

THIRD EYE EDITION

A warm, lighted place (Fiction)

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

That was why Sukhomoy loved to work in Magnolia. Here, some things ceased to exist. He could leave them out in the front steps, somewhere between the fake Japanese lanterns and the squat, tiled marble pots. As soon as he came in at seven every morning, he changed his *dhoti kurta* and slipped onto the maroon tunic with the gold, tarnished buttons in the front. Then he climbed onto his black pleated trousers and slipped into his black shoes. The face that looked back at him in the flyblown mirror of the back room was thin, still boyish, all lines and angles, the grey hair combed sideways. There was something a little arrogant in his nose that jutted out, and sometimes customers thought he was not obsequious enough, and left no tip in the leather folder. But they never looked at his eyes, which was where they could have found the real him – the part of him that was always hurt, always bewildered, as if he had lost the way, but was too shy or proud or cussed to ask for directions.

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

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their minds out of the corner of his eye. Florid faced fathers and heavily painted, shapeless mothers, children in Mickey Mouse T-shirts fidgeting, always fidgeting. Or *Kongs* from forgotten little towns and the countryside with their sad, leathery, defeated faces, slurping tea from their saucers and reluctantly taking out their coins from cloth pouches hanging on hips. Or the hard, brassy hussies in fishnet stockings and short slitted skirts who flicked back their silky hair and crossed their legs, giggling, as the men in fake leather jackets groaned at being denied, always denied.

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

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

Whatever was waiting outside claimed him yet again. Little puffs of mist hung from his mouth as he breathed. Empty cigarette packets, discarded plastic bags swirled along the streets. The lights were still twinkling in the store windows. Maybe Dreamlet was unfurling her fishnet stockings. Maybe Narendra was dreaming his moon faced wife had fled with the woodcutter in some lost Kumaon valley. The egg seller still stood in the main square, with his wicker stand, with the black salt, the pepper and the perfectly boiled eggs. Everyone was waiting in this town. For a generously spending tourist. For a kinder winter that did not chill the bones. For the waterlilies to bloom in the lake again. And the season's first sweet oranges to come, bursting in the tongue, and then the bitter pips to be spat out.

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

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Through the long vista of their shared life, Sukhomoy had barely thought of Malini. She had been from Dacca, a timid little woman with downcast eyes and skin the colour of pale honey, chosen by Sukhomoy's mother, coming into his life with tears and sandalwood dots on her forehead. It was as if they had never learned to feel easy in each other's presence. Even when they had come together, in his father's old house with the wind in the rafters and geckos screeching omens, there had been something furtive, desperate and shameful in the act. And the child, Anuran, it too came between them, hanging onto his mother's sari *pallu*, watching him with dark pools of suspicion. When the press burnt down, and there was no food in the house, no firewood for the winter chill, when her jewellery was pawned, Malini's mouth was like a tap that would not be turned off. He heard that hateful voice even in his sleep. And when the boy began to grow, he joined in, not with words, but by throwing crockery across the room, setting fire to the old books that belonged to many generations of Sukhomoy's family. Then he was in college and there were whisky bottles under his bed, and then the needles, and the strips of Diazepam. As the monster grew and changed shape, like a shadow on the wall, Sukhomoy chose to seek shelter in a warm, lighted place with leather seats and wine red table cloths. A place that carried like a benediction the aroma of freshly cooked food and soft music that gently drowned the rough edges of everyday conversations. Then, one day, he came home to find the monster gone, and a dark bruise on Malini's cheek. He told her he would go looking for him, their son, but he never did.

On his off days, he sometimes went for long, solitary walks, to Don Bosco Square, stopping for a cookie at Gudeth's, then to view the golden Christ on the cross in the emerald grass facing the cathedral. Then to Stonyland and Risa Colony and Kristi Kendra, where he had held on to a balloon and watched Durga *Puja* in a lost boyhood. The stream at Dhankhti was now a dark sluggish trickle. The trees were gone, like friends of his half-remembered past. And sometimes, on a bend in the road, he saw some wild haired human wreck with a polythene sheet wrapped around him, talking to himself, stuffing this mouth with a stale slice of bread. In those moments, a thrill of horror transfixed Sukhomoy to the spot. The colour left his cheeks. His arms felt nerveless. Was this the little boy who once lived in his house, showed him his doodled cars? Whose fault was it that this had happened? And all over the growing city, he found his lost son again and again – asleep on the pavement, curled up like a foetus, jaywalking on the main thoroughfare, strying to enter shops, being growled at by dogs, dank and miserable in the rain. When he did not see one for days, it was as if Sukhomoy breathed more easily. His son was gone, finally. And the haunting would stop.

There were different kinds of farewells, he knew now. The welcome ones, that left peace in their wake, like retreating thunder and angry wind bending the trees. And the other ones – so slow, almost motionless, drop by drop, ebbing away. When Malini sat on a bench in the hospital corridor, he seemed to see her for the first time in the forty years they had been together. There was talcum powder in the fine folds of her neck, and the crisp gold bordered sari billowed around her. Her eyes followed him with a blind, child-like trust as he moved from room to room. Nobody offered much assurance. Nobody had much time. Two months later, he knew that under her starched sari, one of the sagging blue veined breasts

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was gone. He could not imagine how it would look, her deformed body. He barely remembered touching it when it was perfect. Along with the lost breast, Malini lost other things. Her old habit of humming old film songs under her breath. Or flipping through the albums, her finger on some forgotten aunt, a cousin, a neighbour in blurred sepia. Then her saris, given away without a thought to Monu, the Nepali maid who came twice a day. She was going, drop by painful drop, clumps of hair on the pillow, urine on the sheets, bottles of medicines on the sidetable he would hand out when the pain racked her like a vice.

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

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

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

Sukhomoy opened the glass swing door. He raised his face and smelled the frosty air with his proud nose, his eyes suddenly bleak.

"It's cold," he said in a low voice "cold enough. She will stay. Then, I'll have to make the arrangements. I... I must sleep now. Good night. Saha Babu. Have a... have a happy New Year."