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Family Welfare

The woman's brown, carefully shaved pubis was partly visible through the opening in the surgical drape. Omi glanced away. He didn't want any of the staff to think he was staring. The doctor, her hair carefully tucked under an elasticized paper cap, grabbed a fold of the woman's abdominal skin with a pair of forceps, tugged, and said as she always did when a visitor was observing her procedures, "First we make sure the anesthesia has taken effect." Satisfied, she picked up a scalpel, made a two-inch vertical incision just above the pubic hair line, quickly pulled out each fallopian tube with a gloved forefinger, cut each tube in turn, and with the help of an assistant, tied off the ends of the tubes, returned them to their sanctuary, and closed the incision with a curved needle and black thread.

Omi was the manager of twenty-two clinics in North India. He was no longer embarrassed at observing procedures performed on women's—and men's—most intimate parts. As part of his job he had witnessed hundreds of tubectomies, IUD insertions, vasectomies, and abortions. Still, in the operating theatre he always felt he was invading his clients' privacy. The women—who always seemed more vulnerable than the men—came from some of India's poorest villages, where tradition dictated that they respect the wishes of their husbands and their in-laws. In the clinic waiting and recovery rooms, they huddled together in small groups, seeking, Omi presumed, some sisterly solidarity as they watched for the next authority figure who would instruct them to remove their undergarments to be shaved, or propped on a procedure table in the spread-eagled lithotomy position, revealing their private body parts probably for the only time in their lives. Omi marveled that they came at all.

Omi—known formally as Om Manohar Krishnamurty—had long been passionate about family planning. It was by far the most engaging aspect of the world population issue, and, while he was not certain that fewer people would, *per se*, make a better world, he believed with real conviction that helping poor people have the number of children they wished—helping them limit their fertility—was a calling of the highest order.

His clinics were officially known as the Deogar Family Welfare Sanstha, and there seemed to be a continuous line of policy questions. First, he had worried that they were sterilizing illiterate village wom-

en too early in their reproductive lives. Many of the clients were under 25 and most were in their late 20s. But virtually all of them had at least three children. Even for (perhaps especially for) a 22-year-old, three children, he finally decided, is probably enough.

Next he had his first real disagreement with the doctors, who preferred vertical incisions for tubectomies. In the West, he knew, women undergoing this type of sterilization procedure usually had horizontal incisions that left relatively unnoticeable scars. Why weren't the Sanstha's clients entitled to the same courtesy, he asked Sudesh Sharma, the senior doctor.

"The vertical incision is more efficient," she had told him. "The tubes are easier to find; there are fewer mistakes; the procedure is faster. And," she added with just a hint of condescension, "the women of rural U.P. are never, ever going to appear in bikinis on a beach." Omi had to concede this last point. Appearing in public in a skimpy bathing costume would be as alien to these women as living on Mars. After one more consultation on the matter he let the policy stand.

On a Saturday morning as Omi sat down at his desk at the Sanstha's administrative offices, he saw a small yellow post-it note on the corner of his computer screen. "We've got a problem at K-One. Please come. SS." He picked up the phone and dialed the clinic. The line was engaged as he expected it would be. Saturdays were always busy. Omi quickly skimmed his emails, and ran down the stairs to the building's entrance. The monsoon rains had begun and he was grateful for the two large palm trees that kept the downpour from drenching him completely as he ran to his Jeep, told the driver "Kanpur clinic," and made the fifteen-minute trip to the Sanstha's largest facility.

The waiting area was jammed as usual, with more than twenty women, their young children, babies, and in a few cases their husbands. Dr. Sharma's—Sudesh's—office was adjacent. Omi closed the office door behind him and sat down.

"This has happened before of course," she said. "But I'm not sure we can make it go away this time. Vasectomy 'failure.'"

"The usual?"

"If by 'the usual' you mean that a vasectomized man's wife has become pregnant, the answer is yes. However in this case the usual prevarications haven't worked. The woman—her name is Ritu—was here first thing in the morning for a pregnancy test, which was positive. We informed her of this. What we didn't know was that her husband was in the waiting room, and she told him. He turned livid and began slapping her in front of the whole crowd. Kishan and Gopal managed to pull him off and quiet him down and I went out to explain that vasectomies sometimes fail. They rarely do, of course, but still saying that usually does help."

"Did he want a test?"

"It turns out—and nobody knew this, or at least nobody put the pieces together—that he had a sperm count test here a week ago. We'd told him his semen was clear, no sperm. He's outside," she added. "Around the corner. Gopal is trying to calm him down."

"And the woman?"

"She's cowering in the corner of the waiting room afraid to go outside." Sudesh sighed, then sat up straighter and looked at Omi. "Could you talk to the man? His name is Mathur. I think he and Gopal are out next to the pan wallah's."

"How far along is she?"

"Six weeks."

"Six weeks," Omi said. "Abortion's not a problem if she wants one." He counted, envisioning his fingers. "But if his semen was clear a week ago..."

"Dr. Mohan did the op. He practically knots the vas. He cuts out a whole inch, then ties those tubes so tight they never recanalize. I don't think this is a failure of the procedure."

"Okay," Omi said. "I'll see what I can do."

He found Gopal talking animatedly with the man he presumed was Ritu's husband. "Mathur-ji?" he asked as respectfully as he could. The man tilted his head in assent. "I'm Omi Krishnamurty, manager of the clinic. I understand your vasectomy had a failure. Is that right?" The rain had stopped, but several fat drops of water fell from the overhanging clinic roof behind them. Omi shifted position to avoid them.

"My wife is pregnant," the man said in a dialect that Omi found hard to follow. "Yes," Omi said. "Your wife is pregnant. It's a very early pregnancy. She can terminate the pregnancy here today if she wishes to do that. Do you understand?"

Gopal, who had learned half a dozen local dialects, spoke a few words. The man nodded. "Would that be agreeable to you? If she wants to do that?" The man nodded again. "Does he understand?" Omi said, looking at his administrative officer.

"He understands," Gopal said in English. "But it doesn't solve the problem. He's furious and I'm afraid he may do serious harm. He might try to kill her. I'm very much afraid he might try to kill her."

"We need a private place to talk this out," Omi said. "Go in and ask Dr. Sharma if we can use her office. And then let's get the woman out of the clinic. Anita can take her for a cup of tea, somewhere well away. You and I and Mr. Mathur will talk this out and perhaps we can find a solution."

Gopal returned in five minutes. He nodded. "Come with us, Mathur-ji," Omi said. "We'll talk about this." Mathur grudgingly stood, his posture tense. He seemed uncertain for a moment, and then joined Omi and Gopal. The three men made their way back into the clinic. Ritu was gone and Dr. Sharma was just leaving her consultation

room.

"Find out if Ritu wants a termination," Omi murmured to her.

"I expect she does. I'll make sure."

"Thanks."

In the consultation room, behind the now closed door, the three men sat in folding chairs, forming a small circle in front of the consultation table. "Mr. Mathur you must understand that sometimes there are selective failures with vasectomies..."

"What do you...?"

"What I mean is, sometimes there will be a little bit of sperm in the semen, in what comes out of the penis, and later, like the time last week you were tested, there will not be any semen in the sperm even though there was sperm present a few weeks or a few months before. Do you understand?" Mathur looked at Gopal, and they exchanged a few words. Omi looked up. Two pale gecko lizards chased each other in a tight circle, high on the wall.

"I think he understands," Gopal said. "But that is not all. He thinks you may be lying to cover up the truth."

Silently admitting that he was doing exactly that, Omi tried to make his argument as plausible as possible.

He looked carefully at Mathur. "After the vasectomy there is still sperm in the system. Always for many days. Sometimes for a few weeks. Occasionally for longer than that. It is not 100 percent."

Mathur nodded but said nothing. Omi waited patiently. He noticed that a gentle rain had started again and water was running in rivulets down the windowpane of the consulting room.

Finally Mathur turned toward Gopal, twisting his chair so that his back was turned to Omi. He mumbled a few words to Gopal. Gopal asked him to repeat them. He said a few words again and the two men spoke quietly. Gopal let out a long sigh. Mathur glanced quickly back toward Omi, turned in the chair and sat with his back straight. Gopal addressed his boss. "He and Ritu," he said in English, "have not had sex for some time."

"How much time?" Omi said. There was a brief knock. Omi cracked the door and stepped halfway outside. Anita DeCruz, the senior nurse was there. "She will have the abortion," Anita whispered. "She is anxious to have it right away."

"That's a start," Omi said. "Find out if she told anyone else about this. Does anyone else in her family know about the pregnancy? If not, will she swear to keep it secret until the day she is cremated? Will she never ever tell anyone about this, swearing on her soul, forever? If so, maybe this will go away. Hurry please."

Anita nodded and made her way quickly through the waiting area.

Omi sat down and turned to Mathur. "Your wife will have her

pregnancy terminated. She wishes to do that. We can do that today."

They heard a quick muffled knock on the door. Omi put his head out.

"She says no one else knows," Anita whispered. "Only Mathur. She is frightened to death. I believe she will never speak of this to anyone, ever."

"Thank you," Omi said. "Thank you very much. This is very helpful. Let her jump the queue and have the abortion this morning. I'll see what I can do with Mathur."

He closed the door, resumed his seat on the folding chair, and addressed Mathur. "Does anyone in your village know about this pregnancy?"

Mr. Mathur shook his head, "Na."

"Does anyone in your family or in Ritu's family know about this?"

Mathur shook his head again, "No."

"Ritu will have the abortion today," Omi said. "She will never speak of this. I'm convinced she will never speak of this, ever. If you do not speak of it, no one will ever know. Remember, it is possible that this is a failure with your vasectomy."

Mr. Mathur was silent for a few moments.

Gopal said, in English, "If he can save face..."

"Yes," Omi said.

Gopal turned to Mathur, "But you must never harm Ritu. God commands us to protect all women. You must never harm a woman. That is evil."

"God commands women to be faithful to their husbands," Mathur said, his voice beginning to rise.

"Yes, that is true," Omi said quickly. "But harming a woman is wrong. Gopal is correct. That is an evil even worse. Do you understand?"

Mathur did not reply. He stood, and took a step toward the door.

"Do you understand?"

"I understand," he said. "But she must pay." Omi started to reply but Mathur moved quickly to the door. "I understand everything," he said, and opened the door and walked out.

A month later Omi joined the mobile IUD team that was touring a dozen remote villages and setting up temporary clinics for IUD insertions. "Take the service to the client," was one of Omi's mottos. The team included Dr. Sharma, who did the insertions, an assistant, and Anita from the Kanpur Clinic, who organized the logistics.

"Let's include Betpur this time," Omi said. "I'm curious to see if Ritu is well, if she is...if she's all right."

"Yes," Anita said. Her face clouded. "I have worried about her."

As the Jeep van, loaded with equipment, pulled into Betpur, the

raucous sounds of Hindi film music blared from speakers over two of the shops. Moving slowly through tangled crowds of cycle rickshaws, handcarts, pedestrians, motorcycles, cows and goats and dogs, Omi viewed the startling array of merchandise. These village markets always had everything from children's underwear to lentils to plumbing fixtures.

They set up shop at a temporarily unused schoolhouse. Anita began organizing the major cleanup that was required and finding volunteers to spread the word that the Family Welfare Sanstha would be providing free IUD service at the school for the next three days. As soon as she started making her announcements through the Jeep's loudspeaker, a small crowd gathered to hear about the chance to be a referral agent, one of the women who would spread the word around the village and to nearby villages, and who would receive 100 rupees for each client she brought in.

By late afternoon a dozen women had gathered around the schoolhouse entry hoping to be agents. Omi saw that Ritu, looking pale, was among them.

That evening Omi, Sudesh Sharma, and Anita met over dinner at a local tea shop. "There have been some cases of dengue fever here," Sudesh said. "We may need to treat a few cases."

"Do you have what you need?" Omi said. "It's outside our mandate, but..."

"In this backwater they have no other option," Sudesh said. "We'll treat the ones we see."

"What about Ritu?" Omi said.

"I think she has a touch of dengue," Anita said. "I told her to come in for an exam. She has abdominal pain. Her IUD may have come out, or come out part way."

"We'll have a look," Sudesh said.

Ritu was third in line the following morning. Anita handled the preliminaries, escorted her to the operating room. Ritu lay back on the table as Sudesh entered, gowned and masked, pulling on rubber gloves. Omi too wore a sterile gown, mask, and, with the paper hat pulled low on his forehead, he felt sufficiently anonymous. "Where does it hurt?" Sudesh asked in clipped Hindi.

"Here," Ritu said, putting her hands against the sides of her head. "And here." She touched her abdomen.

"Let's have a look," Sudesh said, easing Ritu into the spread-eagled lithotomy position. Let's check that IUD." She reached for the speculum, turned, and stopped, staring. Omi glanced between their client's legs and gagged. The woman's vaginal lips had been crudely stitched together with what appeared to be fishing line. Sudesh continued to stare. "I've been examining women in this district for 20 years," she said. "I've never seen anything like this." She picked up a

scalpel. "Let's get rid of those stitches."

"Na!" Ritu said. No!

"Ritu," Sudesh said, "Those stitches could become infected. It's not healthy. It's not right."

Ritu said, "The stitches must stay." There was a long silence. With a twisting motion, Ritu sat up and flipped her sari down below her ankles.

Sudesh looked at Omi, "At least it should be done properly, with surgical thread." She stopped. "Of course I couldn't do that. I couldn't possibly do it."

"The stitches must stay," Ritu said again. Then, looking down, "My husband checks with his fingers."

Anita moved to Ritu's side. "It's not so bad," Ritu said to her, her voice barely audible. "There's a small opening."

"But Ritu," Anita said. "Surely..." Anita put one hand on Ritu's back and gently clasped her upper arm with the other. "Those stitches are torture. They should come out."

"No," Ritu said. "I still have a husband and a family. I am raising my children and I have a position of respect in the village." She looked at Anita. "Not great respect, but I am still part of my village, as his other woman is not. That is good enough. It is God's will."