Blurb of the book

A young wife is deeply troubled by the arrival of a mysterious woman in her home. An acclaimed writer encounters a shocking truth during an evening walk. An upscale neighborhood conspires to destroy the one who does not fit in. A woman with cancer is given a glimpse of what lies beyond. A young girl’s ordeal is met with indifference. A lonely artist is haunted by the custody of a child. In these fifteen stories the author fashions brief and intensely compact dramas out of the unwieldy material of human experience. They are shaped to extend the readers awareness of human desires and weakness and resonate with the ebb and flow of life. Indeed, nothing is what it seems.

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About the author

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Dedication

To all who can read between the lines.

TITLE OF BOOK; A SEASON OF WAITING

SYNOPSIS

A young wife is deeply troubled by the arrival of a mysterious woman in her home. An acclaimed writer encounters a shocking truth during an evening walk. An upscale neighborhood conspires to destroy the one who does not fit in. A woman with cancer is given a glimpse of what lies beyond. A young girl's ordeal is met with indifference. A lonely artist is haunted by the custody of a child. In these fifteen stories the author fashions brief and intensely compact dramas out of the unwieldy material

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BOOK TITLE - A SEASON OF WAITING

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A SEASON OF WAITING

Uninvited

The woman should never have come. But she did, and there is nothing I can do about it. It hap-pened seventeen years ago. Just a night of staying over. Even her

name fills me with unease. Sandhya, dusk. Shadows melting from grey to black, a vagueness in which nothing is clearly visible-or what it seems. It is not something I have ever brought up before Utpal. Maybe he is certain I do not remember. I should pretend I don't. Maybe he remembers, maybe not. Maybe it does not matter. We have, after all, had a good life together. Pratik is now eighteen, away from home, in a Delhi College. We are alone, together, bound to each other by memories, our child, the sense of journeying together along the long vista of years. Everything in this home is how I want it to be. Among the crystal and ceramic curios is an African couple, an elongated, wooden pair, a man and woman, with shaven heads and slender limbs. They are clad in dull, ochre tribal costumes painted into their ebony bodies. I always place them side by side, looking out at the world, a close phalanx, ranked solidly against crouching lions, famine, forest fires. Isn't that how it is supposed to be?

The woman should never have come. She had arrived like a letter that had not been expected, bearing an unfamiliar postmark, awakening that tiny pang of uncertainty, a little frisson of fear I still cannot explain. And instead of me letting her into my home, it was she, Sandhya who opened the door for me that long ago twilight. There must be some meaning in that, something I don't want to look closely. That was what my mother used to say. What you don't know cannot hurt you. So I stood there holding Pratik, seven months old, asleep, a trail of his saliva on my collarbone. I could feel my breasts engorged with milk

and my sandals hurting, my sari crumpled. After three hours at the doctor's, all I wanted was to give my baby his fever medicine and lie down. I knew Utpal was home. He would insist I rest. But when I rang our doorbell, a stranger I had never met, a woman answered. She stood against the soft, diffused glow of the living room lamplight, looking at me, a polite smile of puzzled inquiry on her face.

It's alright. Utpal came up behind her. This is Suravi, my wife. Suravi, this is Sandhya here. Remember Arun, my friend, the journalist at *Frontier Times?* Sandhya is his sister. She's going to stay here tonight. Just some problem. Missed the nightbus to Tinsukia. Here, give him to me. What did the doctor say? Utpal and I go to our room. On the way I notice two cups of tea on the tray. Whether he had made the tea or she had offered to do so, it is the same thing. In my short, three hour absence, a woman has made herself at home.

The woman should never have come. But because she had, I changed my mind about lying down in my cotton polka dotted nightie, my face wiped clean of make-up, suckling our infant son. Sandhya was slender, her oval face framed by a mass of curly, almost frizzy hair. Her tweezed brows arched over her dark, watchful eyes. A single bracelet circled one pale, delicate wrist. The white silk sari with the black paisley motif suited her, even gave her a touch of class. If she had worn crimson nail polish, splotches of ruby red on the tips of her long

fingers, I could have found it easier to know what kind of woman she was. But her nails neatly clipped, unvarnished, gave nothing away. I could not understand why, as Sandhya flipped through the *Femina*s in our living room, something changed in the way I felt about myself. I saw myself through her eyes – a young wife, a mother. Mid-twenties, pretty, but letting herself go. The wads of fat on her back, the dark circles because the baby cried in the night. A woman slipping into complacence without even knowing she was. And when I saw what she showed me, I felt bloated and ugly, I felt betrayed by the long scar on my abdomen, the furrowed, puckered stretch of flesh and skin stitched up by a masked surgeon seven months ago, the scar that made Utpal flinch, turn off the light.

The woman should never have come. I remember brushing my hair seated on the dressing table, leaving it open, changing into the pink sari he once said I looked good in. Utpal was in no hurry to explain why he had been so kind to the sister of his boyhood friend. He spooned the antibiotic solution into Pratik's mouth, Pratik cried and he dandled him on his knee, crooning the baby language that we were learning to use. I listened, intently, so that I could detect if he was trying too hard to be normal, to be too sincere about being a good father. But he was calm, undistracted, as if he was completely at ease about the presence of this sudden guest in our house.

This woman should never have come. In my English Honours class, I had read of women who were feared by other women – Madam Bovary, forsaking everything for love, Anna Karenina, dying in its quest. In the life I have built with Utpal, my college sweetheart, I want the small, safe pleasures of a well cooked meal, a weekend matinee show, and drifting to sleep in the dreamlike contentment of our once-a-week unhurried love making, I want the right to buy shirts for Utpal, and to scold him when he goes beyond four cigarettes a day. Even Pratik is the name I chose, Pratik - a symbol. A symbol we wrought out of our love, this fragile thing we started in a college corridor, with a teasing question, lowered eyes, frantic notes between books – now a whole home, three rooms, sofas, beds, dressing mirror, cabinets, wardrobes, cutlery, books, stuffed toys, albums of memories, two lives becoming one. And a bright, plump baby with a dimpled bottom who already follows us with his eyes. But, there is always a but. In trying to become one, I shed my differentness, layer by layer, shrinking, so I could fit into the idea, the idea of who I thought I should be, for my man, my son. And it was this diminished me that Sandhya saw when she first held the door open and wordlessly, with only her raised eyebrow and polite, disinterested smile, made me face the colourless, insipid matron I had become.

The woman should never have come. If she hadn't, I would have just warmed the leftovers and put the rice on the cooker. Now a meal had to be cooked. The

part-time maid did not come at night. I am in my new pink sari, my hair open, taking the chicken out of the freezer and she comes in. I am really so sorry for all the trouble, she says. She stands near the dining table. Is the baby sleeping? Good, good. Listen, I'm not really hungry. I had something in the evening. I'm a light eater.

No, no trouble. We have to eat as well. I put the chicken on the rack to thaw. She sits on the chair by the table and waits for me to give her a task. I put it off as long as I can, rebuffing her. But it is almost nine and Utpal has a company meeting at ten tomorrow. Pratik could wake up and cry any moment. I wash three potatoes, put them in a pan, include the peeler, and push it across the table. Here, just skin them. But you must change your sari. Did Utpal show you the spare bedroom?

Don't worry about me. She starts scraping a potato. I can adjust. Are you sure you don't want me to slice the onions. Someone taught me to slice onions inside a bowl of water. She gives a small laugh. That's how you can avoid those tears...

So you missed the bus? I am boiling the *dal* in a wok, and slicing beans to fry; Yes, I reached the station late. There wasn't a single seat. And where were you planning to go? Oh, Jorhat, my mother lives there. In another wok, the oil is

heating up. Blue smoke drifts across the kitchen as the *Paanch phoron* crackles. The sliced onion, bay leaves, the slit chilli go in, sizzling. I pour the *dal* over it. There is an angry roar as liquid meets fire. It bubbles and I turn to pick up the chopped coriander leaves. My tone is level, very conversational. But I thought Utpal said Tinsukia, you were going to Tinsukia. She never misses a beat. Did he? He must have heard me wrong. I said Jorhat. I work at the Tocklai Experimental Station. I'm a stenographer there. Oh, Utpal must have thought I'm going to visit my mother. Our home is in Tinsukia. But you wouldn't know that. We haven't ever met.

Utpal says the only way to eat chicken is fried. I have my own magic with ginger paste, fresh coriander, diced onions and hot and sweet sauce. Tonight it seems so important to make Utpal happy. The pieces of meat sizzle on the pan. I stir them and watch her. I know your brother Jayanta, I say. He comes whenever he is here. He's wife's a Bengali, isn't she, I can't seem to remember his Calcutta address... Golf Links... Ballygunj?

She gives no sign of hearing my question.

The potatoes are done. Do you want me to set the table? Should I take out the water bottles from the fridge. She is restless, covering up our silences with offers of help. There is a lovely aroma filling the kitchen, something sweet, hot

and fragrant. I am in the middle of something I have created, something with which to bind Utpal to me, on this dark, unsettling night, when a strange woman with her snake like eyes sits in the heart of my home and spins a web of lies.

Utpal comes in, holding a thermometer. Just a sec, Urvi. Come and hold *Baba*, I want to take his temperature. Don't forget to switch off the gas.

In our room, he lifts our sleeping baby from the cot. I hold him, unbuttoning his sirglet so Utpal can place the thermometer under his armpit. We wait. Seconds pass. The fever is down this body is cool. I put him back on the cot, carefully arranging the mosquito net.

Listen, don't ask her anything about Jayanta. Utpal's voice is low. Jayanta and she have had some fight. I don't know the details. No, they stopped talking two years back. Don't know... But she missed the bus and needed help. I've known her for so many years. It's not safe for a woman at night. No hotel would let in a single woman...

I'm going to take the blanket and extra pillows to the spare room, I say and walk away. Utpal is not a good liar. He did not sound convincing. There must have been a reason why a brother would not talk to his own sister. It would be something she had done. Something dirty and wicked and unspeakable. Something that Utpal knew about but wanted to leave unsaid to honour his best friend, to avoid upsetting me, adding to my post partum blues. But most of all,

the reason that I feared – to protect her from my censure, to hide from me what she really was, not because I would be shocked, but that I would never let her in through the door should she wish to come in some distant, unforeseeable future.

The woman should never have come.

A man and a woman have dinner together that night. Utpal helps himself to the rice, the woman serves the*dal*, pouring it delicately over his mound of white, steaming rice. They talk quietly as they eat. I will never ever know what they were talking about. I was in our bedroom-as Pratik pulled at my teats, gasping between each frantic gulp, I could feel myself flow away in the darkness, silently straining to hear the faint murmur of their voices in the dining table. Even after all these years, Sandhya's image comes back to me, - the Sandhya Utpal must have been looking at as he tore with his teeth the flesh of the chicken pieces - a slender woman in black and white, a dark halo of frizzy hair, a single gold bangle on the fragile wrist, and such dark, knowing eyes. I do not remember if I ate at all that night, after Pratik slept. I do not remember if she left after breakfast the next day, or before. All I remember is that she had no luggage when she left, only her black handbag with the silver clasp.

That woman should never have come. She came for a night, and has been with me for a lifetime. But because she came, I understood – with a sharp pang, how much I loved my gentle, good-natured young husband and how fiercely ready I

was to clasp him to me, to fight for this life we had made together. Sandhya was the darkness through which I saw the lighted window of my small, perfect world. She alone has helped me understand that, and for that, I must remember her.

The untold story

Once again, he slipped out when no one was looking. It was the time when it was neither day, nor night, the time when a soft, silvery light hung over the city.

After the heart attack, they scolded and fussed over him, hid his packets of Wills, served him toast with Nutralite, instead of butter. On Aarti's face, he often detected a faint, accusing look, silently asking him why he had caused all this trouble, the wailing siren of the *Mritunjoy 108* ambulance racing through the city streets that June night, eight months ago, the whispers, sobs, the waiting and prayers. Now, Probir had gotten into the habit of coming into this room straight after work and asking him in a stern voice, "*Baba*, I hope everything is OK?" Gayatri bought him a book on cardiac health, written by an American heart specialist. It had pictures of pink, smiling men and women running on the beach, nibbling on bowls of chopped lettuce and sitting cross-legged on *yoga* mats. His daughter-in-law believed this was just the thing he needed to be motivated to stay alive. Aarti, Probir and Gayatri believed they were doing the right thing to keep him alive. What he hated most was that it no longer mattered to them how he felt. As long as his heart beat regularly, his kidneys, liver, prostrate, intestines, lungs functioned as efficiently as could be expected of a person his age, Aarti, Probir and Gayatri could live out their lives without concern.

They were doing everything to keep him alive. Aarti rose every morning, took her bath, and smeared the parting of her white hair with vermilion, daring death to take him away from her. Looking at that red streak, and that gentle accusation in her eyes, he felt impatient, desperate to break free, willing his heart to falter, to ache, to stop.

The doctor said he could take his regular evening walks, but not strain himself. The three were horrified. What if he got a second heart attack on the street? So, they sent him out with Maloti, the maid. Maloti walked after him, humming to herself, flinging stones at dogs, cheerily calling out to other maids in the nearby houses. She so annoyed him that one evening, he came back and flung a tea cup across the dining room.

No more walks, Probir's eyes bored into his through the thick lenses. When had this son become his father?

Then they gave up on him. Every evening, he slipped out of home, unhitched the front gate and made his way along the lane. He no longer remembered the names of his neighbours. Every evening's walk was meant to keep his heart working, but to him, it was always more than that. In the street, nobody reminded him that he was damaged goods. Cars hooted impatiently for him to spring aside. No one reached out to steady him when he stumbled. He liked to stand by the railway tracks and watch the trains thundering past, bearing people, oil, coal, sacks of grain, machinery, logs of wood. And after the last bogie rattled away, he gingerly crossed the tracks, tapping the stones with his cane, and on the other end he always stepped at Gopal's *paan* shop for a Wills. Inhaling deeply, and feeling the smoke curl out of his nostrils, he felt something had been set right, as if the hands of an old clock were moving again.

Eight months ago, when he was close to death, hooked up to the ventilator at the hospital, the city's four newspapers and three magazines sent their reporters

to cover his eventual death. For he was not just another old man. He was Jyotirmoy Chowdhury, the Sahitya Akademi Award winning author of eight novels, seven collections of short stories, two books on criticism. Showed visuals of his hassled family, and the closed door of the ICU, and through the first three days of the crisis, sombre men and women sat in television studios, discussing his themes of angst and alienation, the deliberately flawed nature of his characters, his powers of narrative and his place in the literary firmament. People came to his home, and took away rare photographs, even samples of his handwriting. One magazine brought out a special issue on him, even though he did not die as per their expectations, or even hope. When he came back from the hospital, Probir showed him the magazine, thinking it would cheer him up. But Jyotirmoy Chowdhury felt abused and demeaned. A sourness seemed to fill his mouth. Reading the glowing, laudatory pieces, he felt that his life was one big lie, that his work was trivial, commonplace. What had he discovered about this world that others had not known before? Why were his characters so petty, so mean and helpless in the face of great odds? He buried the magazine in the bottom drawer of his study table. From then on, which was eight months ago, he could not write a line without feeling like an imposter. He knew then that God, or fate, or the blind immanent will that ran the universe, had taken away his life as a writer and now, he was only an old man with a bad heart, waiting his turn to go. But, there had to be something he was yet to discover. He was sure of it. Everyday, when he stepped out to walk, or puff at a Wills, he wanted to return

home with an experience that would make his pen flow, and his mind quicken at the infinite possibilities of life.

That evening, he was thinking these thoughts, when a woman touched him on the arm.

“Why have you stopped writing?” She was a young woman, with a round, tranquil face.

He paused and looked at her. “Excuse me,” he said, “Do I know you?”

“What do you think?” her eyes glittered like marbles. “After all that I have been through, because you think you can do anything you like...”

“I’m sorry. I must go.” He quickened his step, his walking stick beating a tattoo on the sidewalk. She followed him, talking to him, her words flowing like a dark tide towards him. Five minutes later, she stopped following him. Then a twelve-year-old boy, one side of his face horribly disfigured, clasped his left hand and walked alongside, whistling cheerfully. Then, a man in orange robes and an enormous trident stopped him and smeared his forehead with ash. Something that had gagged and silenced him in these eighth months loosened, and he felt free. Words and sentences formed unbidden in his mind and he felt the old excitement of expressing his view of the world. This was what had made him leave his house at dusk every evening. For the truth came to him on the street, a truth so momentous that it stunned him with its enormity.

The moon faced woman was a character in his second novel. The boy with the hideous face was Pandu, son of a tea labourer. He had breathed life into them,

given them features, a certain way of speaking, flaws, virtues. He had given them their destinies... Urmila, selling herself to feed her child, Pandu, scarred for a crime he did not commit... the holy man was the thug who changed guises. He had had absolute control over their lives, and they were now coming back to him in the real world. He felt a delicious fear prickle at the back of his neck. He hurried home, over the railway tracks, the uneven stones, the narrow bylane. Pandu was still holding his hand and when he looked back, he saw the shadowy form of Urmila, the soft *slap slap* of her sandals on the road. He unlatched the gate, and stumbled up the steps, panting, pushing the boy away. They were all watching television – Arati, Gayatri, Probir. He went to them, sitting heavily on the couch. Maloti brought him a cup of tea and two cream cracker biscuits.

He spent the rest of the evening waiting for the knock on the door.

The summons

Ankit Chowdhury walked out of the classroom in long, loping strides, his maroon tie flapping and his shirt collar wilted. To be eleven was not the happiest stage of a boy's life. There was a tiny, treacherous moustache creeping out above his upper lip, among other things. These days, when he opened his mouth to speak, two things usually happened. The sound that came out was a thin, girlish quaver, or a deep, hoarse growl. The worst was when one sound followed the other, and it was like two people were speaking through him, as if he was a ventriloquist's doll.

Ankit knew thirty-two pairs of eyes were following his retreating back. There was an excited little buzz around that room. He had created the buzz, the way Benjamin Franklin tied a key to the end of a kite line, and flew the kite during a thunderstorm. When the key gave off, sparks as lightning struck, and he proved lightning is an electrical discharge. It was a dangerous thing to do. You had to be man enough to do dangerous stuff. When he had flunked Hindi in the weekly test, he put his test copy on the table and surrounded by a ring of curious fellow eleven-year-olds, copied his father's quirky signature, with its dots and flourishes, leaning back with a pleased look to examine his handiwork. They had all dared him to execute this little forgery and Bedanta had even promised to lend him *Age of Empires* for a week. The euphoria had lasted exactly twenty minutes. Some mean, treacherous creature, some worm from a smelly sewer had squealed to Shoma Miss, the class teacher. Shoma Miss' eyes, magnified by her bifocals, bore into his for interminable seconds.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Ankit Chowdhury, have you forged your father's signature?"

He stood up, running a quick hand through his hair. "Yes, Ma'am." "Do you know people go to prison for this?" She came and stood near him. "Do you know it is breaking the law? Answer me." Shoma Miss rapped his desk with her wooden ruler. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. He felt a cramp in his

bowels. The boys were too silent. When adults addressed him by his full name, it was not a good sign.

What are goose pimples? He remembered the answer in *Hamlyns 500 questions* Goose pimples are little bumps that appear on our skin when we are cold. The cold air causes muscles at the base of hairs on skin to stiffen, resulting in these bumps. The hairs stand up, trapping air between them, and giving the body some insulation against the cold. But it was not cold now. Another burning August afternoon. But he could feel them prickle his forearms, the nape of his neck, everywhere.

When the bell rang, Shoma Miss suddenly left the room, gathering up her books, her braid swinging on her broad back. He slumped into his seat relieved, but not for long. Hardev, the peon, came in. The Principal wanted to see him. The school courtyard seemed endless. There were boys playing basketball, letting out whoops of glee. Boys were bending down to drink water straight from the taps. The aroma of *dosa* and *idli*wafted from the canteen, to the west. But he was far away from these simple pleasures. Nobody knew what would happen.

The Principal's room was dark. He blinked as his eyes tried to adjust from the sunshine outside. Father George leaned back on his chair, immaculate in his white cassock, the crucifix resting on his chest.

"Ankit Chowdhury," he began in a deep, level voice "What you have done is shocking, criminal, forging someone's signature..."

"My father's, Sir."

"Don't interrupt me. You have been mediocre in studies. You refuse to cut your hair. You do not return library books on time. Always breaking some rule. But forgery.... I will have to talk to your father about this. Tell him to meet me on Monday morning. Now go back to class."

Life had been good thirty minutes ago. He had carried out a perfect forgery and Bedanta was going to lend him the *Age of Empires*. The ring of faces around him had looked awed, admiring. Now, no one looked directly at him. He hung his head and kept doodling on his copy, waiting for the final bell to ring and leave for home.

Ankit Chowdhury, all of eleven, had recently found out how tough it was to be a boy, with the awkward limbs and the funny voice and the shameful growth

above his upper lip. But even before that, he knew it was impossibly hard to be a son. He got the feeling from his Papa that he was never good enough. Papa was a bureaucrat, with his own PA and driver and a special government plate on his car. He carried work home, always popping Gelusils for acidity and was often on the phone, sometimes sounding respectful, sober, at other times bullying, hard, almost threatening. When Papa was at home, it meant several things – the television was to be switched off. Ankit was to sit at his table, pretending to study. His sister, Asmita, tied a sarong over her shorts and did not strike model-like poses before the mirror. His mother cooked an awful lot of food.

Ankit feared his father more than he feared reptiles, Vlad the Impaler and the possibility of being trapped in a lift.

“You are going to give your father a heart attack one of these days,” his Ma told him sadly. “You will kill him”.

That had been the day Shoma Miss had called Ma to say he had called Karan Shitface.

“What’s wrong?” Asmita now looked at him. “Seen a ghost, *Bacchu*?”

He went to his room, undressed, showered, slipped into shorts and T-shirt and lay down, curtains drawn. Ankit Chowdhury thought of many things. Photographs came to his mind – him, two years old, on a tricycle, his father on his knees by him, stern, unsmiling. At seven, on a sea beach, his cruel, heartless father pushing him kicking and screaming into an oncoming wave. Asmita holding the best debater's trophy, radiant, then in her Girl Guide uniform. His parents fighting over something he had done... low marks, fights with the boys... things he could not help doing. And now Papa called by the Principal on Monday morning. Something that beggared the imagination.

All though Sunday he prayed for something to happen. Something so gigantic, so monumental, that a visit to the Principal's office would be simply beyond anyone's reckoning. Tremors from the bowels of the earth... houses collapsing, a nuclear war, some confused dictator pressing the red button somewhere, bubonic plague spreading across continents within hours, thousands of asteroids bombarding the planet, ice-bergs melting with a whoosh and drowning all land mass. But the hours went by without any television reports of catastrophes except for a car bomb in Syria. In his office, next to the sitting room, his father made calls on the telephone, read the papers, met visitors. Ma made lunch and suspiciously noted how Ankit played at his food. But she paid him no attention. Later that afternoon, she would go out shopping with her friend. An unbelievable autumn sale was on at Arcadia.

Ankit Chowdhury actually fell sick at 6 O'clock on Monday morning. His face felt warm, feverish, he had been to the toilet thrice, and his father's enraged face, eyes bulging, mouth drawn into a nasty snarl, seemed to be fixed permanently before him.

In half an hour, he would have to ask Kaushik Chowdhury, the bureaucrat with his own PA and driver and a government car to go to Mountford High and be insulted by the Principal.

Then, something did happen. Not tremors or asteroids. The doorbell ringing at 8:20 a.m. Ankit, jumpy as a rabbit on steroids, not having slept at night, rushed to unbolt the door. There were three men there, in safari suits, asking for Kaushik Chowdhury. The latter was in a crumpled *kurta* and *pyjama*s, bleary-eyed. Ankit's mother put her hand on her mouth.

"I told you.... I told you to be careful," she said in a hushed voice to her husband. "Shut up!" he lashed at her "Listen", his tone towards the safari suited men was low, wheedling, "This is a mistake... let me call my lawyer."

They were everywhere, these men. And out of the familiar furniture Ankit saw briefcases, files, stacks of currency notes that was straight out of the Bollywood

films his father scoffed at. Kaushik Chowdhury, now dressed in black trousers and a sober grey shirt. The media was waiting outside. His face had the menacing impassivity of a bull dog.

Ankit stood by the bedroom doorway, looking at his father.

“The Principal wants to meet you,” he said in a small voice.

His father stopped combing his thinning hair, turned his face towards him and said. “Principal? I have nothing to tell him.”

“He says you must come.”

“I can’t.” He shook his head. “I can’t. Tell him... tell him I am out of station. Tell him anything, I don’t care.” He turned away, shoulders hunched.

Ankit touched his father’s hand.

“It’s okay,” he said awkwardly, gently. “I’ll tell him.”

The Perfect Murder

Well, there we were at the club again, on that balmy June evening. The lawns were freshly sprinkled and in the pool, the nubile daughters of club members frolicked in their designer swimwear. Ice cubes clinked in our gin and tonics as Chopin played softly in the background. We were a classy joint. No Daler Mehendi stuff for us. The bearers moved about discreetly in starched turbans and scarlet cummerbands, dispensing *kebabs*, soda, drinks. The women played cards in an inner room, seated elegantly on faded velvet settees, each face perfectly made up.

Yes, this was a perfect world. We were in a cocoon, sanitized from the madness and the chaos of Assam even though we lived in its capital city. We never saw spilled blood or heard the anguished cries of injured victims. No one torched our houses or raped our wives. Yes, some of us had received extortion notes. Subranil Barua told us a witty story of how his wife, a woman of Amazonian proportions, bullied a hapless extortionist into reducing the extortion amount from five lakhs to fifty rupees. We had a good laugh over that. Oh yes, we were safe. Many of us had children who studied at Mayo or Doon School and we

hoped they would eventually settle abroad. "There is no future here" is the refrain that always went around.

Barua and I sat in the spacious shady porch, nursing our drinks and learning contentedly back on our rattan chairs. It could have been a scene straight out of a Somerset Maugham story. Somewhere along the way, we got talking about murder. You know how it is. Someone drops a stray comment. Another adds to it. And then you have an animated discussion on a single theme. I was saying there was no such thing as a perfect murder. I was an avid watcher of *" Medical Detectives"* on Discovery Channel. Forensic science had made such astonishing strides that it was virtually impossible for any murderer to get away. There even was a chemical, luminol, which, when sprayed on any surface, revealed traces of blood which appeared invisible to the naked eye. Chowdhury came along and reminded us of the story where the wife kills her unfaithful husband with a frozen leg of lamb, which she later cooks for the policemen who come to investivate. Saikia said his favourite story was that of a man who killed his wife. Soon after the murder, he was always seen chopping firewood. Enquiries revealed he bought bottles of a sauce at the village store which was meant to make meat tasty. Well, the guy had been eating his own wife and he chopped firewood just to work up an appetite.

Just then we were joined by Amar Kakati. He was one of our oldest members, a cherubic, old gentleman with silver hair, ruddy cheeks and kindly, twinkling

eyes. He had just won a tennis match against a younger man and looked very pleased with himself. He rubbed his face with a towel, lowered himself into a chair and grunted.

"Hmmph ... Murder. Interesting subject. What qualifies a murder to be called perfect?"

"Well, when there are no clues", volunteered Barua. "When the motive cannot be established".

"When there are no suspects".

"When the corpse cannot be traced".

"When you cannot find the murder weapon".

"Right", Kakati nogged approvingly "we need all these conditions. And I can tell you there is such a thing called a perfect murder, for I committed one myself".

"What?" we exclaimed incredulously. We were a pretty blase lot otherwise, but to think of the cherubic old man involved in such a heinous crime was too much to swallow. But he seemed to be perfectly serious. Suddenly his eyes didn't twinkle anymore. They were dark with malice. There was a cruel twist in his lips and his hands looked large.,.

lmobbly and menacing. We sat in uneasy silence, wondering why he was confessing.

"Well", he said, looking around, "1 wasn't the sole culprit.

We were all accomplices, the whole neighbourhood-men, women, even children ... "

"Children", we echoed. "Yes, you can't imagine the cruelty children are capable of. Let me tell you about our neighbourhood. It is the most upscale part ofthis city. Rows and rows of beautiful homes with immaculate landscaped gardens, garages filled with cars, durwans at the gates. High walls, sweeping driveways. All of us are established, welllmown, loaded with money-surgeons, lawyers, academicans, technocrats ... "

"But why would all of you want to commit murder?" "Patience!" he gave a gentle smile. "It's a long story, quite complicated. We all had our motives. Now, to get on with the story, ourneighbourhood had one imperfection. It was an eyesore. At the end of our lane was a dilapidated cottage with a tin roof. Its walls hadn't been painted for years. Every monsoon, rain water flooded the house. It was set in the middle of a large plot of land. The grass was growing wild everywhere. Dogs and cows broke in through the flimsy fence. The owner was keen to sell the land. We all had an eye on it. My son, the contractor, wanted to make a swanky new apartment block on it. But there was a snag. The

owner had rented the premises to a nephew of his. He was unwilling to move out as the rent was low and he could not afford to pay more. Uncle and nephew argued a lot. But the uncle, the sentimental fool, was unwilling to go to court, saying it was a family matter. So this worm, this Ayushman Das, continued to live in that rotten dump with his wife and brood of four children and would have continued to do so. That is, if we had not taken matters into our own hands ..."

He paused and looked around, allowing the words to sink in. By now some of the ladies had joined us. I saw my wife shudder delicately. Kakati seemed to be enjoying the effect he was having on us. He lmocked back his whisky, wiped his lips with a serviette and went on. "You may be excused for thinking we all wanted the land. But it was not as simple as that. You see, this Ayushman Das did not belong to that neighbourhood. He was like a jarring note in a beautiful piece of music. His presence spoiled the whole effect. We could not forgive him for a lot of misdemeanours. He brushed his teeth in the morning in front of his gate. Digusting. His children pissed in the drain in front of our house. They went' to vernacular schools. His wife looked like a retard. She would stand there every evening, calling out cheerily as we passed by. She did't know her place. And four children .. .it was scandalous, multiplying 'like rabbits. Pardon me, ladies, but all of us in the neighbourhood were too busy to make love".

He chortled with laughter and called for another whisky.

"What got our goat the most was that this Ayushman Das seemed to have no desire to come up in life. A clerk in the department ofland records. Went to work riding a cycle. It is people like him who give us Assamese a bad name. Land of *lahe lahe*, filled with lazy, complacent bums. We were sick of him. But we were too well bred to tell him that to his face. So we got rid of him. It was a long, complicated process. We were all accomplices, yet we never discussed it. As if by telepathy, we seemed to know our assigned roles in the plot ... "

"Quite by chance, we came to know that this Ayushman Das was not getting his salary. His kids and some of our kids were playing badminton. One of Ayushman's kids lost the shuttlecock. Now one of the rules was that whoever lost a shuttlecock would have to buy a new one. The boy blubbered tearfully that he would buy one only after his father got his salary. Which could be months later. So what do you expect? The kids beat him up. They kicked and pummelled him. Someone took off his knickers. He ran home howling, naked and bruised. Didn't I tell you, when it comes to cruelty, there's no beating the children? After that, whenever one of their kids showed up, our children would shout "No pay! No pay!" till they ran off in shame.

"Soon, they stopped coming altogether. But we adults could not go so far. So when Samir's birthday came along, Mrs. Sharma personally went to invite the Das children. The Sharmas were the wealthiest with a luxmious home that even included a home theatre. Understandably, Mrs. Das was terribly flustered by

Mrs. Sharma's unexpected visit. She was sure the lady had come to complain about her children".

"1' 11 be glad if your children can come" said Mrs Sharma.

"We are having a magic show, a lucky dip and even a fancy dress contest! I know this is a difficult time for you. I can't imagine how you are running the household without a salary. It's none of my business, of course. But I do sympathetize with you. And one thing, please don't buy a present for my son. God knows you're having a hard time as it is".

"But she didn't get the message. On the day of the party, her four kids were there, with a crudely wrapped present. The other kids ripped it open and howled with glee at the. cheap fire engine whose wheels came off moments after they touched it. Teasing those kids became more interesting than all the other treats lined up for the evening.Those four kids never showed up after that".

"So the wheels were slowly being set in motion. One day, Das discovered a daily wage earner cutting the grass of his unkempt garden with his sickle. The labourer explained that he had been paid by the Lahkars to do it. Das was pretty rude and yelled at the guy to leave. He had no sense of gratitude, that man. That monsoon his wife got real sick. Some woman trouble. They couldn't afford a doctor. So my wife called her gynaecologist and accompanied her to the house. Das was not at home but he got real mad when he came home and found

medicines on the bedside table. They had a furious row that could be heard all the way down the street. Well, the fool had no right to self-respect, if he couldn't keep his family clothed and fed".

"Anyway, we went on with our plans. Mr. Lahkar dropped his newspaper at Ayushman's doorstep every morning. The milkman was paid by someone else to deliver two bottles of milk to the Das household. The *dhobi* refused payment for their clothes he washed and ironed.

"One day, Mrs. Das could not pay the full bill at the grocery shop. Immediately five neighbours surrounded her with their wallets. She was flustered and almost in tears. Then the ladies of the neighbourhood got together and made a large parcel of all the clothes their own children had outgrown. Then they set off in a delegation to Ayushman's house. He was sleeping inside. Dipti, that silly woman, was simply terrified. Please go away, she begged. We don't want anything. My husband will be very angry. Please leave us alone."

"The women were made of sterner stuff. Look here, they said. Your children are going around practically naked. Your daughters' wear frocks that are indecently short. Soon winter will be here. You want them to die of pneumonia? Is your self respect more important than their lives? As for your husband, why tell him about this? Men don't notice such things. We have only your best interests at heart. This neighbourhood is like one family".

"What could she do? She touched their feet and snuffled tearfully in to her *chadder*. After that, she yielded easily to the flood of generosity. Casseroles of piping hot food were sent through servants to the Das household. Someone paid for the little girls' music lessons. Mrs. Sharma took them out to have hair-cuts at the barber's. When the new academic session came along, all the four children got new exercise books".

"Meanwhile, Ayushman Das was at the end of his tether. His eyes had a wild, haunted look. The flesh melted away from his body. He didn't bother to shave. He sold his bicycle and walked to work. Fourteen months without salary. Sometimes he would stay away from office and just sleep at home. He beat up his kids on the flimsiest pretext. He was on the point of no return".

"The flashpoint came sooner than we anticipated. We have a Durga Temple in the neighbourhood. We have *apuja* every year and some of us men formed a committee. We announced that there would be a meeting the following Monday and everybody was expected to donate money and take part in the proceedings. We gathered in a large hall behind the temple. Lahkar was the president. As the treasurer, I collected the donation amounts. The meeting was well under way when the door burst open and Ayushman Das stumbled in".

"Why was I felt out?" He demanded preremptorily. "Am I not a resident here?"

"Here, take your place:, said Sharma., soothingly, patting the chair next to him.

"I demand an explanation", Ayushman'e eyes glittered like a madman's. He had come in his striped pyjamas and a faded shirt.

"Remember who you are", said Lahkar sharply. "A clerk of the land records department does not behave like this in' front of judges, professors and engineers".

"Das, we've tolerated you far enough", Sharma said testily.

"You are a dammed nuisance. You know very well why we did not call you. We wanted to save you the trouble of paying the donation amount. We know your troubles, oh yes, we do".

"Look mister", Ayushman shook a warning finger". Don't talk in that tone to me. I'm not riffraff. I can afford the donation. Here, take this hundred rupee note .... you want more? I'll give you more. Here .... help yourself'.

"Oh, did you sell one of your children?", called a voice from the back. There was a gust oflaughter. Ayushman paled. He clenched his fists, "Who was that bastard?"

"Mind your tongue", I said brusquely. "We don't want your money. Buy yourself some groceries with that. We have all been contributing to your household expenses. You know that, don't you? Newspaper, milk, food, stationery, fees, even clothes for your children. You think you can buy your

selfrespect with a measly two hundred rupee donation? You lost it long ago, man. It won't be long before your wife does something dishonourable to feed your children. Then where will your self-respect be, Mr. Das?"

Amar Kakati give us a wicked grin and sipped his whisky. "That did it. Ayushman went wild. He started cursing and yelling, overturning tables and chairs. I got a punch in the nose. Two able-bodiled youths dragged him home. He was a real nut-case. We began our preparations for Puja. The goddess was installed in the temple on the day of *Sasthi*. Our wives and children wore new clothes. In the Das household, it was ominously quiet. And on *Ashtami* night, when Dipti's shrill screams rent the night air, we knew our plan had worked".

"What do you mean?" I asked. The others edged closer.

"We did everything. We all took charge. What are neighbours for, after all?"

"What happened?" Renu whispered.

"Well, Ayushman had stopped eating after the fracas at the temple premises. That night Dipti woke up to find her husband's place on the bed empty. The kitchen light was burning. She saw him seated on the dining chair, drinking a glass of milk. She felt very relieved. He smiled at her and apologised for his temper. He took her to the children's room. He woke them all up and they hugged each other. A touching scene really. Then he doubled up, started vomiting, writhing in the floor. It wasn't milk that he had been drinking. It was

phenol from the bottle under the sink. They tried to hold him down as he convulsed to death. Dipti's cries had us running to their house. The doctor shook his head. My wife gently wiped off Dipti's vermilion dot. Her children were brought to my house for the night. We had a nice, decent *shradh*, followed by a tasty feast. Ayushman's sons wore baseball caps over their shaved heads. A month later, Dipti went off with her children to her mother's house at Lakhimpur. The uncle sold my son the land. He has put up a signboard, Ayushman Apartments. Isn't that rather thoughtful?" He looked around at us, smiling. "Now isn't that what you would call a perfect murder? No clues, no suspects, no motive. No violence. A murder that used psychology, a murder where there are accomplices working with quiet, skilled discretion. Don't you think there is an aesthetic element in the whole plot, a coming together of several elements?"

We had no reply. Suddenly I wanted to leave the club.

Suddenly the night seemed full of menace. Suddenly I did not like Amar Kakati anymore.

Kakati walked us to the car. As we got in, he bent down and said with a low chuckle. "We did have a murder weapon, don't you think so? A weapon more potent than a bullet ... "

"What?" I asked, starting the engine.

"Kindness. We killed him with kindness", he said, smiling like an angel in the gathering darkness

The other side - I

Nobody must know. At least, not yet. Shristi thought of this as she climbed the stairs, on the way to her second floor flat. Shristi passed by the doors of seven other flats. Doors that were almost always shut. But always, something outside each closed door lay like a clue to the people on the other side. A child's tricycle – carelessly abandoned. Three pairs of hastily discarded shoes and sandals, raised tones and laughter inside another. A square piece of paper pasted on the third door, black front gravely telling the world that the man inside had two Master's and a law degree. Shristi took these clues and often, on her way up or down, idly mulled over the worlds that she thought existed on the other side of seven doors painted white that shut off the outside.

The door of her flat was ajar. She left her pumps on the shoe rack on the passage and padded on barefeet into the sitting room. There were two rucksacks carelessly flung the sofa, and a half-full coke bottle on the glass top table.

Manju was holding an earthen incense pot trailing clouds of blue smoke that made her eyes smart. Shristi took on the sight of the vermillion glowing brilliantly on the parting of Manju's hair. You poor fool, she thought.

“Baba bring friends again”, Manju made a wry face, smiling at her. “I made four Maggi packets already. Now he wants cold coffee. But the ice is finished.”

“Fill the ice trays,” she said wearily. “Let him wait.”

Neel was jamming in his room. Discordant notes of the stratoscaster drifted out of the half-open door of his room. She could no longer understand the lanky stranger who lived on the other side. His voice was different, his chest had grown hair. There were posters of his heroes everywhere – men, boys in tattoos, chains, earrings, charged, angry, unleashing storms that shrieked through the woof box.

There had to be a place where she could be alone. Somewhere nobody knew who she was or even cared about why it was so important for her to be alone. She imagined a quiet, impersonal hotel room, with its regulation closet with the hangers and deep shelves. The golden glow of a table lamp on a writing desk. The heavy drapes shutting out the light. Flat screen TV, shampoo and soap packets on the sink. White towels and a hair dryer. She would register under an assumed name. There would be no baggage, none at all, if that was allowed. Not even the handbag with the big square envelope rolled inside. Especially not that bag. She would order tea and run the bath water, leaning to check it for the right temperature. And lowering herself into it, she would feel the weightless pleasure of being a foetus in a womb, adrift, dreamless. They would find her, of course. They always had extra keys when hammering on the door did not help.

Extra keys to find out about the silence of an occupied room. But by then she would be truly alone. They would never even know who she was.

But going away was never easy. You were not allowed to do it. It was not fair. I am only forty-five, Shristi thought. Neel has crossed the age when he needs me, but Disha is just eleven. I had to make her pancakes one midnight last week, because she suddenly decided she was fat and skipped dinner. We have not even gotten around talking about the birds and bees. I gave her a baby pink Barbie doll diary with its own tiny silver lock and key. She writes in it, locks it, and hides it new places in her room everyday, making sure I don't find it. Then she loses it and tears through the room, grim-faced, flinging away books, clothes, stuffed in toys, and she finds it and only then am I allowed to enter and clear the mess. She has secrets too. By giving her that diary, I let her have secrets. And I don't want to know hers. Mine is enough – a ripe, rotting fruit, waiting to fall into the ground, split wide open.

Partha will have to told, Shristi thought, towelling her hair after a shower. She would have to be calm and reasonable, maybe even add a bit of humour. We ought to stop arguing for a bit, you know. Neel's lousy grades at school and the down payment details – they have to wait. Something's come up. The tests came back positive. See, I don't really want to involve you in this. Yes, of course, you had to receive your boss at the airport. And that audit report couldn't wait, could it? So, I sat in the hospital waiting room done last week, undressed at the cubicle, had fine needle aspiration on my left breast. I was

alone when they showed me the tissue slides today. They will have to operate, they are also talking of chemo... But you have the annual general meeting coming up, don’t you?

Shristi had these conversations in her head with Partha all the time. They felt real because even when they were actually talking, Partha rarely spoke. There would only be the shrug at the end, meaning, “Do what you think is best.” What is the best you can do when you are slowly, inevitably dying?

Disha was at a sleepover party at her best friend Anisha's house, two floors below. Neel's friends had left, door slamming, feet tramping down the stairs.

"I'm gonna sleep now," he thrust his head through the bedroom door. "Wake me up at ten, OK?"

"What about the science test?" She asked carefully, not raising her voice.

"That's my headache," his face was set.

She could feel a door closing between them. It was no longer possible for her to know what was on the other side.

Manju had readied dinner. Casseroles of rice, *dal*, lady's finger fried in oil and chicken curry were laid out on the table. She was at the sink, rinsing the glasses and spoons, her quick, nervous hands creating a clatter that set Shristi's teeth on edge. For she understood that there

was a reason for that jarring noise, those discordant notes that spelt out what was going on Manju's life. She was thirty-five, a mother of three, working in three homes for the last eight years. A short, dark woman, who lined her eyes with collyrium and revealed her paan-stained teeth as she smiled. Her skin glistened with mustard oil. She who would weep and show the purple bruises on her arm where her carpenter husband beat her. At the beginning, Shristi was indignant. Leave him. How dare he? Call the police. Manju would shake her head, horrified. She fasted for him on Mondays. Things would change.

"Close the door, *Didi*." Manju called out, her glass bangles jingling. "I have to go."

Shristi rose form the table, bolted the front door and sat down, drawing a deep breath. Carcinoma. She touched her left breast, near the topmost rib, the lump hard, like an olive. Ticking inside her, the beginning of the end. I must feel sorry for myself. I must weep. I must be comforted by Partha, Neel, Disha in a tight protective circle. An inspirational story straight out of *Reader's Digest*. Don't I matter?

A month ago, she had ordered Orhan Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence* on Flipkart. She had read avidly of lovers meeting secretly at an apartment in the doomed love story. A month ago, she had her fruit facial, listening to Richard Clayderman as the girl messaged her cheeks in gentle circular

movements. A month ago, she had brought out the literary magazine of her English department and spoken of Daniyal Mueenuddins luminous prose. A month ago, she had gone shopping for FabIndia *kurtas*. And now, she was entirely someone. Someone already in the past tense, burnt with the acid of the word Car-cinoma.

She sat down at her table by the bed and began surfing the net, randomly, her mouth dry, her robe falling open, staring intensely at the screen. She was googling names, places, writers, rockstars, Star cruises, recipes, home remedies for dry hair, Tibetan medicine for cancer, Tata Memorial, masectomy, Vellore. And then, without her being aware of it, she googled ghost photos and clicked images.

More than twenty images leaped up at her. Old black and white photograph of a stairway at a county manor in Bedford, and a wispy, nebulous outline of a woman ascending. Her eyes skimmed across the words, looking for an answer, feeling the orb of her left breast rotting, full of maggots, even as the lavender talc lay fragrant on her just showered skin. People describe ghostly encounters in a lot different ways. People see apparitions or strange lights, hear noises or feel a sudden drop in temperature. They smell a deceased relatives favourite breakfast cooking or hear a favourite song playing while the stereo is off. Objects fall from shelves and doors close and open on their own.

Sometimes, people don't experience anything unusual at all, but they notice strange apparitions or shapes when they look at pictures they have taken.

Somewhere in San Antonio, Texas, an apparition silently crosses a rail road track, the image caught on surveillance cameras. A girl in a white dress stands next to a group of mourners at a cemetery. A long dead man sits on the leather couch of his library surrounded by his beloved books. Two young girls pose for a mobile photograph. Only there's three of them – a young girl holding one's arm in a firm grip.

There were no sure answers. Leaving the computer on, she goes to Neil's room and wakes him up. They have dinner together. She misses Disha's non-stop battle. Neel, of late, makes her uneasy, wary, a sense of having failed him comes over her. And that rotting fruit on her body would turn everything upside down – his jamming, the Board exams. He closes the door to his room. She swallowed the pill and lies down, waiting for sleep. Partha would come from Delhi tomorrow. He would have to be told.

"Why?" She asks to the empty room. Her voice sounds different. "Why?" She thinks the door bell she has heard is in her dream. Then she sits upright, in a blind panic, her eyes taking in the numbers on the luminous beside clock and goes to the front door. It is Manju, "Forgive me." She

has wrapped her thin cotton sari tight around her skinny frame. "He hit me again. I think my arm is broken. It is my fault. I answered him back."

"Let me stay here, *Didi*. He will not dare to come here. I will go in the morning."

"Leave him," Shristi say wearily. "I will send you somewhere. Go and lie down quietly." She reaches out and touches Manju's tearstreaked face, "It will be alright. Go."

She goes back to bed and drifts to a deep, dreamless sleep. She wakes up and remembers what is to become of her. She puts her arms tight across her chest and tries to cry. She hates uncertainties. Last night, she had tried to see the other side. And it felt as if there was no other side, that you could never leave, and were cursed to haunt the places you lived, climbing and descending stairs, standing by windows, sitting unseen in park benches. But then, the photographs could be clever hoaxes, meant to scare and amuse. Nothing was what it was. A perfectly smooth, rounded breast, slowly decaying and spilling open, tissue, blood and maggots.

The landline telephone rang. It was Vandana, next door.

"Have you heard, Mrs. Chowdhury?"

"Sorry?"

"So you don't know? It's so very sad. We know of course, he beat her. But that it would go so far..."

"I don't understand."

"Manju's husband struck her with a hammer. Head injury. No time to take her to hospital gone. You will have to look for someone now."

"You must be mistaken," she says.

"Manju is here. She came away last night, after 12."

"No, no, whole thing took place at took place at ten. My driver is from that basti. The poor children..."

Shristi walks to Neel's room. He has left for school.

"Manju" she calls. There is no answer. She calls out her name two more times. There is no answering exclamation and the thump of the mat being dusted on the balcony. No tinkle of glass bangles. And then, drawing a deep breath, Shristi finds her, in the faint sweet fragrance of the jasmine hair oil she used everyday before she came to work. That was the answer.

Tears and birdsong (Fiction)

At some unknown hour of the night, the girl melted away. There was a high brick wall all around the hous-ing colony, girding the eight apart- ment blocks,

shutting off with bricks and barbed wire the clubhouse, the society office, the badminton court and the *namghar*. So the girl must have slipped, like a faint, sad, wispy shadow, past the gate where the lone security guard sat, cheap liquor on his breath, snoring on his chair in the cubicle, the visitors register open before him on the table.

She must have seen the shuttered shops out on the road, the halogen streetlights with their sickly orange glow, the bushes thick with dust. The barks of street dogs somewhere near, and then, echoing from afar, the answering barks. To the north, along the new highway, the trucks were thundering past, now slowing with a squeal of brakes, now accelerating.

How frightened she must have been. An eleven-year-old in a pink frock two sizes larger, fastened at the back with a safety pin. Two fragile glass bangles encircled her thin left wrist. She carried nothing else. Nothing, that is, but the bluish, purple bruise on the tender flesh of her left thigh. The black tar on the road felt hard on her feet, the warm stickiness of blood. Then the night swallowed her up.

The darkness passed and dawn broke. A few came out in the early hours, when the cry of the *azaan* could be heard, and newspaper vendors cycled in through the gates. Many of the men and women who walked briskly along the neat lanes

within the walled complex were past their prime. They had bought flats here, in this gated community, because the air was fresh and clean, there was open space and birdsong and the gentle hills to the east seemed so close. Together, they had planted saplings which were now shady, blossoming trees. Morning walks, informal meets at the clubhouse, Major Jogesh Barua and his army jokes, Chanchala Devi's tremulous outpourings in verse... There was fond pride about children working far away, in Bangalore and New Jersey, and framed pictures of grandchildren in the living rooms. Empty nest, they told each other, wryly, smiling. They were now free, and could do anything they liked. Only, there was nothing to do.

But it was not that they were all similar. For ten families which were respectable, thrifty, abiding by the rules of the building society, signing petitions, offering help to an ailing neighbour even in the middle of the night, there was one which did not fit in, kept to themselves, wary whenever their doorbell was rung. Each such family was like a small hole in a carefully stitched patchwork quilt, the thread unravelling. Flat B21, where the polite, bearded young man lived with his wife. He was in the construction business, he said. But they found out soon enough he was one of those who had laid down arms, who had once done things they talked about only in lowered tones. They imagined him often in a forest, waiting to kill. Then there was Bornali Garg, a divorcee living with her teenage son. It must have been her fault. She was

beginning to wear deeper shades of lipstick, even as the boy got into more trouble at school. But everyone was unfailingly polite to those who did not fit in, who had secrets and could not belong or welcome them in without a troubled shadow flitting across their faces.

Nisha and Pronoy bought the fifth floor flat, one of the three bedroom, east facing ones and moved in one September afternoon. The facts emerged, discreet enquiries, the gossip of servants. Married for a year now, they had been staying with his parents on the other side of the city. All day, the packers and movers lifted leather sofas, the wrought iron bed, boxes of books, crockery, up the stairs. The woman gave orders, like a man. The Hazarikas saw her first on the landing, in jeans, her hair in a ponytail, talking on the phone, her hand on her hip. She looked right through them.

There was something new, disquieting, with the arrival of this couple. Cars driving in at late hours, carrying friends to their housewarming party. Shrill laughter at midnight.

“No *puja*, no *prasad*, but lots of whisky bottles,” Anita Sarma’s lips were thinly pressed. “The music was so loud. We couldn’t sleep. We are decent people. What is this nonsense?”

Pronoy and Nisha brought with them the heat of youth, the restlessness of the city lying in wait beyond the brick wall girding the colony. She often stood on the balcony, in a terry robe, after her bath, coffee mug in hand. A sleek cat exquisite in her langour, her aloofness. Pronoy smiled at the neighbours, but only when Nisha was not with him. He looked the decent sort, bespectacled, with a low, pleasant voice. On Sundays, he washed the Esteem, rubbing and polishing it till it shone. He did not look unhappy that she had made him leave his home. That was how it was, now, the women nodded, knowing.

One by one, they all noticed the swelling under Nisha's clothes. Then came the luminous glow on her face, and the contours of her body became softer, rounded. Until, one day, she was so big that Pronoy had to help her up the steps, slowly, tenderly. The middle aged Garima, Abha and Anita, chatting after the*namghar* prayers, wondered how one could tempt fate by buying a baby cot and so many stuffed toys before the delivery. And was it not strange how nobody from her side or his visited?

When her water broke, twenty days ahead of the date, at one in the morning, he was white faced and trembling, ringing the Hazarika's doorbell. "We drove her to the nursing home for Pronoy's sake," Anita explained. "He's a good sort."

Little Nainita, or Noni, was born by caesarean section and came home a week later. A few of the women came to see her with gifts of baby clothes, Johnson baby powder, oil and shampoo, blankets. It was the decent thing to do, and now this young woman, all out of shape and her belly spliced, was no more a threat to them. She greeted them stiffly, relying on Pronoy to fill in the gaps in the small talk.

Till then, they had not known there was another child, besides little Nainita, in that flat. It was Garima, with her powerful bifocal glasses, who saw the brown feet, toes splayed wide, behind the curtain that screened the balcony.

Moments later, Maina wandered in, blinking in the light, eyeing the three visitors with alarm. The faded blue frock was too large on her scrawny frame. A tiny stud on her nostril, eyes black as the night, her big ears sticking out of her shaven head.

“Go inside. I told you to wash the plates.” Nisha’s voice cracked like a whip.

“Got her two days back, seems retarded. Would you like tea? Coffee then? But you must... Aunty.”

Maina's head had been shaved so that the lice would not spread to the baby's hair. They had made her bathe with Dettol. She was not to wear slippers in the house. Anita Hazarika got these facts from Maina herself, when Nisha took the baby to the doctor, or visited friends. Maina slept on the carpet, slapping mosquitos that fed on her blood all night. Mrs. Chaliha of the ground floor flat found the bald child munching a slice of mouldy bread from a waste bin. She felt disgusted and quickly closed her door.

Then two things happened at the same time. Little Noni was not too well. When she cried, her face turned blue. There was a wheezing, rattling sound when she breathed. She grew too tired to suck her mother's nipple. Pronoy was always driving to the doctor, tense, unsmiling, hands gripped on the steering wheel. The doctor suspected asthma. Nebulisers were prescribed. More tests, more precautions. At the *namghar*, they repeated what they had said before the baby's birth. Why buy teddy bears in advance and tempt fate?

As Noni struggled to breathe, life for Maina became harsher, more uncertain.

Gossiping servants, sly, observant elderly women who had too much time in their hands, all pooled in the details of what was slowly unravelling in the fifth floor flat, once filled with music, the clink of glasses, the heat of youth. All day, the television was on, but Nisha's voice rose above it, filled with rage as the

bald little girl, trembling, dropped dishes, let the baby clothes fly away in the wind, left the fridge door open. Sometimes, Maina would be let out on some errand. Some man or woman always noted the fear in the enormous pools of sadness in her eyes, and the tiny smile she gave them, as if she believed they would do something.

Spring came. The green and trembling leaves spoke of new beginnings. Little Noni was better. The asthma was always worse in winter, said Pronoy to Major Barua. Now Maina walked around the campus with Noni in her arms, jiggling her up and down, kissing her cheeks, showing her the flying birds, the rosy clouds, children riding tricycles. She was a little mother now, pouring her love into the cooing, gurgling baby, holding Noni close to the two tiny mounds of her budding breasts.

Later, the men shook their heads and refused to discuss it. It was too shameful. The women could not discuss anything else. But in those endless conversations eddying like water in a fetid pool, nothing new was learned, or ever revealed. The beautiful young wife with her confident body and the beginning of her new life had made all of them feel old, spent and faded. But now it was proved they were better women, far better than she would ever be. They could never dream of doing what Nisha did in one of her blind, consuming rages.

Maina was pushed out of the house, the door slammed behind her. It could have been the girl's chance to escape, to go back to wherever she came from. But she would not go. She was shrieking and hammering at the door, calling out to her *Baideo.* Annoyed, Mrs. Hazarika opened her door a few inches to peek out. Maina was naked. The child's face face was contorted with horror. She was like a little animal that, through an ancient knowledge in its blood, knows that the end is near. When she saw Mrs. Hazarika, she streaked past her, howling. For twenty, was it thirty minutes, the naked girl ran around crying, up the stairs, along corridors, down on the grassy open. One by one, people stood still, watching her, dumbfounded.

Jatin, the security guard, caught her just as she was running out of the campus. He wrapped her with his shirt and carried her to the fifth floor flat.

"I wanted to ask that woman why she did that to the poor girl," said Garima afterwards, "What could Maina have done that was so bad? Breaking a cup? Stealing food from the fridge? I think it is something else. That girl was growing up..."

Two days later, Maina was gone. Nobody saw her go. They were so relieved. Mrs. Hazarika could now enjoy television without the keening of a girl being beaten next door. It was a good place to stay, again. All of them, as if by

common consent, avoided Nisha and her family. Nobody asked her why. She had no right to disturb them, to ruffle the serenity of their lives here, where the air was fresh and clean, and there was birdsong.

Say that word

Indrani Raimedhi

The car was travelling at eighty miles per hour. They were get-ting late for the flight. Keya's flight. She had come home, sud-denly, like a meteor, a rainbow, and was going back to college in Delhi after this brief break.

Aparna hated tears. She held them back, as long as she could. Her only child, now a young woman, looking eagerly at the road ahead, her pixie face with its kohl-ringed eyes, the snub nose and delicate chin made her look much younger than her twenty years. This was her black phase-black tank top, black jeans, black sneakers. There was a tiny gold stud on her nostril.

"Look, Ma!" She held up her SLR camera towards the window, focussing on a flight of egrets on the marsh along the road. She shot everything, the brick kilns and their slender chimneys, the hills' blue sadness, women carrying baskets of sand balanced on their heads.

"Careful, Rashid", Aparna called out sharply. "Keep to the left."

"Let him be, Mom. He's good enough for the Formula One!"

"Did you have the cheesecake? I left it in your room."

"Just a slice, Mom. I was full." "I take all this trouble and it's all wasted," said Aparna. "I'm going to have to go home now and get rid of the pork manchurian, the pasta, the yoghurt, the chocolate fondue..."

"But you guys have it, nah."

"You know that stuff is not good for us."

"Us? Who's us?" She looked at Aparna, an innocent expression on her face.

"Your father and I, of course."

“My father and you,” she nodded, a bitter smile fleeting across her face. “Are you guys even talking?”

“Don’t say that,” Aparna said in a low voice. “We’re alright.”

“Ok,” Keya shrugged her shoulders. “If you say so.”

Aparna squeezed her hand. “Don’t worry about us. You must take care of yourself. Delhi’s so unsafe...”

“Oh Ma,” Keya pretended to yawn. “Tell me something new.”

“I’m serious, Keya. Your father doesn’t like saying these things. But you must not travel by autos alone. Always take someone along. Your father and I are proud that you take part in those symposiums, Sweetheart, but I’m sick with worry when you don’t call for the whole day.”

The car turned left and they were in the airport complex now. As Rashid took the parking slip, unrolling the window, Keya slipped her camera into its case, twisted her hair into a chignon and hopped out of the car. Rashid got her red strolley out of the boot. They moved to the Jet Airways counter.

“Sorry, Madam, the flight is delayed by one hour.”

“Oh shit!” Keya swore softly. “All this hurry for nothing. You go back, Mom. I’ll wait at the lounge.”

“I’ll come with you.” Aparna said firmly. “I’ve things to ask you. They got Aparna’s ticket for the lounge, then moved towards the entrance, holding open their handbags for inspection. A woman’s voice murmured inaudibly in the public address system. People sat sipping coffee and tea from styrofoam cups.

Children ran between the seats. Keya wanted iced tea, but there was none. They went into the emporium and looked at the artefacts. Then they sat before the huge flat screen TV.

"You called Jeet, didn't you? Isn't he going to pick you up?"

"No. I'll take a paid cab. Don't bug me, Ma."

"Why can't he pick you up? I feel easy, knowing he's there."

"What do you want me to have, Ma? A bouncer or a lover?"

"Keya, don't talk like that."

"Things don't move the way you want, Ma. Don't you know that already?"

"Can you give me a straight answer? For once?"

"What answer? We've broken up, Ma. Two weeks ago. It's over, Ma, you've got to get into Facebook. I've deleted all his photos." Keya's voice shook. She stared down at her nails, her eyes inscrutable. She then drew a deep breath and said cheerfully: "Ma, let's go to the book store over there. We've got time."

Aparna ran her eyes over the Shiv Kheras and Chetan Bhagats, then at the glossy magazines of impossibly beautiful women. She felt self-conscious in her crumpled cotton *kurta* and *kolhapuri*s. She had even stopped dyeing her hair two months ago–

"Ma, Ma, here's a book you must absolutely read... I order you, Ma... please."

"Which one?"

"Here, Ma, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I can't give you my copy. I sleep with it under my pillow, I love it so much. This Azar Nafisi lady refuses to wear the

veil and is expelled from Tehran University, and then she forms this book club with seven female students. They discuss literature, books like *Lolita* – have you read *Lolita*?"

Aparna nodded. "Yes, long back."

"So Ma, you can see how radical she is, how brave. She's my icon. It's been translated into thirty-two languages. Mom, I'm buying you this book. It's a gift, don't say no."

They came out of the store with the book.

"So, will you get dinner at the hostel?" Aparna asked, worrying. She always had this knack for finding something new to worry about. At the same time, she felt a little irrelevant to Keya's life, Keya, whose hero was a radical Iranian memoirist.

"Guess so. That ugh *louki ke sabji* and watery *daal*. I think I'll have Maggi at the cafeteria."

"Keya, you're addicted to Maggi."

"Ma, there are more important things in life than eating, wearing clothes, using lip balm, carrying the right change..."

"Save your lecture for Jeet,..."

"I told you..."

"I'm sorry." She gripped Keya's arm. "Forgive me, Baby. I am so very sorry."

"It's ok," she gave a wan smile and looked away.

Passengers were now pushing their trolleys to the departure lounge.

“Baby, call as soon as you land. And take a pre-paid cab.”

“Ma,” Keya’s lips were set in a hard line. Her dark eyes glowed with barely suppressed anger. “You think this whole world is one dark hell where every man is a killer and a rapist, don’t you? When you call me, I know you’ve seen something on TV about some girl or woman somewhere and want to know I’m safe. I am safe. I’m smart. I know what to do. It is you who must change.” “Keya, it’s getting late, Baby. You go check in your luggage.”

“Ma, listen to me. You must learn to say one word.”

“Keya.”

“Yes, one word.”

“Keya.”

“That word in enough. Enough. You must say that to Dad. When he slaps you around after a few drinks. Enough. When he twists your arm because you can’t find his keys, say enough, Ma. When I remember you, I see the bruise under your eye when you went to school to get me. All these years, Ma, you let him get away – why? I don’t understand you. Don’t cry, Ma. Please, Ma, for my sake. Here... Take this hanky. Oh, and here’s this book. Read it, Ma. And I will answer the phone, I promise.”

Keya pushed her trolley past the security man. Aparna stood watching her, a slender brave figure in black, until she was a tiny speck in the distance. Clutching the book, Aparna walked back to the car. In the back-seat, Keya’s strawberry flavoured bubblegum fragrance hung in the air.

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Afterwards….

Indrani Raimedhi

Afterwards… afterwards there remained the gritty residue of lost days. Like sand that kept falling off the secret folds of your clothes long after you had left the beach. No one talked of the afterwards to come. As if by a common conspiring to not think about it, by denying its presence somewhere close to you, with clever comments on Tarkovsky, and hoots of laughter after another light bulb joke over sloppy platefuls of greasy chowmein and uncooked cabbage strands, the afterwards would slink away, its head bowed under a fedora, mysterious in a long shabby coat into the twilight mist outside their golden circle – Sheena Massey and her bouncing curls, her eyes narrowed against the

drifting smoke of the cigarette always dangling on her lips. Priya Prakash and her amateur palmistry that could never predict when she herself would lose weight. Pranav Patnaik was always begging them to clear up their F-word act, so he could take them to his parents house in Puri, and the temple by the sea. And Hassan, shoe polish rubbed on his face and arms, a curly haired wig fitted over his real hair, driving his bike through campus in flowing robes, just in time for a Shakesoc rendering of *Othello.*…

But the afterwards had come for her after all. For a few hours she had refused to acknowledge it. She had gone to college, sat in the back row diligently taking notes, the sunshine falling in swathes of light into the room, through the windows, filled with swirling dust motes. She jotted furiously on her notebook, and found the words made no sense at all. It was pure gibberish. “The demand curve is downward, sloping, indicating that the lower the exchange rate, greater is the quantity of US dollars demanded in the Forex market.” Later, she went across to the cyber café and with a few clicks, closed down her Facebook account. In the blink of an eye, two hundred photographs melting into nothingness, the river dolphin saving cause, friendship requests turned down forever. She was without a past, or a future, and there was the beginning of a dull, throbbing ache in her temples, in the inner redness of her eyelids, in the left rib below her small, pear-shaped left breast, all along the length of her legs. She knew Sheena Massey and the others would be at the canteen, dipping bread

pakora into tomato sauce and mourning Safdar Hashmi. They would be so full of subversive and radical insight that they would miss it entirely – how she, sitting quietly beside them, her mirror work *jhola* on her lap, had been sucked into the black hole of the afterwards, where no light penetrated, and where their voices were a distant echo, coming through the static like the radio station voices of some faraway country one insomniac midnight.

Walking through the lane to her one room flat, it was as if she was seeing it all for the first time, the shabby grocery shop with the iron scales and sacks of onions, the PCO cubicle glass stained with dirt, jerry cans filled up from the roadside tap, wizened matriarchs crouching on doorways, children clamouring around the peanut seller's brazier. When Issac and she had walked this way, after classes, or late night after a movie, his arm on her shoulder, ever so lightly, their steps falling together, in a rhythm that came without trying. On the landing, she would rummage for the keys, and he would swear softly, taking his laptop bag onto one hand, impatient. She always found the key just as he threatened to kiss her there, so that the landlord's *Mausi* would see.

Today, the key seemed to reach her fingers of its own accord. How small the room was, and how suffocating. She struggled with the rusted window latch, and it grated open, Surabhi looked around, as if she had stumbled into someone else's room. Nothing in that sad, miserable space seemed to belong to her – the television set on the floor, the tattered strip of multistrand floor rug, the frail

bamboo book rack sagging with the weight of their books. Her clothes hanging from the four pegs on the wall. On the tiny kitchenette beyond, there was a gas stove, three plates, one chipped, three mismatched coffee mugs, salt pepper pots, two packets of Maggi. She knelt down on the mattress. The imprints of their heads were still on the pillows. This time yesterday, her world had been so safe, Issac had lain sprawled, the block print sheet crumpled under him, his back again the wall, watching a football match, the volume turned low so she could complete her term paper. She had made Maggi, with a poached egg on top, and he had taken the plate from her, his eyes still on the game. Later, they had wrapped the blanket of darkness around them.

The phone call came shortly after one. She heard him answer it sleepily, and felt him stiffen, push her arm away from his midriff. She had never learnt his language, and so could only hold up her head in the dark, frowning. He had unlatched the door and was in the landing, the murmur of his voice reaching her.

He then came in and flicked on the switch. There was something different in his face, a hardening of his jaw, his eyes averted from hers. He had begun to dress, pulling his jeans over his shorts, tucking in his crumpled T-shirt, plucking out the charger from the wall socket.

“The old man’s gone,” his voice was thick. “Lost control of the jeep. Must have been drunk, the bastard. Always wanted me to run the bloody estate.”

What estate?". She had sat up, hugging her knees, feeling it begin, the low, throbbing ache of the afterwards. "The tea estate, dammit. The one in Munnar. So picturesque the bloody tourists are always clicking pictures."

Í's sorry, I'm so sorry, Issac. Will you take a flight? Should I call Kartik? He could drive you to the airport. Talk to me, Issac."

"No thanks."

"Issac." Her voice trembled, ever so slightly. "No thankis? Don't ever thank me. We are beyond that, remember? How long will you be away?"

He sat down next to her, pushing his feet into his sneakers, then holding her small, cold hands between his. I wish I could say, Suri. I'll have to take charge – the garden, all those workers. My mother… I think she is going to pieces, my brothers is too young. I did not want this. I was happy here, far away, with you, this little place, our home. I'll find a way to graduate. But my life is there, in Munnar. I know it hurts. I know, sssh, don't talk. We had our moments, Suri, didn't we? Don't look back. Tell the others…"

He was looking through his wallet for his ATM card, then putting his arms through the bag straps. Walking to the door, he looked at her, his face drawn and the eyes with the old sadness she had always wanted to take away with her embrace. Then he was gone.

She had not eaten for two days. After class, she slept in this room, waking up to a numbness she did not resist.

“Do you have a cold?” Her mother’s voice on the phone was sharp with anxiety.”

“No *Ma*, it’s nothing.”

“You must use a Good Knight. They were reporting dengue there. Don’t hide anything from us. Do you have fever?”

“Don’t bore me, *Ma*, I’m OK.”

“All right, then. Do call *Aita* one of these days.”

“Why *Ma?”*

“Because she is old, Suri. She is old and lonely. Your *mamas* don’t care to visit even once a year., your *mahi* says she is tired of paying her medical bills. She lives all alone. They will all tear down the house, and are just waiting for her to die. Call her, Suri. She always sits by the telephone, waiting for someone to call her.”

Surabhi put down her phone and began to brush her long hair. Far, far away, there was an old woman with silver hair and a mole on her cheek, sitting on a wicker chair of a dusty sitting room, willing the telephone to ring. No footsteps

sounded in that forlorn house. No sound of utensils clattering, water gushing out of taps, or music from the television. No human voices.

Surabhi checked her contacts and dialed the number. The afterwards had come for *Aita*, too, when she was old, often sick, and needed them around her. When the number began to ring, she waited, yearing to reach out, to comfort, if only for those moments.

Almost instantly, *Aita'*s voice was on the line, breathless, girlish, so filled with hope.

"Who is this? Hello?"

"It's me, *Aita*. Suri, from Delhi."

"Who is this? Hello?"

"Suri *Aita*, Hello?"

"Can you speak up, dear? It is Anjali, my darling? Is it Barun, my precious one? Who is it, dear? Suri? Suri, my love? Who is this?"

Suri listened, the line was crackling, then filled with a low murmur, as if water was gurgling between them. *Aita*'s voice grew more shrill, reaching out frantically, as if she were getting lost in an empty, implacable void.

In was then that Suri began to cry, her arms around her knees, seated on the mattress on the floor with the pillow still bearing the imprint of Issac's head.

She wept for the bitter-sweet gift of love she had won and lost, about how life would never be the same again, and the memory of Issac's loping strides, his arm around her, arguing why Tarantino's violence was meaningful. But, most ofall, she cried for Aita, reading out long after they already thought of her as gone.

Surabhi rose, washed her face, and went to thefridge. There was the half bottle of Fosters Issac had drunk four days ago. She held the bottle against her chest, feeling its coldness seeping into her. She then lifted it to her lips and drank from it, feeling the bear flow down her throatShe then lay down to sleep, holding Issacs pillow close to her breasts. The night settled around her, bringing dreams she would not remember in the morning.

A kind of hush…

Indrani Raimedhi

On the last day of the year, on the evening when the cold crept in stealthily like a cunning adversary, and the light faded in the sky with sad wistfulness, a wan

lover who has been spurned once again, I sat by the window, on the lumpy couch coloured like seaweed, with the knots of the broken coils inside poking through the rexine like small, bunched fists of foetuses. I was reading an anthology of stories by the Canadian writer Alice Munro. I read of small town characters, draughty barns and stubbled fields of grain, dark forests of juniper, with the cotton wool snow drifting noiselessly over roofs and fields and church steeples, finally covering the tracks of the tiniest animals, enveloping the world in a white, ghostly hush. I moved among men in overalls sawing wood in sheds, or slouched over drinks at a smoke filled bar, among women in chequered aprons, stirring bubbling pots over stoves. It never really mattered what happened to them, or that they existed only in the mind of their creator. All I needed was to be there, among them, as if the words would somehow part and lead me through a tunnel to that world beyond. And each time a book ended, and I rubbed my weary eyes, it was as if another door had slammed shut, and I was back in my cell, awake to the misery of my sentence, knowing that nothing would change, nothing would end.

She stirred in her sleep, and moaned. She had been asleep beside me, on the couch, her mouth a little open, so I could see her tiny teeth, the silken threads of saliva between the lips, liquid cobwebs. I pulled up the threadbare blue blanket to cover her. Her eyes opened. She regarded me solemnly, as if trying to guess who I was, and then, just as suddenly, went back to sleep. I touched the top of her head, felt the tiny, delicate bones, like those of a bird, and stared down at

her. She was a beautiful child, with a mass of soft silky curls, a pale skin that splotched easily. Her thickly lashed eyes were pools of dark watchfulness. When I picked her up, she was almost weightless, and I was sometimes afraid her bones would snap, like brittle twigs.

She had long arms and legs, the blue network of veins showing through the pale skin and I loved to hold the velvet softness of her earlobes between my thumb and forefinger. Sometimes, when I was carrying her, I caught sight of the two of us in the glass windows of a shop and we looked incongruous, I, dark, bearded, obese, with bags under my eyes, wearing rumpled clothes. And she, on the other hand, with the exquisite beauty of a Dresden doll, her pale arms around my neck, her face tranquil with the awareness I would not let her fall.

I had always been told I was good with children. Ever since I could remember, babies would come to my arms, gurgling with laughter. I would gather my nieces and nephews and tell them stories, or play silly games. I think it was because I took them seriously, and never told them what to do. In my canvases, it was children on whom I lavished the most tender attention. There was a painting I did years ago, a boy's figure against a midnight blue background. There was just his bare shaven head and sloping shoulders, seen from behind, and I made that head glow, as it were, bringing out the child's saintly innocence, with two butterflies fluttering on one side. I would have been a good father, caring, indulgent, playful. Now, of course, I shall never know.

She is not my daughter. She is not even mine by choice. Given a chance, I could abandon her, may be at a bus stop, someone's doorstep, a park bench or a busy railway platform. I could leave her along with a bundle containing her frocks, her teddy bear with the missing eyes, a bottle of cough syrup, her hair brush...

It might help that she does not know my name, the name of this street, the number of this house. I have tried before, but have always failed. She has run behind me, letting out loud, ragged sobs, wrapping herself around my leg, once savagely biting my hand. And so, she does not trust me, following me from room to room, waking up with a little cry when I turn over at night. That is why I cannot leave home to work, for a walk, or even to buy cigarettes, without her. The magazine which has employed me sends a boy with proofs and matter to be edited, and I also do cover pages of other magazines, and book covers. I am good at my work and they don't want to let me go. We live frugally, and no one troubles us.

For weeks, there would be silence in our house, no sound of our voices, except the clatter of dishes and pans in the kitchen, the tap running, or the music on the television. She is almost four, but she has not learned to talk. I have taken away so much from her, and her speech is one of them. Her silence is a language of accusation aimed at me, reminding me of what I long to forget. If only she would speak, if only to be able to tell me how she hated me, or that she wanted

to go back to where she really belonged, then it would be a relief, this taut, hurting strain between us would loosen, like a sagging clothesline.

I, too, had been a silent child, somehow always in the shadows, watching my family instead of being one of them, too sick to take part in my brothers' boisterous games. Ever since I could remember, our home was not a home, but a confluence of people. Men in rumpled *dhoti*s and weather-beaten faces waited for an audience with my father. He was the politician, always in immaculate *khadi*, his leonine head raised with pride and assurance, his speeches holding the crowds in thrall. There would be meetings and consultations in our house, party workers sipping tea my mother and sisters made. I tried to stay out of his way, for he despised my weakness, my fevers and aches, and my love for art. I could not measure up to his expectations, I was not man enough. I accepted this and was even willing to believe that our family was no different from those of others. But, when in my twenties, I learned my father had another woman, somewhere in another town, complete with two children. My mother had known about it, blaming only herself for something she vaguely thought she lacked. When I came to know of it, I knew I had to leave ...finally. Our family, that home, was a monstrous lie. He didn't love us. We were nothing to him. How did he dare to laugh at my weakness, when he was himself so weak?

So, I left home, embittered, almost penniless, living with a friend. My friend had connections in the art world. And that was how I became a portrait artist of the dead. Family members came to me with photographs of the departed. And I

resurrected them on canvas, capturing every line and feature, the light in their eyes, the essence of what once was a living, breathing entity. Sometimes I removed a few wrinkles, making the face more youthful, less weary. Sometimes, I even bathed the figure in a soft halo. They paid me well and it was enough for me. But these jobs did not come every day. Sometimes, weeks and months would pass by, and no one would come. It was as if the living had moved or, were unmindful of the dead.

That was why I took up that job in a small magazine. It was in that little town almost on the edge of nowhere, a town that time forgot, a place you would almost pass by without noticing, just a cluster of houses, shops, a post office, a bus depot and a redflagged temple, on the gateway of which a blind man sat singing hymns, his palm outstretched. He is closer to God than I will ever be.

The house I chose to live in was old, going to seed, like an old woman whose breasts sag and her eyes are weary with the losses of her life. Its plinth seemed to have sunk into the ground and its windowpanes were grimy with the dust of years. Inside, the walls were mildewed, a door barely hung on its hinges, and the bathroom sink had a fine network of cracks. I settled in without fuss, unpacking my scanty belongings, cooking my meals over a temperamental stove, reading, tenuously linked to the rest of humanity through the radio, its songs of love and longing, the news, weather forecasts, the humming static, languages changing with the turning of the dial, sometimes the unbearable

sweetness of a Chinese opera singer making me feel empty and lost. Often, after I got back from work, I would sit on the back porch looking out at the pond behind the house. It was a large pond surrounded by tall grass, an old *kadam* tree reflected on its calm surface. It seemed to exist for no other purpose than to mirror the sky, the clouds. Then, a flock of wild geese swooped down on it, swimming and splashing, calling out to each other with sharp cries, the light catching on their wing tips as they flew. I was learning to be happy. And then, they came.

In the beginning, they felt like inter-lopers, sneaking into the sanctuary I had considered to be safe. Unlike the winter geese, the placid waters of the pond, the great white indifferent expanse of the sky, humans made me uneasy, opening old wounds, making me feel the pus of my fetid sores oozing out, drop by drop. My landlord, who lived in the far end of town, brought in tenants to the other three vacant rooms of this old, half-dead house. They seemed to trust the old man, for they came straightaway with their luggage. Watching a family move with the flotsam and jetsam of their lives, bursting suitcases tied with rope, clothes horse, jangling utensils, ugly furniture, plastic buckets, plastic flowers, cardboard boxes taped shut seems oddly repugnant to me. Is this all there is to a family?

But this family was not uneasy with such questions. The man was instructing two men with the unloading from the Omni van. He was a solemn man in his early thirties, with a clipped moustache and a little self-important air, in a blue striped shirt rolled at the sleeves, his small paunch poised importantly over his dark trouser legs. The woman was pale, listless in her movements, her blue *sari pallu* fluttering in the air as she held her struggling child in her arms. Strands of hair had escaped her loose bun and her vermilion dot was smeared across her forehead. She eyed me warily and went indoors. The man was friendly enough. He had come in from Kalyanpur as the deputy manager of the rural bank. It was too tough commuting to and fro. And the missus had wanted to come.

I don't know when was the exact moment I stopped thinking of them as interlopers and they became my only link to a normal world. A world where the alarm trilled at six in the morning and a man's hawking and spitting could be heard beyond our connecting door. A world which brought wafting to me the aroma of eggs frying, *paratha*s tossed on the griddle, spoons tinkling. A world of low murmured voices, a baby's laugh or sudden wail, the television's endless music and voices. In their world rooms were swept, dishes washed in the sink, trousers, petticoats, nighties and baby socks hung out together in the backyard, all this intimate mix up reminding how three lives were so enmeshed, so inextricable. So, this was family. This was what I had imagined

and never found. The simplest things were so elusive. What did you really need? A man, of sound mind and body, providing for his family. A woman, reasonably beautiful, giving birth and looking after a home. A child with bouncing curls and petal soft skin, who tottered to my door with her nonsensical babble, coaxing me to throw her the red ball, to play, to forget my demons.

When the man came home in the evening, he always carried a bag of groceries, vegetables, fish or meat. Alone in my room, surrounded by the mute daubs of paint on my canvases, the untidy stacks of books and empty whisky bottles, I could hear their low, comforting voices, their calm, assured footsteps in the rooms, the filling of water into vessels, and the pounding of the pestle as the pungent flavours of spices sharpened the pangs of my hunger. There would be fish frying, the oil crackling sharp and clean, and the pressure cooker going off. Then, the plates being laid on the table – her voice urging her husband to take another helping, his protests, the small coins of human exchange. And now, I was the silent interloper, sitting on my side of the house, soaking in the flavours, the sounds, the soothing normalcy, the unhurried tenor of family life, with its quiet assurance, its promise of perpetuity. I began to cling to that picture of family life. It became food for my soul. No, it became a drug to dull my pain, my sense of ennui. I was never a believer. I had never uttered a

prayer in my life. And yet, for those months, you could say I was a believer. I thought there was a benevolent power somewhere, a power that made small happiness possible. For the Shandilyas, I must always have been this weird, hard to understand middle-aged human wreck with no one to call his own. But they must have thought me a harmless lunatic, for they were always nice. Arun came over to chat with me about current affairs and what was wrong with the banking sector. He tried to be interested in art and shook his head in mild disapproval of MF Hussain. Sandhya once returned two shirts I had hung out in the backyard and forgotten all about. Sometimes, she brought a casserole of fish curry. The baby would be two soon. They called her Baby. They had not yet thought of a name for her. I was asked if I would help. After all, I was an artist.

Slowly, things slipped into a pattern. I worked from home, and so was available all the time. After Arun left for the bank, Sandhya would bring Baby to stay with me while she cooked and cleaned. The child would have her toy cars on the floor, making revving sounds, strands of saliva slipping out. She would totter towards me with a crayon, or an empty cigarette packet, and put it gravely on my outstretched palm with the hauteur of a princess. Sometimes, she would lie asleep in my arms, as I hummed a song I thought I had long forgotten.

In the beginning, Sandhya was very apologetic about this arrangement. She always tried to make up with food. Later, when she saw how happy I was in Baby's company, she relaxed. Then, Sandhya left the child with me and went out for the whole day. At first, she told me she had some shopping to be done. The next time it was an ailing aunt in the next town. Then a doctor's appointment. It was no more than once a week. But she seemed different when she returned. How should I put it, there was a sheen on her face then, and her movements were fluid, not the jittery, high strung gestures of the morning. And when she picked up Baby, she did not at all look guilty about having left her so long. She did not even ask me if Baby had eaten or cried.

This continued through that monsoon. I can see her hurrying through the rain, her face alight with some strange glow, and secret shadows dark liquid in her eyes. And the day she casually told me, her face averted, that it would be nice if I did not tell Arun about these trips, was the day I stopped being a believer again. I got drunk that night, swearing softly and weeping in my darkened room, as they lay peacefully asleep in the other room. I had not wanted much in life, only the freedom to let me be. I myself was too weak, too flawed, to have a woman sleep in my house, and a child born from my loins. But it was enough, or had been enough in those months, to know such ties are possible, and then life had ceased becoming that black screaming tunnel I

fought not to be sucked into. But now, this fabric of family life, this snug cocoon of human affinity was a monstrous lie. In those midnight moments, feeling the whisky travel down my gut like fire, my agonised obscenities wiped away my illusions forever.

But it was not over. That benevolent power, who was not at all benevolent as I found out, had plotted the denouement with care. Sandhya came to me with Baby at eleven. “Couldn’t sleep. I have the most terrible headache. I’m going to town for some aspirin.”

“I have some here,” I said. “No,” she shook her head. “I have to pick up some fruits, too.”

She was gone. For a woman with a headache, she was dressed rather well. A cream silk *sari* and pink lipstick…

I lay stupefied in my armchair. Baby tottered around, her meaningless prattle all around me. I did not call her, or pick her up in my arms. She was, after all, a part of the lie. The bad blood ran through her too. All her adorable sweetness wouldn’t stop the slow, insidious poison that had crept in between her parents. She was not good enough, not precious enough to ensure that this rot would not set in. So, why touch her velvet cheek, make her laugh, dandle her

on my knee? If she was nothing to her slut of a mother, what difference could I make?

I began to drink again and felt the world whirl around me, the walls, the daubs of the canvases, the world beyond the windows, the sky and the light poles, the roofs of other houses and fences. In that whirling I lost all sense of time, or even who I was and the lightness of my being could have been a heady foretaste of death, that blessed cessation of all feelings, all sensations. But there were voices calling out to me... loud voices, like shrieks, and hands shaking my shoulders. I forced myself to open my eyes, and groaned, feeling the wet stain of vomit on my shirt front. There was Arun and Sandhya ... others, too, ... suddenly, it was evening ... and they were asking me the one question I have never found an answer to.

□□□□□

I have never seen Arun and Sandhya after that evening. They left the house late at night and someone came for their belongings a week later. I, too, fled that accursed house, but this child has come with me. Am I supposed to be glad she chose me over them? Are the very young able to judge people, in a way we can't? Maybe not. Sometimes, I dream she is a grown woman, with books in her arms, walking a college hallway. I dream of long arguments with her about art, or politics. I dream of my hand on her shoulder, feeble, shaky, as

she helps me to my bed. I see her from my deathbed, sitting with my hand clasped in hers, as compassionate as Madonna, as my last heart beats echo in the cavern of my body. But all this cannot exist outside my mind.

Four days ago, I came across the notice in the newspaper. Seventh September. There was the photograph, a little blurred, the names of the two grieving relatives. And a nice little quote by Tagore. But what was more important, there was the name of a house, a lane, a town. Holding the paper, I counted the years. Three years. Three years of having something that belonged to another.

It was time to go. Rajnagar, to the east. A four hour train ride. I took only a change of clothes. For her I packed all her frocks, her toys, her cough syrup, her hair bands, lace socks. On the night before the journey, I filled up a tub and tried to give her a bath. She screamed and screamed like an animal caught in a trap and became limp in my arms.

So, we travelled through the morning and noon. At the station, I asked for directions and climbed into an auto. In that dull, cloudy evening, the quiet, leafy lane was still. House number nine was new, with lemon walls, a wrought iron balcony. A neat, new house. His name was on the gate. I stood with her across the road, in a run down park with abandoned swings, screened by an untidy hedge.

They came out an hour later. He was now more stocky, and wore glasses. Her hair was shorter, but she looked pale, haggard, much older. I somehow didn't expect this, but he was pushing a stroller, and there was a baby in it.

I am not the monster you think I am. At that moment, I clasped Baby tightly in my arms. They had moved on. They had even filled in the gap of her absence. I put down Baby tenderly on the ground. I looked at her, remembering how, one whisky laced afternoon, I had let her wander out of that wreck of a house, toddle over the unruly grass and star shaped wild flowers to the soft, squelchy edge of that pond swollen by the silver rains. I can see her reaching out to a water lily perhaps, keeling over, the water closing over her, then floating with her face down...

"Go, Baby," I gestured towards her family. "There they are." She tottered slowly towards them, unable to call out. But I think she knew she was going home. For she did not look back at me. She was their little faithful shadow all the way down that quiet, leafy lane, each tiny footprint a wet puddle of water. Then, they turned a corner, and vanished out of sight. I turned back, and realised I was holding her bag. I put it down on the park bench and walked away. There must be no memories...

A warm, lighted place (Fiction)

That year, winter came without warning. First, it was the thin, soundless rain that slicked the twisted streets of Police Bazar and shone at dusk like confetti drifting past the yellow taxi headlights. Then the ruddy cheeked Bhutias stood hopefully, implacably on street corners with armfuls of mufflers, sweaters and ponchos coarsely knitted in thick wool. Just as the tourists from the plains flooded into the hotels in loud groups, checking the window views, the taps in the bathrooms, the softness of the mattresses and the tariff cards, the Christmas trees, dark plastic junipers, appeared on the store windows, with brassy balls, twinkling lights and empty gift-wrapped packages at their feet. Then the Santas, how could they not come in winter? Pink cheeked, cotton tufted beards, smiling, always smiling, in their bright red baggy suits and the knee high black boots. They stood in every doorway, clucking children under their chins, laughing that false booming laughter. Beings made for happiness. Like a lighted window in the midst of an unknown, fearful darkness. Nobody remembered them in summer. They simply didn't exist.

That was why Sukhomoy loved to work in Magnolia. Here, some things ceased to exist. He could leave them out in the front steps, somewhere between the fake Japanese lanterns and the squat, tiled marble pots. As soon as he came in at seven every morning, he changed his *dhoti kurta* and slipped onto the maroon tunic with the gold, tarnished buttons in the front. Then he climbed onto his black pleated trousers and slipped into his black shoes. The face that looked

back at him in the flyblown mirror of the back room was thin, still boyish, all lines and angles, the grey hair combed sideways. There was something a little arrogant in his nose that jutted out, and sometimes customers thought he was not obsequious enough, and left no tip in the leather folder. But they never looked at his eyes, which was where they could have found the real him – the part of him that was always hurt, always bewildered, as if he had lost the way, but was too shy or proud or cussed to ask for directions.

Sukhomoy believed for a long time he was destined for greater things. Once, he could talk animatedly of Ritwik Ghatak and Rash Behari Pal. In the late fifties, he would always be in his father's printing press at Nongthymai, working through the night, while his pale bride Malini tossed and turned in the four poster bed at home, reading romance novels and sniffling. Then the press burned down, Malini became shrill, nursing a new baby at her blue-veined breast. Her jewellery was the first to go, and then his father's heirloom – the gold watch. The two front rooms were let out to two Naga students, who played music all night and smoked pork over a coal brazier. This, in the room his dead father once talked of Vivekananda. He was able to leave all that outside when Magnolia took him in. Saha Babu, the manager, liked Sukhomoy from the start. There was something, well, almost aristocratic about the lean, erect shouldered man with the sad eyes, the proud nose and the prematurely grey hair. Sukhomoy knew how to keep his mouth shut and bend his body with just the right angle of

genuflection. In his soft musical voice, he suggested to his customers the speciality of the day. Prawn *malai* curry perhaps, or chicken *kosha*, the *masala* toned down, perhaps vegetable au gratin? He bowed and stood very still, watching them make up their minds out of the corner of his eye. Florid faced fathers and heavily painted, shapeless mothers, children in Mickey Mouse T-shirts fidgeting, always fidgeting. Or *Kongs* from forgotten little towns and the countryside with their sad, leathery, defeated faces, slurping tea from their saucers and reluctantly taking out their coins from cloth pouches hanging on hips. Or the hard, brassy hussies in fishnet stockings and short slitted skirts who flicked back their silky hair and crossed their legs, giggling, as the men in fake leather jackets groaned at being denied, always denied.

Sukhomoy was a silent worker, painstakingly jotting down orders, filling glasses, explaining the menu, making sure the cutlery was gleaming on the sideboard. This was his world, the endless to-ing and fro-ing from the red-carpeted hall to the heated kitchen with its marble slabs, the leaping flames of the stoves, the*naans* flying in the air, the fish and chicken and vegetables chopped and four mixies whirring at once. And then dirty dishes disappearing into the soap-suds. Here was life, here things were happening with order and sanity.

Here, they needed him. Dil Bahadur, Narendra, Goshtu Ram... but they were not a patch on him. They did not understand English the way he did. Once Goshtu Ram carried the soup with a finger dipped in it. Dil Bahadur always whispered in corners of starting a union. But, Saha Babu knew Sukhomoy was different. It was as if he came to Magnolia not because this was where he got his bread and butter. In a way Saha Babu never understood, Magnolia was Sukhomoy's sanctuary. When it was time to leave, late in the evening, after the crowds of cinema goers from Dreamland had flocked in for coffee and pastries, Saha Babu sat at his counter, below the pot-bellied Ganesha and the fragrant joss sticks, watching the waiters get ready to leave. Without his red tunic and black trousers, Sukhomoy looked pallid, insubstantial, as if you could put your hand through him. He took his frayed Mahendra Dutt umbrella from the back room and with a little nod, wrapped his Kashmiri shawl against the blast of the winter wind waiting like a beast outside.

Whatever was waiting outside claimed him yet again. Little puffs of mist hung from his mouth as he breathed. Empty cigarette packets, discarded plastic bags swirled along the streets. The lights were still twinkling in the store windows. Maybe Dreamlet was unfurling her fishnet stockings. Maybe Narendra was dreaming his moon faced wife had fled with the woodcutter in some lost Kumaon valley. The egg seller still stood in the main square, with his wicker stand, with the black salt, the pepper and the perfectly boiled eggs. Everyone

was waiting in this town. For a generously spending tourist. For a kinder winter that did not chill the bones. For the waterlilies to bloom in the lake again. And the season’s first sweet oranges to come, bursting in the tongue, and then the bitter pips to be spat out.

Most people thought of three kinds of waiting. But Sukhomoy knew it was his lot to wait for that some other thing. And when the pine trees around the lake turned brown and bare, and sighed with a secret language of loss he understood so well, Sukhomoy knew it would not be long now...

Through the long vista of their shared life, Sukhomoy had barely thought of Malini. She had been from Dacca, a timid little woman with downcast eyes and skin the colour of pale honey, chosen by Sukhomoy's mother, coming into his life with tears and sandalwood dots on her forehead. It was as if they had never learned to feel easy in each other's presence. Even when they had come together, in his father's old house with the wind in the rafters and geckos screeching omens, there had been something furtive, desperate and shameful in the act. And the child, Anuran, it too came between them, hanging onto his mother's sari *pallu,*watching him with dark pools of suspicion. When the press burnt down, and there was no food in the house, no firewood for the winter chill, when her jewellery was pawned, Malini's mouth was like a tap that would not be turned off. He heard that hateful voice even in his sleep. And when the

boy began to grow, he joined in, not with words, but by throwing crockery across the room, setting fire to the old books that belonged to many generations of Sukhomoy's family. Then he was in college and there were whisky bottles under his bed, and then the needles, and the strips of Diazepam. As the monster grew and changed shape, like a shadow on the wall, Sukhomoy chose to seek shelter in a warm, lighted place with leather seats and wine red table cloths. A place that carried like a benediction the aroma of freshly cooked food and soft music that gently drowned the rough edges of everyday conversations. Then, one day, he came home to find the monster gone, and a dark bruise on Malini's cheek. He told her he would go looking for him, their son, but he never did.

On his off days, he sometimes went for long, solitary walks, to Don Bosco Square, stopping for a cookie at Gudeth's, them to view the golden Christ on the cross in the emerald grass facing the cathedral. Then to Stonyland and Risa Colony and Kristi Kendra, where he had held on to a balloon and watched Durga *Puja* in a lost boyhood. The stream at Dhankhti was now a dark sluggish trickle. The trees were gone, like friends of his half-remembered past. And sometimes, on a bend in the road, he saw some wild haired human wreck with a polythene sheet wrapped around him, talking to himself, stuffing this mouth with a stale slice of bread. In those moments, a thrill of horror transfixed Sukhomoy to the spot. The colour left his cheeks. His arms felt nerveless. Was this the little boy who once lived in his house, showed him his doodled cars?

Whose fault was it that this had happened? And all over the growing city, he found his lost son again and again – asleep on the pavement, curled up like a foetus, jaywalking on the main thoroughfare, strying to enter shops, being growled at by dogs, dank and miserable in the rain. When he did not see one for days, it was as if Sukhomoy breathed more easily. His son was gone, finally. And the haunting would stop.

There were different kinds of farewells, he knew now. The welcome ones, that left peace in their wake, like retreating thunder and angry wind bending the trees. And the other ones – so slow, almost motionless, drop by drop, ebbing away. When Malini sat on a bench in the hospital corridor, he seemed to see her for the first time in the forty years they had been together. There was talcum powder in the fine folds of her neck, and the crisp gold bordered sari billowed around her. Her eyes followed him with a blind, child-like trust as he moved from room to room. Nobody offered much assurance. Nobody had much time. Two months later, he knew that under her starched sari, one of the sagging blue veined breasts was gone. He could not imagine how it would look, her deformed body. He barely remembered touching it when it was perfect. Along with the lost breast, Malini lost other things. Her old habit of humming old film songs under her breath. Or flipping through the albums, her finger on some forgotten aunt, a cousin, a neighbour in blurred sepia. Then her saris, given away without a thought to Monu, the Nepali maid who came twice a day. She

was going, drop by painful drop, clumps of hair on the pillow, urine on the sheets, bottles of medicines on the sidetable he would hand out when the pain racked her like a vice.

Once again, he fled to his sanctuary. The new year was upon them. They had pushed the tables and sofas to one end. There were balloons and streamers on the ceiling. There was a stage at one end and a live band. There were long lines of people, young, impatient, in leather jackets and glittery dresses, waiting to be let in as the thin rain fell like confetti from the starless sky. Whisky flowed in streams. Lovers kissed openly, as if with a sense that all this would pass too soon. Saha Babu had the bright idea of making all the waiters wear red caps with a furry knob of white. Sukhomoy was so miserable he agreed. So there he was, a sad face under a funny cap. He drank too, from the discarded glasses he carried back to the pantry, and for the first time in his life he could feel his rigidness ease, and his breath move in and out without fear of being suspended. His steps were careless, almost jaunty and when the clock struck twelve and the fireworks exploded outside, a great surge of freedom welled up in him. He would got to the lake at dawn, and feed the gold and black fish from the arc of the wooden creaking bridge, he would walk roads he had never walked, and yes, he would have cob of corn fresh from the brazier, with salt and dash of lemon. It was now his life, alone, to do as he pleased, and Malini's eyes had known that

too, as he broke the phials into her kheer and helped her, one spoonful at a time, wiping her chin, tenderly.

Now the party was over. The waiters were too drunk to clear up. Saha Babu, on their way out, put his arm on Sukhomoy's shoulder.

"The missus, she is not well?" he asked gently.

Sukhomoy opened the glass swing door. He raised his face and smelled the frosty air with his proud nose, his eyes suddenly bleak.
"Its cold," he said in a low voice "cold enough. She will stay. Then, I'll have to make the arrangements. I... I must sleep now. Good night. Sahu Babu. Have a... have a happy New Year."

A quiet rage-I

He got out of the car and slammed the door. She flinched and waited. Perhaps he would bend down, look in and ask her again. Then she heard his quick steps moving away. A long, slow breath, trapped within her, escaped through her parted lips. She felt her body slacken, the heart beats slow down, the pulse regain its steady throbbing. She covered her eyes, pressing her palms into them. Then she reclined the seat, leaned back, and prepared to wait.

Gaurav had parked the car by the hospital side entrance. It was a narrow lane, dimly lit by the sickly glow of a street lamp. The thick sludge of the drain had been dug up and lined in heaps on one side. There was a paan shop with its supari packets and bottles of toffees, a PCO with a glass cubicle. Further ahead, she saw a man sit with a goat's carcass hung on a hook, slashing and chopping meat on a round wooden block. People were passing by on foot, by cycle or rickshaw. The thin drizzle of dusk had given way to a brisk shower now. She could see people walking faster, almost running. Raindrops splattered on the windscreen, running down in a silver deluge.

It would be difficult for him to get back to the car. She did not know why, but the thought seemed strangely comforting. Gaurav not being able to come back to her. Not to be able to make her feel somehow inadequate, undeserving of him. His calm reasonableness, his stolid, practical approach to all of life's troubles, was a counterpoint to her vagueness, her way of drifting along life without purpose. He often treated her like a child, telling her what to do, explaining the simplest things to her, as if deconstructing an event, so she would find it easier to understand and react. But now, alone in the car, in the dark side street, the rain lashing around her, filling the air with a deafening din, she felt she was her own self, answerable to no one, not needing to defend her thoughts.

They had been to Khemka Brothers to pick up Siddhant's school uniform. Then she had browsed at a nearby bookstore. She bought a small book of Haiku poetry. Yes, she, too, believed in celebrating the moment. She thought of moments like dewdops, trembling, perfect, each containing a world in itself, so precious because it would vanish. But of course, the book was just another distraction, to fill up that jagged hole in her existence, that gap which made her incomplete.

Glancing idly, she saw, on top of the dashboard, a small heap of ash in front of the tiny copper pot with the plastic leaves and coconut. Gaurav lit two joss

sticks every morning before he started the car, cupping the matchstick flame with his palm. Two joss sticks to set right the wrongs awaiting the day. She felt her lip curl, involuntarily. Then, that handkerchief folded in a neat square, with the little phone book over it. Gaurav, always a creature of habit. Maybe it was good for her to be anchored by such a mate, to feel safe in the present, in his real world of telephone calls, appointments, shopping for groceries, watching the news, deadened against old hurts, old shadows.

The rain poured down the windows. She stirred uneasily. The roar made her feel suffocated. There was already ankle deep water on the streets, car wheels whooshing past. She could feel the dampness already on the floor. Cooped up in the car, within the misted windows, she was suddenly much too aware of her body. She was wearing her sweatshirt again, the grey one with the dark eagle in front. She could feel the sports bra squashing her breasts flat against her chest, the way she wanted. There was a dull ache running down her back, and a tight knot in her belly. She could feel the roughness of the denim against her thigh, and the slight tremble in her hand as she fumbled in her bag for the packet of cigarettes. She was smoking again, secretly, guiltily, not that Gaurav cared any longer. It gave her something to do, that was all. It was also a way to not be a woman. When the smoke filled her mouth, she could feell her tongue

become bitter, her softness and roundness hardening, becoming angular, male.

A man rode by, his trousers rolled to his knees, pedalling his cycle through the dark waters. She could see his shirt stuck on his back, wet. It would have been so simple to follow Gaurav to the hospital. One of his colleagues at the bank had had a stroke and was admitted there. Gaurav had wanted her to accompany him. He had stopped asking her for anything and she could have said yes. But the moment he asked, she could feel the chill in her blood. The trundle of the gurney wheels along the corridor, saline bottle tilting crazily, the nurse's ashen face, voices fading... "You go along", she had said, her shoulders hunched, already in anticipation of an argument, "I'm not dressed for that."

"It doesn't matter," he had said, switching off the ignition. "Do you think it matters to him how you are dressed? I don't even know if he's conscious, if he'll make it. Come on."

"I don't know him. I'd be uncomfortable."

She had seen the hardening of his jaw, and his tight grip on the steering wheel. "So you know that crazy Japanese Basho? You are comfortable about buying his useless poetry? Is only that kind of thing important for you?

"Shut..."

“You shut up!” His face had been inches away from her. “Shut up and sit here dreaming of seasons changing and all that bullshit. And don’t call me. I’m switching off my cell.”

Every minute that he was away was a reprieve for her. She could not even bear the big bulky frame to be near her, shoulders touching. But he was a handsome man, even now, with the thick-waisted solidity of approaching middle age and the jowly cheeks. Someone solid and dependable, even distinguished. He was easy to please, not fussy about what he ate, spending Sundays washing his car, taking Siddhant to the park. That dark, unspoken cloud between them had nothing to do with him, nothing at all. It was something that the two joss sticks he lit every day with such absorbed care, such naive faith in invisible gods, could do nothing to change. And even her fear of nursing homes was like an iron link to another link all the way to her shadowed past. It was like metal snapping into metal, in a chain that twisted viciously around her. A chain she had stopped struggling with…

Her cell rang. Siddhant’s voice came through, sleepy, petulant. “When are you coming, Ma ? I want pizza.”

“It’s raining, beta. We are stuck in the car. Everything is closed. Tell Binu to fry the chicken nuggets. Yes, you can watch Cartoon Network, not too long. We’ll be back as soon as we can, ok? Love you.”

They say you choose to give love, and to receive it. That was why it was the least random act in the universe. She had chosen to have Siddhant. That was what his name meant – decision. Chosen him not by giving her body and feeling him float in the warm wet sac within her, emitting those primal screams that brought him out, coated with her blood, eyes shut tight, hands flailing in the air. She chose him instead in that shabby, white-washed home he had lived with the others, playing quietly with a yellow plastic duck in his crib, his dark eyes sadder than hers. She had him by signing the papers, along with Gaurav, and six months later, bringing him home, fast asleep in her arms, his body warm and breathing softly against her. Five years had gone by and he was seven now. She could not imagine the texture of those days when he had not been a part of their lives. Many people had told her it was a noble thing they had done, rearing a child not their own, and she had always felt this cold stab in her heart when they said that. It reminded her of the other child, always beside Siddhant, following him through the rooms, or tugging at the pallu of her sari, the tiny fingers brushing her arm as she slept. If Siddhant was her decision, what happened to this other child, this gossamer entity that cried to be let into her dreams each long night, had been her decision too. And in that cramped car, with the wet rubber smell mixed with jasmine from the joss

sticks, and her own sweat, she had the feeling that all the things that she had pushed down to that cellar of forgetfulness, were climbing up again.

Once, after a seminar on creative writing at the college where she taught English, when an Oriya poet brought in his feeble voice the gold white sands by the sea, and the sonorous chant of priests in the temple, she had sat up one night with a sheaf of blank paper. For an hour she stared at the paper – it was pure, white, as passive as peaceful death. It was neither day, nor dark, neither the past, nor the present. Her acid tipped words would burn the pages, the thorns of memory would rip them apart. That episode of her life would become real, tangible, something open to the world, like wriggling worms revealed by a lifted rock. So it remained in her, a monster baby refusing to be born, feeding on her.

Everything had a beginning, and this was no different. The first iron link, created when she was ten years, five months and twelve days. Somewhere on a street like this, ordinary and forgotten, on a lonely night when dogs ran in packs sniffing garbage heaps and the last empty buses roared in bursts of speed, Baba, walking home from a card game with his friend, clutched his chest, weaving unsteadily, throwing up the whisky and the peanuts, leaning on a lamp post. She always imagined him falling to his knees, his spectacles clattering on the pavement, the glass lenses shattering in spider webs, his last

ragged breaths as he slumped to his death. For several days there used to be heaps of sandals and shoes on the front porch. The red slash of vermilion on Ma's hair parting vanished. The newspaper said he was a trade union leader, tirelessly defending workers rights. She could not now remember the Russian stories he told them, her two older sisters and her, of men with strange sounding names, bleak, snowing winters, the Red Army. Sometimes he patted her gently on the head, as if he had no idea who she was. Two days after he died, she took a coat which belonged to him and hid it among her bed clothes, breathing in its tobacco smell and crying herself to sleep.

By the time of the shraddh, more and more relatives were coming in from other towns. Her mother sat in a white sari, on a reed mat, saying – at least he had not suffered. Her sisters moved among the guests, handing paper plates of soaked gram, slices of fruits, glasses of sherbet, addressing invitation letters for the shraddh. Then, of course, there was Him, whose name she could still not speak, twenty-five years later. He had been there from the very beginning, and she felt like He was a vulture circling overhead in the dead white sky in slow, watchful circles. But nobody thought of Him that way, of course. He had come from Mumbai as soon as He could, a younger cousin of Baba, He was an engineer in a big company with a Marathi wife and a son. So He was everywhere, making arrangements. He had even set the pyre alight, smashing

the pot, waiting to shave his head at the shraddh. A tall, heavy man with swarthy skin and an arrogant tilt in his head. Smelling of cologne and wearing a thick gold chain, speaking their tongue with an accent. He was staying at the most expensive hotel in the city and came every morning, supervising the arrangements whole day. When He was not there, it was as if the house unravelled, and no one knew what to do.

Sometimes, she had a feeling it was all her fault. It happened a day before the shraddh. She was sent to bed early. She lay down, pulled the sheet over herself, and reached out for Baba's coat. It was not there. She groped for it, sat up, flinging the sheet aside. It was not there. Somebody had taken away the coat. Taken away her Baba. She was rigid with shock. She would not let him go. She ran to her mother and flung herself down on the mat, screaming with rage, drumming her heels on the floor, choking, gasping. Nobody could quieten her. She should have let Baba go, quietly, into the night. Then it would have not happened.

It was His moment, of course. The vulture knows when to swoop. "What's wrong, baby?" He scooped her in his arms. "Being cranky? Oh, your Baba's coat? Well, all his things have to go, our custom and all, you know. But guess your Baba will always be where you want him to be. In your heart, silly! Now how would you like to go for a taxi-ride with me? Get your shoes."

She got her shoes, combed her hair. No one had been paying attention to her lately. She was hurting. She would hunt for Baba's coat again. It had to be somewhere.

Nobody even saw them go. It was the house of death. Pieces of apple, glasses of sherbet changed hands. chairs scraped, words were murmured, and the flame wavered in front of Baba's garlanded portrait. Nobody to stop them.

Outside, in the darkness, her hand in His, she went to meet her shrouded destiny.

Through the misted windows and windshield of the car, she saw the ghost-ly forms of people appear and then disappear. And she, too, continued to wade through the darkness of her heart, asking the same questions, and experiencing the dull ache of knowing no answers existed.

If only it had rained on that night twenty five years ago. If only someone had stopped her from leaving that house of death. Her little hand in His. Her steps matching His. It had been a clear, star-lit night, a small, restless breeze making her frock billow about her. There had been groundnuts roasting on a brazier, and the melancholy call of the muezzin from the masjid. Perhaps shopkeepers sprinkling water on the kerb in front of their shops. And from somewhere,

maybe the sweetmeat shop, had came the tinny, achingly sweet voice of Lata Mangeshkar. In the house of death, the meals had suddenly turned bland, the colours, muted, the voices low and sorrowful. But that evening, everything came back again, in sharp relief, and her little heart felt uplifted.

It was she who had seen the fair first. That glow in the sky from the powerful beams of lights. And through the branches of trees, the giant ferris wheel slowly turning, and tiny screams of fear mingled with delight. The foghorn voice announcing the names of people separated from their loved ones. A thought twisted within her, like the blade of a knife. If she asked the man to announce Baba's name – would he return to her, smiling absent-mindedly, puffing at a cigarette, in his frayed blue shirt and crumpled brown trousers? And she had hopped on one foot and then on the other, her hand tugging His, in a fever of hope and excitement, pleading to be let in.

He had rolled his eyes in mock annoyance, but had moved to the counter, rummaging for change to buy the tickets. They had surged through the gate along with many people, as if everyone was frantic to leave behind the drabness of their everyday lives and enter a swirl of glittering lights, floating helium balloons, puffs of pink cotton candy on sticks and the roll of the tambola. In this gay fairyland awash with music, it was impossible to remember death and sorrow. So she forgot about bringing to life her Baba and

began partaking greedily the feast of the senses. He let her have a double scoop of ice-cream, wiping her mouth with His handkerchief. He slipped glass bangles into her hands and knelt behind her, steadying her aim, as she fired pellets into the balloons. They watched a bare chested man swallow swords, and little girls walk on tightropes. In the house of freaks, they saw a calf with five legs, a man with a monstrous growth on his forehead. Three poodles, with snow white fur, leaped nimbly through rings of fire. Twice she lost Him and He found her again, pinching her cheeks, His teeth white against the dark skin, then His hand, warm, big, holding her firmly...

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Her cell beeped and startled, she dropped her bag on the floor. Gaurav was on the line. The colleague was not doing so well. They were sending for a specialist from Delhi. He had not regained consciousness. “His wife is not taking it well. I’m filling up some more forms. You’ll have to wait for fifteen minutes.”

“It’s alright,” she said quietly. “Do what you have to.”

Now she wanted Gaurav to come back, to fill the car with his presence, to bring the everyday world with him. She wanted Siddhant, his boundless energy

and the hoots of laughter as Tom and Jerry capered on television. She wanted to be among her students, discoursing on the loneliness of Stephen Daedalus.

Last year, on an impulse, she had enrolled in a meditation class. She remembered the first day. When the instructor, a slim, ascetic young man, gave the first lesson, he had fixed his piercing gaze on her face, as if he seemed to know the troubled darkness she had lived with for so long. He had quoted the words of Patanjali. “As your thoughts break their bonds, your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands... In every direction... and you find yourself in a new, great and wonderful world... to be a greater person by far, than you ever dreamed yourself to be....”

After the class, in the cubicle where she changed her clothes, she had wept with her hands pressed to her face. For the first time in years, her mind seemed to lighten, expand. But even meditation, and the wise words of Raghavan, her mentor, could only skim the surface. Under layers of rocks, it was as if the molten lava seethed.

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It must have been in the ferris wheel that she had felt the first prickle of fear, a sense of approaching danger. They had buckled themselves into the dangling box, and slowly, with a trundling sound, the ferris wheel moved. As they

climbed higher and higher, the people in the field became midgets, and they were floating like the helium balloons. She could see the city beyond the carnival, the autorickshaws lined on the roadside, the shops and buildings, the billboards. That everyday world she had left aside briefly came back to her like a grant tidal wave, and with it the realisation that her Baba was not at home and would never be, that all that was left of him was an urn wrapped in a piece of red cloth, and that evening she had also lost his coat, her last link to him. Her face crumpled and her mouth opened in a soundless gasp of grief. He turned to her, puzzled. And He had comforted her. His hand rubbing her back. His hands pressing her knees. His wet mouth on her cheeks, her nose, her neck. Something different from how other grown-ups loved her. A little prickle on her skin. A little voice, whispering, alarmed. Make Him stop, make Him stop. In one little moment, suspended high up in the night air, He had changed. No, He was always that, only now the mask had slipped. He was no longer the caring Uncle who had set the house of death in order. He was the one who brought death for her too, the end of her childhood and innocence.

But it was not over. Oh no, the night had only begun. The ferris wheel trundled, and their box began its slow descent. She stepped out unsteadily, stumbling. All at once she longed to be among her three sisters, to be scolded and hustled to bed, to slip into sleep, safe from the night. Then she was

doubling over and retching, all the fruit and ice-cream and sourness surging up from her belly, up her throat, to the mouth and to the ground, spraying into the front of her frock. Her skin felt clammy and the lights made her eyes hurt. He hurried her out, to the everyday world beyond. He hailed an autorickshaw and they bowled down the emptying streets. When they got out and He paid the driver, she saw it was not the house of death, but some place else. It was the fancy hotel He was staying in and He said he had to get things from his room.

Again He took her out of the everyday world. A vast hall of glittering chandeliers and deep leather sofas. Softly glowing porcelain vases on intricate carved tables. Framed paintings on the wall and turbaned waiters moving with trays. A long carpeted corridor and then His room. The triple mirrors and the television. The mini-fridge with cold drinks. The fruit wrapped in cellophane. The marble bath and the shower curtain. The bedside lamps He switched on. For Her.

It was too much kindness for one night. The ice-cream, the bangles, the balloon shooting, the ferris wheel. Enough. She should have said. Enough. One word to stop what was going to happen. She was too young, too confused, too ill to know life would change.

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Afterwards, they again got to the everyday world and in front of the house, He said to her, “They will scold you for the ice-cream. Don’t tell them where you have been. It’s our secret. OK?”

In the house of death, no questions were asked. In memory of the dead, the living were forgotten. She could not sleep, she could not eat. She felt like a bird, its wings crushed. There was a purple bruise on her body and she felt the sourness of vomit on her mouth for weeks. On the day of the shraddh, she told her mother. Her mother listened, her face expressionless. She tried to hug her mother, to bury her face in her lap. But Ma flinched, and there was a fleeting expression of disgust on her face.

“You are like your father,” she said flatly. “Always making up stories. I have never heard such a thing in my life. Your uncle has been a god for us. We will need his kindness now. He will look after us. Remember that.”

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That was twenty-five years ago. She had kept her word. She never mentioned that night again. He sent money every month. He visited, always with His wife and child. He was paternal to her, asking about her studies, her friends. He married off her sisters, one by one, like a father. That night might have never taken place. When her own wedding drew near, she told Gaurav she wanted a

court marriage. She did not want Him to give her away. That would make her feel tainted once again. She never told Gaurav why.

She saw the car door open. Gaurav got in, his hair plastered, his shirt soaked.

“I’ll have to come in the morning. God, look at the road, How the hell are we going to get out?”

There were cars in front, red tail lights in the dark. And the swirling water all around them.

“Sid called. He wanted pizza. I think he’ll wait up for us.”

They sat silently for some moments. Then he said. “I’m sorry for losing my temper. I didn’t mean to.”

“Forget it,” she said “It doesn’t matter.

“Thanks.” He turned to face her. “But really, you looked sort of really scared about going to the hospital. It’s strange, you know.”

She drew a deep breath. For ten years she had kept him away from the truth. Every time he touched her, she had flinched and gritted her teeth, waiting for it to be over, to be free from it. And he had felt the shame of not being loved enough, desired enough. It was like acid that corroded their shared life. And Gaurav did not deserve that.

“This is not easy,” she began, shakily. “But I’ve been meaning to tell you this for a long time. “I had a bad experience at a hospital once.”

“What kind of experience?”

She wanted to smoke, badly. But she went on resolutely.

“You remember the day you rang home from the bank and I wasn’t there? Remember how I got home at eight in the night? And how I wouldn’t tell you where I was?

“You must have had some reason.”

“Yes,” she said sadly. “I had a very good reason. You were so sure I had a lover. But it isn’t true. I do not know how to love. That day, I was at a hospital, to have an abortion.”

He switched on the light, staring at her, his face ashen. She switched off the light.

“It was our child. Yes, I was pregnant. I went to a shady nursing home. For a medical termination of pregnancy. MTP, they call it. But it went wrong. I began to bleed, had cramps. A half hour job stretched to hours. I was frantic. I had to come home. I slipped away from there. I could never tell you, because it’s

worse than having a lover. I killed our child, Gaurav. I can't ask you to forgive me. I pretended we couldn't have a child. Then we went and got Sid."

She covered her face with her hands, spent, leaning against him.

"But why?" he asked.

"So that I would never have a daughter. So that I would never have to worry if she was safe."

"Safe from what?"

Then it was tumbling out of her, urgent, agonised words in a torrent, gushing from a past he had never imagined, the night of the ferris wheel. He listened, watching her in the dark, feeling her anguish flow to him. In that instant, she was no more the cold and distant woman wrapped up in herself. He saw the fragile, wounded young girl seeking closure. She had been afraid it would disgust him, just as it had disgusted her mother. But someone had to tell her the long night was over, and that she had suffered enough.

He took her hands, holding them in his. No words needed to be spoken. Two hours later, the waters ebbed, and they drove home, to their sleeping child.

A season of waiting

Spring was here. And nobody told him anything about it. The cuckoo must have sung, but he hadn't put on his hearing aid on time. It was too much of a damned nuisance — the hearing aid, not the cuckoo, of course. In March, the dusty winds lurched about like homeless drunks with nowhere to go. So his strident, short-haired daughter-in-law shrilly ordered the maid that all doors, windows and ventilators be shut. But the fine, gritty dust lay on every surface in the rooms and made them all sneeze. And he, Niren Choudhury, simply *Deuta* these days, was eighty-one and followed up the sneezes with a hacking cough that was worrying for everyone and extremely annoying for him. One night, lying awake and wondering if he had remembered to go to the bank for his pension, he heard a soft murmur outside his window in the darkness where a street light threw into relief the stunted guava tree, its leaves trembling and branches outstretched. The murmur was like the whispers of young girls sharing some dark, delicious secret. Then it was the first rain of Spring, gentle, shy, scattering over the surface of leaves, rocks and earth, roofs and faces, dreaming monuments and statues in the park. "Are you awake?" He looked towards his wife asleep beside him in the darkness – wanting to wake her and yet, not wanting to. She, slender as a girl, but now almost blind and her straggly hair snow white, the scalp showing through the thin, wispy strands in daylight.

"Umm," she turned to the other side, her back to him. Renu was stingy with words these days. For some reason which must have been his fault, something

he could no longer remember, she had just stopped caring. So if he buttoned his shirt wrong, or forgot to have his two teaspoons of Waterbury's Compound, she just looked at him in an abstract way, as if she was not sure what he had done wrong and therefore, could not scold him in her low, murmuring, persuasive voice. And then she would look away, as if he was a stranger passing her by on a kerb.

But of course, this was every man's dream, to have a wife who had stopped being a nag. But, after fifty-two years together, he had long gotten used to her gentle chiding, and loved reaching for her in some buried midnight, stirred by a dream, and clasping her, his nostrils filling with the sharp fragrance of her jasmine– scented hair oil and Pond's cold cream. Now, she did not give herself to him, and after some midnight dream, he felt strangely defeated.

He insisted on having his breakfast of cornflakes, milk and a banana on the balcony. Mornings were when the shrill and overwrought Pallavi whirled around the house like a demented hen readying lunch, turning on the washing machine, the vacuum cleaner, her hair drier, all at one go. *Deuta* was still deeply distrustful of electricity, and equally so of his jittery daughter-in-law. Between the two of them – the electricity and its manic user – they would generate a huge explosion that would be seen from outer space. So the verandah was for him the safest retreat under the circumstances.

Such things were possible. Bonku said so. *Deuta* had very mixed feelings about his only grandchild. Bonku was twelve and all the fat on his rotund frame jiggled in ways that made *Deuta* flinch. Bonku liked tight, violently coloured T-shirts with Pokemon and Hulk Hogan emblazoned on the chest. He wore cargoes and floaters even to weddings and played drums in his room when he was angry with his parents or had flunked a test – which was often. Since *Deuta*'s son Probir, he of the formal ties and peptic ulcer, was hardly ever at home, running a medicine distributorship whose boxes of pills and tonics had no cures for his rather strained home life, Bonku did not have much of a father figure in his young, mixed up life. So, of late, he had taken to calling his grandfather Pops. *Deuta* was apoplectic. He growled that he would not answer to that cheeky, disrespectful and American term. But Bonku persisted, and with *Deuta'*s memory what it was, he was soon responding to it promptly enough.

So, the morning after the first Spring rain, *Deuta* read the papers in the balcony. The sky was a brilliant, aching blue and the sunshine spilled warmly over the potted plants, the mosaic floor and the white painted wicker chairs. Fish and vegetable vendors were hawking their wares stridently along the lane below and so he just took off his hearing aid and sank into the welcome hush. Somehow, his mind was not on the assembly deliberations, the disappearances and demonstrations. He was indifferent to the need for transparent governance. Then, on page five, he found her. A young woman, a dancer, her hands on her

full hips, her face raised as if like a flower reaching for the light. The glittering *gamkharu*s were thick on her wrists, and the *muga chadar* wrapped around her full, almost wanton form. Her eyes looked at him, directly, with a kind, shy, yet bold teasing. He looked at her for a long time, dazed, wordless and somehow, in that blazing Spring sunshine, the years fell off from him; it was as if he had slipped through a mysterious, inviting tunnel of time to his youth and its restless passions. He felt a flood of longing wash over him and then abruptly, the sour, musty old man smells came surging back; he saw his gnarled hands, the flesh hanging loose, and the click of the dentures in his mouth. The girl, looking up at him from the paper he put down on the table, was one more reminder of loss, and he did not want to see her again.

He put on his hearing aid. The calling bell was ringing, a shrill bird sounding like its wings were being plucked off. Then, Bonku coming into the balcony. "Pops, some people to see you."

"Who are they?"

"Didn't ask. Bad manners. I made them sit. Two men."

"You idiot, didn't that mother of yours tell you not to let in strangers?"

"Don't worry, Pops. They don't look like they have guns, or ropes. And we don't have money. You can hide your pension in the flowerpot, if you like. And if they act funny, I'll go play my drums."

He struggled out of his chair, grumbling, then walked slowly, waddling across the hall to the sitting room. Two men in their twenties sat on the edge of the

sofa, one of them holding a manila envelope. They rose as he came and one dived down to touch his feet. Bonku stifled a snort and pretended to study the ashtray. The men were members of the city's Pragati Club and they would be honoured to felicitate him on the Rongali Bihu *Utsav* at Chandmari field. They would send the car to pick him up on the 14th evening. They murmured a few fawning words about his great contribution to society and left, backing out of his presence like royal courtiers taking leave of the king. When they left, Bonku chuckled till he choked and then read out the contents of the letter, taking an awfully long time because the Assamese tongue was as unfamiliar to him as a life without burgers. The letter, however, was too short to give a grandson much of an inkling about the achievements of a grandfather, so *Deuta* took Bonku to his small study and pointed out, as he had done ever since the little wretch had learnt to walk, actually – the dozen books he had penned from the age of thirty to seventy-five – the myths of this land, the magic and folklore, customs and traditions, stories that had travelled across time from mouth to mouth, folk music and dance. He brought out the dusty tomes from the glass almirah and spread them on the table to see. Bonku grew silent, turning the pages, glancing at the old, stooped man who had so much in him that he, Bonku didn't know. *Deuta* saw Renu come in, sit on one of the easy chairs on the other side, her face intent on understanding what passed between the two.

"You're cool, man. You wrote these books yourself?"

"What would you understand? You failed Assamese twice already this year."

“Guess I didn’t get your genes. You’ve got me all upset now. I’ll go and bang those drums.” He stalked off.

“You are cruel,” Renu said quietly, in a flat, disappointed tone, “You always were.”

Probir returned from his trip two days later and read the letter. “Is there going to be a cash prize? Or just a shawl and citation?”

“What does it matter? They are honouring him,” said Pallavi sharply. “I’ve sent his *eri* shawl to the dry-cleaners. And the tailor says he can ready his *kurta* in two days.” That night Niren Chowdhury wrote out his acceptance speech, crumpling up each sheet in disgust. He was too smug in one, too modest in another, so full of platitudes now, ponderous and boring at times. Then he heard the songs floating through the night. Somewhere they were rehearsing for Bihu. Renu sat quietly by the dressing mirror, combing her white hair, her bangles tinkling, gathering the falling strands with her fingers from the comb, twisting them. She would not see much of herself, she was almost blind. The thought made his heart ache. He would ask her to accompany him to the function. She would like to hear their warms words of praise for his work, and the rousing applause, the television cameras... Later, in the car, he would hold the flower bouquet close to her face, and she would inhale the fragrance. Yes, she would like that.

But Renu would not go. She shook her head. She hated leaving the house. So, on the evening of Bihu, he waited in the sitting room, stiff in his new,

crisp *kurta* and elaborately folded *dhoti*, the shawl draped across his stooping shoulders. Bonku jiggled his legs on the adjoining sofa, checking the camera and humming an annoying tune, his cargoes and floaters in place, waiting to go with him to the function. Probir called from office. Had they come to fetch him? Pallavi was considerate, not turning on a single electrical gadget to alarm her father-in-law.

6 p.m., 7 p.m., then 8 p.m., *Deuta* sat stiff and expectant. Any minute now. So many cars came purring through the lane, none of them for him. Then Bonku got the phone number on the invitation letter and called, moving to the balcony to do so. *Deuta* listened. Bonku sounded grown-up, sharp, insistent, impatient. Today Bonku had taken charge.

Deuta watched Bonku coming into the lighted room. Putting down the camera on the side table he said, “Would you like a cup of Horlicks, Pops? You’re thirsty, ain’t you?”

“Bonku, I can take it. Tell me the truth, boy.”

“I’m upset Pops, I’ll go to my room and bang the drums a bit.”

“Sit here, Bonku, sit with me. Tell me, why didn’t they come? Did they forget the address?”

Bonku flopped down beside him. “I’m going to read your books Pops. I swear on Pokemon, I’ll do it. Let me improve my Assamese a bit, okay?”

“Why didn’t they come?”

“Because,” he picked up the crystal ashtray, turning it around and looking at it as if it was the first ashtray he had seen in his life. “Why didn’t they come?” *Deuta* asked, very quietly. “Because the fools were so dumb they didn’t do their homework. There are two Niren Chowdhurys, Pops. The other one is a social worker and he’s the one they really want to honour. But the dumbos mixed you both up and didn’t have the decency to let you know. This is worse than my flunking Assamese. At least I don’t hurt people. Anyway, Pops, there is only one Niren Chowdhury I know, and it’s you. Let’s forget this, Pops. Not worth it.”

He looked at Bonku. He was almost tempted to hug him.

“Okay boy, call *Aita*. She’ll have to help me get out of all these new clothes. Call her.”

“She’s in the dining room.” Bonku said shortly. “She doesn’t talk to me”.

Deuta rose and walked slowly to the inner rooms. The new shoes were pinching. The starched *kurta* had made him sweat. At least Renu could have brought him a cup of tea. Had she seen the girl in the newspaper? Did the very old still get jealous?

In the dining hall he leaned against the sideboard. There were four dinner plates laid out on the table - for him, Bonku, Probir and Pallavi. Renu was looking at

him, her pupils dark against a face as delicate as bone china. She must have been nineteen, slender arms emerging from a ruffled blouse, a star-shaped flower in her bun. He had been in the frame, too, in all ill-fitting suit – but between the living and the dead, the picture was of hers alone.

He went to this room, undressing in the darkness, certain he had never heard a cuckoo after she had gone, and all the springs left to him would be a kind of waiting, to go to a home he knew not where, but one in which she was waiting.

Indrani Raimedhi

Carmen

She was watching television in an impatient, distracted way, flipping channels every time the shampoo and car ads came on, biting her lower lip and tapping her foot, sprawled on the couch. Outside, thunder rumbled in the night sky, and the curtains billowed inwards in a sudden breeze.

The cat was at the window ledge, its gold-flecked eyes gazing intently at her. Then, in one smooth, liquid movement, she leapt onto the backrest of the sofa, on the other end of the room, sliding into the seat and jumping lightly to the floor, walking slowly, deliberately towards her, her tail raised.

"Hello, Carmen", she said in a low, coaxing voice. "Come, come to Mummy". The cat rubbed herself against Sumona's legs, her fur rippling, ears twitching. Sumona lifted her into her lap, and stroked her fur. She could feel its body ripple at her touch, quivering against her fingers. A year ago, she had slunk in through the kitchen ventilator, upsetting a jar of water, and with a terrified meow, had scrabbled up the curtains to escape. Soon she was everywhere, lying watchfully under the centre table in the drawing room, licking her fur, slinking from room to room, leaving her footprints on the leather sofas, scratch marks on the doors. Sumona began calling her Carmen – after the wild gypsy killed by her jilted lover. Somewhere, she had read about an opera named after her. And this gorgeous creature in her lap, proud, mysterious, silent, with her liquid movements and hypnotic stare, had to have a name like Carmen. And when Adi called her Kitty, she willed herself to ignore it. That was Adi again, a man without imagination, practical and matter-of-fact. Perhaps deep within her, there was her secret self which had not given in to him. The secret part that was like Carmen, and which rejected his seed.

She carried Carmen to the kitchen, cradling her against her stomach with her left arm. She opened the fridge door, took out the carton of milk, poured it into Carmen's enamel bowl and set it down on the floor. Purring, Carmen began to lap it up, tail twitching.

Adi called when she had just slipped into her terry robe after her bath, droplets of water running down her body, one hand holding up the towel coiled around

her hair, trying not to slip on the wet floor and brushing past the shower curtain. “I was going to call you.” Her voice seemed unnaturally loud inside the steaming bathroom. “Did you get the *rajanigandha*?”

“Right.” She could sense the sour malice in his voice. “The very best. I guess you want chocolates, too, don’t you? To get into the mood and all that... Of course, we could just get drunk, and be done with it.” Padding into the bedroom, she held the phone against her left cheek, looking at her reflection in the dressing mirror with narrowed eyes, taking in the angular lines, the boyish hips of her thirty-five-year-old body. The tears were pricking already behind her eyelids, tiny grains of sand, hurting.

“Don’t bullshit me, Adi,” she said quietly, dropping the damp towel on the bed. “It’s for both of us, remember? Tonight’s the last time, promise. I’m sick of it, too, you know.”

Ten minutes later, she had changed into her powder blue nightgown, rubbed cream onto her face with circular strokes of her fingers. There were fresh sheets on the double bed, Spring green floral print on white, the pillows perfectly plumped. Their eight-year-old wedding photo was in its ivory and silver frame on the headboard, just by Adi’s Paulo Coelhos and her ceramic dolls. A late summer wind blew in through the window. Then she was in the kitchen, checking on the pasta in the microwave. Moving to the living room, she switched on the Madhubani print lamp, touched the tassels lightly and settled down in the couch. Her handbag was still on the side table, put there when she

returned from work, two hours ago. At office, they were cobbling together a special travel issue. All week, she had looked at jungle trails, Buddhist boy monks and lakes as still as frozen glass. Everywhere people wanting to get away- booking tickets, making reservations, and packing bags, she was among those who helped them to go. But she herself felt no yearning to go anywhere. The mystery in her life was not what lay beyond the next bend of the road. It was why her body refused to yield new life, to follow the law of Nature, to let the sperm meet the egg.

Somewhere between the mating and the swear words, the kissing and the blaming, she lost track of the number of specialists she had consulted, the amulets her mother had pressed apologetically into her hands, and which she had thrown away. Everyone has children, why can't we be different? she had once said flippantly at a party, half-drunk. Later, they had had a huge fight, Adi screaming at her in the car. Why do you have to so bloody embarrass me?

"You are not a statistic," said a doctor who had just come back with an advanced degree in fertility treatment. "You are an individual with highly personal reasons for not yet becoming pregnant." On a YouTube video she was trawling through a late insomniac night, a woman in blonde braids and a peasant shift was saying, "Often I will be sitting with someone seeking to have children. And because I am sensitive to energy, I can actually sense the souls patiently waiting for a space in the lives of the possible parents, a place for them, room to

grow. They are wise enough to wait until there is room for them, until there are parents nurtured enough to nurture them."

Adi came at nine-thirty and watched the news as she put the *rajanigandha*s on a vase on top of the bedroom bedside the table. Even as the fragrance filled the room, she could sense Adi's hard, unyielding resistance to her, to what was waiting for him later in the night, just one more meaningless journey, a thankless chore, performed quickly, perfunctorily, not spoken about in the morning and then the wait, the markings on the calendar...

Drawing a deep breath, she went to lay out their dinner.

They ate in silence, she cleared the plates, rinsed them, put them back on the stand, checked the gas and went to brush her teeth. He had switched on the bedside lamps and lay on his side, reading a magazine. Adi was heavy, square jawed, a man of substance. The company he worked for manufactured ball bearings. He often used the work productive. It set her teeth on edge.

Then the lamps were switched off. They lay together, breathing, silent. She reached out and lightly massaged his temples. He had deep frown lines on his forehead .

"Do we have to?" he asked in the darkness. "Can't we just stop?"

"No." She gripped his arm. "If we give this up, we'll have nothing to hold us. The doctor said..."

"Enough." He shifted away from her. "That's the whole problem. We paid that man so he could give us those promises."

She switched on the bedside lamp. “What do you want to do, Adi? We just have to keep trying. We can’t afford those new treatments. But nothing is really wrong with us, Adi.”

“I’m sick of trying.” Adi’s face was grim. “I don’t even know I want kids anymore. Why do we need them, for God’s sake. Just to prove we are normal? Sumi, just for tonight, just leave me alone.”

This had happened on the second Saturday of May. The following day, she moved to the guest bedroom. She carried her clothes and hung them in the closet. Her ceramic dolls were now on a window sill. In that east facing room, the light flooded in early, and her insomnia worsened. She had never felt so alone. At her mother’s house, where she went once a week, one sentence kept running through her mind. Adi no longer sleeps with me, a line which she would never ever utter to anyone. In all other ways, he was the same as before, solid, dependable, caring, dropping her at office, calling her if he was late.

It was only with Carmen that she felt at ease. Carmen leaping lightly onto her lap, mewing from under the bed, arching her back and stretching her legs, her movements sensuous and graceful. Sumona showered her with love, buying cat food from the departmental store, getting her a reed basket lined with soft rags to sleep in, leaving saucers of water in all the rooms so she would never be thirsty. Carmen seemed to revel in this love. She grew plump and unwieldy, seeming heavy, even inert in her lap as she sat reading. These days, as the

moonsoon raged outside, Carmen no longer left the house and would meow and scratch on the front door when she heard Sumona turning the key on the lock.

Then came September, time for the Goddess to come down on earth. Sumona was caught in traffic when trucks carrying the three-eyed many armed Goddess was carried with shouts of joy.

That night, she lay awake, all her senses alert, unable to sleep. She had not seen Carmen for two days. Sumona had worried about her even at work, as all around her female colleagues talked of *puja* shopping. The bowl of milk remained untouched on the kitchen counter. The reed basket was empty. As she tossed and turned in bed, she felt the ache of being abandoned, first by Adi and now a cat that had once craved for her love.

She dreamt of walking along a twisted road and clouds changing shape, a fearful urgency to reach. Some place whose name she did not know.

Then the mewing started. A faint, high sound in the beginning, which soon grew more insistent. The dream retreated like a wave as she sat up groggily.

"Carmen."

There was silence in the room. Outside, a man rode by on his cycle, with milk cans rattling. There was another meow. She looked under the bed. No, it was coming from the closet. The door was half-open. She pulled it wide and peered inside.

“Carmen, come here... come here... come to Mummy.” She pulled away her clothes hangers, bending towards the bottom of the closet, where the blankets were piled up.

She flicked on the switch. Carmen was curled on top of the blankets, staring warily at her with her gold-flecked eyes. There, by her side, were four newborn kittens, grey balls with eyes shut tight, scarcely moving.

She had thought Carmen was the wild gipsy, outside the natural order of things, her ally. Now she was just a bitch who had been in heat.

Her cry woke up Adi. He came into the room and held her, stroking her back, puzzled. “Take them away!” She pointed to Carmen and her litter, her voice shaking and mouth twisted, “Take them away right now. I don’t want to see them again. Adi, do you hear me?”

The longest week

Indrani Raimedhi

Monday

It came without warning. One minute the world, her world was a safe, sunny place. Even a boringly safe place – where lists were made, shopping was done,

meals cooked, clothes folded, furniture dusted, telephones answered, doors opened and closed, newspapers read, television watched, arguments resolved and lovemaking decorously carried out under the cover of darkness, like it was done by all married couples. Then, on Monday night, she woke up and found his side of the bed empty. At first she thought he was in the bathroom, but the light there was not on and she did not hear the flush. Pulling aside the blanket, she got up and padded barefoot to the kitchen. Sometimes he was hungry and helped himself to something from the fridge. But it was still and dark. She moved towards the living room and stood on the doorway. His back to her, Swagat was slumped on the couch, aimlessly flicking on the TV channels. He was talking in a low voice on the phone.

"Why don't you understand? I can't tell her."

She felt herself go cold. A sick feeling rose from the pit of her stomach. She backed from the doorway and fled to the bedroom. She got into bed and pulled the blanket over her. She could feel the throbbing of her heart against her ears. Sometime later, he came back and lay down quietly by her side. She lay awake till the faint light of dawn appeared through the windows. She looked at his sleeping face, his jaw slack, his face pale, wondering what he had done.

Tuesday

When he left for office, after picking on his toast and leaving the coffee half drunk, she got to work. She went through the pockets of all his shirts, coats and trousers. She then ransacked his bureau drawers, going through each scrap of

paper, every receipt, invoice and prescription. His almirah yielded nothing out of the ordinary. She was late fetching Richa from school. Her daughter stood forlorn in the playground, scuffing the sand with her shoe. Anjali treated her to double scoop strawberry ice-cream at the nearby Kwalitys. As Richa licked with her pink tongue, her mouth ringed with pink ice-cream, Anjali wondered why this precious child was not enough to bind Swagat to her for life. That afternoon, dropping Richa at her dance class, Anjali went to Shringar. She treated herself to a fruit pack and a hot oil hair massage. Her eyes closed, she tried to feel the comfort of fingers rubbing her scalp. But in her mind's eye was a darkened living room and a man saying something unbearable to someone unknown on the phone as the TV played on the background. A single tear rolled down her cheek. The beautician was well-trained and made no comment.

That night, she took a sleeping pill at bedtime, so that she would not know if he left the bed.

Wednesday

On Wednesday, her sister called. Priya was an airhostess with Cathay Pacific and was just back from Hong Kong. She was in Mumbai for a day, before flying off to London. A peripatetic life. A life without roots.

"You don't sound good, sis," she said in her typical direct way.

So Anjali told her. Her voice broke. "That's all?" Priya sounded dismissive.

“He says he can’t tell you. He cares enough not to hurt your feelings. Shouldn’t that be enough? Anyway, the French say nothing improves a marriage more than an affair.”

As usual, Priya was being facetious. After a few meaningless words, Anjali hung up.

When Richa was at school, and she was alone in the house, she called Satish. Three years ago Satish, slurring after a few drinks at a party, had whispered in her ear that she looked like a goddess. She had been scared, elated, aroused, scandalised. They had talked on the phone for a month but she had refused to meet him. It was, she had pleaded, too dangerous. And he was Swagat’s friend, after all.

“Anjali?” Satish now seemed wary. “This is a surprise. How are you?”

She found herself sounding foolish, talking about her parents, Richa, mutual friends. Then his other phone rang and he excused himself. Her cheeks burning, Anjali stood in the empty living room, shamed.

Thursday

Swagat was drinking gin at nine o’clock in the morning of a working day. He talked in monosyllables. He did not care that one of his shirt buttons was missing. His hand trembled slightly when he reached for the marmalade at breakfast. She tried to ignore all this. She asked him if he had booked the gas, and if they would go to the Chowdhury’s wedding. At noon he called up to tell

her that he had left office. He was in a garage at Kedar Road, getting the car painted. He hated the black colour. He was painting it white.

She did not say “Is there something you want to tell me?” She was afraid of his secret. She said white would look nice.

Friday

Her friend Mala often talked of Sunanda Devi, seventy-year-old Sunanda Devi who knew of your troubles before you spoke of them to her. A psychic, a face reader, a dispenser of sacred threads, amulets and gems. She called Mala as soon as Swagat left for work in his now white car.

“Mala?” she lied into the phone. “There’s a woman, my neighbour, who wants Sunanda Devi’s address.”

“Sure. She stays in Kushal Nagar. House No. 35.”

Two hours later, she was sitting in a cramped living room filled with heavy sofas and a bed pushed along a wall. Ma Sunanda Devi sat on it, in a spotless white sari, her frizzy salt and pepper hair cropped short, a sandal wood mark looking like an exclamation mark between her brows. “Your husband is a good man.” She said in a gravelly voice. “But the influence of Saturn is not good. Some trouble has come to him.”

Anjali told her about everything that had happened. But she could not bring herself to ask if there was a woman involved. Then, Sunanda Devi looked deep into her eyes and said, “My child. I see a woman in this.” By the end of her visit, Anjali paid an advance for an amulet to be made. She was to make Swagat

wear it on his right arm. She felt foolish and full of despair. Of course, he would refuse.

Saturday

They went to the Choudhury's wedding. She had won her parrot green Kanjeevaram and looked beautiful. She felt her pride returning. How dare he? On the way back they were silent, listening to Rahat Fateh Ali Khan. At 11 p.m., he was still on the couch, surfing channels.

She went and sat down across him. It was now or never.

"I've been watching you." She began evenly. "Something is the matter. You creep out of bed and talk on the phone at midnight. You drank gin in the morning, you barely talk to me. I'm not a fool. What is it that you can't tell me?"

"Anjali."

"Come on, tell me. Is it some woman? Your'e bored of me aren't you? What is this, a fourteen year itch?"

He switched off the TV.

"Anjali, its nothing like that. You've got to trust me."

"Then who were you talking to on Monday night?"

"Satish."

"Satish, what for?"

There was silence. He came across the room, sat down next to her and clasped her hands.

“I’ve done something terrible.”

“What?” Her mouth felt dry.

“Remember I met Satish and the others for drinks on Sunday evening? I had a couple of whiskeys and didn’t give a damn. I was driving back real fast, the streets were empty. I didn’t want you waiting up for me... anyway, near Vinayak bypass there’s this woman with a sack running across from the left... I braked but I hit her... she just crumpled up in front of the car. I should have got out... I lost my nerve... I just backed and came home through the Sadar Bazar side. I was checking the local channels that night Anjali.”

“And?”

“And it was everywhere. She was a mad, homeless woman knocked down dead by a careless driver. I was telling Satish about it.”

Anjali sat stunned, holding his hand. Then it began, a long, slow wave of relief washing over her, buoying up her heart.

“Darling.” She kissed his hands. “It wasn’t your fault. Its okay, it’s going to be okay.”

Sunday

In the evening Priya called from London.

“You’re sounding peppy!” She said teasingly. “Won him back?”

“It wasn’t anything like that at all.” Anjali said defensively.

“What was it then, sis?”

“Oh.” She said after a pause.

“Everything’s fine now. Don’t worry, okay? It was just a minor thing.”

Saying goodbye

Indrani Raimedhi

“She was at the television studio, giving an interview about her latest book of poems, *The Virgin Syndrome*. The studio had been made to look like an Art Deco living room, and she was pleased that the pale cream padded sofa would set off her purple *Kantha sari* to perfection. They had enlarged her eyes and lined her lips and teased her shoulder length hair. She had been very careful not to trip over the cables running along the floor. The interviewer was a pale, anorexic, flat-chested girl in glasses, who kept looking back on her notes, and asking her questions with a breathy awe.

“Poetry is a response to the process of living,” said Devashree. “We live amidst so many contradictions, in the chaos of existence. The conflict between the self and the whole – that is painful. Poetry is the genie inside me, you know, the voice that other people can’t control. And I want to keep that voice, poetry, which is my freedom.” It was then a relief to have the big lamps switched off, and the microphone unclipped from her blouse. The anchor murmured in appreciation, and Devashree felt the phone vibrate in her bag. “Call me. Urgent. Soma.” Her closest friend from school, Soma, dear sweet Soma, had never been inside a television station. She cooked and cleaned and read romance novels in

her free time. It was a miracle Soma had learnt to SMS. Devashree did not call Soma that evening. She was not in the mood for anything urgent. Instead, she went off to the parlour, got her eyebrows threaded, and had a coffee at Bean Bag, idly flipping through a large coffee table book on Angkor Wat. Ajit would not be home till 7, and after Urmi left for Pune, the home was just so much unused space.

Soma was not surprised when Devashree did not call back. Devashree was a poet. She was eccentric, absent-minded. In school, she always forgot her homework assignments. They had been in the same class, were of the same age, but Soma felt strangely maternal towards Devashree. At twenty-one, Devashree had run away from home, married an artist, and lived for fourteen years in the same city without seeing her parents or sister. Her artist husband gave up his art, started a business, and prospered way beyond everybody's expectations. Devashree did not know what to make of it. It was like waking up in bed with another man.

This was what she had once told Soma. Soma did not believe Devashree's problem was even worth discussing, though she was too kind to say so. Soma worked in a school, and supported her mother and two unmarried sisters. Biplab, her husband, was a lawyer, but was too easy-going to fight cases with spirit. Sometimes Soma felt she was a bullock tied to a yoke and all that life meant was going round the circles. But when everyone turned to her for help, whether it was a missing button or a broken heart, she realised it was a special

role given to her by fate to be of help to others. So, when she first heard the news about Ankita, she felt a swift stab of fierce sorrow, and a wish to do something to help.

On the other side of the city, Deepa heard the news from her neighbour, whose brother was a doctor. She called Soma, and was surprised that Soma already knew. She felt cheated of being the first to break the news. Then, instead of talking about Ankita, Deepa complained to Soma how her migraine was getting worse, and the annual audit at her accounts division was going to be the end of her.

Then Tina called from Delhi. Tina had been the most beautiful girl in their class. The boys of a nearby school had scaled their convent wall to sneak-a-peek at her one faraway June afternoon when she was playing volley ball, her skirt flying. Now she wore oversized shirts and baggy trousers to hide her bulk.

“I’d love to go to Guwahati just for a day or two, you know, spend time with Ankita. But we’re leaving for Cyprus next Wednesday. We’re doing the whole European hog, you know. And if nothing happens by then, I can still come, right? How is she? Have you visited her?”

“We’re planning something”, said Devashree. “It’s quite delicate, like – what would we say.”

“You’re a poet,” Tina sounded catty. “You could write a nice poem, you know. It would be very thoughtful and all.”

After several rounds of phone calls, Devashree, Soma and Deepa zeroed in on a Saturday when they would all be free. But then Devashree had to host a dinner for Ajit's clients who had come from Mumbai. Soma and Deepa decided to go the following Saturday without taking Devashree. But, Deepa's migraine acted up and Soma's son Tutun had his exams.

In June, the rains began, and half the city was inundated. Devashree wrote more poetry, flirted idly with a playwright and visited her daughter in Pune.

Time was moving on, drip by drip, sand falling through fingers. Great hulking apartment towers were reaching for the sky. The rivers flowed endlessly past the city, as buses raced each other. In September, Deepa managed to get Ankita's address, and made a plan to visit with Soma. Always the kind one, Soma called Devashree, and asked if she would go.

So Deepa, Soma and Devashree got into Devashree's car and set off for Ankita's house. On the way, they talked of her. Ankita had very fine features and warm, smiling eyes. Her socks were always drooping, the elastic lose. She was average in studies, but drew the most amazing maps. What else was there to remember? Oh, they were the class of '75. The adults were then always talking of the Emergency. Ankita once told them that doctors were on the way to their school to tie up their tubes so that they wouldn't have babies. That had been a bad scare. In the car, the three of them began to laugh. Then they remembered, and sobered up.

"We've come empty-handed," Soma said, regretfully.

“A Get Well card is hardly appropriate,” Devashree said.

“It’s pancreatic cancer.”

“Isn’t it the one Steve Jobs had?” asked Devashree.

“Yes, yes, Miss Show-off,” retorted Deepa.

“*Bhaiya*”, Soma told the driver, “Turn right. Yes, House No. 65.”

“Are we there already?” Devashree sounded nervous. She fiddled with her purse.

The car halted in front of a grey, single-storied house. They got out, rearranging their sober-coloured clothes. A dim light shone on the verandah. A bearded man opened the door. It was Kalyan, Ankita’s husband.

“We came to know only recently,” murmured Devashree. “How is she?”

“Not so good. You must excuse me. The night nurse has still not arrived. I have to be with her.”

The three friends looked at each other.

“Can – can we see her?” Soma asked softly. “We won’t tire her.”

Kalyan shook his head. “No, she doesn’t want to meet anyone now. In the beginning, yes... She needed her friends... and some did come, but now, she wants to be left alone. She has said her goodbyes.”

They walked out to the verandah. “I hope you understand.” Kalyan’s haggard face was full of apology. They drove back to their separate homes, each lost in their thoughts. Soma thought of school, Madonna and the Child, all of them marching to the band music. Deepa though of linking her arm around Ankita,

and trying to figure out boys. Devashree felt numb inside, emptied of all poetic thoughts. In the end, all of them struggled with the pain of the same thought. They would never see Ankita again.