As recommended by my physician, I had come to Deoghar for a change. On the way, I kept on remembering the famous lines of a Rabindranath poem:

With doctors and medicines –
The trouble was more than the sickness.
--When I was made a wreck,
Then you suggest I go for a change.

Though people are all aware what happens when one goes for a change, yet they opt for it. I had also come for it. I resided in a huge house with a high wall encircling its garden. Each morning around three o’clock, someone starts singing bhajans in a cracked and monotonous voice. Then I woke up and open the door to sit in the verandah. The night gradually waned off, the birds started to arrive. I found out that the *doel* woke up the earliest. It started singing as soon as the darkness ended. After that the *bulbul, shyama, shalik,* and the *tuntuni* would start arriving one by one. Some sat upon the mango tree next door, some in the *bakul* tree here, and some on the top of the peepul tree by the road. I had grown so familiar with their voices everyday and though I could not see them, I felt that I knew each of them personally. A pair of yellow *bene-bou* birds would come a little later. They would register their attendance every morning by sitting upon the highest branch of the eucalyptus tree next to the boundary wall. Their sudden disappearance for a couple of days kept me worrying – did anyone catch them? There was no dearth of trappers in this country and it was their business to export birds. But it was a great relief to see them return after about three days.

This is how the mornings passed by. In the afternoon I would go out of the gate and sit on one side of the road. I did not have the energy to walk, so I kept on looking at those who could so. I realized that middle class women constituted the largest number of sick people. At first a whole group of young girls with swollen legs would pass by. I realized that they were victims of beri-beri. They took great pains to cover their swollen feet. Some of them even covered their feet in tight socks, though the warm weather did not require it. Some of them wore their saree so low that it almost touched the floor. Though this caused a hindrance to their walking, they were very eager to cover their deformity from the eyes of keen onlookers. There was a girl from a poor family whom I pitied the most. She walked alone. There were no relatives accompanying her except for her three small children. Though only about twenty-four or twenty-five years old, she had a frail body and an equally pale and anaemic face. In spite of lacking the power to pull her weak body along, she carried a small child in her arms. She could hardly walk but probably did not have the place to leave it behind. There was such a tired look in her eyes. It seemed as if she was ashamed of me and wanted to leave the place as quickly as possible. Covering the three children in tattered clothes, she would daily walk along this path. She probably thought that by recouping herself as much as possible in the healthy weather of
Santhal Paraganas she could compensate for her other failures in life. She probably hoped that she could spend the rest of her life successfully in looking after her husband and children after she recovered her health and strength. I would sit alone and ruminate – what else could she wish for? She was a typical Bengali lady – did anyone ever teach her to expect more? I would secretly bless her, hoping that she would recover soon and go back home to nurture the three sons who had sucked away all her life force. I did not know whose wife or daughter she was, neither where she lived. I only knew that as a representative of the innumerable women from Bengal, she left an indelible impression upon my mind.

A young friend had accompanied me here. As he had also done in Kolkata during my serious illness, here too he served me unconditionally. Sometimes he would tell me, “Come dada, let’s go for a walk.”

“You go along,” I would say. “I will sit here and finish that.”

He would add impatiently, “People who are much younger than you walk here everyday. How will you feel hungry if you do not move about a little?”

“Less food will do,” I replied. “But I cannot tolerate walking about just for nothing.”

Annoyed, he would start walking alone. But he would always warn me against returning home in the dark.

“Ask the servants to bring a light for you. There are plenty of krait snakes here. Basically they are harmless, but they do not like to be tread upon.”

On that particular day also, my friend had gone out for a walk. It was still late for dusk. Several old men who ventured out to increase their appetite had completed their walks and were returning home as briskly as possible. They were probably all rheumatic patients and needed to return home before dark. Their gait encouraged me to go for a walk that day and I walked along the path for quite a long time. It was nearly dark and I thought that I was alone. Suddenly I turned back and found a dog following me.

“Do you want to go with me?” I asked him. “Can you lead me safely home in this darkness?”

He stood at a distance and just kept wagging his tail.

I understood that he had agreed.

“Then come along with me,” I said.

In that faint light on the road I saw that he was quite old. Half of his fur had fallen off after illness and he walked with a limp. But one could make out that he was quite sturdy in his younger days. On the way I asked him a lot of questions till we reached the entrance of our house. Opening the gate, I asked him to come in, “You are my guest today.” But he did not have the courage to enter and stood outside wagging his tail.

The servant came up with a lamp and wanted to shut the gate.

“No, let it remain open,” I said. “If he comes in, give him something to eat.”

Upon enquiry an hour later I came to know that he had not come in but had gone away somewhere.

The next morning when I came out of the gate, I found my last night’s friend waiting for me there. “I invited you yesterday. Why didn’t you come?” I asked him.
In reply he just looked up to my face and kept on wagging his tail. I told him, “Today you must come and eat. Don't go away without eating, understand? “
In reply he wagged his tail ever harder, maybe implying, “Are you speaking the truth?”

At night the servant reported that today the dog was sitting in the courtyard below the verandah. I called the cook and told him, “He is my guest. Fill him up with food.”
The next day also I came to know that my guest was still there. Overcoming the dignity of a guest, he was still resting there comfortably.
“Never mind, give him food today also,” I said.
Everyday a lot of food got wasted so I knew that no one would object to it. But there was objection and that too of a very serious nature. I did not know that our gardener’s wife was also a big shareholder of all our surplus food. Being young, good-looking, and very casual about the food, she received more sympathy from the servants and hence my guest had to fast.

Whenever I would go and sit next to the road in the afternoon, I would find my guest already ensconced on the floor there. When I went for a walk, he would accompany me. I would ask him, “My dear guest, how was the meat cooked today? How did you like chewing the bones?”
He replied by wagging his tail and I thought that he had really liked the meat. I did not know that the gardener's wife had beaten him and thrown him out; she did not allow him to enter the garden and that was why he spent his time sitting outside near the pathway. My servants also consented to this behaviour.

One day I suddenly fell ill and could not go downstairs for a couple of days. Lying upstairs in bed in the afternoon, I had just finished reading the newspaper and was staring out through the window in an absent-minded manner. I looked at the warm, clear blue sky and thought how desperately the Congress leaders were trying to become ministers. They tried to conceal their desires and show their apparent complacency through various ways and means. Instead of abiding by the lawmaker’s advice, they quarreled with them about various legal interpretations. Undoubtedly they tried to prove their mal-intentions. What a frustrating thing that was!
Suddenly, the shadow of the dog fell upon the stairs near the open door. I raised my head and found my guest standing thee wagging his tail. The servants were busy taking their afternoon nap behind closed doors and he took that opportunity to come up straight near my room. After two days of absence, I thought that he had surely come to see me. I called him, “Guest, come inside.”
But he did not come in. He stood there and kept on wagging his tail. “Did you have your meal,” I asked him. “What did you have today?”
Suddenly I realized that his eyes looked wet and that he had secretly come to complain about something. I shouted for the servants but as soon as he heard the sound of doors being opened, my guest ran away.
“Did you give the dog food today?” I asked.
“No, sir. The gardener’s wife has chased him away.”
“There was a lot of extra food today, what happened to that?”
“The gardener’s wife has wiped off everything.”
Rubbing the sleep off his eyes, my friend came into the room to enquire about the confusion and said with a smile, “Dada, what do you do? People do not get food to eat and you want to feed a street dog.”
All right. I knew that my friend was justified in his point of view, so I kept quiet. It was very difficult for me to explain how in this world certain demands affect certain people.

Anyhow, my guest was once again called in and he again settled peacefully in the courtyard below the verandah. He was no longer afraid of the gardener’s wife. Each afternoon I would find my guest standing up and eagerly looking up towards the verandah. It was time for the stroll.

My health did not improve and soon the day to leave Deoghar arrived. Even then I tried to delay the departure for a couple of days with silly excuses. The train was scheduled to leave in the afternoon, so right form the morning packing began in full swing. A long line of carriages assembled outside the gate and all the luggage began to be loaded. As if supervising the whole event, my guest ran up and down along with the coolies. He was very busy and excited, keen to see that nothing was lost.

After the carriages left one by one, my carriage also started to move. The station was not very far away and when I reached there I found that my guest was waiting for me there as well.
“You have come here too?” I asked. In reply he wagged his tail. I do not really know what it meant.
The tickets were purchased, the luggage loaded, and my friend came to inform me that only one minute was left for the departure of the train. All the people who had accompanied me were duly tipped, the only exception being my guest. The warm air had covered the place with dust and through that haze I saw him standing outside the station gate and staring at the train. As the train began to move, I lost all my enthusiasm of returning home. I just kept on thinking that today my guest would go and find the big iron gate of the house firmly locked and he would not be able to enter it. He would keep waiting for me in the street for a couple of days. Maybe in some silent afternoon he would sneak in upstairs and search my room and after that the street dog would once again take shelter in the streets.

There might not be pettier creatures in the city apart from him, nevertheless, I am writing about my short stay at Deoghar by remembering him.

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Translated by Somdatta Mandal