing her clothes, briskly combing her hair, dabbing a little powder on her face, she put on a light pink cardigan and quickly left the house. Asha Stores was just three or four minutes walk from there. From a distance, Sumita saw that the shop was empty, there were no customers at this late hour of the evening. Only a tall, young gentleman was standing near the counter, probably waiting for her. He was handsome - tall and very fair, with fashionable side burns and wore gray trousers and a yellow shirt.

There was a warm welcome in Hiru Nandy’s voice today.

“Come, come. This gentleman wants to place an order for a sweater and wants a quick delivery”.

“Quick?” Sumita sounded slightly exasperated. The man said, “Quick meaning ten to fifteen days. Won’t it be ready by then?”

Sumita thought for a while. It can be done. Then she looked up at the man’s face and said, “Then you please select a design”.

“Design?”
“Yes”, Sumita noticed the inexperienced look in his face and smiled. Then she put her head down and said, “Here, there are many samples in my notebook,. I shall knit whichever design you select”. Selecting the pattern was a great problem. The gentleman was truly a novice in this field. Whatever design he saw in the book, he started liking it immensely. Sumita smiled and gave an advice, “That’s not the way to do it. Please decide which design you want. All patterns will not look good in all shades of wool and you have to select which colour will suit you as well.”

The man was flabbergasted. “Oh! Is it so complicated? Then I better not select any design. I leave it unto you to choose the pattern and the colour for me”.

Sumita was still hesitant. “Then, you cannot blame me if you don’t like your pullover”. Hiru Nandy intervened. “Why don’t you do something else instead. You come to my shop after four or five days. In the meantime she’ll have some work done. Then you can see for yourself how the pattern is working out”.

The gentleman agreed. “Yes, that’s fine”. He looked at Sumita and asked, “Will it be inconvenient for you if I come on Saturday?”

“Saturday?” she smiled back. “It’s perfect with me. I stay at home in the evenings”.

After the man left,, Sumita started to select the colours of wood by herself. He was pretty fair, so any deep colour would suit him. At first she selected a maroon colour. Then she picked bottle-green. While packing the balls of wool, Hiru Nandy suddenly said, “The gentleman is still quite childish. I haven’t seen him before. Maybe he’s a new arrival in our locality. It doesn’t look like he’s married too”.

The remark was casual, but Sumita blushed. It was strange because such news was not supposed to excite her. She’s knitting a pullover - what difference does it make whether the man is married or not?

“He’s called Ratan Sarkar,” Hiru Nandy went on. “Let him come another day and I’ll find out all the details about his family too”.

Not Saturday, but Sumita met Ratan accidentally on Friday itself. She had gone to College Street market to buy some tea. When she turned back, she startled to see the gentleman smiling at her.
“Hope you’re coming on Saturday. I have knitted quite a bit of your pullover”, she said softly.

“It’s a piece of good news, so it has to be celebrated with a cup of tea. If you do not have any objections, please come along with me”, pleaded Ratan.

Sumita could not turn down his first request. It would look very bad to refuse, she thought. So she started walking with him. It was of course true that within her heart she was quite pleased. Who would not like to spend a few solitary moments with this handsome young man? They entered Basanta Cabin and sat face to face across a small table. Before placing the order, Ratan asked her,

“Shall we have an omelette along with the tea?”

Looking up at his face, Sumita replied, “You must be very hungry, but I’m full. I just had lunch before leaving the house”.

“Never mind, have an omelette. It’s no use being different when we are together”.

“I’m very much worried about your pullover pattern”, Sumita said sipping the cup of tea.

“I hope you do not dislike it at the last moment”. Munching a piece of omelette, Ratan’s tone seemed serious too.”I’m also worried. What will you do if I do not like the pattern in the end?”

“What will I do?” Sumita looked quite helpless. “I’ll open the pattern and re-knit the whole thing once again according to your choice.”

Ratan gave a loud laugh. “Don’t you have a bit of self-confidence? Tell me first why I will not like the pattern?”

They had a long tête-à-tête at the restaurant that day. He inquired about her family, and did not hesitate to talk about himself either. He worked at a bank at Clive Street and lived in a mess at Fariapukur.

On Saturday, Ratan was all praises for the pullover design.

“Marvellous!” he exclaimed. Then with a smile on his lips, he continued, “See, you were getting scared for nothing. Really, your face looked so worried that day at Basanta Cabin”.

“Basanta Cabin?” Hiru Nandy knitted his brows. “Here sir, when did you meet Sumita at Basanta Cabin?”
“Why yesterday”, Ratan blurted out. “We had gone in to have tea together....”
Sumita could not lift up her head. Blushing, her face had turned red out of shame. She cursed Ratan’s foolishness. Didn’t he know that it was improper to tell everyone so blandly that he had gone to Basanta Cabin with a woman who was not his relative?

After Ratan’s departure, Hiru Nandy gave a broad smile. “He must have liked you”, he added. “I’ve inquired about him. He comes from Chandannagore where his widowed mother lives alone. He has a good job in a bank and earns about five to six hundred rupees a month. They belong to the same caste, you know. If you wish, I can put forth a marriage proposal too.”

“Look after your own business”, Sumita replied with a mock temper. The bending her head down, she went on, “One should not overreach one’s limits you know - a moth should not desire for the star”.

“OK, OK.” Hiru Nandy retorted. “I’ll do whatever has to be done. Marriages are made in heaven you know, so nothing will stop if God desires so”.
Sumita finished knitting the pullover exactly on the tenth day. Hiru Nandy was really impressed. “It’s really great, Sumita. I must give you a prize for it. You can leave it here now. I’ll inform Ratan and will call you when he arrives”.

Three days elapsed. There was neither any message or summons from Asha Stores. So, overcoming her shame, Sumita went to the shop one day. Hiru Nandy welcomed her and told her that Ratan had come the day before and had paid the full cost of the wool as well as the making charge.
Sumita was really surprised at such a mercenary attitude. Really, he understood nothing but accounts, she thought. Hiding her displeasure, she said, “At least you could have called me Hiruda”.

“There was no way to do that”, Hiru Nandy explained in details. “He was in great hurry to meet someone at eight-thirty, so he hurried away with the pullover. But he has promised that he would come again.”

“Come, when?” She seemed slightly relieved.
“Within a few days. He will come and personally tell you how he liked the sweater.”
Then giving a meaningful smile he added, “I’ve spoken to Ratan about you. I think that he has begun to like you.”
“Oh, please don’t talk like that”. Within a minute the heaviness in her heart vanished and started soaring up to the clouds. Sumita spent the whole night in a trance-like state. She imagined that both of them were having tea again at Basanta Cabin or elsewhere. Ratan was talking to her endlessly and she went on smiling incessantly. Then they started walking together towards a brightly lit up building. A melodious tune gradually soothed her nerves into deep sleep.

Sumita received summons from Hiru Nandy’s shop exactly three days later. She dressed up quickly, wore a nice saree, combed her hair, dabbed powder on her face. She did not want to be late. Ratan was such a busy person, maybe even today he would have to hurry and meet other people. Hiru Nandy was not there in his shop. Ratan was waiting alone near the counter with a packet in his hand. He was wearing the same gray trousers and yellow shirt. Strange, Sumita thought, where was the newly-knit pullover?
Ratan’s face seemed grim, without a ray of smile.
“I have something special to tell you. Can you come out of the shop for a few moments?”
His tone sounded rather serious. Sumita gave an inward smile. Surely, she thought. All those words cannot be uttered within the shop premises.

It was quite dark outside with the typical winter smog burning the eyes. Still, she walked along with Ratan in complete silence for quite a distance. He entered a park on the left-hand corner of the street and stopped. Then, all of a sudden he unfolded the packet in his hand and took out the newly-knit pullover with the dexterity of a snake-charmer opening his basket of snakes.
“Can I ask you something”? he said.
Sumita was feeling uneasy. Why did Ratan take out the pullover all on a sudden? Why did he have to bring it in a packet? Didn’t he like the design? In a soft tone she asked,
“What?”
“How many balls did you need to knit this pullover?”
Sumita’s sixth sense indicated that something was wrong. What is the matter? What does Ratan want to imply? In a serious tone she said, “Didn’t Hiruda take the price of wool from you?”

“Yes, he’s taken the price of fourteen balls of wool. But I want to hear it from your own lips. How many balls of wool did you really use?”

“Fourteen”. The false word just slipped out of her mouth instantly. The in a mellowed tone she asked, “Why does this question arise?”

“One of my sisters-in-law told me that this pullover was not knitted with fourteen balls”. Sumita seemed to gain a firm footing under her feet. In a sarcastic tone she added, “Your sister-in-law did not knit the pullover. How will she know how many balls were required to knit it?”

“There are ways of knowing”, said Ratan. “I have tested that. You did not use fourteen balls to knit this pullover. You’re lying”.

“Lying?” Sumita attempted a last resort of self-defense. But Ratan was shrewd, merciless. Giving a sharp-witted glance at her face he added, “I have got this pullover weighed from a reliable place. It’s exactly three hundred grams. If one ball of wool weighs twenty-five grams then you calculate and tell me how many balls were used.”

Sumita was dumbfounded. Her feet started trembling, her throat was parched. Like a maths teacher Ratan had given her a mental sum and was staring at her face for the reply. She tried but could not utter the correct answer.

“And I thought you were as innocent as a flower, as pretty as the moon, as soft-natured as a bird’s song”. He went on sternly, “I thought I could trust you for my whole life. But now I see it is all false, all lies. You are really a swindler, a cheat”.

Ratan did not wait any longer. Giving her a last neglected look, he slowly walked out of the park. Sumita stood motionless like a stone statue. Wouldn’t it have been better if Ratan had slapped her hard on her two cheeks or even offer suggestive advances towards her in this quiet and deserted park in this cold winter evening? Even that would have made her less sad. Tears streamed down from her eyes. She had never felt so devastated or ruined in her own life.

----------- [Translated by Somdatta Mandal]