

The beauty trap

Indrani Raimedhi

Don't get me wrong on this. Being ambivalently somewhere between a Plain Jane and Drop Dead Gorgeous, I have no illusions about being beautiful. But I have a healthy respect for women trying to look beautiful. Nobody much cares for inner beauty. That's the consolation prize for not being beautiful in the exterior. Being beautiful certainly has its uses. It is believed that doors open magically for you. But then, a beautiful woman who has reached the top of her profession has to face the insinuation that she got there horizontally, something a handsome man isn't alleged to have done. Then there is the phrase beauty with brains, as if the normal is beauty without brains. I enjoy reading dumb blonde jokes until I realise they are sexist, offensive and unfair to women with natural or peroxide blonde hair.

Talking of blonde reminds me of the time I became disenchanted by this whole business of being beautiful. A bunch of us seven-year-olds took part in an elocution contest at school. For weeks the formidable Mother Cecil, she of the wide girth and snow-white wimple, put us into a kind of boot camp, making us rehearse Tagore's evocative poem *Where the mind is without fear* till we got it just right. On the appointed evening, our parents, teachers sat on the hall as we came to stage one by one, reciting the poem with suitable gestures. Among us was a blonde girl named Wanda. Wanda was not only blonde, but had a peaches and cream complexion, a pert nose and cornflower blue eyes. Wanda was the last to recite the poem. As we watched her perform from the wings, an amazing thing happened. A red light suddenly beamed down upon her, bathing her in a ruby glow. A wave of applause greeted the ethereal sight. So no surprise, Wanda got the prize. It was so unfair. The boot camp was just a front. The contest had been rigged to favour the one most beautiful among us, a firangi lookalike at that.

Cut to the present. You must read Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* if you want an objective look at this whole beauty business. Among other things, she says that today the gaunt, youthful model has supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood. There is a belief that an objective measurement of beauty exists and women must strive for it and men must desire such women. And when women chase this dream of being beautiful, they not only become psychologically weak but generate billion-dollar profits for the cosmetics industry. A woman then becomes her own victim, enduring agonising procedures on every part of her body to some ideal of perfection, leading to horrible scars and disfigurement. This is just one aspect of the story. Should the woman be a part of the entertainment industry, the desire to be perfect is not even an option. And then, as she ages, the desperation, the treatments reduce her to a sad caricature.

The quest for beauty exists in all cultures, in all corners of the world. Remember the Yaping Hullo nose plugs of the Apatani women? The moment a girl's nose hole is big enough, a cane plug is inserted. Masai women pierce and elongate their earlobes with thorns and stones. Japanese girls cap their upper canines to create a fanged look. Maori women ink tattoos that cover their whole faces to create an illusion of beauty. A tribe in Ethiopia enlarges a woman's lower lip till it becomes, believe it or not, like a disc – the size of a dinner plate. Thai girls wear stiff metal coils that elongate their necks, ostensibly to protect them from tiger attacks. Oh, really? Then why don't the men wear them too?

Then, we've all heard about the bound feet of Chinese women or how women in the West once wore painful corsets to show off their tiny waists. But the search for beauty still comes

with an ability to withstand pain and suffering. Famous and not so famous females continue having the fat sucked out of their bodies, getting skin removed, having their faces pulled up and tucked under their hairline, putting foreign substances under breasts, smoothing their wrinkles with botox, not to speak of punishing diets that promise much and deliver little. We wander around the supermarket looking for products that will make our hair glossy, but skins unlined and radiant, clothes that will conceal our tiniest bulge, shoes that will help us tower over others, perfume that will make us feel like Cleopatra. Each of us, deep in our hearts, are longing to set up a Trojan War, with us as the seductive, irresistible Helen at the centre of it. It is time we stopped this infantile craving for what we need not be.

(Indrani Raimedhi is a journalist, columnist, and author.)



The she conundrum



Yet another International Women's Day hovers on the horizon. You can bet your bottom dollar or cryptocurrency that it will come and go with a flurry of tokenisms. What gets at me the most is the term woman of substance. Grow up people, it's just the title of a book by Barbara Taylor Bradford. Why repeat it ad infinitum at boring meetings full of about-to-wilt marigolds? All the battles seem to have been fought, or lingering on in a half-hearted way. In case you haven't noticed, every woman you know – your bestie, your colleague, your hairdresser, even your maid has gotten off the floor and nobody is a doormat anymore. You don't sit by the fireside and look on. You kick ass, you live life, you get teased, groped, elbowed, whispered, leered at and you fight without making a song and dance about it. All around me I see young women take life in their own hands. It's scary at first, one is filled with self-doubt. Then the adrenaline kicks in – you move to a new city alone, you rent your first flat, you say no to the boyfriend who seems controlling. At work newer and newer challenges are thrown at you. You roll up your sleeves and plunge in. You then get it – freedom is not about wearing ripped jeans, swigging back tequila shots and having a smoke. It is beyond that – an aspiring for heights you alone envision, a fierce, buoyant joy at going for it. Like Steffi Graf said, "When you lose a couple of times, it makes you realise how difficult it is to win." You have great intelligence, you have no connections and some opportunities. But it's not enough till you get up every day and begin where you left off. There's a catch, though. The greatest invention of mankind since the wheel, the internet is not excited by your kind of life, your kind of kick-assing. But Priya Prakash Varrier does a saucy wink in a film clip and there's so much hooha and a tidal wave of memes. Someone wrote, Okay India, we need to talk about Priya Prakash Varrier. Really? Is she the only

female in Indian history who has shut one eye and left the other one open? I am not amused. This is how they are trivialising women.

From a wink to eyebrows. I am not talking about raising mine. There's a viral clip of a woman who put on a face mask, ripped it off, and her eyebrows came away with it. Women were doing the strangest things on the net long before Padman was garnering attention and celebs were turning up selfconsciously holding sanitary pads. Rupri Kaur's blood-stained pyjama-donning photo set off a tidal wave of both support and disgust on the internet. Clever girl Rupri spoke of the sacredness of menstruation just when this issue was gaining traction. Her book of verses Milk and Honey went on to become a bestseller, with media like The Huffington Post gushing in approbation. The poems I'm afraid, didn't do much for me. Read this one Of course/ I want to be/ Successful but/ I don't crave/ Success for me/ I need to be successful to gain enough/ milk and honey/ to help those around me/ succeed. Rupri, why be so coy and apologetic about craving success? It's a dog-eat-dog world, woman. And who gives milk and honey away after you've earned it? What are you, an Instagram saint? In another gem, she promises to call woman resilient and extraordinary rather than label them pretty. Ah, profound.

Some young friends tell me with mock horror that Rupri is considered a hot contender for Neruda as a phenomenal poet. That her fame has reached the stratosphere. That's my point. Why are our young women not getting acquainted with RTI activist Aruna Roy, scientist author Vandana Shiva, anti-dam activist Medha Patkar, power women like Chanda Kochhar and Kiran Mazumder Shaw, sport stars like Saina Nehwal, Mary Kom, PV Sindhu, historians like Romila Thapar, artists like Anjolie Ela Menon? If this country is to go anywhere, young women should have these role models. You will not get a single meme on them but should you choose to discover their awesome work, it will change your life. Instead of studying the work of Indian trailblazers and being inspired to follow a higher path, many young women I see around are single-mindedly obsessed with their weight, their clothes, the silkiness of their hair and their popularity with the opposite sex. When I chat up a young girl, all she goes is me, me me. She embodies the sexual objectification of women, consumer capitalism and the triviality of mass culture. And there's more. Somewhere down the line she decides that she is going to be a very difficult wife. That she will be making the hubby do the dishes, even if he has a meeting early the next morning. As for the poor fellow, he is forever treading a minefield. Some off-the-cuff remark, some innocent comment is certain to trigger a typhoon of accusations, recrimination, glacial silences and the mandatory peace offering by the sheepish man in the form of some gift. Funny thing is, the boors, the perverts, the gropers get away without an apology whereas the decent guy, the gentleman, if you will, is constantly made to feel that he is not caring enough, not sensitive enough, not obliging enough to please the woman he is with. I don't necessarily always blame the woman. Surrounded as she is by the boors, she is hyper-alert to signs of boorishness in her man, leading to the poor male always having to walk on eggshells around her. In the end, we need to reclaim the word feminism and understand it simply as the right to be human. Feminism, make no mistake, is not about having a slugfest with men.

The big sleep

Indrani Raimeedhi

The whole dilemma of modern life can be summed up in this line – “In the morning, you beg to sleep more, in the afternoon, you are dying to sleep, and at night, you refuse to sleep.”

For some years before I got the hang of the internet I was well in bed and asleep by ten.

Post-internet, I am up beyond midnight, a cyber owl trawling videos, pages, social network sites until I realise I have office the next day. When you are young, your parents lay down your time for bed, when you have babies, they decide when to wake you up with their cries and when you have adult children living in other cities, you wonder if they are having too much of a good time.

I have a brother-in-law who says, with a great deal of misplaced pride, that he wakes up at the unearthly hour of three at dawn.

“What do you do then?” I ask in awe.

“Oh,” he brags, “I turn off the porch light, unlock the gate, switch on the pump for water.”

Readers, did you notice? He never watches the sunrise.

I wonder if young mothers sing lullabies to their babies anymore. I know one who plays them on her phone by the baby’s cot. Even grandmothers, especially those who are getting more hep with every passing year, want to having nothing to do with singing they consider at best rustic.

Remember how it was dinned to us that sleeping early and rising early was the key to health, wealth and wisdom? If it was as simple as that, why didn’t people concentrate solely on that instead of following complicated ways to get their hearts’ desire? Every morning, standing by the roadside of a place near my home, would be these scores of men who were, in spite of rising early, far from wealth, wisdom and health. These early risers were all unskilled labour. Point to be noted.

We know about the phenomenon of sleep, its various stages, the theories of dreams, sleep paralysis, sleep apnoea, sleep walking. But still, there is something profoundly enigmatic and elusive about this most normal aspect of life. This maybe because sleep is an activity that cannot be shared and we are then isolated beings, helpless, vulnerable and utter strangers. That is why artists are so taken up with this state of lassitude, a state resembling death. In Botticelli’s Venus and Mars, Venus sits alert, upright, while Mars lies asleep in a state of surrender. This is a mythological interpretation of sleep as a weakness.

Dreams, the offshoots of sleep, have served as a precious tool for many great writers. Lewis Carroll experimented boldly with the possibilities of a dream setting. In Alice in Wonderland, Alice gets into the dream state and has the time of her life. Tolstoy in War and Peace causes a character named Pierre have a terrible nightmare of being attacked by a pack of wild dogs. After this macabre experience, Peire is ready to make amends for his evil ways. In Dostoevsky’s dream scene of a mare being mercilessly whipped, the author warns of the destruction of society that condoned such acts.

Dreams are the most private parts of ourselves, shielded from the world. But in Orwell’s 1984 the ‘Thought Police’ get wind of all that is going on in one’s mind. Freud, in his monumental book on dreams suggested that the activity of our unconscious minds can be interpreted. He believed dreams were forms of wish fulfilment or an attempt of the sleeping mind to produce a solution to our unresolved issues.

Except for insomniacs, sleep is an activity we take for granted. But deprivation of sleep leads

to fatal physical and psychological effects. Throughout history people have known and used this to break down their hapless victims. In the 16th century Scotland, women suspected of being witches were kept awake for days altogether and when they hallucinated, these were taken as confessions. Sleep deprivation torture was carried out in Japanese POW camps during World War II, South Africa during Apartheid, and in other conflict zones.

In childhood, the story of Rip Van Winkle by Washington Irving struck a powerful chord. A cheery, popular Dutch villager nagged by his wife walks away in a huff and falls asleep in the woods for 20 years, only to wake up and find the American Revolution had taken place and there was another Rip Van Winkle, his son grown to a man. His nagging wife had long gone to meet her Maker. Sometimes we all feel like Rip Van Winkle, that somehow we had been dozing as momentous events took place around us. The manic growth of Guwahati into a teeming, sleepless metropolis has that effect on me.

In the end, there are enemies of sleep. While the villager has to escape at midnight from rampaging elephants, the city dweller is at work on his laptop on yet another presentation. The frustration of trying to fall asleep is best exemplified by a man trying to blow up the Eiffel Tower because its light shining through his bedroom was keeping him awake.

Let's face it, we spend one-third of our lives sleeping. Some of us would say that it's a lot of time lost. But for those in the know, sleep keeps us frisky, motivated, energetic and pumped up for any challenge. So switch off all gadgets, curl up under the duvet, think of the day gone by, all the people who love you, the gifts of tomorrow waiting to be unpacked and there... zzzzz... you are lost to the world.

Being thirteen



They are fighting again and one way or the other, I don't care. It takes courage to grow up and be who you really are. Problem is, I am only 13. There are other seriously serious problems. I have this huge struggle with my body because it is hell bent on being chubby. My mother waits impatiently in front of trial rooms at malls as inside, I try to wriggle into clothes that were not tailored to fit even one bit of me. I hate myself, the clothes, the mirrors in the trial room, my mother and the insolent look on the shopgirl's face as she takes armfuls of my rejected clothes.

Pa's voice is getting louder. I am not worried. He doesn't hit my mom, ever. They say being a teenager is an amazing time and a hard time. You have the best friendships and the worst heartbreaks. Ayan – the basketball star in high school, looks through me, even though I write poems about him every night after tackling the horrors of trigonometry. And Kasturi, Riya, Tina and me, we are the gang. They approve of my wanting to get a Cosmic Woman tattoo on my inner ankle. Riya wants a tongue piercing but worries hot momo sauce will be forever painful after that. We are an almost happy family. I was seven when Mom got happy and fat. Dad got her candied fruits and fashion magazines to read as she lolled about in bed in her blue nightgown. Dad took me for a walk and said I was a big girl now and there was a visitor coming along and I had to be really good and understanding. I think I was not good and understanding enough, because the visitor never came. Mom went away somewhere for a few days and came back all pale and droopy. She cried when she saw the candied fruit. Dad took me on another walk and he was smoking, taking quick puffs and there was a stubble on his cheeks. I was told I was not to talk of the visitor who never came. From then on I thought of us as an almost happy family.

That made me insecure. I realised that for my parents I was never enough. They wanted someone else too. When I saw the boys in our neighbourhood sail by on rollerskates, I

wondered if the visitor would have been like them. Or the pig-tailed goody goody girls of junior school. Someone who would never have thought of an ankle tattoo or about writing love poems.

I can hear them arguing but cannot get the words. Perhaps they are fighting in a foreign language. I want a new life. I want my own flat. I want clothes that fit. I want exam scores that make the others gasp. I want my crooked front tooth to go away, and my blunt cut to always look perfectly set. I don't want those days of the month. I want to know when to use words like 'edgy' and 'visceral.' But most of all, I don't want to belong to an almost happy family. I want my mother to be happy and fat and my father tell me with wonder in his voice that a visitor is coming.

The next day is a Sunday. My mother makes parathas and anda bhurji. But they are not talking. As we eat in silence, my mother asks him challengingly.

"Why don't you tell her?"

My father glares at her, but says nothing.

"We were going to buy our own house." My mother says in a level voice. "The real estate guys showed him the space. He paid five instalments. We took money from the bank. And now, those agents have vanished, you know, poof! We don't have a house, our money is gone, but I am supposed to be calm and make parathas and anda bhurji."

My father eats in silence, his shoulders stooping. I stack the dishes on the sink. I rinse them. I water the plants. I plump the cushions on the living room couch. Then I go to my room and cry. I promise God to give up dreams of the Cosmic Woman tattoo, Ayan the basketball star, the charms of turquoise eyeshadow, my secret desire for a Chanel bag. I want to make my father smile and my mother get her spirits up. I get to work.

In the evening, they are watching TV. Trump is waving at the crowds. They look too spent for another fight.

"Here." I say shyly, handing a piece of paper to Pa.

"What's it, baby?" He asks, taking it from me. He reads it through, looks at me, and passes it on to my mother. Wordlessly.

"Its amazing," she says in a hushed voice. "How did you even think of it?"

"This is what we needed, Jaya." Dad is smiling. "Read it to us, baby."

I begin.

"No vision and you perish/ No ideal, and you're lost/ Your heart must ever cherish/ Some faith at any cost/ Some hope, some dream to cling to/ Some rainbow in the sky/ Some melody to sing to/ Some dream that is high."

They clap and they kiss me. They take photographs of the poem on their cellphones. The fighting stops, like some gushing faucet turned off. I had needed to do it, and I did. How was I to know where it would take me, take us, an almost happy family?

That evening, we drive to Uncle Vivek's place. They are not there to discuss the estate agents who went poof. They did not talk of going to the police. Instead, Dad read out my poem from his phone.

Vivek uncle thumped me on the back and Sarita Aunty gave me a Mont Blanc pen. Two days later, my mom had my poem composed in green italics with graphics of butterflies and birds, framed it and hung it on the wall above the reclining Buddha. The poem travelled far, like a bird with a large wingspan. When arguments began between my parents again, I wrote another poem, then another. My mother ordered special natural-made paper diaries online. All visitors were encouraged to view my masterpiece above the reclining Buddha. By now I was writing like one demented. I spoke of how in the depth of winter lay the bloom

of summer and that old words die on the tongue, new songs rise from the heart. I never showed these poems to my friends. They were to be for my almost happy family, to help them heal from the little visitor who did not come and the crooked men who took our money and went poof!

Throughout that long summer vacation, I lay sprawled in my locked room, writing by the glow of the laptop, getting chubbier but not caring. My almost happy family held together with the glue of my poetry. Sometimes I wondered how long this could go on. Sometimes I questioned myself. But I had no choice.

My heart finally sank when my parents unwrapped a slim book at the dining table. They had published my poems, with the cover of a mountain spring, Rhapsody of Hope on the cover, my name at the bottom. I grew pale, trembled and had hysterics for ten straight minutes.

She is not ready for fame... Ma murmured to Pa. By now things moved in their own momentum. Two days later, we have a small book release function in a modest hotel hall filled with red plastic chairs and a marigold-lined dais. I stand on stage in a denim skirt, white blouse and my glasses. Dad's old school friend, a Professor of English – Avirook Uncle releases the book. Most in the audience are family friends and my gang.

Two days later, Dad's friend, Avirook Uncle, the academician, visits us. He wants to talk to me alone. We sit in the living room. Pa and Ma are away.

"You want to tell me something, Jiya?"

"No, Sir."

"Why did you copy those poems?"

"Pardon?"

"I traced each of them on the net. Harriet Auber, Thomas Clark, Andrew DuBois... do these names strike a bell?"

"No, Sir... I mean Uncle."

"Of course they do. Those were the original poets. You lifted their work and passed them off as your own."

"I did it for Pa and Ma," I say. "I want my parents to be happy, to stay together. Please don't tell them."

He looks at me through his glasses. When he speaks again, he says, "Jiya, write what you believe in. Let it come from within you. And write for yourself."

That night I write a poem about Ayan. It makes me blush. Through my words I make Ayan run his fingers through my hair even as he is dribbling the basketball. My feelings are real. I am finally true, to myself. And our almost happy family looks like it will survive, after all.

Santa and the coup

Indrani Raimedhi

A few weeks ago, meandering around the shops of Meer Market, at Fancy Bazar, I had my first Christmas moment. There on a shelf, exactly at eye level, was this perfect snow globe with Santa inside, his snowy brows raised quizzically, his cap perched rakishly on the side of his head, one bright-blue mittened hand stretched out in friendship. I picked up the globe, shook it, put it back, and watched entranced as the powdery snowflakes swirled around him, drifting gently down around his boots. Santa had me fall in love hook, line and sinker. Readers, you guessed right. I didn't at all haggle over the price. For this first magical Christmas moment, I was ready to part with any number of gold ducats, if I had any, that is. The snow globe now sits on my study table.

For the last couple of weeks, I have sat in office within three feet of an illuminated, bedecked Christmas Tree, put up by female colleagues old enough to be my daughters. Their child-like enthusiasm has rubbed off on me big time and I have actually WhatsApped a snapshot of my snow globe to my sons, with one of them gently hinting it was time to grow up.

My evenings are awash with the rich baritone of Jim Reeves and the carols loved since childhood. Hearing them, one experiences a feeling that is timeless, full of innocence, anticipation of being among loved ones, the storybook image of Santa riding his sled, bearing gifts for all the wee ones who have been good.

We are conditioned by our colonial legacy to cherish mistletoe and plum cake, Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer and angels with a devotion that make these elements our own. As the world waits to celebrate one of the most significant events of human history – the birth of Jesus, I feel this need to focus on Santa Claus. An evolved avatar from St. Nicholas, Santa is considered by many Christians as nothing but a secular distraction in Christmas festivities. Through the ages, canny entrepreneurs have fed into the Santa myth, ensuring a yearly consumer boom that's now worth trillions.

But that is not what I am going to work on. Cynicism is not my style, but novelty is. For ages now Santa has been this man with a big girth, wearing this garish sloppy costume, going "Hohoho!" which is nothing short of appearing linguistically challenged and then carrying his gifts in an ungainly sack. Instead of knocking on the front door like everybody else, he comes whooshing through the chimney but is somehow never covered with soot. He not only has the milk and cookies left for him by kids, but also the sherry and mince pies left by adults. After a whirlwind global tour, Santa retires to the North Pole. What do you do when you have a job that means you turn up for work only once a year? What does he do the other 364 days? Maybe he trains the reindeer to fly faster. Maybe by January he's already ordering gifts on Amazon. Maybe he's being nagged by Mrs. Claus to get into shape. Wait a minute... it is actually Mrs. Claus who looks after the reindeer, and makes cookies with the elves. The feminist in me suddenly raises her hackles. Why is Missus Santa forced to stay put in the freezing wastes of the North Pole, while hubby dear goes gallivanting around the world, welcomed, feted in every home? Why can't she have a piece of the action too? In popular media, she is depicted as heavy-set, elderly, kindly and hard-working. She is seen as a calm and pleasant woman. That's patriarchy at work – making the woman colourless, docile, uninterested in the world beyond, contented in the role of the invisible partner. What if Missus Santa were not so passive and subservient after all? What if she was filled with angst at her isolation, her invisibility? Could we even imagine her staging a domestic

coup, as it were, snatching the reins and driving the antelopes to do what hubby Claus has done with such obvious enjoyment down the ages?

So one day, in a not so distant future, Missus Santa will call the shots. Wearing that clunky costume will go for a toss. She will perhaps be donned in green, as part of her environment message. Instead of leaving the presents under the X-mas Tree, she will actually talk to the children – finding out stuff happening in their lives. And she will nibble only half a cookie.

Like other women, she will be better at finding things than men. Hubby dear needed his sherry to handle the stress. The Missus will just breathe deeply and go on.

Like those of her sex, Missus Santa is a multi-tasker. While delivering presents, she's will be also planning what to cook for Santa once she goes home. Lichen lasagne, anyone?

Women will love Missus Santa for revolting. It will give them the guts to stand for their rights, overturn stereotypes. Seeing her, they will think that even if you are silver-haired and without an hour-glass figure, you can still dare to break free and have fun. On that note, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Parlour Philosophy

Trust me, if you aspire to be a philosopher, go to a beauty parlour. Of course, you may well ask – how on earth can a place that only straightens your hair, slathers your face with algae-like masks, tames eyebrows and buffs your talons serve as a bastion for such a profoundly complex area of study, a subject that looks at reality, existence and life itself? I am not making the tall claim that our beauty parlours could produce a Simone de Beauvoir or Ayn Rand. I am more into the mundane, garden variety of philosophers here, women like me who go to a beauty parlour, who are of a certain age, and whose focus is not on enhancing one's appearance for some glitzy pageant but merely submitting to some expert maintenance work on an engine a bit past its prime.

There are certain conditions prevalent in a beauty parlour that encourage the act of thinking, and if one is more immersed, in philosophising. First, you have to keep still. Stillness of body leads to stillness of mind. Second, you can't fiddle with your phone when they put rose-water dipped cotton pads on your eyelids. So that gets rid of a maddening distraction. The hum of driers sends you to a pleasant, soporific trance, very conducive to reflection. Then again, the more you are subjected to kneading, stroking, tweezing, threading, the more intense is your awareness of the poignantly temporal nature of the human body. It is then that you are prone to consoling yourself with the belief, however improbable, that perhaps your mind, your consciousness may continue to exist at some cosmic level long after the body has gone the way of all flesh.

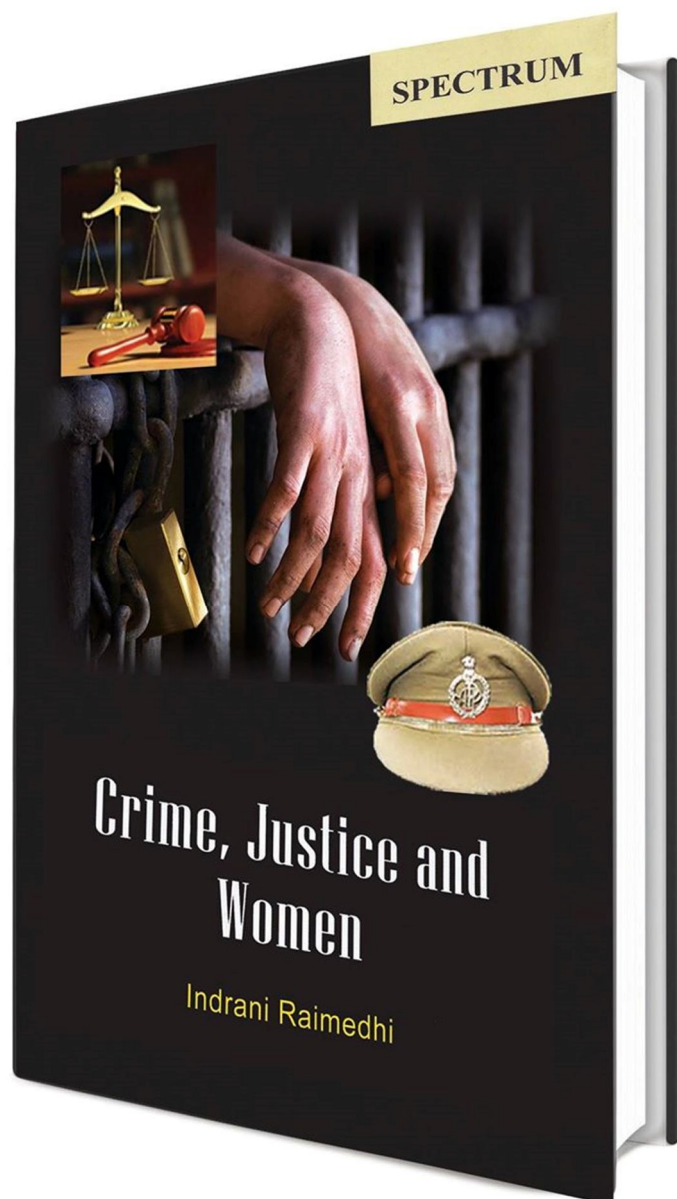
So there I was, submitting myself to a procedure being done to my hair, when my mind began to wander. My thoughts homed in on a certain Indian filmmaker who had dreamt of immortalising on celluloid a mythical queen, only to have swords waved against him in real life in a nightmare he cannot wake up from. Do I take his side? Do I talk of creative licence? The television channels have explored all angles already. The trouble with Sanjay Leela Bhansali is not that he did not do his homework, that he was not respectful of tradition, but simply that he was not pessimistic enough. Yes, you read that right. He should have been a pessimistic artist who had a clear mental scenario of everything that was probably going to go horribly wrong with his magnum opus. He would then have carried a life-jacket, as it were, even when he was on the boat.

Another example of the dangers of not being pessimistic enough is a 92-year-old gentleman who dons outlandishly garish clothes and wears a perpetual bull dog expression. You've guessed right. Robert Mugabe, had he been pessimistic enough, would have seen the dead end he has manoeuvred himself into – sacking his deputy, letting wifey Grace call the shots. What was he thinking? And yet, here he is, clinging on to power with blind optimism, making himself a laughing stock of the world. Thirty-seven-years of dictatorship has left him out of sync with reality and blissfully complacent that things will always go his way.

Then you have Harvey Weinstein himself, the Sultan of Smut, every woman's obese, beady-eyed nightmare. As the scandal hits the stratosphere, no less than 90 accusers range themselves against this sleazeball. Its optimism again that did Harvey in. He thought he was smart enough to stay out of trouble by hiring an army of investigators who kept tabs on the women who had accused him of sexual assault and on journalists who were investigating their claims. He was brash enough to suppose this would silence his victims once and for all. A measure of self-doubt, of pessimism would have changed things for Harvey, whose grope fest looks like it is well and truly finito.

I am making a strong case for pessimism because I myself come from a long line of pessimists. I have had a grandfather who, when asked how many people it took to change a lightbulb, would growl that he knew a lot of idiots who couldn't change a light bulb at all. Since he saw life through dark lenses, he was more careful of his health, did not have unrealistic expectations and reluctantly toddled off to meet his Maker only in his late nineties. Oscar Wilde put it across beautifully when he said "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." The optimists will keep gazing dreamily while pessimists like me will know we have to get back on our feet by ourselves. My hair is done. And so is my philosophising.

ULFA women free from fetters of patriarchal society: Members



GUWAHATI, Nov 8: Women leaders and cadres in the ULFA had an “honoured position and were, in general, free from the fetters of the traditional patriarchal society”, claim the rebel group’s leaders in a new book.

“On joining the ULFA, we lost all sense of being the weaker sex as we wore the same uniform, followed the same training assignments and completed the same chores and assignments,” ULFA’s lone woman executive member Pranati Deka, who belongs to the faction currently in talks with the Government, is quoted in the book *Crime, Women and Justice* by journalist-author Indrani Raimedhi.

Deka, the cultural secretary, points out that women were working in high responsible position and all were soldiers – not just men and women.

“Our training was gruelling and none of us women backed out with any excuses... I would go so far as to say that the position of women in the organisation was better than in civil society,” she adds.

Raimedhi points out in her book that there is a strong public perception that women ULFA militants were simply care-givers, hewers of wood and drawers of water and often comfort women but it cannot be denied that they were efficient emissaries who spread the outfit's mission.

"The induction of women was a tactical strategy of the ULFA leadership and they formed only 12 to 15 per cent of the membership but they underwent arms training and carried out subversive anti-national activities. Therefore, I wanted to find out what made perfectly normal, law-abiding women leave their homes and families to challenge an all-powerful state," the author says.

The outfit's chief of women's wing Kaberi Kachari, also wife of chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, points out that ULFA women proved to be invaluable during Army operations All-Clear, Rhino and Bajrang.

"With great skill, courage and stamina, we women ensured supplies of food, medicines and weapons reached the camps. It was a task that demanded stamina, presence of mind, courage and organisational skills," she says.

Kachari, who now edits an Assamese literary magazine Pratishruti, however, rues that men in the outfit do not acknowledge their efforts and 'this is a bitter fact'.

She further points out that the trajectory of the outfit from a band of idealistic men and women out to create a new Assam to a terror group was mainly due to the indiscriminate enlisting of cadres in later years.

"A cadre must be aware of political ideology before he holds a gun and the selection of new recruits did not conform to the old, strict norms," Kachari adds.

Referring to marriage among the cadres, she says that the leaders wanted them to lead a normal life in spite of the adverse circumstances and "we organised several mass weddings and also had training camps for the new wives where rules, duties, their role in working for the common good and sharing in communal living were highlighted".

The ULFA did away with caste, creed, prejudice in the marriages of its cadres, points out another senior member Runima Chetia Choudhury, wife of the outfit's foreign secretary Sashadhar Choudhury.

The book, however, deals just not with insurgency but began with the idea to analyse the circumstances that lead women to crime and destroy families along with the underbelly of Indian society where women struggle to cope with neglect, deprivation and a life blighted by crime.

"I visited several jails in Assam, met social activists, jail authorities, lawyers, psychiatrists to piece together the multiple stories of women offenders who broke the law along with those who staked all to defend the law," Raimedhi says.

The book deals with two groups of women who are placed at two spectrums of the law – the group that upholds the law through their work as police officers, lawyers, forensic specialists and the other group who break the law by committing crimes.

"One aspect that emerges with great clarity and unanimity is that women who uphold the law come from privileged backgrounds and have availed of opportunities for academic and personal growth but those of the other group are poor, illiterate, marginalised and often abused," the author says.

The common thread, however, that binds them is – just as there are few women in the legal profession and in the police force, women offenders too form a tiny percentage of the overall prison population in India, she adds. – PTI

A kind of hush

Many winters ago, a man gave me a precious gift. He didn't wrap it in ribbons. He didn't even attach a lovey-dovey card. That was not his style, you see. It didn't cost him a thing to give it to me. But the gift is more precious than anything I have ever received. Come to think of it, I never thanked him for it. It takes a lot of living and hurting to treasure what he gave – the gift of silence. And the man – lean, taciturn, gentle in a tough way, was my maternal grandfather. Silence was a part of my grandpa's personality – like the leanness of his tall frame and the wispy mop of his white hair. He spent his time in his huge garden, among the nodding dahlias and blushing roses, the coconut palms with their stiff upper lips. Roots, stems, leaves, roses from the soil in fecund silence, guided by his knowing, sure hands. Beyond the garden the Bhogdoi flowed in that lazy silence that wraps one like Koka's eri shawl. When we sat with him on moonlit evenings in the front verandah, his silence made alert all our senses and we were aware of something greater than the sum of our parts, of starlight and fireflies coming together and the realisation how fishes were silent and mountains too. The chatter inside our heads melted away and we sat in a stupor, not willing to open our mouths in case the spell was broken.

This gift he passed on to us has stood me in good stead over the years. I have been silent when I wanted to break out in angry words; I have been silent when learning the difficult ways of coping with a new family as a bride. I have been silent when life had seemed unjust and painful. And it is in silence that I have found God, away from the cacophony of the multitudes, far from the din that passes off as devotion. The two most precious arts to me – reading and writing, are silent and perhaps that is why they always offer solace and also a way to experience eternity. It's good to remember that silence is not just a state of being or the absence of noise. Whatever is created comes out of it. One's thoughts are born of the nothingness of silence. Words sprout from that void. All creativity blossoms from stillness. There was a time in my life, as in the lives of all young mothers, when Grandpa's gift of silence seemed to be irrevocably lost. As a mother I came to dread the thin, high wail and the lusty cries of the baby in the middle of the night. The furious yells seemed to fill my cranium as I frantically warmed the formula. After guzzling the bottle he would be burped and put back to sleep. Then silence, blissful silence would fly back into our home life a blessed tide, till twenty minutes later the baby decided the diaper was not dry enough, the pillow not soft enough, or he had to get out of a baby nightmare.

Those days passed too. But, silence was easily perishable. The teenager decided he wanted to form a rock band. His friends trooped into his room. The speakers crackled. The drums boomed, the guitar sounded demented. I covered my ears.

That too did pass. Then, one tearful day, his bags were packed and he was ready to go. As his and then the brother's college life began in a distant city, our home fell silent. So silent you could hear a pin drop. No more baby wails and unprompted bedroom rock concerts. But what was this? Grandfather's gift of silence was the last thing I now wanted. I heard my sons' voices in my head, their cricket balls thwacking, their Wrestle Mania bouts in the living room full of macho grunting and growling. Against the pulsating energy and boisterousness of their youth, silence now seemed lifeless and melancholy.

This was a silence of unbearable desolation. Then slowly, over the interminable years, I began to value Grandpa's gift again. It is in silence that I witness a cavalcade of memories. It is in silence that I bow my head in thanksgiving for all the good that has come my way. And in silence I have found a loyal companion who is forever speaking to me.

Full circle



long afterwards, he thought of that hot stifling day as a path that forked into two, and he had taken one and not the other. Sometimes, on the bad days, when boredom lay like flat beer in his mug, he ached for her. At other times, working quietly at his cubicle, toting up figures, he felt safe, free from the strangeness of her presence, rescued from the life that scared him, as if he were walking the train tracks blindfolded.

Then, one day, a year ago, half-way through the morning, a small, white, sealed box had arrived for him. There was his name, printed in the middle, with the word CONFIDENTIAL below it. He remembered the prickling uneasiness with which he held it in his hand, his brow furrowed. He pulled the drawer on a sudden impulse and pushed it into the inner recess. He had looked around furtively. No eyes were on him. But who had delivered the packet, and why was he not asked to sign it and receive the receipt? He sent some e-mails, noted details of consignments. Then, thrusting the package into his trouser pocket, made his way to the deserted cafeteria downstairs. Quickly, desperately, he tore open the package. It was a key, flat on his palm, an ordinary key sent to him by a stranger for a purpose he could not understand. Inside the box, on a small square piece of paper, were the printed words. Harmony Grand 5A, Anand Nagar. An address.

He came back, trying to walk casually. Barun met him on the way.

"Lunch, bro?"

"Not hungry. You go ahead."

"You look a bit under the weather."

"I'm fine, absolutely."

He got back to his seat and drank an entire glass of water. He drummed his fingers on the table. By opening the box, he had proved his complicity in what was about to take place. He felt a small frisson of fear, and then guilt. Perhaps he could call Roma. He quickly dismissed the idea. Perhaps Roma would overreact, demand that he inform his boss or the police. Perhaps Roma would accuse him of some dirty secret that was now unravelling. In eight months, Roma and he would be seated under a glittering shamiana, repeating the marriage vows. Nearly every weekend they met at his home to talk endlessly about the preparations. Ma and Baba were indulgent. She seemed guileless, spoke with respect and once even made chicken stroganoff for them. Ma said for a daughter of divorced parents, Roma was a sweetheart. Roma's mother visited them once. She said she was glad her daughter had found someone to love her.

But the Roma at his home in demure salwar kameezes was not the Roma he knew. No, not even he could say he knew Roma, though he had held her in his arms and whispered in her ears and made love to her twice a week in her friends' flat. The slender, dark-eyed Roma bit him so hard on their first kiss that she had drawn blood.

"I'm so ordinary, what do you see in me?" he would often ask in those early days.

"I was never saved before," she would say solemnly and laugh with a strange kind of irony.

On New Year's Eve, two years ago, Barun had asked him to join a party at the Royale Tower. He had a vague memory of a shrill DJ in leotards, raucous music, the young crowd nimble on their feet. For some moments he had felt life had passed him by, and he was already thirty and alone. After the flare and whoosh of the fireworks he made his way to the parking lot. Then there was a commotion. A young woman in a tight skirt, fishnet stockings and stilettos was weaving unsteadily between cars. Some youths were following her, whistling, making catcalls, taking pictures on their cellphones. He remembered there was gold dust on her bare shoulders, her hair fell in a tangled mess down her back. She turned blindly towards him, terrified and in one smooth movement he took her arm.

"She's with me, move off, she's with me, okay?"

He had put her on the passenger seat of his car. She was so drunk that she was actually laughing, throwing back her head and revealing her perfect teeth.

They drove around all night. She could not say who she was, where she lived. Her phone was missing. He called his mother, said he would return in the morning. As she sat slumped on the passenger seat, her perfume reached him. He drove along the city streets and as it dawned he looked at her and felt he had known her for eons. By the time she remembered her name and the address that was her home, he was truly, madly, deeply in love. And what seemed more surprising, so was she.

Samrat left the office hurriedly, got into his car, and drove off. Anand Nagar was unfamiliar territory. Google Maps didn't help, he had left his phone at office. He got down no less than eight times before someone pointed to him a high rise set back from the road. There was no one in the lobby. He took the lift to the fifth floor and found a locked door, 5A. Looking both ways, he slipped the key into the lock and let himself in.

Three bare rooms, a kitchen and bathroom. A panoramic view from the balcony. Who wanted him here? There were often news items of honey-traps. Roma would never forgive him. The marriage was only eight months away. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. He paced up and down the living room floor. What an utter fool he had been. He

had, of his own volition, risked his reputation, his love, his future or had this been a deliberate act on his part, a darker version of him taking the upper hand. What was he looking for? Did he really know himself?

There was a quick knock on the door. He stopped in mid-stride, stiffening. Then he heard it again. His pulse raced. It was time to discover what he had come for. He opened the door. She entered, quickly slammed the door shut and pushed him against the wall. Her breath smelt of cloves.

"What are you up to, lover boy?" Roma's tone was teasing, faintly mocking. "Not so ordinary after all, are you? You have your wild side, that's for sure."

"Roma, I don't get it. How did you know..."

"I rented this flat, sweetheart, and I sent you the key. You just fell for it, lover-boy."

She threw her bag on the floor and flung up her arms. "This feels soo like Last Tango in Paris. Oh, you are too innocent to have seen that movie. A man and a woman, strangers, meet at an empty flat in Paris. They go at it hammer and tongs but the man, Marlon Brando says they must not ever tell each other names, or anything about themselves."

"But why do we have to be them?" He crossed his arms. "That's just copulation, not love."

"No," she looked irritated, "it's exploration. All music, poetry, art is exploration, uncertain, mysterious. And you have to live life like that. Don't look for certainties. That's so bourgeois. You are alive only as long as you experiment, you know."

He looked at her strangely. All at once, he realised she would not be tamed. She did not want to live life but be drunk with it. He tried to stick to the practical.

"And what about this flat? Who did you rent it from?" "I was coming to that." She tapped his chest. "This is where we are moving in after the wedding, sweetheart."

"But why... Ma and Baba..." "That's okay. Let Ma and Baba be happy at their home. But I can't wear salwar kameezes forever, can I? I can't do without my cognac and daiquiri, gimlets and whiskies. And we can't disturb Ma and Baba with our weekend parties... can we now?"

"I am their son, I can't leave. It's out of the question." She began to laugh. "There, you said it. That's what makes you ordinary."

"Roma, listen, I can't hurt them. Be reasonable. Give me a break." She snarled at him. "What about hurting me? Aren't you lucky you found me? Listen, I'm not the kind of woman who fits into some damn slot in the husband's home."

"Roma, listen to me." He said quietly. "I've put up with your craziness for two years now. It was I who did you a favour. That New Year's night, remember? They were ready to pounce on you, I'm ordinary but I am also decent. I would never leave behind people who need me. Not everything is about you. Remember that."

She raged against him, taunted him. Called him names to his face... he looked at her and wondered what he had found beautiful about her. When she tried to clasp him into her arms in that bare, soulless room, he fought free and walked out of the door. When he switched on the ignition, he saw the red, angry scratch on the back of his hand. He knew then that the road forked into two and he had taken one, and not the other.

The mail trail

I've been accused of many sins and one of them is procrastination. Never do today what you can do tomorrow – that's my credo. So my young colleague was aghast to discover that my inbox was choked with not hundreds, but thousands of e-mails. In a way then, I am an e-hoarder and am always hopeful that somewhere in the clutter I will find the secret to everlasting life and eternal happiness. And by gentle persuasion and tempting baits, I, or we, are made to believe anything is possible. I can live in a pest-free house, get loans at the drop of a japi, wear a Tissot on one hand, and a Rolex on the other, get my spouse a full head of hair with the latest French technique. The ghosts in the machine will update my CIBIL scores, whatever that means. I am assured of not one year's trip to Malaysia but 25 years of annual indulgences. I am a little anxious to know if wheelchairs and oxygen cylinders are part of the deal but at the pace technology is advancing, at seventy-five we might actually be doing cartwheels on the beach. What a lark!

These hoarded e-mails also give me a sense of the crazy times we are living in. Anne Lamott, probably some spaced out hippie veteran writes about kindness, mercy and forgiveness, while just below it is Kim Jong-Un's nuclear paroxysm.

And then again, my e-ward could well be my way of keeping myself grounded. I will never wear a Tissot and holiday in Malaysia for 25 years. All the loans promised to me have the fine print I should watch out for. I would rather have an invigorating spat with my spouse of three decades than follow relationship tips and become like two tepid cups of tea.

I like to keep things simple. That's not likely to happen if I own a Tissot watch the e-mails are persuading me to acquire. Now I just flick my eyes over the dial of my sensible watch and I'm done. The Tissot will instead, tell me – hey, not so fast, lady. You'd better check out the Meteo barometer, altimeter, chronograph within lap times and split with logbook function, compass and regattae countdown function. And for Pete's sake, can't you understand the azimuth feature for navigational purposes? Between you and me, there are less expensive ways to induce a nervous breakdown.

Nostalgia is a powerful engine that drives our lives. Every young person in their thirties speaks of the Eighties Doordarshan programmes, Sridevi movies, and the embarrassing MalaD ads which popped up as the whole family huddled before the box-like television set having pride of place in the living room. But think about it – can you relate nostalgia to e-mails? It is bereft of all moods, all associations, the register of emotions flat and not like letters on paper and ink. Something fine, subtle and human has been leached out of us. And wait, there's more. You could keep your personal letters locked up, in secret places nobody knew about, shoeboxes, for instance, and presto, now your account is hacked and your life is all over the place. We have it from Edward Snowden himself that intelligence agencies get results for anything they want – phone numbers, e-mail, user id, cell phone handset id – its all the same. My e-ward, unless its deleted, could bend me in serious trouble about entertaining thoughts of repeated Malaysian vacations and suspicious pest control devices. Now, a close look at my sent mails. Almost 90 per cent of my mails relate to work – acknowledging an article, commissioning one, apologising a delay, massaging fragile egos. The other ten per cent relates to my publisher. I think I have been pretty smart on this.

Every word that you type on is on the public domain. And I would rather keep things to myself, thank you.

I must end with my encounter with the right honourable Houda Mamoud, of Accra, Ghana, who, in something of an unseemly hurry wanted to discreetly hand over a large sum of money to, of all people, me. In order to do so, he wished to keep the whole matter "out of prying eyes". I was encouraged to contact – Confident Security Company, 14 Agnostino Neto Street Achimota, Accra. I mailed back asking where we could stay, how was the cuisine and what nice places were there to see.

Houda didn't much care for my nothing- official- about- it approach. He wanted phone, fax numbers, a private e-mail address. Drama queen that I am – I mailed "Dear Houda, I am becoming nervous, I have many enemies in the family. Am worried they will harm me if they come to know of the money. Please advise." Houda kept up the flurry of e-mails till he petered out in hurt silence. I have never had so much fun with e-mails, ever.

Life's meaning

We are a land-locked part of the world and strangely enough, the blue whale has swum right into our midst. Even as I write this, the first TV visuals are coming in of a youth admitted to a city hospital after an apparent suicide bid. Chillingly, on his arm is the carved outline of a whale. We are all talking about the Blue Whale Challenge, started by secret groups on Russian social media networks. Imagine this scenario. You are a typical urban professional couple. As you race the clock to meet your never-ending commitments, your teenage son or daughter is at home or among friends, venturing into the outer limits of cyberspace, losing grip on reality, floundering in confusion, angst and even resentment towards you and other authority figures. And then comes this game that excites their curiosity, gives them something to achieve, and arouses the need to follow a leader. S/he is slowly drawn into meeting 50 challenges – watching horror films, inflicting self-harm among them. Monitored by a curator, your kid secretly takes photos after carrying out an assignment and uploads them for the curator's approval. The last challenge is suicide... the negation of all purpose, worth, and meaning of life. Philipp Budeikin, a curator of the challenge, was arrested for assisting suicides last year. The 22-year-old later pleaded guilty and said the victims were biological waste and that he was cleansing society. How eerily similar to the Nazi Final Solution.

How strange is the human mind, we play with it, it plays us. A few weeks ago, I repeatedly watched a Whatsapp suicide video of a young IAS officer. In calm measured tones, he said, among other things, that life had become meaningless for him. Even more disturbing was his quiet declaration that all lives which had gone on before or are yet to come are futile, bereft of meaning. In the days that followed, I kept returning to one question. Was life meaningless? The disturbing thing is – Leo Tolstoy thought so. He said the only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless. Somerset Maugham was of the view that when you realise life is meaningless, the world does not seem so cruel anymore. Bertrand Russell had it that unless you assume there is God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless. From his years of psychiatric study practice, Carl Jung was of the view that man cannot stand a meaningless life. Milan Kundera warns how we live on the border from which you can slip to the other side where love, convictions, faith no longer have any meaning. Immerse yourself in existentialism, absurdism and nihilism, and life will seem unbearable in its desolation.

Then, something happened when I was returning home from work. Our car was held up by a crew of men and women on a water-pipe construction site on the lane near our home. As I sat in air-conditioned comfort, feeling faintly guilty of heating up the earth, my eyes alighted on a scrawny woman in a faded saree, struggling to shovel stones even as the baby strapped to her back wriggled and cried. With every ounce of her strength, she shovelled the stones on a pan and lifted it on the head of another woman. As she toiled in the pitiless sun, forcing her body to feats of strength and endurance, it suddenly struck me that this poor woman, this mother and daily wage earner did not have the luxury of questioning if life was indeed meaningless. She survived life one day at a time, a shovelful of stones at a time, so she could feed herself and her baby. That was the meaning of her life, the meaning she was ready to strive for.

Take the stone on my study table. I picked it from the dry river bed in Bhutan. It is just a stone, worn smooth by the water, fitting snugly on the palm of my hand. It is just a stone, a thing of no value. Yet, I give it meaning, I give it value. It is a reminder of the timelessness of

natural things, of how experience rounds out our rough edges. In a fragile life, it is, indeed, comforting to hold on to the solidity of this tough, unyielding stone.

Life is just that, life. We have to give it meaning and passion. As you snuggle up in bed every night, a new dawn approaches. What you do with the day is for you to decide. And even as you are aware that death waits in the end, that's all the more reason to hold life with both hands, humbly and gratefully.

No piece about life's meaning can be complete without the book *Man's Search For Meaning*. It is a 1946 book by Victor Frankl, describing his experiences as an Auschwitz concentration camp inmate during World War II, and describing his psychotherapeutic method, which involved identifying a purpose in life to feel positively about, and then immersively imagining the outcome. Frankl, a psychiatrist, lost his parents, wife and brother in the Holocaust. Frankl says that we cannot avoid suffering but we can choose how to cope with it, find meaning in it and move forward with purpose. Frankl's theory, known as logotherapy, from the Greek word *logos* (meaning) postulates that our primary drive in life is not pleasure, as believed by Freud, but the discovery and pursuit of what we personally find meaningful.

In the end, the meaning of life is not an edict on stone, single and immutable. All of us find meaning in different ways and under different circumstances. When you bring up your young, instead of dinning it to them the need to have the means to live, help them discover meaning to live for. Questioning the meaning of life should be the beginning of an adventure, not the end of an existence.

A way of service



Dr. Sunita Changkakati is committed to serving the society.

Indrani Raimedhi

Life guru Deepak Chopra said something that comes to mind today. "Everyone has a purpose in life... a unique gift or special talent to give to others. And when we bind this unique talent with service to others, we experience the ecstasy and exultation of our own spirit, which is the ultimate goal of all goals."

I feel this whenever I meet Dr. Sunita Changkakati, eminent social worker and activist. She is full of life, her eyes twinkling, smiling, making plans for the future, plunging into affirmative action, doggedly believing anything can be done if you just set your mind to it.

Sunita has another identity, she is the granddaughter, on the maternal side, of the first Chief Minister of Assam Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi. Her parents Tapan Mazumdar Barua, a research officer, and homemaker Aruna Barua brought up Sunita and her three siblings at Tezu and Upper Assam. Her father had such integrity that he refused to let the family use the family car. This was a lesson she always remembered.

After graduation from Cotton College, Sunita did her doctorate from GU on the impact of modernisation and urbanisation on the tribal villages of Assam, basing her study on the

village of Rajapara near Chandubi. She then delved into development studies under the Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, also being a gender consultant. In this capacity she is associated with the Mahila Samata Society in the area of education for women empowerment.

Then Sunita joined the Assam Centre for Rural Development, which was set up by her aunt Lily Mazinder Barua. Those first ten years were a gruelling, uphill climb for Sunita and her fellow workers. Resources were scarce, there were constant setbacks and some dreams just fell by the wayside.

But the organisation worked tirelessly in the tribal areas, setting up self-help groups among women, training them in piggery, sericulture, weaving, initiating women in the basics of enterprise, collaboration and money management. Things improved when NABARD extended help and the SHGs flourished.

Sunita recalls with pride how women in Baksa were given baby goats to be reared as a source of income. Rural women have no access to money and this project changed their lives in many ways, helping them to hold their heads high and make plans for the future. At Borduwa Bagan, she ran an SHG that provided vocational training and skill development. Products were made using natural dye, beautiful woven clothes were created, multi-crop methods were taught.

Then, from 2009, Sunita plunged into the work of fighting human trafficking. Her work in rural areas made her aware that women and girls were vanishing from Assam's rural hinterland, lured by touts to big cities to work as virtual slaves in homes, factories and brothels. Her work in this sector ultimately led to her establishing a rehab home for trafficked victims in Mirza, on the outskirts of Guwahati.

Today Sunita is the Chairperson, Assam State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights and pours her zeal and passion into speaking up and acting for the welfare of children, especially those who have fallen through the cracks, as it were.

"I am able to get through every busy day because of the inspiration provided by my husband Pradipta Pran Changkakati. He has encouraged me never to hold myself back and take on life as an adventure, she says fondly."

"Another source of strength is my daughter Prerna who has joined my NGO. Her work has given me hope that we can continue to engage in many social causes in a meaningful and productive way. My other children – Rishav and Tapasya, are very supportive."

If you go to Sunita's FB page you will have an idea of the kind of person she is – always surrounded by people, almost always in rural surroundings, upholding causes, speaking to gatherings, distributing flood relief materials, sponsoring talented youngsters for higher education, she is tireless in her mission.

Martin Luther King had said, "Life's most urgent question is: what are you doing for others." Social workers like Sunita seem to live by this credo. But she is not one to look back on her achievements with complacency. She is constantly setting new goals for herself and reaching out to people and their problems. It does not matter how complicated this is going to be. Like always, she will just plunge right in and find a way out.

Tossing and turning

Eminent sleep specialist

Dr. Deelip Chatterjee explains why we are not sleeping well.

Remember that cute quote by Dr. Seuss, "You know you are in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams?" Not falling asleep is a matter that has serious ramifications, both at the personal and societal levels. If you are sleep-deprived, you are grouchy, out of sorts, disoriented, unable to make decisions. Your inter-personal relations go for a toss. There is strain between partners and spouses. You do not perform at your optimal level at the workplace, and airline pilots, captains of ships, train drivers who are fatigued and sleep-deprived have caused horrible accidents. But the strange thing is – doctors and fitness experts will counsel you to eat well, exercise daily but very little is being talked about sleep, or the lack of it.

This is where Dr. Deelip Chatterjee, a world-renowned U.S.-based sleep specialist offers advice and service that is not only life-altering, but also life-saving. According to him, diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease can be traced back to disturbances in sleep. "The biggest culprit of sleep disorder is our lifestyle," he says. "People work for long hours, watch too much television, eat fast foods, are socially isolated. Then we hold bright laptops close to our eyes, drink caffeinated drinks in the evening, which wreak havoc with our sleep rhythm." Like his sleep clinic in New Jersey, Dr. Chatterjee has just set up the MedSolutions Sleep Centre in Guwahati, which is one of the first of its kind in the country. It is alarming to know that one in ten people suffer from some sort of sleep disorder. The tendency of poor sleepers is to get prescription pills from a doctor without going into the underlying causes of poor sleep, which may vary from past trauma to drinking coffee at bedtime.

Children require nine hours of sleep, whereas adults need seven-and-a-half. Sleep needs vary across ages and are impacted by lifestyle and health. However, there are recommendations that provide guidance on how much sleep you generally need. Good sleep hygiene practices include limiting daytime naps to 30 minutes, avoiding stimulants like caffeine and nicotine at bedtime, exercising for better sleep, steering clear of foods like heavy, fatty or fried meals, spicy dishes and ensuring adequate exposure to natural light. Dr. Chatterjee, an alumnus of CMC, Vellore, has spent 33 years as a medical practitioner. He is based in New Jersey and is a qualified specialist in Sleep, Critical Care, Pulmonary and Internal Medicine. He believes in treating sleep disorders without recourse to sedatives, which have harmful side-effects and only compound the problem. He is concerned that the treatment of illnesses such as depression does not include a sleep test at a sleep clinic. "Nothing is more ridiculous than the attitude that 'I'll sleep when I die'." Sleep has a tremendous impact on our well-being and Nature has decreed we spend one-third of our lives sleeping. Sleep affects our memory, capacity for sex, blood pressure, obesity and slowing down of our metabolism.

City noise hampers sleep to a great degree. So do bright lights. Many people have a sleep avoidance tendency and even boast of being night owls. But the body clock needs to be respected, as does the circadian rhythm.

"If we look back at the lifestyle of our forefathers, a lot of things fall into place. There was no electricity, no television. By dusk they had dinner and went to bed. They had the big sleep. They woke up at about three and ate something to go back to the small sleep. They

suffered few of the lifestyle disease we do now," he states.

Dr. Chatterjee has tied up with the Assam Government to conduct studies on sleep disorders to reduce the burden of healthcare. Describing sleep medicine as social, responsible, preventive medical care, good sleep would vastly improve attention deficit disorder, help treat hypertension, Alzheimer's and other maladies. Sleep is vital in shutting down organs and healing then.

Unlike Robert Frost, it would be wrong to think of miles to go before one sleeps. Turn off the light, curl up with a blanket and close your eyes. It could save your life.



Murder she wrote

Indrani Raimeedhi

I kind of enjoy surprising people and a couple of years ago, I was at this informal gathering of top cops, primly seated on a sofa, refusing even a single drink, nibbling instead cheese and pineapple and murmuring all the right things.

Then, on my right, a really top cop turned to me and more as a gesture of politeness, in the spirit of that pleasant chit chat that is the stuff of these gatherings, he asked. "So Mrs. Raimeedhi, what are your interests?"

"Crime," I said, without missing a beat.

"Oh really?" he looked astonished, trying to calibrate my lady-like genteelness with my dark predilection for morally depraved deeds.

Soon we were like a house on fire, hopping from Dostoevsky's epic on crime and punishment to Hawley Crippen, the first criminal to be caught in the mid-Atlantic aboard a ship with the help of wireless. The bestiality of serial killers like Ted Bundy, Jeremy Dahmer and Aileen Wournos were avidly deconstructed. Two days later, the really top cop gallantly sent me two books, one on H.H. Holmes one of 19th century America's creepiest killers. This endorsement of my interest in crime as a harmless activity by the law enforcer, in fact, has yet encouraged me to spill the beans before the public as it were. My appetite for crime fiction and film noir goes back a long way. It would be no exaggeration to say that I literally leapfrogged from Blyton's cosy world of tame adventures and scones with melted butter to the dark cul-de-sacs of sinister men with smoking guns, voluptuous blonde corpses and the apparent absence of motive of James Hadley Chase crime thrillers. While the good nuns were ensuring my soul had a chance in heaven, I was sinking fast into a quagmire of blackmail, intrigue and initiation into creative ways of bumping off people. Hadley Chase's gift of plunging straight to the narrative, the rat-tat-tat tension of the sentences stood me in good stead in my own struggles with writing.

They say a criminal is the creative artist and the detective the critic. From Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot to Wallander, the life of a detective has seemed one without structure, filled with danger and wild goose chases, as well as a singular absence of a happy conjugal life. No surprise that most of them smoked like chimneys and drank like fish.

After Hadley Chase, it was time to move on. Nimbly climbing up to a high shelf in a room of grandpa's house, I chanced upon a dusty stack of Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason series, about the whip smart attorney-at-law who could crack any case as easily as a roasted peanut. What endeared him to me was that he always helped a natural blonde in distress. I could not much wrap my head around his courtroom moves and situational ethics, but boy, did he sound dishy!

My dangerous ambivalence about crime became more firmly entrenched when I first read Mario Puzo's Godfather and later saw the films. The theme music gives me goosebumps even now. The closed world of Sicilian gangsters, the oath of omerta or silence, a code of honour, the intrigue and skullduggery among different Mafia families... it sent me into a trance. Much later I was able to be more detached and realise how awful life was for the Mafiosi women – the mothers, wives, daughters and sweethearts always prepared for the

death of their loved ones.

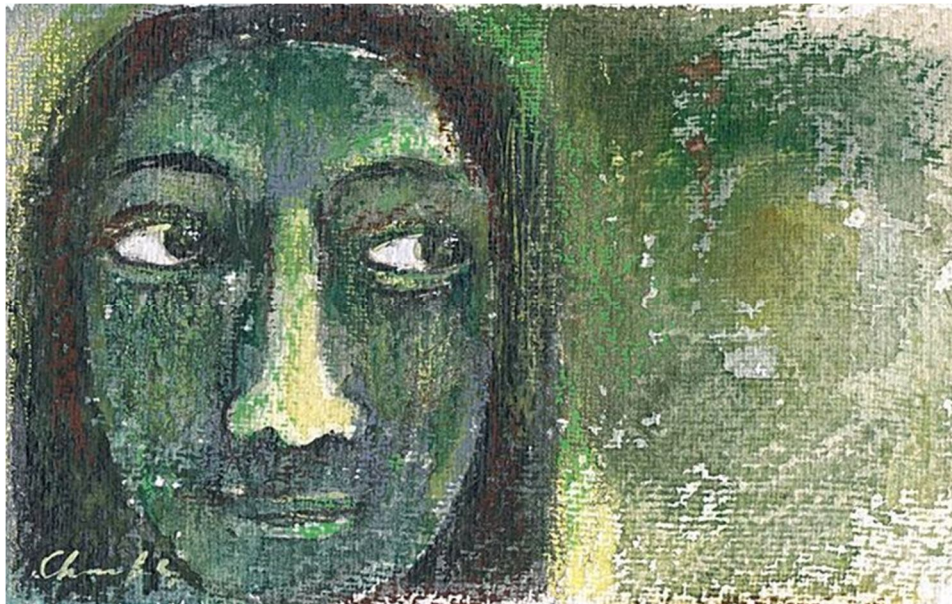
Do not be under the impression that crime fiction is only to do with vicarious pleasure and entertainment. This genre asks all the difficult questions that have confronted mankind for thousands of years – what is the meaning of life? What is free will? What is law? What drives some people to kill? Does the state have the right to take lives as retribution for a crime? Are the insane exempt from guilt even if they rape and kill?

If there was one maestro who enjoyed crime and made the telling of it his business, it was the great Alfred Hitchcock himself. According to him, seeing a murder on television can help work off one's antagonisms. And if you haven't got antagonisms, the commercials will give you some. He said if he made Cinderella, the audience would at once look for a body in the coach. The success of a film is in direct proportion to the success of a villain. He said blondes make the best victims. They are like virgin snow that shows up the bloody footprints.

Does a female writer interpret crime differently? You've got to take Agatha Christie's views. For one, she's convinced few of us are what we seem. She freely admits to specialising in murders of quiet domestic interest, and that every murderer is probably someone's old friend. Her murder mysteries are like a Rubik's cube and the actual gore and mess of corpses is not so graphically rendered by today's standards.

These days TV crime series both from the west and home-grown, are all over the place. While one enjoys the brisk pace and methodical thoroughness of Crime Patrol, Savdhan India is a melodramatic soap disguised as a crime show. Often it is the news that highlights strange and more gory crimes than these shows. In the end viewing real life surveillance tapes of crimes cannot but help lead to a profound unease about the depths to which criminals can descend. Edward Gibbon summed it up quite tersely when he wrote "History is little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind." I sort of guessed as much after my long-ago greedy gulps of the Chase whodunits. If my sins in this life cause me to be born again, I would like nothing more than to be a male detective.

Memories of loss



Sandeep and Suravi have just made love in their dark bedroom after a two-week gap in which they had perhaps forgotten that desire was possible, and more so, its fulfilment. Now Sandeep lay solidly beside her, breathing deeply and evenly, lost in sleep. Suravi too turned on her side, closing her eyes, spent and pleasantly languid. She dreamily thought being forty-five was not something that one felt regretful about. On a night such as this, years ago, not knowing it yet, their lives had changed, binding them inexorably together... her body tensed. Somewhere in the whorls of memory, twisting and turning, a thought became conscious, insistent, urgent. She felt that all too familiar rise of panic, the prickling unease that caught her breath at the back of her throat. She knew she could not sleep now. She crept out of bed and padded barefoot out of the bedroom. The whole house lay silent and dark. In the second bedroom she retrieved her keys from her bag. Trying to make as little noise as possible, she inserted the key to the lock of her almirah. She switched on the light and sighed. Where would she begin? When had she seen it last? Was it even there? But her blood pulsed with an urgency that was almost unbearable. She began to carry folders, cardboard boxes of papers over to the bed. As the world turned on its axis, as dogs barked outside and trains hurtled through the night, as the madman wrapped himself in cardboard, Suravi sat hunched on the bed, a strap falling across her shoulder and the thin nightgown outlining her shape. With infinite patience her hands shuffled through photographs, birthday and anniversary cards, letters, warranty cards, tickets to plays and concerts. As the minutes ticked by the sense of loss, of desolation grew upon her. She cursed herself for remembering it, and for being what she was, so intense, so fearful of loss, almost to the point of being demented. The bed was full of papers she had hoarded over the years. Nothing was of value to anyone but herself. She pushed aside the papers to one side. Something fluttered to the floor. A small square piece of paper, brittle, yellowing. She held it in her hand, her eyes wide. There it was – the name of the clinic, the words Gravindex Test and below it, in blue ink, the slanting letter... positive.

"Mom." Arya stood on the doorway, looking at her sleepily. "What's up?" He had heard

sounds from his room, and seen the light. She smiled radiantly at him.

"Look at this," she held out the piece of paper. "The first time we knew you were coming, darling."

"Go back to sleep, Mom," he said gently. "This is not normal, you know."

This weakness in her went beyond what Sandeep and Arya were able to guess. Two months ago she had returned from office taut with anxiety. Through an entire afternoon she had rummaged through her collection of books for Nabokov's *Laughter in the dark*. A man doomed by the love of a much younger woman. It was a slim volume, almost in tatters. It was nowhere to be found. She could order it on Flipkart. But the new book could never take the place of the old one. Because that book of doomed love was given to her by Ranjeev. History honours, debating champion, exchanger of a single drunken kiss in the darkened auditorium watching a staging of *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*. Then she was on Facebook homing in on him frantically. Something that had not occurred to her before. There he was, corporate professional, Mumbai. In a relationship. She messaged him, asking for his number. It took him two days to respond. Straightaway she guessed he had not given her message much thought... had not even made the connection or checked her profile. He was a little wary, polite, holding back. Then he laughed, remembering and said if she ever came to Mumbai, to please get in touch. Another shopworn convention.

"You have to do something for me," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "You have to courier a book to me. Its *Laughter in the Dark*. Nabokov, remember? You gave it to me on our last day. Your signed it. I want you to order it, sign it, courier it to me. That's all I want. Please, Ranjeev."

There was a pause. "You were always a little strange, Suravi. Is this your way of saying you are ready to mingle?"

She never called him again.

Two years after she lost her father, she went to spend a day with her mother. Her mother had surrounded herself with his photographs. She had a cabinet built where she kept his diaries, his spectacles and his wedding ring. Suravi felt a strange envy at her mother's orderliness, everything accounted for.

"Ma, where is the lithograph of Tagore that Baba got from Santiniketan? The one we had in our Shillong drawing room wall?"

"Oh!" her mother said vaguely. "He must have put it away somewhere."

"But where is it? Why isn't it on a wall? That print reminds me of Baba... can you call Rathin and get a step ladder to the attic? I would know where to look."

"Please don't, Suravi. What does that matter, when he is gone? How many things must I try to save and for what?"

October brought with it its golden sunshine. Sandeep took her to Shillong. Arya wanted to stay back home. They took a room at Pinewood. The next day, Sandeep expected she would go shopping for shoes and winter clothes. Instead, Suravi wanted to go to Golf Links. While Sandeep sat on a grassy knoll, sipping out of a can of Fosters, Suravi strode further and further from him, venturing deep into the cospes of pines, as if sleepwalking. Eons ago she had held on to the hand of her youngest uncle, Ma's brother, Baba and Ma close behind. Jit Mama had said he was taking them to the most secret place in the world, a place unknown to any other human soul, animal, bird or insect, and that she would have to keep it a secret too. And then, the dense dark pines had opened to a perfectly oval field of waving grass, the wind rippling against it, and above them the sun emerged from a bank of clouds, lighting up the emerald oval like a cosmic spotlight.

But now in the present Suravi walked in and out of pine copses without finding the magical oval she never forgot. Because she lost that place, she felt she had lost a part of her life, lost people she had loved and most of all, the permanence of the past.

They drove back to Pinewood. As Sandeep sat watching television Suravi caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She had fine lines around her eyes and mouth, there was a gauntness on her face. Unknown to her, even as she tried to hold on to things she cherished, her youth had tip-toed away and Suravi realised at the moment that she did not know how she could summon the will to begin her search for it.

The colour of pain

Indrani Raimedhi

When she was four, Shweta's class teacher wrote a note asking her parents to meet her. Her father had a meeting, so her mother went. The teacher showed Kavita a series of drawings Shweta had done at the art workshop. She had used only black crayons. They were always the same. Three stick-like figures, a man, a little girl standing upright, and a woman face down. The lines were stark, urgent, angry, sometimes even causing the paper to tear. Even the sun was black.

"Mrs. Chowdhury." The teacher said gently. "Is everything alright at home?"

Kavita stared at the drawings, stunned.

"Of-of course." She stammered. "We're fine. She's just a bit moody."

"Our school counsellor made an evaluation. Something is disturbing the child."

"We give her everything she wants." The teacher said, "It's not that. Children need a safe environment. Is there something going on at home that we should know? Please, Mrs. Chowdhury, we have to help your daughter."

"I have nothing to say." Kavita said. "Please don't tell this to her father. That's a request."

H H H

Then Shweta was eight. They went on a holiday to Goa. Deep Chowdhury was in an expansive mood. He had just clinched a lucrative deal. He put on bright fluorescent bermudas and ventured far out into the sea. He was a tall, obese man, with powerful biceps and thinning hair. Kavita, dressed in a loose top and sarong, sat quietly in the sand. Shweta licked an ice-cream, looking out to the sea. Her father was just a dot. The waves could carry him away. But soon he was swimming back towards them, his eyes on her mother.

"Get back, get back to the hotel."

"But we've just come, Papa."

"Get back, that's an order."

In that beautiful hotel room fitted with glowing lamps, paintings and curios, Deep Chowdhury grabbed Kavita by the hair and hurled her across the floor. She fell like a floppy rag doll, blood already oozing from her cut lip. A large purple bruise would flower around her left eye, almost shutting it. Shweta whimpered in one corner, pale, her hands icy. She could see her mother's legs exposed. Right up to her thighs.

"There, look at her, dressed like a whore." Deep spat at his wife.

The holiday ended.

H H H

Near their apartment block was a park. There were flowering shrubs, a fountain, a cobbled walkway looped in a circle. In the evening senior citizens walked there, and children played on the swings. Shweta was now twelve, quiet, bespectacled, old beyond her years. She had no friends, because she was afraid the secret would escape her lips. That they would pity her, her mother. So she brought her books to the park instead. Physics, chemistry, history, civics. She read them as if her life depended on them. And most of all she loved Geography, to lose herself in strange distant lands and cross the borders of countries with her forefinger, to know that there are millions of people different from her and her circle of pain, guilt and despair. She was never Daddy's girl because she flinched when he tried to hug her and she was not Mummy's girl too because she had not been able to save her in all these years. So she bought her mother band aids, gauze and ointments. These were what

her mother needed most of all.

H H H

Then Shweta was 16 and appeared for her school finals and topped in the State. This quiet, bespectacled girl faced the news cameras and acknowledged messages of congratulation that flooded around her. Deep Chowdhury's chest puffed up with pride. Kavita wept but for once these were tears of joy

The Chowdhurys were invited by a students union to felicitate the toppers. There was a huge crowd in the auditorium. The family was ushered into the front. Many speeches were delivered. The toppers were described as harbingers of India's future. Then it was time for the felicitations. Shweta's name was called out. Clad in black trousers and a simple white top, her hair pulled back with a barrette, Shweta walked up to the stage and joined her hands in a namaste. Thunderous applause filled the hall. The chief guest ceremoniously handed her a scroll, a trophy and a cheque. The television cameras recorded those moments

"Miss Shweta," the anchor said. "This is a special moment for your family. What would you like to say to them?"

Sweta stood there, blinking at the lights, overwhelmed by the question.

"I would," – She stammered, "I would like to say not just to them, but to all parents that the most precious, the most precious gift you can give your child is peace."

Deep Chowdhury looked down at his watch. He fought down a desire to walk away. He looked at the figure on the stage... his daughter, and finally knew defeat.



Opening doors

Look at it this way. You are about two years old. You are just about able to stagger from point A to point B. Gravity is the constant enemy and to your annoyance and indignation, most things are too high for you to reach. But toddlerhood has its compensations. Once in a while your dad, or an uncle, will play a game with you. He will pop and vanish behind a wooden contraption that swings open and shut. When the person disappears, your mouth does a drooly O. Then, before your disbelieving eyes, the figure pops its head in and reappears. You cackle so hard that you fall on your butt. The game goes on, depending on how cackle-worthy you are. But this piece is not so much about the cute, idiotic pleasures of toddlerhood. It is a meditation on doors – what they mean to us, the associations they trigger, the symbolism inherent in them. We open them, shut them, lock them, knock at them, hammer at them, kick at them, break them down, peep through keyholes, eavesdrop behind them, wait to be let in, crave to be let out. Looks like our entire, finite lives revolve around doors. And divas like Elizabeth Taylor often said there were many doors to open, and she was not afraid to look behind them. Emerson, poet and mystic said we must be the opener of doors. It is all too easy to wait for others to open doors and shy away from the light or darkness that lies beyond. We take for granted those whose doors are always open, and we put a premium on a door that will not let us in.

Doors are never always utilitarian fixtures, part of the architecture of a building. A door or doorway symbolises the transition and passageway from one place to another. Doors are seen as passages to another world in religion, mythology and literature. Just as an open door stands for welcome and acceptance, a closed door means rejection, secrecy, hostility and even imprisonment. Every door is a call to discover, to find out, to know. They say that in dreams, an outward opening door means you need to open up and connect to others. But an inward opening door implies you need to clue in on your inner self. Seeing closed doors in your sleep may mean your subconscious frustration at opportunities being denied to you. When you talk of doors, you also talk of doors of perception, which we have in the mind. You are fearful of cellar doors, which are a fixture in the horror flick genre. And think of the number of door idioms. We beat paths to doors, get a foot in the door, see someone to the door, close one door only to have one open, and think fondly of the girl next door. In totalitarian regimes people cower at midnight for the knock on the door.

Not surprisingly, doors play a serious role in unlocking minds. The colour of a door you choose in a test may actually reveal what is going on in your life. Your choice of a certain type of door may reveal your entire personality. Carl Jung designed a test in which one had to express emotions felt on being in a white room without doors or windows. Spoiler alert... the white room represents what you will feel like when you are about to die.

For die-hard Game of Thrones fans, there is the celebrated Door No 9 actually located in Belfast's Ballygally Castle Hotel. This door depicts the famous battle between House Stark and House Bolton in the penultimate episode of Season 6. This beautifully carved door displays the crests of the two houses,, Bolton's hungry dogs and Winterfell Castle. The door opens not to dark intrigue and passion, but to a restaurant.

At some point in my life when my age was still in single digits, some unkind adult let on that

ghosts don't need doors because they can easily glide through them. I had relied on a bolted door to keep myself and my kid brother safe from ghouls at night and all along they could saunter in without a by your leave? I don't remember how many nights I lay staring at the bolted door in the faint streetlight, waiting for apparitions. Things got better when Mehmood, the comedian, trying to get his screen dad Om Prakash to finance a horror film, does a rip-roaring impersonation of a door creaking open. That helped me loosen up. The movies have lavished a lot of care on doors. Remember the round Hobbit Door set on a hill in Lord of the Rings? The fire doors of Ghostbusters exist for real in the Manhattan Fire Department building. But the most unforgettable is the frail door in The Shining into which a deranged Jack Nicholson is clubbing an axe. It is a bathroom door, and Wendy, his wife and victim is trapped. Trust Stephen King and Stanley Kubrick to have us cringing in our seats. At a romantic level who can forget the blue door of the modest house in Notting Hill where Hugh Grant lived, and Julia Roberts visited as she fell in love with him? The famous actress and the modest bookseller made a pair that raised the film to stratospheric heights, blue door and all.

I end with our colonial legacy. Bill, a true blue Brit, arrives in India completely ignorant of Hindustani. Tom, his more experienced friend, helps him out. "Look mate, when you want a door closed, you say, "Darwaza bandh karo. If that's tough, just say. "There was a brown crow." If you want that door opened, you are supposed to say "Darwaza khol day." You could just say "It was a cold day". That's how they ruled us for two hundred years.

Freedom from hunger

indrani raimedhi discovers the labour of love that produces meals for children.

It was Mother Teresa who had once opined that “Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think is a much greater hunger than the person who has nothing to eat.” Akshaya Patra, one of the largest NGOs in the world, is committed in its mission not only to gift children with the feeling of being loved, but also ensuring that they are fed a piping hot meal everyday. The forgotten world is made up of the developing nations, where most of the people, comprising of more than 50 per cent of the world population, live with hunger as a constant companion and the fear of famine is a very real menace.

Hunger and malnutrition have devastating consequences for children and have been linked to low birth weight and birth defects, mental and physical defects and poorer educational outcomes. Akshaya Patra runs a mid-day meal programme, serving wholesome lunch to over 1.6 million children in 13,636 schools across 12 states in India.

Looking out of a window in Mayapur, a village near Kolkata, His Divine Grace AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada saw a group of children fighting with stray dogs over scraps of food. From this single, heart-breaking incident was born a determination that no child within a radius of 10 miles of Iskcon Temple would go hungry. This resolve led to the germination of the Akshaya Patra Foundation, aptly named after the vessel in the Mahabharata that never ran out of food.

In June 2000, the Akshaya Patra Foundation started the mid-day meal programme in Bengaluru, Karnataka. It started with serving food to a modest 1,500 students across five government schools. The vision was simple– “No child in India shall be deprived of education because of hunger.”

Today, partnering with the Government of India and various State Governments, as well as philanthropic donors, the organisation runs the world’s largest mid-day programme. Built on a public-private partnership, Akshaya Patra combines sound management, innovative technology and smart engineering to deliver tasty and nutritious lunch to school children. The positive results are there for all to see – enrolment in schools has risen, malnutrition is being tackled on a war-footing, children have more attention span in the classroom, and most of all, the motivation to turn up at school, come rain or shine.

Akshaya Patra is not only studied as a business model by universities such as Harvard, but has also won innumerable awards abroad and in India.

Curious to discover for myself the endeavour that has reached such epic, life-changing proportions, I present myself at an unearthly hour at dawn at the organisation’s first centre in Assam, located at Amingaon in North Guwahati. It is a model replicated across this vast country.

I am met at the front door by Durgesh Kumar Gupta, an MBA who is Manager, Operations. A deeply religious person, he expresses how profoundly fulfilling his work is.

He takes me on a tour across the 35,000 sq.ft. kitchen. Hundred and thirty uniformed workers, 30 of them women, are working with robotic synchronicity – cooking a vast amount of cooked rice, vegetables and dal meant for 47,000 children in 607 schools.

Giant rice chutes separate the chaff from the grain. There are clouds of steam around the huge cookers, with a conveyor belt transporting steel carriers of food to the dozens of vans parked outside. Three boilers service eight rice cookers, two dal cookers and three sabji cookers. The workers chop the vegetables and prepare the spices the previous night itself. Cooking starts from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Loading of the carriers is completed by 9. By 11:30

a.m., the vans park in front of innumerable schools, as children eagerly line up with their plates, chattering and smiling.

"There is stringent testing throughout the process," says Durgesh Kumar. "We undertake great pains to check that only the best ingredients are used, and the nutritive content of the meals is high. We also make changes in the menu so that the children are not bored of eating the same items."

At present, the Akshaya Patra Amingaon kitchen supplies meals to schools in Kamalpur, North Guwahati, Hajo, Sualkuchi, Airport, Rani and Jalukbari.

Each meal costs roughly Rs. 8.50, of which the government contributes Rs. 4.50. The organisation relies on donors to fill this gap. There is also the need for a plot of land to set up the kitchen because the rent of its present premises is not cost effective.

With steam-based cooking, cold storage facilities, the kitchen is ISO certified. The workers are paid minimum wages, have access to Provident Fund and ESI. At a time at dawn, when everybody else is asleep, these men and women make sure that children they do not know will get to savour what they have lovingly cooked for them. This is something deeply fulfilling to witness first-hand.

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Minerva Cabin



Once a month Anjali and I meet for lunch at Minerva Cabin. This is a restaurant long past its former glory. This was where we hung out in the late Seventies, having long, impassioned discussions on the students' movement, the elections, the arrests, the police excesses. Minerva Cabin is close to college and still has the most affordable mutton cutlets in town. It still has its beige coir-carpeting, battered cane tables and chairs, Chinese style lamps mounted on brackets on the walls. And the waiters still mix up the orders.

Anjali and I go back a long way. She came down with her family from Shillong in the early Seventies, quiet, a bit secretive, exquisite in her small boned beauty and bobbed hair, trying to fit in our convent's claustrophobic confines. This was when we were in class six. I was the star volleyball player, with cropped hair, muscled calves and a weakness for swear words avidly picked up from Harold Robbins. When I saw her the cusses evaporated, and all at once I found my life's purpose... to shield Anjali from all the slings and arrows of life. Surprised and grateful for my friendship among a sea of strange faces, Anjali grew close to me and soon we were inseparable.

We both did well enough to get into the best college. Through Milton, Karl Marx, The Kothari Commission, we were together, a pair in contrast. Anjali wore simple handloom saris and tiny pieces of silver jewellery. I never got out of my jeans and buttoned up kurtas. Minerva Cabin then had a row of box-like cubicles on one side, each discreetly curtained. This was for couples in need of privacy. We did not know what went on there. Or pretended not to. But I can still feel the stab in my heart when I saw Anjali emerge from one of the cabins, followed by Biman, one of the student leaders, skilled at words, sly, persuasive. Instead of confronting her, I chose to remain silent. What could I say? The rest of our time in college passed in a blur. We both graduated and just as I enrolled for law, a mutual friend told me Anjali had eloped with Biman. It had been a huge scandal... with her family disowning her. I was not surprised. She had always been naïve. When I lost touch with her, I never allowed myself to think how she was. I do not have a man in my life. I am not easily persuaded.

Then, eight years later, we met each other on a busy street, linking our fingers and scanning

each other's faces to see if the past lived within us still. And that was how we returned to Minerva Cabin, seeking comfort in its continuity with our shared past.

I am now a rising lawyer, with a growing clientele. And Anjali? She had given up all of her old life to marry Biman. The door to her parents' house was firmly shut, and had been so for years. While her classmates went on to gain Postgraduate degrees, even Doctorates, Anjali cleans her father-in-law's bedsores, cooks for a large family and sleeps with their son always between her and the man who had won her with sly, ingratiating words but did not understand nor desire her anymore.

Anjali reveals to me these details of her life in bits and pieces, between sips of coffee and Dire Straits playing in the background. She no more longs for love, she says. I look to where the cubicles were, now long gone. Her romantic disillusionment, the droop in the corners of her mouth, her large, hurt eyes and fragile wrists draw me to her once again. I feel she needs me more than ever before.

The day the Berlin Wall falls Anjali gets a job as a subject teacher at Mount View English Medium School.

"Why do you settle for so less?" I ask, exasperated. "The school isn't even recognised."

"I don't have an MA degree, remember? It's better than cleaning bedsores. Don't spoil my day, Isha. And the treat is on me today. What will we have?"

For a time Anjali is happy. She talks of teaching Solitary Reaper and the Lucy poems, Socrates and Jim Corbett. The colour comes back to her cheeks. So does the silver jewellery, those tiny silver earrings I had loved seeing on her. It is raining the day darkness creeps back to her life. When we meet I am uneasy at her silence.

"What?" I try to be witty "The Man-eater of Rudraprayag got your tongue?"

She begins to cry, her shoulders shaking as she twists her hanky round her fingers. His name is Keshav Gupta, the vice principal of the school. Somehow, every one hour, he finds a reason to summon her to his room. To devour her with his eyes. To reach out and squeeze her hand. To make her sit in air-conditioned comfort, writing out the study plans, as he leans over her, breathing heavily.

This was the time we had no sexual harassment law, no complaints cell, no Vishaka guidelines.

"What will you do?" I ask, feeling the rage rise in me.

"If I complain, they'll just fire me. If I let this go on, one day everyone will know and think I'm a slut. Biman is against me working. We fought about it for weeks. He does not want me to neglect Vicky. But Vicky goes to school. He does not need me all the time. My parents would be delighted to know I have paid the price for eloping. I dreamt of love. I should have settled for self-respect, earning my own money, not being a victim. I'm tired of being a victim..."

She rambles on, her eyes averted from me. Suddenly I feel so inadequate as her friend. I do not know how, but I had somehow never been there for her. I have failed her. My love has amounted to nothing.

There were no cellphones then. Contact was tenuous. I call her several times on the landline. There is no answer. She has never asked me my number.

This Saturday evening Minerva Café is suddenly full of students. It feels like the Seventies. I sit at our usual table, wondering if she would come. She does and slides into the seat opposite mine. We order mutton cutlets and coffee.

"Something strange has happened," she begins.

"At school?"

"Yes." She nods, eying me solemnly. "Last week, Gupta called me to his office. I felt it was time to end it, to hand over my resignation. But, you know, he was not leering, or leaning over me, or trying to squeeze my hand. This was, I swear, a different Gupta."

"What do you mean?"

"He was polite, respectful, sat at a distance. He praised my teaching and said the school board was thinking of raising my pay. It's just surreal, Isha."

The cutlets arrive. Our knives and spoons tinkle. I had seen Gupta shrivel as I spoke my cold, menacing words in his chamber. I had seen how he had mopped his brow with his large handkerchief. In all my years of practising, those were the most savagely satisfying moments.

The cutlets had never tasted so wonderful, the crust crisp, and the delicately flavoured mutton keema melting in the mouth. Anjali has no idea what I had done. I would like it to stay this way.

Return of the native

Rehna Sultana is eager to give back to her community.

Rehna Sultana is fast asleep in her hostel room at Gauhati University. It is past midnight and she has been studying for long hours, her spectacles lying over an open book. As she floats in the tide of sleep, a dream comes to her, of golden sands and green fields swept over by the river, the cries and confusion, the mud huts abandoned in haste, people, her people, goats, cows and chickens cramming into bobbing boats, along with their pitiful possessions. For weeks after this, life will continue precariously on the boats. Gruel will be cooked over smoky stoves, clothes will wet and dry on the bodies they are worn in. There will be fever, chills, cholera, diarrhoea. Babies will be born under the open sky, on the boat, the screams of women in labour merging with the cries of the birds flying overhead. Thus, they will hunker down on the edge of existence, the forgotten river people of the chars.

You can take a girl out of the char chapori, the riverine plains flanking the Brahmaputra, but you can't take the char out of her. In a feat of unimaginable proportions for a minority community and that too from a land time forgot, Rehna has pushed herself through school, college, degree, and is shortly poised to get her doctorate degree. Her thesis is on the Folk Speech of Char Chapari's Muslim people.

And that's not all. She has penned her first book on the theme Char-Chaparir Loka Jivan Aaru Bhasa Sanskriti, exploring the lives of the people in the char chapari and their language and culture. This pretty young woman, still in her 20s is driven by a burning zeal to tell the story of her forgotten people and free them from the prejudices of the outside world who view them as inconsequential, or with suspicion and misgiving.

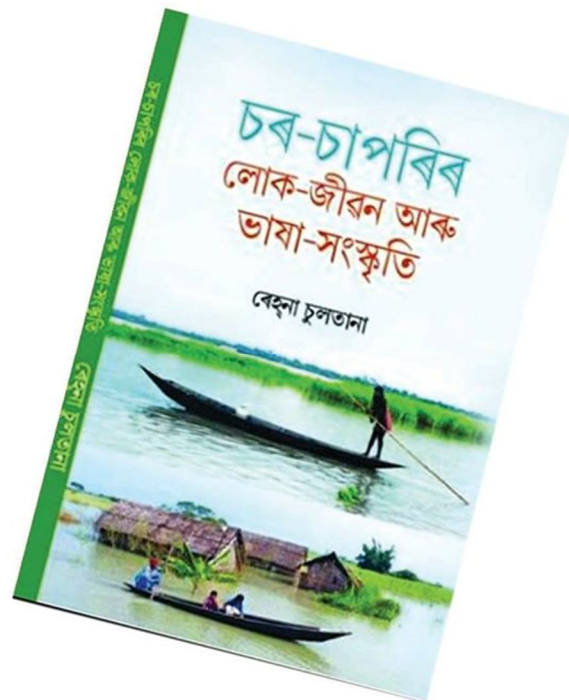
"Here are the facts," she begins "the Brahmaputra traverses an area of 800 km of Assam, forming char chaporis or sand bars as it flows. In 1992-93, there was a socio-economic survey of the region, there were 2,089 char villages with a population of 16 lakh. Ten years later there were 162 more char villages and six lakh more people. Surely the administration must pay attention to the char chapori. Spread across 14 districts, it covers a landmass of 3,608 sq. km. or 4.6 per cent of Assam's total area. As a people we not only have to survive Nature's changing moods, but also make do with scarce resources. From mid-May to mid-October boats are our only lifeline."

Rehna refutes that the char chapori areas are the hide-outs of illegal migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. "There is no family planning of any kind practised by couples here. A woman gives birth to eight or nine children. When these children grow up, they build adjacent houses and that is how a settlement expands."

Haunted by malevolent forces of Nature that displace them in a never-ending cycle, the people too display signs of instability, of enraged outbursts and sudden cruelty. Rehna says sadly – "This is most evident in the way our women are treated. They are considered no better than beasts, slapped, hit and thrashed for the most flimsy of reasons – like adding a bit more salt to the curry. When a woman is thrashed by her husband, nobody comes to help her. It is her fate. And nobody questions it. This always made me furious. And as the years flew by, I was determined not to be married off young like my sisters but to leave the char chapori, my village Sontali in Boko Circle, and do something meaningful with life. Now I know what it is. Our char areas are geographically alienated from the mainland and psychologically detached from the mainstream population of Assam. I have gone into interior char areas to gather materials on the community and the problems they face. I was met with suspicion and hostility, as I was thought of someone going to investigate citizen

issues. There are some officials who blackmail these people regarding this and they fearfully pay up. My findings speak for themselves – there are large families in a society where polygamy is common. Resources are scarce. There is no access to drinking water, electricity, education and healthcare. Quacks rule the roost. Every year countless women die of childbirth complications. My life's work will be to highlight these issues and bring succour to them."

This feisty daughter of the liberal Murjamal Haque and Sufia Begum is all set to make a difference. And her time starts now.



Power couples?

Indrani Raimedhi

Politics does not interest me half as much as the couples in politics do. In that case, I am not competent enough to tell you what made Trump jettison the climate deal, but I could wax eloquent about the weird turn the Trump Melania marriage is taking. Melania adjusts her hair in Rome to avoid holding podgy Donald's hand, gives him a hand swat that is so evident a rebuff, that too before the media in Tell Aviv. They air kiss – as if unable to bear each other's lips. She is adamant about not staying in the White House with him. I would love to sport one of those Free Melania campaign T-shirts that have appeared in a bid to get the Slovenian beauty away from her bully of a husband. But now it looks like wifey is hitting back and Donald can scowl all he wants. Unlike the Obamas, the Trumps sure are making a complete hash of being the First Couple.

Let's face it – less and less people in this schizoid world today believe what Balzac called marriage – the immortality of the souls. Couples therapy, marriage counsellors, divorce lawyers – everything points to one direction. Marriage as an institution is coming under the swing of the wrecking ball and it's scaring the hell out of us. It's not just the newly-spawned relationship experts who are dispensing with tips to give your marriage the kiss of life. No less than the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche suggested that before marrying, we should ask ourselves – will we be able to converse well with this person into our old age? I would, as a woman, want a minor readjustment here. I think I speak for all women when I ask a bride – will your groom let you speak without interruption till he faces inevitable loss of hearing in old age? If so, go for it, girl.

Why everybody, including yours truly, is gobbling up what seems so patently useless news about a power couple actually goes beyond vicarious pleasure. At the root of every successful marriage is a strong partnership. And this partnership, in the case of power couples, casts its effect on other areas of statesmanship. A leader who is a bumbling failure in his ties with his own spouse can hardly be expected to shine elsewhere. Can he be trusted to form stable alliances, inspire loyalty and give his hundred per cent to his office when things are less than perfect at home?

Trust the French to restore our faith in romantic love and matrimony. The relationship between the new French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte Trogneux has captivated the world. When Macron was 15, he took part in a school play directed by Trogneux, a teacher and 24 years his senior. Brigitte went from being his teacher, lover, partner and wife and has always been his mentor and inspiration, "Without her, I won't be me," claimed Macron at a recent interview. Her adult children from her previous marriage, one of them of Macron's age, support the couple. Brigitte mentors her young husband in her caring, committed way, including even guiding his voice modulation in election speeches. France can hope much from a President who stayed committed to his one true love in spite of a huge age gap, facing hostility and opposition from both sides of the family. Then, at the other end of the spectrum, away from this sentimental soufflé, you have a woman who shares her bed with one of the most feared dictators of the present – the megalomaniac Kim Jong Un, a rogue leader bent on pushing the world towards a nuclear apocalypse. Even as the world's eyeballs are glued on the man who thinks nothing of liquidating his own kith and kin, his wife Ri-Sol-Ju remains an elusive figure. She had performed on stage as an entertainer during her earlier days. After the birth of a baby

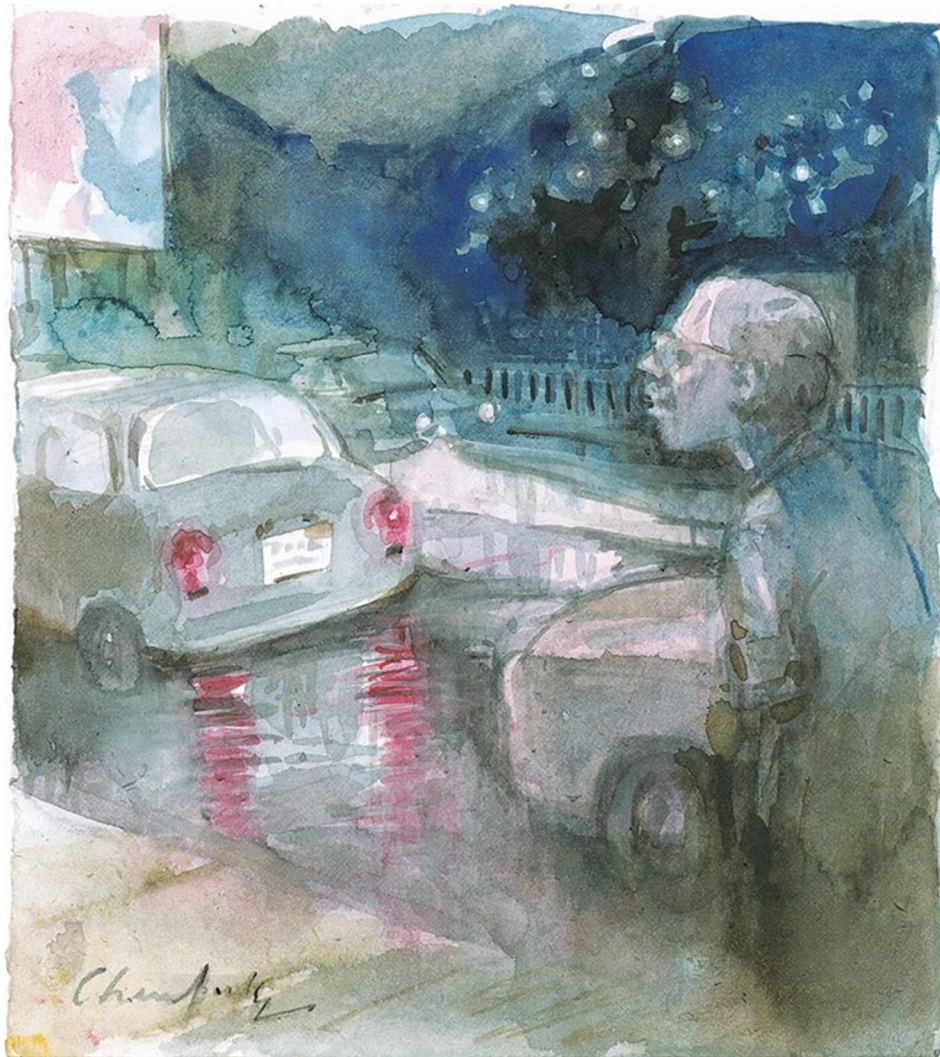
daughter she mysteriously disappeared for nearly eight months, raising fears that she had been bumped off. But recently she is seen by his side, all dolled up and quite at ease. In a desperately poor Communist country she wears Chanel suits and carries Christian Dior handbags. Nothing comradely about that, what? It has been reported that when the Korean First Lady speaks, it sounds like raindrops on roses. With a husband like that, that kind of micro-decibel hush is a sheer survival tactic, don't you think?

Jackie Kennedy choosing to stay away as Marilyn breathily sang "Happy Birthday" for JFK in those cringe-worthy moments, Lady Diana saying there were three in their relationship meaning Charles, herself and Camilla, an embattled Hillary facing the worst debacle of her life during Monicagate – those are some very public memories of how the high and mighty betray and lacerate each other.

Many of you, like me, go all mushy listening to Don't cry for me, Argentina by Madonna, from the musical Evita. It is all about Eva Peron, the Argentinian First Lady from 1946 to 1952. Evita became a powerful political figure helped by husband president Juan Perón. An illegitimate child, and with a past of questionable morals, Evita emerged as the champion of the poor. She inspired millions with her campaigns to give women voting rights. To her supporters, she was an angel. To her detractors, she was a controversial figure. What Evita makes me think is, can't unhappy power wives go ahead and do something that is larger than themselves and their floundering marriages?

A small flame

Indrani Raimedhi



I am sitting in the dark on the couch that holds the shape of my gaunt body, as if waiting for something to happen. A rainy summer night, smelling of wet leaves. I can feel the soft winged insects touch my arm, my waiting face. When you are 68, you can feel every drop of life dribble out of you in a gentle patter of a leaky tap that will not let its stopper be mended. The thing is to be calm, not to panic. Most of all, not be sentimental. When you are an old man, a man as old as me, you play this mind game with your family. My son, his wife Manisha scold me for not exercising, forgetting to have my blood pressure pills, watching too much TV, that too without my latest Siemens hearing aid – trying to make it clear they care, they care desperately for one to continue to float around the spaces of the house like a moth looking for a source of light. Two years ago I had what my son and Manisha told their beer-swilling friends was a health scare. That's how they talk nowadays. It had been a mini stroke, leaving me with a slur that made me sound mildly drunk and my left hand had tremors that caused me to drop things. The sound of things falling... clanking, clattering... and then the accusing silence and Manisha coming in with her lips pursed. I am being tolerated.

My part of the mind game is to prove to my son and Manisha that I am a useful being to

have around. I am the first to answer the doorbell, receive parcels, pay the garbage collector, tick off the newspaper boy for late delivery, attend the housing society meetings, see that the maid swabs all the corners. I get milk and bread from the grocers, even when not needed. I insist on going to the bank alone for my pension. Being alone is a useful condition when you need to smuggle home a Black Dog in your trouser pocket, wrapped in crumpled newspaper.

But this usefulness takes a lot out of you. An evening's conversation made me understand that I could be most useful by being absent. Not permanently, of course. Between five and six in the evening, I heard Manisha tell my son – I had my hearing aid on – that Piklu was to have his new tutor coming over for Maths. It was discussed that I was to be stopped in that hour from occupying the living room couch and turning on the TV. Since I was a stubborn old fellow and would refuse to be confined to my room, something had to be done to get me out of the house between five and six thrice a week. Manisha's words.

Without mathematics, there is nothing you can do. Everything around you is numbers. Hadn't Einstein himself called it the poetry of logical ideas? If God used mathematics to create the world, Manisha was using it to keep me away from stymieing Piklu's brilliant future ahead.

I am a generous man. I will gift them what they wish for, an hour of my absence. Without giving any inkling of having overheard the conversation, I announce the following Monday that I am visiting a friend and would be back in an hour. Piklu looks stricken. He had counted on my presence to wreak havoc on his tuition. I wink at him and depart.

I shuffle, I amble, I try to break into a trot. My glasses catch the remorseless headlights of oncoming cars and I take them off, folding them onto my breast pocket. My knees ache, the acrid fumes of tyres burning somewhere snake insidiously into my nostrils. The pavements dip and rise without warning. I try not to look at young men in bikes zig-zagging through traffic. What brilliant mathematicians they are – to know in an instant the distance between vehicles. Every day I go a little further, return a little later, so that my son and Manisha can one day bask in the eternal sunshine of Piklu's exalted career. From Ambikagiri Nagar I crawl my way each day to Zoo Road Tiniali, then Commerce College and finally to the flyover. I feel curiously light-headed as I walk the gently undulating sidewalk of the bridge.

Then halfway through, I see her. Against the scudding clouds of monsoon, on a huge billboard, lit by concealed lights, she looks at me, her face turned, as if beckoning, lips parted and moist, eyes midnight lashed and teasing. Her hair tumbles down the small of her back and she is in that aching unbearable bloom of her youth, caught in a moment of exquisite tenderness, and I felt a softness brushing against my damp skin, the gauzy wings of insects drifting into me in the darkness. In those moments I feel I had known her, somewhere lost in the long dim vista of my 68 years, and that no words are necessary between us.

That night I lie in the darkness, between pleasure and sleep, and for the first time feel a stab of regret that my life was dribbling out of me, drop by drop and she would be there, infinitely beautiful, a creature of air and light, as she, with liquid grace turned to the sunrise and I made my slow, stumbling way to the sunset.

As the days go by, I grow stronger, more sure-footed, more secretive about my movements before my family. It is a sweet, almost unbearable joy to stand by the bridge, see the stream of traffic below, the thousands of glittering cars, incandescent, and then look up at her, the last gift of my life.

Then comes a day when winds blew hard and rain falls in slanting sheets. Piklu misses school

and I have to mind him because the tutor does not come. The TV is full of news about flooded streets, power outages.

On the third evening the clouds lifted and there is only a thin drizzle. I take my umbrella and leave the house before the evening tea. The pavements are full of puddles. The streets are jammed with traffic. I feel cold and feverish. Then I am on the bridge, short of breath, a peculiar sense of dread coming over me.

She is gone. The enormous flex sign had been ripped apart by the storm and lay in tattered shreds on the iron frame. No one would smile at me like that, the last gift of life had been taken away savagely from me. I went a week later, just in case. They had put up something else. A family in a car. But I had nowhere to go. Nowhere at all.

Ties that bind

Indrani Raimeedhi

We all laugh. It is our mother reminding us, without preamble, how high she had scored in her high school geography class. She beams with delight (it is too dark to see) as the rest of the family make appreciative noises. The thing is, our mother does not forget anything. This was rather inconvenient when we were children... our crimes and misdemeanours could never ever be deleted, and now we are just happy she remains sharp and agile even as the years roll by.

We are in the car, squashed together in the dark, driving home from dinner at a restaurant in the pelting spring rain. Apropos of something, nobody remembers what, a shy, girlish voice pipes out from the back seat.

"Isn't Caracas the capital of Venezuela?"

We all laugh. It is our mother reminding us, without preamble, how high she had scored in her high school geography class. She beams with delight (it is too dark to see) as the rest of the family make appreciative noises. The thing is, our mother does not forget anything. This was rather inconvenient when we were children... our crimes and misdemeanours could never ever be deleted, and now we are just happy she remains sharp and agile even as the years roll by.

When my mother names a capital of the world, it took me a long while to figure out that it was a wistful hint of the road not taken, of wings clipped at an age when one was meant to soar and discover and revel in freedom – not tend to colicky babies and cook and keep a household running. And yet I cannot remember her ever express even the faintest trace of resentment, only perfect caramel puddings, plum blossoms in vases all around the house in Shillong and an infinite patience to listen to our daily convoluted sagas of schoolyard triumphs and heartbreaks.

Things seem so much clearer on hindsight. I was about fourteen. Having a certain way with words even then, the good nuns at school took me to an institution far away in the city to take part in an on the spot essay contest. May I be forgiven for boasting that I won the first prize. When I jauntily reached home it was almost dark. My mother stood on the porch, quite beside herself with worry. Inside, she motioned me to put down my trophy on a table, swung her arm and delivered a stinging slap that knocked the wind out of me. I was, of course, full of injured indignation. Is that how one treated a winner? That was the first and last time my mother hit me. I brooded over it a long time. Then I understood. The world did not allow mothers not to worry about their daughters. And things are infinitely worse today. And yes, you also worry about your sons if they don't answer after three rings. Ask me.

Here's the thing. I have an aversion to turning this piece into a cutesy, nostalgic piece conjured up by a clever mining of memories. Some of the most harrowing evocations of motherhood come from William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*. Styron's tale is holocaust experience at its bleakest. The gist of it is that survivor Sophie reveals to a character her deepest, darkest secret on the night she arrived at Auschwitz. A camp doctor made her choose which of her two children would die immediately by gassing and which would continue to live. Sophie chose to sacrifice her seven-year-old daughter Eva, leaving her with a grief that finally overwhelms her.

In Ozick's *The Shawl*, Rosa, her baby Magda and niece Stella painfully make their way to a Nazi concentration camp in the dead of winter. The baby Magda suckles on the shawl she is wrapped in. Rosa hides the baby as much as she can, but ultimately, Nazi guards find out

and fling her against an electric fence.

All of you must remember the Columbine shooting that killed 13 students and injured scores. The masterminds were schoolboys Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, who then killed themselves – Sue Klebold, mother of one of the killers, spoke out in public about the horror and regret she felt about what her son had done. She had entirely missed any signs of abnormal behaviour on his part. Without seeking sympathy she spoke of her depression, panic attacks and cancer in the aftermath of the horrific tragedy. She ended with an appeal for more access to mental health facilities for young people.

Since the last several years I have sent a cake and flowers on Mother's Day to her home on the other side of town. This year, we just laughed and decided there was a limit to being silly and sentimental. The gift we share is the assurance... we can call each other at any time of the day and night, urge each other to stay away from crazy diet fads, argue about things we later laugh and concur are too trivial. They say when a son grows up his shadow is taller than his father's. Not so with mothers and daughters. Their shadows become mysteriously of the same height. And that is just one of the wonders of this beautiful bond.

The other woman

Indrani Raimedhi

As a very little girl, I was hypnotised by Meena Kumari spreading her dark tresses on a marble bath by her bed. I can swear it had rose petals. But later, of course, I decided that all that melodrama was not worth a cooling head bath, hedonism be darned.

Let's see if you can get past this – what is the common link between Phryne, Veronica Franco, Madame Du Barry, Sally Salisbury, Nell Gwyn and Sada Abe? In case you are shaking your heads, here it is – these are some of the most infamous women of ill repute in history. They commanded astronomical prices, wore the best in furs and jewels, had access to movers and shakers of society, and led lives that virtuous women could only imagine. These women, legions of them, provide a service which is a 100-billion dollar global industry whose legal status varies from country to country, an industry that has been traced back to 4000 years, in ancient Babylon.

Prostitution enjoys a strange status in India. It is legal but its related activities like soliciting, pimping are not. A Human Rights Watch has it that there are 20 million prostitutes in India. Seductive sirens make a great impression in Indian mythology in the form of Menaka, Rambha, Urvashi and Tilottama. Sanskrit plays have been written on courtesans as have Urdu couplets of great delicacy. Kings have treated them with respect. With the end of royalty and feudalism, these women have lost their place and are today labelled as just being in the flesh trade – their minds do not matter, nor do any cultured graces. But not all dismiss the women compelled to sell their bodies. One of the greatest Urdu writers Saadat Hasan Manto – whose biopic is being made by Nandita Das condemned the misogyny carried out in the name of honour and nationalism. His relentless gaze on the horrors of Partition showed ambivalent women who struggled to survive the madness of the age through humane ties. Manto's so-called women of loose morals like Saugandhi are complex characters who tussle with questions of life and living even as the crazed crowds look to kill and loot.

If you talk Hollywood, the most memorable tramps that instantly come to mind are Jodi Foster in Taxi Driver and Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman, and on the other end of the span serial killer Aileen Wuornos, in Monster. But the depiction of fallen women in Indian cinema is far more nuanced and complex. Years ago, I met Basu Bhattacharyya, the maker of Aastha and argued how financial problems alone could not lead a respectable middle class woman to prostitution. He was obdurate and said it was entirely possible. In Chameli, a young man shames a tramp, only to realise the challenges of her life.

Years earlier, during the golden years of Indian cinema, it was Jewish women like Sulochana (Ruby Myers) and Nadira (Florence Ezekiel) of a Bagdadi family who played vamps to the hilt and seemed to have a merry time too.

Then there is the artistic vision – night-time. The air is redolent with attar and jasmine. A circular room with velvet draperies and gleaming chandeliers, bolsters strewn on carpets as men of wealth and privilege are treated to music and dance by women of exquisite manners. Suggestive looks are exchanged... and the rest is left to the imagination. You saw it in Pakeezah, in Umrao Jaan, and a hundred other rip offs. Courtesans after all, were mentioned since Vedic times. But those days are gone and practitioners of this oldest art operate with none of the court- liness of a bygone era.

A moll with a golden heart was Waheeda Rehman's Gulabo in Pyaasa, who helps Guru Dutt

during his times of the deepest darkness and anhedonic despair. Sharmila Tagore's coquettish charm helped her play the part, both in *Mausam* and *Amar Prem*. In *Manoranjan*, Zeenat Aman is at her uninhibited best and it was considered too risqué. Tabu struck all the right notes as a bar girl in *Chandni Bar*, eliciting sympathy for this beleaguered tribe in a prudish society.

No mention of films on this genre would be complete without mention of *Sold*, a narrative feature film based on Patricia McCormick's novel of the same name. The film tells the story of Lakshmi (played by Assam's own Niyar Saikia) who, after being trafficked, travels from a rural village in Nepal to a brothel called Happiness House in Kolkata. She risks everything in a heroic struggle to get away.

It would be undeniable that women prostitutes in film and literature also serve as feminist mouthpieces slamming patriarchy, hypocrisy and exploitation. They also serve to reinforce the idea of female solidarity. Shyam Benegal created memorable happy whores with Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Neena Gupta, Anita Kanwar, etc., in *Mandi*. Perhaps, for the first time in Indian cinema, the women did not have a sob story for their predicament.

As a confused and naive teenager I was totally besotted by Rekha in *Umrao Jaan*. I had no idea what she did, but was ready to give an arm and a leg to wear those gorgeous ensembles. As a very little girl, I was hypnotised by Meena Kumari spreading her dark tresses on a marble bath by her bed. I can swear it had rose petals. But later, of course, I decided that all that melodrama was not worth a cooling head bath, hedonism be darned. In the latest *Begum Jaan*, the Begum and her fellow harlots are shown challenging the Radcliffe Line threatening to run through and destroy their only home. All such women negotiate a precarious space, always in peril of humiliation and displacement. There is a certain mystique about these women that will continue to be explored in the artistic sphere, even as no one lifts a finger to accord them a measure of safety and dignity.

The long wait is over!

Indrani Raimeedhi

Dr. Santwana Bardoloi talks about her new film.

So a story, an idea has to uplift and inspire me to the extent that I cannot rest unless I film it. That is why I have been passive, receptive...

It is often a good idea to get the negatives out of the way. That done, the discourse that emerges is freed of the bitter stain. So here goes. The search engine comes up with not only a small, but rather tiny group of female filmmakers and the silence regarding their work in the public domain is deafening. When Kathryn Bigelow made *The Hurt Locker*, critics and movie goers were skeptical as to how she could handle such a male theme as soldiers in combat. But boy, did she pull it off spectacularly! In spite of the challenges of being of this gender and taking on the mammoth task of lifting a film aground, we have such stellar names as Jane Campion, Agnieszka Holland, Samira Makhmalbaf, Jean Chen, Lynne Ramsay, Agnes Jaoui and Sofia Coppola.

In India, there are 16 women on record who have cracked the glass ceiling. These range from Fatima Begum who made her debut feature in 1926, titled *Bulbule-Pakistan*. Years after making *36 Chowringhee Lane* in 1981, Aparna Sen continues to make award-winning films like *Mr and Mrs Iyer*. Her *Sonata* on female bonding is due for release soon. Kalpana Lajmi's socio-realism was evident in *Rudaali* and *Daman*. Sai Paranjpye followed her own trail with critically acclaimed films like *Sparsh*, *Chasme Buddoor* and *Katha*. Young director Tanuja Chandra is known for her off-beat films. Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair have attained cult status with their work. Anusha Rizvi's socio-political film *Peepli Live* made waves. Others who have made their presence felt are Reema Kagti, Kiran Rao, Farah Khan, Gauri Shinde and Zoya Akhtar.

In this August company belongs Dr. Santwana Bardoloi. A paediatrician by profession, who has a significant body of work as a theatre, radio artist, Dr. Bardoloi quietly set about making a film that has proved to be a classic. *Adajya* (1996) is based on Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *Dontal Haatir Uiye Khuwa Haoda*, set in 1940's Assam. The kernel of the story is that three widows struggle amidst stifling strictures to lead a life of piety. Into their household arrives a young American scholar. This arrival, coupled with a snakebite, the theft of ancestral jewellery drive the young and rebellious Giribala towards a chilling predicament. With no previous experience and a shoe-string budget, *Adajya* went on to win the National award for Best Regional Film and the Jury's special award.

It was but natural to expect a slew of other films from this maverick director and yet, what followed was a 20-year hiatus that seemed baffling. So, quite obviously, seated opposite me, she has to manoeuvre through this unavoidable question.

"I am trained to be a doctor. Even when I am sad, upset, lonely, I am on auto-pilot as a doctor. But as a director I have no learned skills.

"So a story, an idea has to uplift and inspire me to the extent that I cannot rest unless I film it. That is why I have been passive, receptive, waiting for that story to arrive. And do you know? *Maj Rati Keteki* is one of my own stories.

"Before I go further, I want to clarify that I made two telefilms for Doordarshan before *Adajya*. The first was *Aaranyak*, based on a powerful story by psychiatrist and author Dr. Suresh Chakravarty. Then I made another telefilm on a story by acclaimed writer Nirupama Borgohain.

"I feel that male directors are aggressive, testosterone driven. They can push away all other concerns in the pursuit of their work. We women cannot do that, and that is perhaps our loss.

"The title of my new film Maj Rati Keteki is derived from an Assamese poem. Keteki is the hawk-cuckoo whose sorrowful cry can be heard only at night. It is a metaphor for suffering humanity." Bardoloi scripted and directed the film which has won a place in the International competition section of IFFK and a Rajat Kamal.

Interestingly, the film makes a gender-crossover as the protagonist is a famous writer Priyendu Hazarika who returns to the town where he started his literary journey. The different people he meets open the floodgates of memory. The dilemma he confronts as a creative seeker and human being forms the crux of the film. That is all that Bardoloi is willing to reveal at the moment.

Produced by herself, the film is cinematographed by Ghana Shekhar VS and edited by Ushma Bardoloi. The film features Adil Hussain, Shahil Imtiaz, Mahendra Rabha, Sulakshana Barua, Dr. Indu Mohan Das, etc.

One is certain that this is a film worth a wait for Santwana Bardoloi fans.

