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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ  
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An Evening in Delhi  
& Other Stories

Rina Singh

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
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## ABSTRACT

### An Evening in Delhi & Other Stories

Rina Singh

The stories in this thesis are set in urban middle-class India, and are thus linked by place and socio-economic background. The stories explore Indian value patterns, ways of looking at life, attitudes towards religion, caste, dowry, servants, and the importance Indians attach to things like fair complexion, the gender of their children, and social status. The thesis is an attempt to interpret the Indian scene -- bustling, with problems as modern and as timeless as family tensions, thwarted ambitions and personal betrayal.

An Evening in Delhi

& Other Stories

Thanks to Robert, for opening  
a whole new world for me --

And to Lynda, for her endurance

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### The Big Brother

My brother is an elderly man. His hair is mostly white now. He is a Homeopathic doctor. He has a clinic which is very close to the house he owns, where we used to live, my brother, my mother, myself, my wife and my three children. He has a good practice. All day he wraps those tiny white pills in bits of paper, puts them in small brown paper bags and gives them to the sick people. I guess they must get well, because they come back with their ailing children, sick mothers and very old fathers. I don't know how they get well because, I remember, I was sick once. We had gone to our cousin's wedding. I went away with the drivers to have some Indian whiskey. I feel no shame meeting the drivers and drinking with them. But I got sick and started to throw

up. I was brought back to the wedding house where my brother became very angry with me. He gave me some of those sweet white pills, but I continued to be sick for some time.

My brother is a strict vegetarian. He will not allow even an egg to come in the house. He does not even eat garlic or onions. Garlic I can understand, but onions!

I am fifteen years younger than my brother. (In between us are two sisters.) From childhood, my mother has always treated me very gently. I am her youngest child. My brother always says to her, "It is all your doing. You have ruined his life." She is so old, almost deaf now. She cannot hear a thing my brother says to her and she just smiles at him. "There is no need for smiling, mother", I tell her when my brother has gone. I explain to her that he is angry. She somehow understands and strokes my hair.

I would have liked very much to work in an office like my sister's husband in Delhi. He always wears an English suit and carries a briefcase. They even have a telephone in their house and my sister feels so proud every time it rings. It is a nice life they have. But for me, I am a P.T. Master in a village school. They

could at least give me the title of Physical Training Officer or something, but no, it has to be P.T. Master; so cheap, so demeaning. It greatly reduces your status in life. Nobody respects you. There is no joy in life, for what pleasure could there be for me in being a P.T. Master? I am a very thoughtful person and I always like to sit and think my own thoughts and dream my own dreams. But for months and even years I have had to teach the dumb village children to exercise. The children don't respect me, those rogues. The peons treat me as if I was one of them. I get paid only 400 Rupees per month, while other teachers get 600 Rupees. So from time to time I fight with the principal on some pretext or other, and he throws me out of the school. But my brother has a very influential friend in the Government Service, some Commissioner or something. He always gets me reinstated and transferred to another village school near our town. It has been like this for many years and has now become a way of life for me.

A few years back, I fell into bad company and I took up drinking. I gave up the bad company at my family's request, but could not give up drinking. Since I cannot drink at home -- my brother would not hear of it -- I go to the Shalimar Hotel. It is a small place with a few

tables and wooden benches. I am also fond of seeing films. I am often sad and films make me happy. It makes me happy to see the beautiful women dressed in lovely clothes and golden necklaces. They always have such handsome lovers singing love songs to them. I am myself not a bad-looking man. I am quite tall and when I wear my imported jeans and sunglasses I am told I resemble Vinod Khanna, the film star. During the film I imagine that I am the lover of a beautiful heroine. I am such a dreamer. After the film is over, I never go home straightaway, because I do not want my dreams to get shattered. My wife is not at all a beautiful woman.

I was very disappointed in her when they first showed her to me. I didn't eat for two days. But my sisters, what a cry they raised. They threatened to do all sorts of things. I finally gave in and married her. Now I have grown used to her. I remember when she got pregnant with our eldest daughter, who is now six, I didn't come home for one week. I was so embarrassed. Now, I thought, she will go around with a big belly and the whole town will know what I did to her at night. But I got over that. Now we also have a son who is four and another daughter who is one and a half. My eldest daughter goes to a convent school and can speak

English. It was my brother's wish to send her to a convent school. It is clearly my brother's duty to keep me and my family, for I earn only 400 Rupees, which is barely enough for me, let alone for a family. But my brother does not mind. He is like that, always doing things for others. When he was young, he refused to get married because he wanted to serve his family. Then he became too old and my sisters were not able to find a suitable match for him. My wife is very much afraid of my brother. She will serve food to my brother before she will serve me. It is strange that a wife should serve her brother-in-law before her husband, but it is so in our house. I am jealous of this privilege my brother has, but I cannot say anything, because I live in his house.

I wanted her to be afraid of me also, so one day I hit her across the face. I hit her because I was angry over something and also I wanted to see how afraid she would get. I thought she would humble herself before me and beg for my pardon. But she stood there and stared at me in disbelief, as if I had committed a crime or something. She didn't even cry, the shameless hussy. She went straight to my brother and told on me. He called me a wife-beater and warned me never to raise a hand at her

again and sent me back to my room. I have this friend who beats his wife black and blue, but she never complains. I don't know what it is with my wife. She has a screw loose or something. I was still angry with her for telling my brother that I had hit her and it was in my mind to teach her a lesson. Many weeks passed however and I forgot about the whole thing.

One day I was coming back from the school on my bicycle, which makes me so miserable. I wish I had a scooter like my sister's husband, but no, my brother will never buy me a scooter. He will send my daughter to a convent school, but not buy me a scooter. Anyway, I was coming home on my bicycle when I got a puncture. I could not find a repair shop, so I had to walk a good four miles at least, and I was really tired. On reaching town, instead of going home I went to the Shalimar Hotel and started drinking. Time passed and I had one too many. The proprietor told me to go home. I think he suspected I had not enough money. I paid him and went home. When I knocked on the door my wife opened it. I threw my bicycle on the floor, pushed my wife towards the kitchen and demanded food from her. She said she was serving my brother and would serve me after that. I was really getting angry. What did she mean, she would serve

me after that? "I want my food. And I want it now." I raised my voice. "You must wait. I will serve Bhai sahib first and then I will serve you," she said.

I don't remember what all I said after that, because to tell you the truth I was really drunk. But from what they tell me I asked my wife who her husband was, me or my brother? I even told my brother he had something going with my wife. But what I remember is being slapped across the face several times and thrown to the floor. Then I was dragged by my arms and thrown onto the street. By this time the neighbours had opened their windows and doors, whichever gave a better view, and were watching the whole scene with great interest.

I had started to come to my senses and realized what I had probably done. My wife left no stone unturned to tell me what vicious things I had said. She told me to go in and apologize to my brother. In the circumstances, I thought that would be the best thing to do. I went in and begged my brother to forgive me. I stood there with my eyes lowered, humiliating myself. I begged him so many times. So many times I told him that he was my mother and my father and that I looked only to him for my life and the lives of my children. But no, he said, I must go. I must leave at once. I must take my family

with me, my wife and all the children, even the daughter who studies in the convent school, and get out of his house, his life. "Get away from my eyes!" he yelled.

I had never seen him like that before, angry yes, but never like that. Now I was truly afraid. I had nowhere to go. Where would I take my wife and children? She suggested she would go to her parents' house which was five miles from there. So we hired a rickshaw and I sent them off. I myself went to a park and slept on the bench there. I was too ashamed to face anyone. My almost deaf mother slept through the whole drama.

In the morning, I went to my sister who lives in the same town and told her what had happened. She nearly killed me. She was so angry. She kept saying, "How could you? How could you? Your brother is such a saint. How could you be so vile, so ungrateful? He looks after you, your wife, your children. Now you go to the streets and eat with the dogs."

After much cursing she told me to sit down, and made tea for me. I was so hungry, I asked her to give me something to eat also. She promised she would go to my brother and ask him to forgive me, but she also threatened that if I ever behaved like that again, I was on my own. I touched my ears. Not again, sister. She

told me to come back in the evening and find out what my brother had said. I went back, but she said on no condition would he take us back. What was I to do? A few weeks passed. Sometimes I slept at the school, sometimes at my sister's, but things were not moving. Whenever I went to visit my wife, she would start wailing aloud, informing her father's neighbours about the whole affair. I was so fed up, I stopped going there altogether.

It was then decided that my sister in Delhi should be called and she would negotiate with my brother. She came and stayed with my other sister and said the same thing, "How could you? How could you? Your brother is such a saint." She also told me to go down myself in a glass of water. And I listened with my head bent, my eyes lowered. I had no choice but beg her pardon too. She finally told me to go away and to come back in the evening. Meanwhile she would try to pacify my brother and ask him to forgive me. I felt maybe she would be able to influence my brother and he would give me another chance. I felt a little light-hearted and decided I would go to see a film. That way time would move faster."

When I was watching the movie, I forgot all my troubles. I forgot I had a brother who had turned me out

of his house, a wife who was ugly, and a job I despised. I was transported to a world so truly beautiful, where everyone was handsome and rich, and all the problems they had were resolved in the end. But the film was over now and it was getting late. I was hungry and realized that I had not had a good home-made meal for so long. I had to go to my sister's house and I wondered if she would offer me food. I went on my way, secretly hoping she had made chicken curry with lots of spices and onions.

## Didi

Indira woke up to the sounds of the dogs barking on the street outside. That must be the milkman, she thought. He had been coming at seven in the morning for as long as she could remember. She had been married for almost six years now, but it seemed like forever, as if she had known no other life but this. The dogs always barked at the milkman. It was not as if they didn't like him. They also barked at the postman and they loved him. They would stay with him till he had distributed all the letters from house to house and disappeared from the street on his bicycle. The milkman would walk past the dogs in a very resigned manner, almost ignoring them, singing a religious tune to himself. If one tried to come too close, he would either stamp his foot on the

ground or try to drive them away by pretending to hit them with his pail of milk. She could hear him knocking on their neighbour's door. She lay on her back, staring at the tin roof. Theirs was a makeshift room on the terrace. It had two string cots, and one wooden table, on which she kept a small mirror, her comb, a few lipsticks and some talcum powder. Beside the table was an iron chair on which they kept a table fan. Both were badly rusted. Under the string cots were two trunks containing their clothes. Over their heads was that tin roof on which the sun would beat all day. It was better anyway than sharing a room with her sister-in-law's two sons, ages fourteen and eleven. There were only two bedrooms downstairs. One was occupied by her sister-in-law and brother-in-law and the other was taken up by the boys.

There was a big veranda where a dining table was kept along with a few comfortable chairs. It was here that Indira and her sister-in-law spent most of their time. One corner, hidden by a curtain, contained the servant's charpoy. There was also a small living room with a sofa set and a table in the centre that was used to receive business clients. Her brother-in-law had a small factory which made scientific instruments.

Indira's husband also worked for him. Her sister-in-law handled the sale of the instruments to big industries, and for this reason businessmen would often come to their house to discuss business matters.

Many times Indira had begged her husband to get them a place of their own. She had told him that she would be happy even in one room, if it had a small kitchen and a bathroom. At least it would be a place she could call her own. But her husband always laughed it off. He asked her where she got such notions, and to banish any such thoughts, for he would not think of living anywhere else. And besides he didn't make enough money. His brother gave them food and lodging and also some pocket money. There was another advantage -- he didn't work when he didn't feel like it, which was quite often, she thought bitterly. She looked at her husband, sleeping heavily, absolutely unaware of her unhappiness. She sighed.

The milkman knocked on their door. She heard her sister-in-law or 'Didi' as Indira respectfully called her, shouting, "I am coming, old man, I am coming. I'm not deaf."

She heard the door open and Didi go into the kitchen to fetch a pot for milk. Indira heard her exclaim: "You

thief of somewhere, you added water to the milk again. In your old age you cheat innocent people! How will you show your face to God? I ask you. - You can have it written from me that you will not find a place for yourself even in Hell."

The milkman then started to swear on his children, every one of them, protesting that the accusations were not true. The buffaloes, he claimed, were giving thin milk these days, but he always gave them enough to eat.

And so the day started. Indira got out of bed, straightened her crumpled saree and combed her hair. Didi did not approve of her sleeping late, especially if she was up herself. She went downstairs to use the bathroom. There was only one for the whole household. She touched Didi's feet and wished her good morning.

"Oh, the queen has got up," Didi said, more out of habit than anything else. Indira did not give it any thought. She knew no harm was meant. She had a sharp tongue, her sister-in-law, sharp as a pair of scissors and she made maximum use of it. Sometimes, though, Indira wished she wouldn't start off so early in the morning.

"So, the milkman added water again today?" she asked.

"Yes, that thief," Didi replied. Indira went into the bathroom, and from inside she heard Didi roaring at the servant.

"Govind! Govind! Have you died or something? Where is the tea I asked you for? Nobody listens to me in this house."

Govind appeared with a cup of tea. He was only fifteen years old, and everyone bossed him around. Govind, do this, Govind, do that, Govind, get me water, Govind, polish my shoes, Govind, run to the market and get me cigarettes. Poor Govind, there was only one of him and it never occurred to anybody to say a word of thanks or appreciation; but he didn't seem to mind.

"What is this? Tea or mud boiled in water?" Didi demanded.

"Tea, Mensahib," he replied.

Didi then told him to go to the market and get a dozen eggs. She took out two Rupees rolled in a handkerchief which she kept in her bosom. She told him to come back in twenty minutes or she would break his legs. Govind ran out quickly. He loved to go on errands like this and always took extra time. Sometimes he didn't return for hours. He was always scolded when he came back. Only Govind could take all that, for all the

previous servants had either run away or been dismissed after a few weeks. There had been one very sensitive, frail boy from the hills who had come to work in their house. He burst into tears every time Didi spoke to him harshly, and left after a week. But Govind was strong. He had been around for almost two years now. He only had one weakness, films. He was crazy about seeing films. He had posters of film actresses on the wall above his charpoy and he had a small transistor radio which blared film songs all day long. He spent most of his salary on films and film magazines.

\* \* \*

Didi started sucking her tea very noisily. Was there anything Didi did softly, Indira wondered. Didi was a short woman with a generous bosom from which her saree was always slipping, often when businessmen visited their house, and especially when Mr. Kapoor came. Didi took great care in dressing up for Mr. Kapoor, for he was an important client. There was something about her face which made her very appealing. She had a firm skin like a young girl's and big black eyes which looked even bigger when she outlined them with kajal. She usually wore a bright lipstick and always the red mark on her

forehead.

\* \* \*

Indira's husband came down the stairs, rolling the sleeves of his kurta, asking for Govind: "Govind. Govind, get me some tea."

"And why should Govind get you some tea? What should your wife do, sit with hands folded? Why don't you make a throne for her where she can sit all day? These good-for-nothings, both of them". She meant Indira and her husband. Meanwhile, Indira had come out of the bathroom and quickly gone into the kitchen to make tea.

\* \* \*

Her husband and Didi fought all the time. They argued over everything and she disapproved of everything he did. She didn't like his shirts, they were too loud. She didn't like his hair, it was too oily. She didn't like his posture, it was like an old man's. She didn't like his friends, they were all loafers. There was no end to it.

But sometimes they sat together on the veranda and laughed heartily over some client or somebody living in

the neighbourhood, as if they were the best of friends.

\* \* \*

The household had started stirring. Indira's brother-in-law and the boys came out of their rooms yawning and stretching their arms. They all wanted Govind and some tea. Govind was not home and the boys were too young to have tea. Indira was ordered to make only one cup of tea for her brother-in-law. He was a big man with curly hair. He rarely spoke and was always scratching his thighs. He was utterly dependent on Didi to manage his business.

Meanwhile Govind came back and both Indira and he started to prepare breakfast. The boys got ready and breakfasted. "Eat my sons, eat," Didi coaxed them. But they needed no coaxing. They had appetites like elephants and if they didn't watch out, Indira thought, they would start looking like them. They devoured the parathas with pickles, butter and milk, and were gone till five o'clock.

When Indira's husband came for breakfast and asked for a third paratha, Didi looked at him and asked,

"What do you have inside? A stomach or a well? Are you going to sit on my head all your life, just eating

and breaking beds?"

But this didn't stop him from taking a third paratha and a fourth.

\* \* \*

By ten o'clock the men were out of the house. Indira went around the rooms dusting. The sweeper girl came later, around twelve o'clock, to clean the floors and the bathroom. Didi sat on the veranda, her feet up on a stool, reading the newspaper and ordering Govind and Indira to do various chores.

At eleven o'clock, when the vendor came, Didi went out in the street and haggled with him over the price of potatoes, cabbage and peas. She came back with the vegetables, calling the vendor a thief.

Once or twice a week, they went to the fruit market. Didi and she. Didi made her carry a plastic basket and they went from shop to shop trying to find the cheapest prices. There was one shopkeeper she always went to and asked, pointing at the mangoes, "What is the price of those mangoes?" If he said "Eight Rupees a kilo", she would stand there with one hand holding her purse and the other on her hip. "Eight Rupees for these mangoes? These undernourished mangoes? Even my sweeper would not

eat them."

"All right," he said, coming down to seven Rupees. But no, Didi would not pay more than six Rupees. He would finally give in, grumbling that he and his family would starve to death if he had more customers like her.

\* \* \*

After their shopping they sometimes hired a rickshaw. Didi would haggle with the rickshaw-puller also. It became embarrassing, because these rickshaw pullers had become very bold. They argued with you and even said insulting things, instead of accepting what was given to them. Indira had no say in the matter, and moreover she was afraid to displease Didi. If the rickshaw puller asked for two Rupees, Didi said one Rupee -- always half the amount. If he didn't come down in price, she called him a thief and tried to get another rickshaw for a lower price. If she didn't succeed, she just walked home, with Indira treading behind her.

\* \* \*

Radha, the sweeper girl came at one o'clock that day. She was quite a young girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen. She was very dark, and whenever she asked

Didi to give her an old saree, she was told to go look in the mirror first, her face was like the back of a frying pan. She was engaged to a tailor and felt very shy if somebody mentioned his name or brought up the subject of her marriage. First it had been Sarla, Radha's sister who had worked there, but then something happened and Didi had forbidden her to enter their house.

It so happened, some three years ago, Didi and Indira had planned to go to the cinema to see a matinee show. In those days they had another servant called Hari, a young man of about twenty-one years. He always used to tease Sarla, calling her "my cauliflower" and "my black rose", for she too was dark-complexioned. But it was all in fun. Sometimes Sarla complained to Didi and Hari was scolded, but the whole matter was never taken seriously. So Didi told her to finish the work on her own, and go home later. Indira and Didi went to the three o'clock show, but upon getting there, they found out that the house was full and there was no chance of getting tickets. So they visited a few shops, had ice cream, and came back. They were shocked to find Hari and Sarla together on the string cot on the veranda. They were embracing and laughing. When Didi saw them, she took off her slipper and started beating Hari. She called him so

many names. She said she would hack his bones into tiny pieces and feed them to the dogs. Sarla had quickly started buttoning her blouse. She was not spared either. Didi called her a bitch and a prostitute and said that if Sarla ever showed her face in the neighbourhood again she would find her skin peeled off and fed to the vultures. Sarla disappeared quickly and Didi told Hari to roll up his bundle.

For days they talked of nothing else. Then Radha replaced her sister and was warned that if she gave a performance like her sister's she would be skinned alive. That was enough for her and she never misbehaved. Moreover, she was engaged to be married.

That day she came an hour later than usual. It was her turn to be scolded, Indira thought.

"Oh, Radha memsahib has come. Should we make tea for her? Were you dead or something? Or was it your mother-in-law's funeral you went to?" Didi shouted at her. Radha did not reply and was told to clean the house properly. It was Tuesday, and usually on Tuesdays and Fridays Mr. Kapoor came to visit in the afternoons.

Kapoor Sahib, as he was respectfully called by everyone, was a rich man. He owned the biggest scientific industry in town and always came in a chauffeur-driven

car. He gave them a lot of business. At first he came only in the evenings when everyone was home. They used to all sit together, have tea, and talk, but not much business would be discussed. At that time he used to place very small orders. Then he started to visit in the afternoons when only Didi and Indira were home. At first they would sit in the living room, but that room got sun in the afternoons and it became very hot there. One day Didi casually complained that the heat was unbearable. The very next day Kapoor sahib had a water cooler installed in Didi's bedroom. After that Didi would take Kapoor Sahib to her bedroom for those afternoon discussions.

It was around that time that Kapoor Sahib started giving them a lot of business. He was a real gentlemen. He was always polite to Indira if he ran into her and asked after her health. He never came empty-handed. He brought cakes and pastries from the best bakery in town. On every festival he brought a new saree for Didi. Sometimes he brought a little gift for Indira also. After they had finished discussing business, Didi made special tea for him with herbs and spices. She served the cakes he brought and sometimes made fritters stuffed

with chillies.

That day Didi asked her to prepare the batter for fritters for the evening tea. Indira had done it after lunch, before retiring for her afternoon nap. After a while she heard a car horn in the street. That must be Kapoor Sahib's car, she thought. She heard the door open and after about five minutes she heard the car drive off. That was strange. She debated whether she should go down on some pretext to see what the matter was, but then she thought it was none of her business. But she felt uneasy and could not sleep. She put on her slippers and came downstairs very softly. She thought that if she was questioned as to why she had come down she would say that it was to get cold water from the fridge. It was such a hot afternoon. Didi's bedroom door was closed and she could hear her crying. Indira knocked and went inside. Didi was lying on the bed and sobbing.

"What's the matter, Didi? Who came just now? Whose car was that?"

But Indira got no reply. She held Didi close to her and finally was able to make out something. It was Kapoor Sahib's driver. He had come and told her Mr. Kapoor had died that morning of a stroke.

Kapoor Sahib dead? How could that be? He couldn't

die. He was larger than life and such a nice man. The same evening they went to the funeral. Didi was in control of herself and not once did she cry in front of Mrs. Kapoor, who even in her grief shot suspicious glances at Didi. The women could be seen whispering to each other whenever they looked at Didi.

\* \* \*

It is three months now since Mr. Kapoor's death. Didi never quarrels with the milkman or the vendors anymore, rarely goes to the market to buy mangoes and never fights with Indira or her husband. It is as if a light has gone out of the house. Indira misses those days and most of all she misses those delicious cakes and pastries with the evening tea. She sincerely hopes that Didi will start shouting at her or the servant.

Lily.

I

I remember my first day in this house. I sat on my bridal bed and looked around. It was such a large room. It seemed large then because it was mostly empty, except for the dunlop bed on which I sat, the dressing table, partly wrapped in brown paper, and the steel almira, all of which my father had included in the dowry. My suitcases were lying against the wall, packed with my new sarees and other household items. I was wearing my red brocade saree and gold ornaments. My mother-in-law or "Maji" as her children called her, had insisted that I wear all my jewelry in the presence of wedding guests who were curious to know how much gold I had brought in my

dowry. I was waiting for Niren, my husband. I hardly knew him. It was an arranged marriage and I was both nervous and excited. He was a lecturer in English Literature at a local college and was in the middle of finishing his Ph.D. He was writing his thesis on D.H. Lawrence. I had been very impressed by that. I secretly hoped to become a writer, and I kept a diary in which I wrote poems and short stories. I thought Niren would encourage me to write more and appreciate what I had written. I had myself wanted to do a Masters in English Literature after my B.A., but my father would not hear of it. He wanted me to get married and settle down. How my father had cried when I said good-bye to the family. Thinking about that, I began to cry a little myself. It was then Niren came and said he understood that I missed my family. He promised he would do everything he could to make me happy. I told him it was a big house they lived in. Yes, he said, it was his grandfather's house, and was passed on to his father, who, rest his soul, had died a few years back. Now it belonged to him and his younger brother, Ranjit. The house had a central courtyard and many rooms opening out from it. On one side was a veranda supported by three pillars. The walls were damp from the previous year's monsoons and the

doors needed to be painted.

Niren talked at length about his family. His mother, he said, suffered from high blood pressure, and as a result occasionally lost her temper. But it was the other way around, I discovered later. First she lost her temper, then her blood pressure went up.

Niren's brother, Ranjit, was a salesman with a well-known medical firm. And it was time Ranjit settled down with a girl from a good family instead of having an affair with Lily, that Christian nurse, said Niren. Kamla, his sister, was the one my husband was most worried about. He seemed anxious to find a suitable match for her and get her married. She was another of the reasons his mother sometimes became ill-tempered, he explained. And on this note, my married life began.

In the beginning we were invited to a lot of dinners given by my husband's colleagues. After one such dinner, when we came home to our room, I discovered to my dismay that our bed was no longer there. It had been replaced by two string cots. I was speechless with anger. Niren noticed the string cots and also saw that I was very upset. He said, "Why does Maji do these things? Look, darling, if it bothers you too much to sleep on charpoys, I will go and get the bed back from her room. As for me,

I don't care. I can even sleep on the floor." I felt ashamed of my petty feelings, especially when he was trying to be so noble. I told him it didn't matter, but I cried myself to sleep that night. It was that same night that Niren told me to read Sons and Lovers. That bed -- how lovingly my father had purchased that bed, and for so much money! Money does not grow on trees, you know. Maji had been eyeing that bed ever since she had first seen it. She had often touched it and remarked on its quality. Then she would add that she hated to sleep on her charpoy. It was no good for an old woman's back, she'd say. Next morning Maji kept glancing at me, waiting for me to say something, but when I did not mention the incident at all, she seemed very disappointed.

Maji was a large and greedy woman, and being a widow she always dressed in white. She frequently beat the servant when her sons were not around, and from her talk it seemed that her only aim in life was to show various people stars in daylight. She always treated me like an outsider and gradually she started saying rude things to me. She said that she would marry Ranjit into a well-to-do family, because from my parents she'd got nothing. At first I kept quiet, but by and by I became a

little bold.

"Your father didn't even give you a dinner set," she said one day.

"He gave me a sofa set, didn't he?" I replied.

"Sofa set!", she said sarcastically, "What is a sofa set? Even a peon would give a sofa set to his daughter."

And every day it was one thing or the other that my father had not given. One day we both sat on the veranda, shelling peas, and she said that my father had not given a dining table in the dowry. That day I gave her hell. I thought the whole thing was going too far. My husband has a very mild temperament and was anyway occupied with his damned thesis, that Lawrence, his sons, and their damned lovers. I had to stand up for myself. I told her quite sharply, "Well, I didn't know I was getting married into a family that doesn't even own a dining table."

She told me that I had a sharp tongue, and cast suspicion on the reputation of my family. I told her approximately how long her own drooling tongue was. My guess was nine yards. And I told her that women with such long tongues obviously didn't come from good families. I also told her that she should be ashamed of herself for sitting in the court yard, always scratching

her fat legs in front of her grown-up sons and the servant, instead of putting oil on them and keeping them covered with the saree.

She kept saying, "Let him come. Let him come. He will beat the hell out of you. If I don't show you stars in daylight, my name is not Maya." She had worked herself up into such a frenzy that the moment Niren entered she clasped him and wailed aloud, "Oh, Oh my son, Oh my son ..."

I stood there on the veranda leaning against a pillar, looking defiantly at them. She went on to narrate something entirely different from what had happened. Niren told his mother to behave in a gentle fashion and not like a street woman. That night Maji took to bed complaining of blood pressure. Every time she lost a fight she took to bed, saying it was her blood pressure again.

## II

Kamla, Niren's sister, was quite different from her mother. She was splendidly built and had a very bad complexion. At first she was cautious with me, very distant and polite. I think she was under the influence of her mother's attitude towards me. As she had no

friends of her own to talk to she sometimes came to my room in the afternoons and talked to me. All she talked about was men. She asked a lot of questions about the physical relations between men and women. Sometimes it became disgusting. Once I told her that if she asked me any more questions, I would tell her brother.

I should probably not say it, but she was quite a useless character. She never helped in the kitchen, she had no useful hobbies to occupy her time. From morning till evening she sat in the courtyard or on the veranda, listening to the transistor radio and either filing her nails or reading romantic novels. She had only completed high school and was not at all interested in pursuing further studies. She was already twenty-seven years old and unmarried.

Maji worried about her a lot. When some old women from the neighbourhood came to visit her, (Maji's temple buddies, as Ranjit called them), she talked of nothing else but her daughter's forthcoming marriage.

On Sunday mornings, she asked Niren to go through the matrimonial column of The Tribune and underline the advertisements he thought suitable for Kamla and instructed him to start a correspondence with the concerned parties. When the replies to those letters

started coming in, Kamla became very friendly with me, friendlier than usual. Once she offered to wash my hair with her imported shampoo, which she was keeping for her wedding day. She insisted on plucking my eyebrows and putting mud packs on my face, even though I didn't want them. After that she somehow manoeuvred the conversation to the subject of marriage and she asked me to steal those letters from Niren's file. I could hardly refuse, after having accepted her bribes. She locked my bedroom door from inside and read the letters as if they were letters from a lover whose presence was being denied to her. If there was a photograph of a prospective suitor, she asked my opinion and gave her own. If she liked the particulars of any boy, she requested me to recommend him to her brother. I did whatever she told me, for I was as eager as she was, if not more so that she get married. It was pathetic to see her waste her life like that.

Whenever a boy was invited to look her over, Maji came to my room, opened my steel almira and picked out a saree to dress up her daughter. They were almost new sarees, for I was newly married myself. All evening I worried that Kamla would drop tea on it, or syrup from the sweets. Sometimes Maji forgot to give them back to

me. . It was always with my silk sarees she forgot. One day, I remember, she walked out with my pink and silver brocade saree and did not return it. I cried that night, how I cried. I was inconsolable. Niren said he would buy me another exactly like it. I told him it cost almost a thousand Rupees. He was silent. After he had pacified me a little, he told me to read Sons and Lovers.

"Sons and Lovers!", I said in frustration. "What has 'Sons and Lovers' got to do with my pink and silver saree?" I cried even louder.

I was more eager, than ever that Kamla should get married. Then one day, finally, to everyone's relief a boy approved of her and she approved of him and they became engaged. Maji did not want to waste any time. She wanted them to get married within a week. Kamla's future in-laws were surprised. They enquired if one week was enough for preparation. Maji said, yes, that the dowry was already prepared.

So Kamla was married and gone, but not for long. She came back with strange problems of her own. Her mother-in-law made her sweep the floors. In her husband's absence, her brother-in-law made passes at her. Kamla could be seen moving in and out of our household. When she was in, both mother and daughter sat in the

courtyard and cursed the old hag that Kamla's mother-in-law was. Maji moaned when Kamla was gone, "A daughter's grief is like carrying a mountain on your chest."

## III

The least concerned about the family problems was Ranjit. He was having a big love affair with Lily and he made no secret of it. He took her everywhere on his motorcycle, to the restaurants, and the cinema. He was also very disrespectful to his mother. She begged him to give up "that Christian girl" and accept a proposal from some rich family. She warned him that if everybody knew about his affair nobody would give his daughter to him in marriage.

He often told her to mind her own business and suggested that she spend more time in prayer rather than meddling with his affairs. I used to tease Ranjit, asking him when I would see the famous "Miss Lily". He would say with a twinkle in his eye, "Soon sister-in-law, soon."

One day, he did bring her home. She was not the beauty I had imagined her to be, but she was extremely smart. She had short curly hair, a wheatish complexion

and wore a very fashionable skirt and blouse. Maji threw a fit when she saw Lily's naked legs, not because anything was wrong with them -- they were shapely -- but because it was not proper for girls to show their legs at all. It was different with Lily: she was a Christian, and all the girls from the Christian community wore dresses. Maji began suffering from high blood pressure again. After that Ranjit started bringing Lily home more often. I liked her from the beginning. She was very friendly and took great interest in me.

One day she just moved in. Ranjit carried her suitcase to his room. Maji would not survive, we thought. But Ranjit explained that they had been married in civil court. Next morning Lily got dressed in her starched uniform and ordered the servant to prepare breakfast for her as she was late for work. The way she made herself at home so soon, I felt as if she had always been a part of the family.

Most of the day Lily was out, and I noticed that Maji had started being more friendly with me. She told me to stay away from the she-devil, who had enticed an innocent son with her black powers. "What evil fate has brought such a woman into our house?" She cried from time to time.

I paid no attention to her. I looked forward to the days Lily was not working. I enjoyed her company. I sometimes read a magazine while she sat in the courtyard putting curlers in her hair or painting her nails. It was then she talked about herself, her work, her life. She told me all the hospital gossip. I knew which nurse was having an affair with which doctor. She told me that Mrs. Puri, our neighbour, had gone to the hospital to have an abortion. She must be having an affair with someone, she said, and asked me to investigate.

She also talked about herself. She was an orphan, raised by Christian missionaries. Those sisters were so good to her, she said with tears in her eyes. They had raised her and sent her to nursing school, but she had Hindu blood in her veins, she said, showing me her wrists. I told her it didn't matter whether she was a Hindu or a Christian as long as she was a nice person, which she was. But she didn't like the way the "old woman" went on and on about her being a Christian, as if she was an untouchable.

If Maji called Lily a she-devil to her face or insulted her, Lily would say to Maji, "I'll give you an injection so big..." Then she would pause and hold the palms of her hand about a foot apart. Sometimes she

brought them closer or spread them further apart to illustrate the size of the imaginary injection; and then she would finish, "... that you will not wake up for weeks." Sometimes she said it very seriously, in a tone one would use to scare a child, while at other times she would burst out laughing, as if she was entertaining some amusing fantasy.

Maji meanwhile had become more and more ill-tempered. Her one aim in life was to get rid of Lily.

One day Lily was in the kitchen. It was her day off and she was making minced meat. She only liked it the way she cooked it, with tomatoes and green chillies. She had sent the servant to the market to get fresh bread and Campa Cola and she seemed very happy, probably looking forward to the delicious snack she was preparing. I was on the veranda reading a book. Maji went into the kitchen, looking for something. I heard Lily say, "What are you doing in the kitchen? Don't you know I'm cooking meat?"

Maji, being a vegetarian, disliked meat being cooked in her kitchen, but she could not stop Lily from doing it. I looked over my book and saw Lily scoop her finger in the meat and bring it close to Maji's mouth.

"Here, taste it," she said teasingly.

, "Get away from me, you she-devil of somewhere." Maji screamed and hit Lily on the hand. Lily put the finger in her mouth and exclaimed that it was delicious. I had hardly looked down when I heard Lily scream. When I looked up she was drenched in kerosene and Maji was trying to set Lily's saree on fire by putting one end of it on the burning stove. I stood up, shocked, my hand over my mouth. By the time I reached the kitchen both of them were on the floor, wrestling with each other. I grabbed a kitchen towel to put out the fire and pulled them apart. Lily was shaken. She had suffered a minor burn on her hand while trying to pull the burning saree from the stove. I took her to her room, put Burnol on her hand and told her to bathe and change into fresh clothes, then rest till Ranjit came.

Maji, meanwhile, suffered from high blood pressure. When Niren and Ranjit learned about the incident, they apologized profusely for their mother, who had gone mad, they said. But they said nothing to their mother because that evening her blood pressure soared to a record high. She had suffered from a heart attack.

She was admitted to the hospital. Lily generously offered to take care of her. She informed us that she

had requested Dr. Seth to do special check-ups. Dr. Seth was head of the Cardiology Department. Even the interns were afraid to approach him, but she, a mere nurse, had asked him to do this personal favour. Maji was in good hands, she reassured us. A month passed and Maji was still in the hospital. Whenever Niren or I asked her when Maji would come home, she said, "oh, a few more days." Dr. Seth wanted to do more tests on her. One day Ranjit asked her when Maji was coming home. He said it had been more than a month, and wasn't it a little unusual that Maji was taking so long to recover? Lily really got angry at him. She shouted at him. First she called him stupid, then she said,

"You can go and fetch her now, if you want. I will tell Dr. Seth to discharge her this minute, but..." she paused heavily, "if something happens to her..." She left the sentence incomplete. It must have carried weight because Ranjit began to apologize, called her darling, and saying that he didn't mean anything. He just wanted to know how his mother was.

In fact we all had to rely on Lily to tell us about the progress of Maji's health, because whenever any one of us went to the hospital, Dr. Seth was never on duty,

or if he was on duty, he was never available. He was either in surgery or in a meeting.

And Maji, how could anybody ask Maji how she was. Whenever we went to visit her, she was either sleeping or too drowsy to talk.

### The White Man

Mr. Dube, or "Dubeji" as he was respectfully known by the people of his town, was the founder of the Dube Marriage Bureau. At the age of thirty-two he had got the idea for the business after his own parents failed to find a match for him. He felt that young men and women were unable to find suitable matches because there was no one to introduce them to the right people at the right age. He hired a shop in a busy street from which he operated his ambitious venture. Twenty years later he owned not only the shop but the whole building in which the shop was located. He had the upper portion converted into his residence where he lived with his wife, whom he had wed at the old age of thirty-eight. They had two children. In the lower portion he took two other

shops and turned them into a fairly large office. In the office was a dais, covered with a mattress and a white sheet. Cushions were placed on three sides of the dais. Dubeji sat there from ten to six with a desk in front of him. The legs of the desk were cut short in order for him to use it while sitting on the dais. A little further away was a table with a typewriter and a chair for his typist cum accountant. There were also some chairs for visitors. On the wall above the dais was a framed picture of his dead father, who was a lot fatter than Dubeji and had a very mean look in his eyes. This was the same father who had failed to find a match for him.

Dubeji was a fat and kindly man. He always dressed in white kurta pyjama, and came to be greatly respected by the people of the town. Wherever he went people greeted him with folded hands. Even passers-by in the street who saw him sitting on the dais greeted him humbly. Dubeji would merely nod his head, because it would have been very tiring for him to fold his hands every time someone greeted him. By his side was a black telephone which rang only now and then. Usually people preferred to come in person. When it rang, Dubeji preferred to answer it himself, speaking very loudly to the party on the other end. When Dubeji spoke on the

phone, the typist stopped his work because the conversation, almost always about somebody's marriage, distracted him.

From ten to six was open house. People came with pictures of their sons and daughters. Those who were in a greater hurry brought their sons and daughters along in person. Dubeji greatly objected to that, for what business was it of those sons and daughters to be present while their marriage was being discussed and arranged? While the sons and daughters hung their heads in shame and embarrassment, Dubeji wrote the particulars -- the age, occupation and family details of the boy and the age, talents and family background of the girl. The information was later typed by the typist and filed away.

Dubeji charged 100 Rupees to each party for any meeting he arranged between them. He did the ground work, judged the compatibility of the two families to the best of his judgment, then simply brought them together. Whether something materialized out of the meeting or not was no concern of Dubeji's, nor was he responsible for any trouble arising after the marriage had taken place. He made it very clear to his clients that it was his job to bring the two parties together and their job to check each other out closely. If someone blamed Dubeji for a

broken marriage he simply told them that being a marriage broker was like being a property broker. If the property broker sold someone a house in winter and the house started leaking in the monsoons, well too bad! It was not the broker's responsibility, now was it? But if the meeting materialized and resulted in marriage, Dubeji was always invited. He charged nothing extra for that, though a box of sweets was optional.

A fee of 100 Rupees was no hard and fast rule. Dubeji often made concessions to less well-off people, especially to poor men with many daughters of marriageable age. On the other hand, there was an extra charge if the girl in question was dark-complexioned or, had pimples on her face. As a matter of principle, Dubeji did not consider boys without jobs, but an exception could be made if the father of the boy owned a business. He also entertained requests from widowed or divorced people, but for them the price was slightly higher. As the saleability of the goods decreased, Dubeji's fees increased.

Although Dubeji had some knowledge of astrology, he employed the services of a professional astrologer. It was absolutely essential to be accurate. You could not marry someone's only daughter whose Jupiter was in the

sixth house to a boy whose moon was facing the Jupiter. That could annoy the girl's Saturn in the eighth house and cause the death of the girl in the very first year of marriage. Many things had to be taken into consideration. It was indeed a very responsible job and Dubeji was very much aware of it. He ran his business efficiently, and wisely spent money on advertising. He had all the available walls of the town as well as those of the outskirts, painted in bold letters, both in English and Hindi --

**MARRIAGES WERE MADE IN HEAVEN**

**BUT ARE FIXED BY DUBEJI**

For further information call 69146

or visit in person, at 43, Merchant's Market

He occasionally had flyers printed with promises of a beautiful bride to the families of eligible boys and dowryless marriages to the families of eligible girls. The flyers were distributed with the newspapers. In a country where it was hard to find a son-in-law whose family did not desire refrigerators or T.V. sets or a daughter-in-law who was fair-complexioned, who could resist the tempting offers made by Dubeji? In such a country Dubeji's business was bound to flourish.

One summer afternoon, Dubeji was sitting on his dais

studying the horoscope of a client when he saw a rickshaw stop in front of his office and a white man get down. Dubeji was extremely puzzled. What could a white man want from him? Maybe he was a tourist who had lost his way, Dubeji thought. The white man knocked on the open door and came in. He must have been in his mid-forties and was dressed in jeans, (all foreigners dressed in jeans) and a cotton short-sleeved shirt. His beard was golden and trimmed. Two cameras were slung on his shoulder and he carried a brown canvas bag. The white man put his bag down, folded his hands and said, "Namaste! Are you Mr. Dube?"

"Yes, Yes", said Dubeji, getting up to shake hands with the white man. As a rule Dubeji never got up for anybody, but this was a white man, a guest in his country. He should be shown the utmost respect. The white man introduced himself,

"I'm Mark Goodman."

"I am Shri Dube, also good man. Please be seated."

Dubeji pulled a chair for him and turned the table fan towards the visitor, who was perspiring visibly.

"Kaloo -- O Kaloo", Dubeji shouted for the servant. Kaloo appeared, a dark skinny boy of about fourteen years; he stared openly at the visitor. He had never

seen anybody so white.

"Bring cold sherbet for 'gora'-sahib. Put lots of sherbet," Dubeji ordered. There was an endless supply of sherbet for visitors in summer and cup after cup of tea in winter. Kaloo came back with a red-colored sherbet and offered it to the white man. He continued to stare at him and broke into giggles. He made no attempt to conceal his amusement. He really had not seen anybody so white in his whole life. And the hair, just like threads of gold! Dubeji scolded Kaloo in a loud voice and told him to get out. When Kaloo left, reluctantly, Dubeji apologized for him and said he was Kaloo, the mad man. Mark sipped his sherbet, while Dubeji asked him, "You news reporter?"

"No, No, Mr. Dube. I'm here for something else." He didn't quite know how to put it. He was from New York. Yes, New York. Dubeji knew one Indian boy who had come from New York the previous winter wanting a wife.

"I too want a wife." Mark grabbed at the opportunity. Dubeji was speechless. Then he began groping for all the English words he knew.

"You marry wife from India? Why? No wife in America?" No, No. that was not the case, Mark explained. In fact he had two wives in America.

"Two, wives? Lucky man!" said Dubeji who only had one. Dubeji was surprised that he wanted yet another one. He was not a Moslem, was he?

Mark explained that his first wife had been given to violent rages of temper and had later lost her mind. She had not only broken his heart but all the windows of his house, many dishes and some furniture. After having divorced her, he'd met Jennifer, his second wife. Mark loved children and had wanted to have a family, but Jennifer was not interested in little brats and was unfaithful to him many times. One day he had found her with the plumber in their own bedroom. He was so disgusted he had divorced her too. Being a free-lance photographer, he had decided to travel. After going to Japan and Indonesia he had come to India, where he travelled widely.

"How did you find my office?" Dubeji was curious to know.

"Your name is all over the walls of this town," Mark said laughing. Mark had been travelling in a bus when he noticed the advertisement and decided to pay a visit. Dubeji seemed very pleased. Mark confessed he liked Indian women with their dusky complexions and long black hair. He believed they made good and faithful wives. No

doubt, said Dubeji, who got down straight to business.

Mark produced his passport and said that he was willing to sponsor his wife if Dubeji was successful in finding him one. Dubeji took down information about Mark. Age? 48. Occupation? Free-lance photographer. Assets? A house in the suburbs of New York. After Dubeji wrote down the information, he made it very clear to Mark that it would be impossible to find a virgin from a rich or well-to-do family. Dubeji gave a list of reasons. First, Mark was a foreigner; second, not a very young one; third, he was not a Hindu. If that was alright with Mark, he was not to worry. Nobody went without a wife, when he came to Dubeji. He was known for that. Mark had no objection whatsoever.

Dubeji opened his file, and after studying it carefully selected a few photographs of young women. He laid them out in front of Mark and asked if he desired a meeting with any of them. Mark looked at them and selected one, which he handed back. It was Durga's photograph -- the scoundrel had an eye for beauty. Durga was a young and a beautiful woman, but a very unfortunate one. She was the youngest of the three daughters of Shankar Prasad, a junior clerk in the Post Office. She had once been married to a drunkard. Dubeji told Mark

the whole story.

Shankar Prasad had been heavily in debt after the marriages of his two other daughters, so he had married Durga to a one-eyed and good-for-nothing fellow called Kana, who did not demand any dowry. The name "Kana" itself meant one-eyed. An attack of smallpox in childhood had closed his left eye forever, leaving him pock-marked and one-eyed. Kana turned out to be a very wicked man. He beat Durga. And what could you say about his mother? She was even worse. Dubeji shook his head sadly, ashamed to lay bare the whole story. Durga had left her in-law's house. What else could she do? She was legally divorced, had no children and was a heavy burden on her old father.

Mark's heart went out to Durga even before he had met her. He was very keen to see her, he told Dubeji. Dubeji sent Kaloo to fetch Shankar Prasad, who came and folded his hands to both of them. He was a frail man, his shoulders bent more with worry than age. Dubeji asked him if he would consider a white man for his son-in-law. Shankar Prasad looked suspiciously at Mark, and shook his head, saying, "No dowry."

"Keep quiet, old fellow. Do not give ideas to the white man." Dubeji scolded him in Hindi. Shankar Prasad

agreed to bring his daughter. He was so weary of life, he no longer cared who wed his daughter as long as she did not live under his roof and disgrace his name. A meeting was arranged in Dubeji's living room. About an hour later, Shankar Prasad returned with Durga, who was taken upstairs. Mark and Durga were left alone to make what they could of each other.

Mark folded his hands and said, "Namaste!" That was about the only Hindi word he knew. She replied in the same manner and partly hid her face with one end of her saree. She smiled shyly. She had long hair which was loosely plaited, and beautiful black eyes, full of melancholy. How could anybody beat her, Mark thought. He felt an impulse to touch her face and tell her it would be alright. Instead he began to tell her about himself. She listened courteously, almost with awe, even though she did not understand a word he said. She sometimes said 'yes' or 'no' as a concession to the other's language. When he stopped talking and made no attempt to go on, she said 'Thank you.' It was her turn perhaps. Having exhausted her English vocabulary, she broke into Hindi.

She told him her father was so poor he had married her to a one-eyed man. As she said that, she closed her

left eye and gestured towards it with her hand. Mark guessed she was talking about her ex-husband. He said "Yes, Yes" very vigorously. Feeling encouraged, she told him that her ex-husband was always drinking and beating her and her ex-mother-in-law, that bitch, may she lose everything she has, also beat her. Durga wanted to crush her ex-mother-in-law into pulp and break every bone in her ex-husband's body. Why, he had tried to sell her for one night to one of his friends for 50 Rupees. "50 Rupees!" she said, "that bastard! Is that all I am worth, 50 Rupees?"

She sounded distressed. Mark understood the word Rupees. He thought maybe she wanted money. He took out his wallet from the hip pocket and offered her American dollars. She shrank away from the unfamiliar currency. He then fumbled in his breast pocket and brought out a 10 Rupee note.

"Yes, Rupees, 50 Rupees", she said and gently pushed his hand away. She asked him if it was also difficult in his country to find a spouse. He knew she had asked him a question, but didn't know exactly what, so he began to tell her about his travels in India. Every time he mentioned the name of a city, her eyes lit up. Those beautiful black eyes. If he married her, they would have

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children with those eyes.

Dubeji knocked and asked if they needed any sherbet or anything. Mark sensed that the meeting was over. He followed Dubeji down the stairs and into his office, where Shankar Prasad sat tense and motionless.

"Please tell Durga's father, that I will take Durga as my wife," said Mark. Dubeji was delighted. He patted Shankar Prasad on the back and said, "Kaam ho gaya." The work was done. Shankar Prasad looked nervously at Mark, then at Dubeji and said,

"No dowry, Dubeji, No dowry."

Inder

Inder sat on a string cot in the courtyard of his house, reading the newspaper. The courtyard was littered with string cots. It was still summer, so at night Inder and his family slept outside. All of the cots were empty except for one on which his seventeen-year-old son, Mickey, lay sleeping. Beneath Inder's cot lay Pondy, their dog. She had recently given birth to four puppies and needed a lot of rest. But his son, why did he need so much rest? No seventeen-year-old needed so much. Inder looked from the newspaper to his breakfast lying on the cane table in front of him: toast, an egg which resembled an omelette, and a cup of tea. Every day it was toast and some kind of egg or left-over vegetables.

In his own house he could not ask for parathas. Parathas needed a lot of ghee and that was expensive. Only in his mother's house was he able to eat parathas every day. Sometimes they were stuffed with spiced potatoes and sometimes with shredded radish. He sighed. Life had changed, so much. It was only burdened with troubles now. Inder had to support his wife and three growing children. The children's tuition had to be paid. Not only that, they needed clothes too. It was surprising how many clothes children seemed to want. Every month they wanted new outfits. The servant had to be paid. How expensive everything was. Ghee alone was fourteen Rupees a 'kilo. What was he but a mere clerk, a Lower Division clerk in a Government office, drawing 750 Rupees a month, plus the 125 Rupees he got in rent money from his tenants. The upstairs portion of the house was rented out to a Bengali couple, Mr. and Mrs. Banerji, who had two young daughters. Seema, Inder's eldest daughter was nearly nineteen years old. She too had to be provided for. Where would he get the money for her dowry? He would surely have to take a loan, but first he had to find a husband for her. His parents had mentioned a proposal some time back. This reminded him that their visit was due any day now. The memory of their earlier visits made Inder very tense. There was so much worry in

a man's life in this world and the foolish servant had burned the toast. "Chotu!" Inder cried for the servant. Chotu was a dark skinned boy of about fourteen, but he looked very innocent -- more like a child of eleven. Chotu appeared from the kitchen, and stood near Inder without saying a word.

"Bring me another toast. This one is all burnt." Inder picked up the toast and showed him both sides. Chotu went back to the kitchen and passed on the request for another toast to Lalita, Inder's wife.

Lalita was always in a bad mood in the morning. She had not bathed and her hair was uncombed. Her face looked oily and swollen. She stood there in the crumpled cotton saree she had slept in, packing lunches for her husband, their son, Mickey, and their youngest daughter, Meenu. Seema, their eldest daughter was away for a month, visiting Lalita's sister in Lucknow.

"Today you burned the toast, tomorrow you will burn the house. Bread does not come for free in the bazaars. I will make you eat that toast, only then you will learn a lesson. Here, take this for him", she said, slapping a slice of bread on Chotu's hand. Asking Lalita for any favour in the morning was like inviting a bull, saying, "Come bull, hit me."

Inder did not wish Chotu to be shouted at, especially on his account, but for the sake of a servant you could not argue with your own wife. And it was not as if the piece of bread she sent was any better than the previous one. This one was not toasted at all. Inder lost all interest in his breakfast. His attention was diverted by the sound of a door opening upstairs.

Mrs. Banerji stood on the landing watching her daughters descend the stairs. Banerji's daughters were dark like their mother. Thank God his own Seema was fair-complexioned. It would not be very difficult to find a boy for her. ~~The~~ Banerji girls and Meenu went to the same school. They all waited at the common main door for the rickshaw puller, who was hired on a monthly basis to take the girls to and from school. The girls looked so neat in their starched uniforms. Inder thought of his son, still sleeping. Not a worry about college.

"Lalita, O Lalita," Inder called for his wife.

"What is it? Why are you shouting in the morning?"

"Why is your beloved son still sleeping?"

"Why don't you ask him? Isn't he your son too?" she cried from the kitchen.

Was that any way for a wife to speak to her husband, answering his question with more questions? No respect

at all. He was not as stern with his wife as a husband should be. Neither was he as stern with his children as a father should be. He looked distastefully at the sleeping figure of his son, who had covered his face with a sheet because the light and flies had been bothering him.

Inder felt very irritated by his son. When Mickey was home he just wanted to be waited upon by his mother and Chotu, the servant. If he was not sleeping, he was looking into the air dreamily. He had such loafer friends - all of them hanging around cinema houses in the evening. Already Inder had heard several complaints that his son and other loafer boys stood at the Sadar Bazaar Crossing and teased young girls. These boys had made it difficult for sisters and daughters of the town to do shopping. Many times Inder had noticed that his son also made eyes at Banerji's eldest daughter. If his bad habits were not checked, he would certainly disgrace the family's name.

"Meenu, wake up your brother," Inder told his daughter.

"Mickey, brother," Meenu said shaking her brother's shoulders.

"Leave me alone," Mickey shouted in a cracked voice.

"Wake up, Mickey, brother. Daddy is saying wake up."

"You will get a slap from me, if you touch me again."

"Daddy!" Meenu pretended to cry.

Lalita came and stood at the kitchen door and said to Inder, "All you know how to do is start a fight in the house. If you have finished your breakfast, why don't you leave for the office?"

Leave for the office! Was it the wife's place to tell her husband to leave for the office? It was only eight o'clock and the office didn't open till ten. He looked up to see whether Mrs. Banerji had heard his wife shout at him.

"She-ass of somewhere, woke me up just like that!" Mickey was still annoyed at his sister. The rickshaw puller came, ringing the bell of his rickshaw, and the girls left for school. Mickey tried to go back to sleep.

"Postman!" the postman announced himself. Inder got up to get the mail. There was only one letter -- a postcard from his father. Why did his father write on a postcard? An inland letter cost only 10 paise more than a postcard. To write a personal letter for the whole world to read. He sat down and read the letter written

in a shaky handwriting. "Dear son Inder", it read, "your respected mother and I will be arriving on Tuesday by Santa Express. How is dear Lalita? Important matters about daughter Seema must be discussed. How is son Mickey? Give our love to sweet daughter Meenu. Om and his family are well. Dear Geeta is suffering from malaria". The postcard then ran out of space and it was signed "your father".

This was a new worry for Inder. Not a moment's peace would he get now. He must however break the news to his wife. "Lalita!" Inder spoke, almost guiltily. Taking advantage of her husband's subdued volume, she raised hers even more, "What is it? Why are you shouting my name, Lalita Lalita, all the time?"

"Chotu!" Mickey yelled, "Chotu come and scratch my back." Chotu left washing the pans in the kitchen and came running from the kitchen. He lifted Mickey's kurta and started scratching his back, leisurely.

"A letter has come".

"To the left, you owl," Mickey's voice guided Chotu's hand.

"From where?" Lalita asked suspiciously.

"Mother and Father are coming tomorrow."

To this she had no reply to give. Inder wondered

what her silence meant -- whether she had accepted or whether it was a silence of obstinacy and defiance. Lalita went back to doing whatever she had been doing in the kitchen. This confirmed his suspicion that it was the silence of defiance. Inder felt very irritated by his wife's attitude. It was a man's duty to make his wife respect and serve her in-laws. "They are my mother and father," said Inder importantly. Lalita pulled a contemptuous face, which made it clear what sort of importance she attached to his mother and father.

"No, there, a little to the right," said Mickey.

Inder shot another glance of distaste at his son, who so shamelessly had his back scratched. Who ever heard of a seventeen year old having his back scratched? Next he will have his legs pressed. The fool! Inder folded the newspaper, picked up his tiffin, which he tied carefully on the carrier of his bicycle, and left the house. Only Pondy, their dog, came to the door to see him off.

\* \* \*

Next day Inder went alone to the train station to fetch his parents. He paced the railway platform. The train was half an hour late. He looked around him. Some people, like him, were waiting for the Janta Express.

Some were sitting on the benches, others on their bedding and luggage. Little servant boys from the sweetmeat stalls called out their wares, "Coffee, Coffee, Tea! Tea! Tea," each trying to outshout the others. They were all trying to lure weary travelers and other people to their stalls. One boy came up to Inder and asked, "Hot samosa, sahib, Campa Cola?" Inder was tempted to eat samosa with chutney but when he saw the flies hovering around the stalls he decided against it. He just walked away from the boy. Coolies in red shirts and dirty white pants sat indolently, smoking beedies and chatting with each other. It was a very long half an hour.

The train finally arrived, and even before it had stopped completely the same servant boys ran along the train, offering tea, coffee, Campa Cola and unnamed orange drinks to the passengers. Coolies suddenly became active, running, offering to carry luggage, and showing their badges to suspicious travellers. Inder too ran along the train, looking for his parents. It was very difficult to find anyone in that rush. He peeped into all the compartments and in one of them, he saw his father. His father stood there helplessly, making no attempt to pick his luggage. "Father!" Inder cried. His mother saw Inder first. She looked surprised and cried

excitedly, "There is Inder -- Inder -- son Inder!"

Inder muscled his way into the train, fighting the descending passengers. Some of them seemed very angry. They used bad words and poked their elbows into Inder's chest. He in turn stamped on people's feet and used some bad language himself. He managed to squeeze through and reach the compartment. He picked up their baskets and a steel trunk which had very sharp corners. His mother carried several cloth bundles. He helped his mother climb down.

Inder's mother was a very short woman, too short to be anybody's mother, really. Her hair was an untidy mixture of black and grey, which she oiled liberally. She wore a beige nylon saree with pale blue flowers on it. The saree hung six inches from the ground. She was afraid that the ground would make the hem of her saree dirty. It was the same saree her nephew from New Jersey had sent her. Whenever and wherever she travelled, she wore it. Many times, Inder had thought of suggesting to her that it did not look nice. The neighbours who probably saw her wearing that saree might think she only had that one, which was not the case. It did not reflect well on him, or for that matter on his brother, Om.

"I touch your feet, mother," Inder said bending down

to his mother's feet. She hitched up her saree even higher to show cheap plastic slippers.

"God bless you, my son," she said, hugging him.

"I touch your feet, father." Inder turned towards his father's feet.

"The journey was very uncomfortable," said his father, as if all the fault was Inder's.

Inder's father was a rather tall man. They made an odd couple, his father and mother. But when they got married, boys and girls often did not see each other before marriage. It was only on the first night after marriage that a boy could see his bride, and then he had no choice but to cherish her for the rest of his life. Inder's father was almost bald now, except for some white hair that still lingered obstinately on the sides of his temples and the back of his head. His father wore a khaki Safari hat and khaki knickers which he had preserved from the days of the British Raj (of which he had been an obedient servant). He had also inherited from them a superior attitude towards the lower classes of people.

"Lalita did not come?" Inder's mother enquired, noting the rude absence of her daughter-in-law.

"And that man was smoking like an engine, all the

way, throwing rings of smoke into my mouth," his father continued to complain.

"No, mother, Lalita and the children are waiting at home," Inder said.

"Ill-bred village lads! I don't know where they come from. Who allows them to travel in trains?"

"Coolie!" Inder called out to one of the available coolies. "Please carry this luggage." The coolie put the trunk on his head. He balanced it with his left hand. In his right hand he carried the baskets and the bundles.

"But you have not asked how much money he will charge?" reproached his father. Inder's father banged his walking stick on the railway platform, a sign for the coolie to put down the luggage.

"We will pay him what he asks," Inder said angrily.

"We will pay him what he asks," mimicked his father.

"If he asks for 100 Rupees, will we give him 100 Rupees?" demanded his father.

"Go, go -- you go ahead." Inder told the coolie. He did not wish the coolie to hear his father's remarks about the menial classes.

"Please, father, you just follow me."

They came out of the station, looking for a tonga,

because all the luggage and three people could not fit in a rickshaw.

While they were waiting for a tonga to show up, a beggar woman holding a small child came and stood there, her hand extended. The state of beggars in this country! Inder wished the Government would provide for them somehow. They should not be allowed to roam so freely, looking boldly into peoples' eyes, defying rather than begging. The woman was young and her dark skin shone with perspiration. She wore no blouse and her torn saree, draped unskillfully, left little to the imagination. Her hair was matted with dirt and strands of dirty unwashed hair fell on her face. Her son was naked, not a thread on his body.

"O Babuji, give me four annas, ten paise, anything Babuji."

"It was so hot in the compartment," said Inder's father.

"Your father felt quite sick at the Agra station. The tea there was very bad. I think, they used sour milk," complained Inder's mother.

"It is only a question of ten paise, Babuji. You give me ten paise, God will give you ten lakh."

"Even the biscuits were quite bad," added his

father.

"Look, Sahib, look, look at my child. He has not eaten for three days," the beggar woman said, tapping her son's stomach.

"Look ~~elsewhere~~, Mae," Inder told her indifferently.

"O Babuji, O Sahib."

"Get out from here, the scum of society!" Inder's father suddenly became very angry.

Inder quickly found a four-anna coin and handed it to the woman. She kissed the coin, blessed Inder, made a face at Inder's father and proceeded on to tell the same story to somebody else. Inder hailed a tonga and settled the luggage. He paid the coolie one Rupee. Inder's father was totally confused. He didn't know what to say, whether to first scold his son for giving four annas to the beggar woman, for paying the coolie so generously, or for hiring a tonga without bargaining. Inder's father began to protest.

"It is all right, father. You sit inside."

"They loot the public. They are all thieves, these beggars, these coolies and this tonga driver."

"Shh," Inder told his father to keep quiet.

\* \* \*

After they had arrived home and the whole family had greeted each other, Inder's father settled himself on a string cot.

"Is anybody going to offer us tea?" he asked. He looked around restlessly, as if waiting for something to happen. Chotu came from the kitchen, saluted them and went back to make tea.

"What, a new servant boy? What happened to the other servant? Did he steal anything? What did he do?" Inder's father became interested now.

"No, father," Inder said impatiently. Why did his father think all servants were thieves and cut-throats?

"They know how to put a knife in you."

"But father he is only fourteen years old."

"They lie about their age. Did you enquire where he came from? Who his parents are? He is all alone in the kitchen. Who knows what he may put in the tea?"

"Father, why don't you relax? You've had a long journey," said Inder, suppressing his anger.

Inder's mother went and pinched her husband's arm; he had begun to irritate her also. For the rest of the evening, Inder's father sat quietly, only occasionally complaining about the train travel and the quality of tea at the Agra station. Chotu served the tea. Inder's

father was going to protest, that the tea hardly had any milk in it, but one look from his wife and he silently began to drink.

Inder's mother opened a box of sweetmeats and offered it to the children.

"Eat, children, eat, it's all for you. Inder you also eat. Lalita, daughter-in-law, you also eat."

Inder picked up two sweetmeats and gave them to Chotu.

"Two sweetmeats to a servant? No, my son, no. You should be careful. You will spoil his habits. Then he will not eat his bread, he will always ask for sweetmeats," said his mother. Inder ignored her. They all sat in the courtyard and had their tea: Chotu had his in the kitchen.

Inder's parents settled down in their son's house. They usually stayed for a few months, unless they quarrelled and left earlier to go back to Om and his house.

Inder's father shared a room with Mickey, who was in a very bad mood about it. Inder's mother shared the room with the girls. At night two extra cots were put for them in the courtyard. Pandy was chained to one end of the courtyard. Inder's parents did not care for dogs

and especially disliked Pondy. As long as they stayed, Pondy was chained most of the time and she did not like that. She made her dislike quite clear by barking at Inder's parents regularly.

On the first Sunday after their arrival, Inder's parents wanted to discuss Seema, Inder's daughter. His father told him about a proposal for her. Inder's mother interrupted her husband all the time, correcting his facts and adding some of her own. It was a Sunday morning, and talking to them, Inder felt, was not a very good way of spending it. But he could not tell them this, especially in front of his wife. She would lose whatever respect she had for them. So Inder sat with them, listening, nodding his head and asking questions about the boy and his family.

Lalita heard all the conversation from the kitchen. Later she came and joined them. She sat at a distance on another cot. Whatever she had heard about the boy, she did not like. Since the boy was related to her sister-in-law, Kanta, Om's wife, that was all the more reason not even to consider the proposal. She flatly told them she had somebody in mind -- her eldest sister's nephew, who was a Gazetted officer in the Bank. Only a Gazetted officer would she consider for her daughter.

"Are we dead already, that you make a match for Seema without consulting us?" asked Inder's mother.

"And what about you?" retorted Lalita, "discussing everything with your son. Not once did you say, come daughter-in-law, you also sit with us."

"You were in the kitchen," Inder's mother defended herself.

"You are very clever, you only talk when I am in the kitchen," said Lalita sharply.

"Look, look, how her tongue moves! There is no respect for us here. We were better off in son Om's house," said Inder's mother.

That was another matter Lalita wanted to settle with her. Always she was hearing about son Om and his house.

"What about Kanta sister-in-law?"

Inder's mother felt very uneasy to be cornered like that. "Yes, what about her?" she lamely defended her other daughter-in-law.

"There is nothing hidden from me. She even measures the sugar she gives you in tea. She will not let you drink more than three cups of tea in a day. Here, I never put a lock on anything. Sugar and ghee are always lying unlocked in the kitchen," said Lalita, proudly.

"All our relatives told us, don't marry a girl from

Delhi. Girls from big cities have no respect for their elders. They can go and sell their in-laws in the market, in no time. But our luck was bad that we did not listen to such an advice. There was nothing to be got from such a quarter, only trouble and worry. My poor son! How much he has to bear with a wife like you," complained Inder's mother.

"And what about me? What about my luck, that brought me to this house?" asked Lalita.

Inder had never felt any great love for her at any time of his life, but to hear such a thing from the mouth of his own wife, was shocking. His mother had always made him feel that he had done his wife a great honour by marrying her. He had no idea that his wife did not think likewise. Even if she felt that way, she had never said it in so many words before.

"What good offers of marriage I had received. Such rich families too. How fair I used to be! Only on milk and fruits I lived. Coming here has ruined my health," said Lalita.

"Milk and fruits!" cried Inder's mother unbelievably. "Huh. In your father's house rivers of milk used to flow and there were orchards of apples and

mangoes too?" asked Inder's mother.

Inder did not interfere, though he wondered why he allowed these two women to go on as they did. He should put his foot down; after all, he was the master of his household, not these women.

His father on the other hand was extremely interested. . . Once he took Lalita's side and was immediately told by his wife to keep his toothless mouth shut. That was not altogether fair. Inder's father did have a few teeth left. Inder's father corrected himself and added hastily, "What bad times have come that daughters-in-law battle with their mothers-in-law." After that he kept his mouth quiet for the rest of the morning.

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Ever since his parents had arrived, Inder dreaded coming home. There was tension in his house. His wife was always silent and when Inder was anywhere within hearing, she sighed unhappily, as if she was carrying a heavy burden on her shoulders. Why should she be unhappy? She had no reason to be unhappy. If anybody had a reason, it was him. He had so many worries on his mind, and the people of his house made no attempt to live happily with each other.

His mother was always complaining of being neglected. As a result, she sang glories about son Om and his house. This was a great source of irritation for Inder.

Inder knew very well that his brother was a very strict man. His parents could hardly speak, let alone complain or voice opinions in front of him or his wife.

Inder also felt great hostility towards his father. A father should be a person to whom you can look for advice and support. But Inder's father, it seemed, had only three interests.

First, was the newspaper. Nobody could read the newspaper till he had read it from column to column; he liked to read it aloud, especially bad news. Every day Inder learned that a policeman had ~~raped~~ raped a woman while she was in police custody, or a domestic servant had stabbed an old couple and stolen all ~~their~~ money and jewelry, or famine had killed 300 people in Bihar, or floods had left thousands homeless in Assam.

His father's second obsession was servants, Chotu in particular. He felt that the servant boy had been planted in their house to cause misery. He could not bear to see Chotu sitting idle, even for a moment. In Chotu's idle moments, Inder's father's legs ached and

needed to be pressed or his head felt scratchy and needed to be massaged with almond oil.

The third obsession was Mickey. Inder's father could not get along with Mickey. He objected to all the posters of young actresses and starlets in his room. The posters were obscene and caused dirty thoughts in young minds, he said. Inder's father was also after Mickey to cut his long hair, which made him look like a hippy, he said. "Look, Hippy has come!" Inder's father often remarked when Mickey came back from somewhere. A remark like this made Mickey very angry.

Mickey, on the other hand, complained that sharing a room with his grandfather was highly inconvenient. His grandfather suffered from a bad stomach and belched loudly. "If he has hardly any teeth left, why does he crave for rich foods. He wants curry with lots of spices and sweetmeats oozing with ghee, which he can't digest at his age," Mickey often remarked, disgustedly.

Inder's father had another annoying habit. He talked to people unnecessarily. He would stop Mr. Banerji, who would be on his way up, and discuss with him the decline of morals in young girls and boys as well as the length of their hair:

"What an upside-down age has come! Girls wear short hair and boys wear long hair," he remarked, which invariably brought his attention to the length of his own grandson's hair. When Mrs. Banerji came down to buy vegetables from the vendor, Inder's father discussed the problems of servants with her. He commented upon the unavailability of good servants and the bad qualities of the available ones.

Even Pandy, their dog, was not happy. When Inder's mother had first seen the puppies, she had remarked, "I wonder in which street and with whom she has blackened her face!". Pandy could always be heard barking unhappily in the background.

Inder found joy only in the company of his daughter, Meenu. She was still young and innocent. In the evenings when Inder lay in the courtyard, she pressed his head and brought sherbet for him. Why did people long for sons, he wondered. He felt sad at what his own object of longing had turned into. But daughters! How considerate they were. It would be nice he thought, if the customs could be reversed. When the daughter got married, you didn't have to send her away. On the other hand when the son got married, you would send him to your daughter-in-law's house and see him only on festivals and weddings.

One afternoon, about a week after their arrival, Inder's father came out of Mickey's room to speak to his wife. He looked worried.

"Inder's mother! Have you seen the ten Rupees I kept in my shirt pocket? I cannot find them." Inder's mother was on the veranda, telling beads and had every right to feel disturbed.

"Are you going to the market in this heat, that you look for ten Rupees? You have become very forgetful. You never remember anything. The older he gets, the more headaches he gives me," she answered.

"But I could have sworn it was in my pocket."

"Check in the trunk. Maybe you put them there."

"They are not there. Where can they have gone?"

He stood there, flapping his slippers on the veranda for some time. Suddenly a thought struck Inder's father and everything became very clear to him.

"Chotu!" he thundered in his old voice. Chotu was washing dishes in the kitchen and singing songs to his own grandmother. He sang: "Nice granny, sweet granny, the peacocks have taken your peahen away..."

"Chotu!" Inder's father yelled again. Since the tap was running and dishes made a lot of clatter, he could not hear Inder's father.

He continued to sing: "Be a nice granny, be a sweet"

granny or the black thief will take you away, please thief, please thief, don't take my granny away.

Inder's father felt insulted that the servant did not come when called for and instead bellowed songs. This confirmed his suspicion that Chotu was the culprit. A happy servant was not to be trusted. Inder's father went to Mickey's room to get his walking stick and went to the kitchen. He came out bringing Chotu by his ear.

"Son of a pig, thief, where are my ten Rupees?"

"Listen to me, sahib," Chotu pleaded.

"Are you my uncle that I should listen to you? Say you stole them. Say it!"

"Leave me, sahib. I didn't see any ten Rupees."

Inder's father hit the servant on the back and legs with his stick. Chotu screamed for help. The cries woke up Lalita, who was having her afternoon nap. She came out of the room looking quite annoyed. How dare her father-in-law hit the servant without asking her.

"What is going on here?" she asked.

"This thief, this son of a snake, he stole ten Rupees from my pocket."

"Did you?" Lalita asked Chotu.

"I did not, Memsahib," replied Chotu, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Inder's father now began to quarrel with Lalita for taking the servant's side. Chotu wept and his complaints lapsed into incoherence. When Inder came from the office, he found Chotu crying, his father and Lalita quarrelling and his mother, who had made a mouth, telling beads vigorously.

"Mother, what is going on here?" Inder asked.

Inder's mother shrugged her shoulders ill-humoredly, but Inder's father was more than eager to repeat the story, along with the abuses.

"What proof do you have that he stole your money?" Inder asked.

Inder's father was aghast that his own son had asked him for proof. He looked at his wife for support. She felt it was her duty to side with her husband.

"You insult your father -- you insult me. Not one more minute will we stay in this house! You give priority to your servant whose worth is two paise and we your parents have no value for you. We will go back to son Om," said his mother.

"Then go -- go this minute. Don't bother to come back. Think Inder is dead for you," shouted Inder. Inder had never really shouted at anyone in his family. Now that he had started he rather felt like shouting some

more:

"For forty Rupees a month, you want a slave, that's what you want. Have you ever given him four annas as a token of thanks? Did you know he is an orphan? Better to be an orphan than have parents like you!" continued Inder.

"Mickey's father!" Even Lalita thought he was going too far and for the sake of a servant?

"You too hold your tongue, woman. Night and day she eats my head, not one minute's peace will she give me."

Inder had not scolded Lalita, even in private, let alone shamed her like this in front of her in-laws. She just stared stupidly at her husband, but Inder's mother's mood improved considerably. She turned against her own husband, "Forgive him, son, forgive him. He has turned sixty and his brain does not function any more. He does such things in son Om's house also. I know Chotu is a good boy."

Mickey, who had also woken up from his nap, came out and said very matter-of-factly, "Grandfather, I found ten Rupees lying on the floor. I didn't know they were yours."

Inder's anger was now vented on his son. "They were lying on the floor and you thought they were yours?"

Yes? Answer me! There are stones lying on the floor, there is dirt. Also Pondy's puppies are lying on the floor. Will you put them in your pocket?"

Mickey thought something must be wrong with his father, getting upset over a stupid mistake. "What's the matter with him?" Mickey asked his mother, pointing at his father quite insolently.

"You will know what is the matter with me when I pull your thirty-two out from your jaws and put them in your hand. Get out of my sight before I do something to you," said Inder, clenching his fists.

"And let it be clear to you all, this is my household, not a fish market," said Inder and put his arms around Chotu, who had begun to cry again.

"You are right, son Inder," said Inder's mother, "You are the master of this house and it is everybody's duty to obey you and serve you. Is it not, daughter-in-law Lalita?"

Lalita ignored the remark.

"As long as this boy is in my house, no one will lay a finger on him," warned Inder. To Chotu he said, "Go son, go to the kitchen and do your work."

Inder's wife, his father and Mickey crept back to their rooms. His mother closed her eyes and resumed telling beads.

## The Astrologer

Pundit Devsi Mahapatra was a roadside astrologer. He was in his early forties and short-statured. His complexion was extremely dark and his eyes were unusually small. He always wore a white loincloth, a white shirt and a white turban. The whiteness of his clothes stood out sharply against his dark skin. Personally he would have preferred to wear saffron-colored clothes, but he knew people no longer trusted or respected saffron. You could not blame them. Many quack fakirs and fake sadhus who had donned saffron robes had cheated the poor people. White, in that respect, was safe. It was pure and colorless.

Devsī Mahapatra was known as Punditji to the people of the small town of Ambala, which is about two hundred kilometers north of Delhi.

Punditji conducted his business under a pipal tree on the side of the railway road. The pipal tree was about a hundred yards away from an M.P.'s huge bungalow, opposite the Rotary Hall. The road was busy most of the time because it connected the town to the railway station. Cars, scooters and rickshaws could be seen passing along the road all day. Every morning Punditji arrived, spread out his straw mat and displayed his professional equipment. The equipment consisted of a small tin board with a palm painted on it, showing all the prominent lines. At the bottom of the board Punditji's name was painted. This board was hung on the bark of the tree every morning. A square piece of cloth with strange mystic charts drawn on it, a red notebook, a cheap magnifying glass, a green parrot in a cage and hundreds of fortune-telling cards were placed on the mat.

Punditji had in the past moved from road to road, changing sites, looking for better prospects. But for a year and a half now he had been settled under the pipal tree. No sooner had Punditji established his business than a tea stall sprung up close to him. The owner of the tea stall was Sunder Lal. He was an elderly man, and very friendly. Both Sunder Lal and Punditji benefited from each other's business. People who came to see

Punditji often had a cup of tea after their session with him. And the people who had stopped for a cup of tea often consulted Punditji, sometimes out of curiosity and sometimes out of sheer boredom. The ones who really needed Punditji's services, however, sought him out, coming from all over the town.

Sunder Lal had great regard for Punditji. Every day at eleven o'clock in the morning, he gave Punditji a cup of tea with extra milk and sugar in it. He did not take any money in return. He was a God-fearing Hindu and could not accept money from a Brahmin. You were supposed to give to a Brahmin, God forbid, not take from him. Punditji, on the other hand was no beggar who took alms from people. True he did not pay any money for his tea, but he kept Sunder Lal informed on the position of his planets. It was a fair exchange.

When Sunder Lal's shop began to thrive, a fruit vendor brought his moving cart under the pipal tree. He was so unfriendly nobody even knew his name. His business did not go well. The sort of people that came to Punditji could not afford to buy fruit.

On the other side, of Punditji, a seller of cheap cloth spread out his mat, and he made the most noise of all. All day he shouted to people passing by in

rickshaws: "Come sister, come didi, please brother -- "

This was quite annoying to Punditji, whose work needed extreme concentration. But Birju, the cloth seller, was a young boy, and very respectful to Punditji. Sometimes he gave Punditji half a yard of cloth as a gift for his wife, who could make a blouse out of it, or a left-over piece of material to make shorts for Punditji's youngest son. Besides, Birju was very fond of Mithu, Punditji's parrot. He fed the parrot fresh green chillies which sharpened the bird's wits.

The parrot, which he had purchased for five Rupees, was, according to Punditji, endowed with mystic powers. Mithu's wings had been clipped and he talked a lot. His vocabulary, though, was limited. Like Birju, he too cried: "Come sister, come didi, please brother -- "

Punditji's fees were very modest because his clientele consisted of poor people. A palm-reading and a natal chart reading cost eight annas each. The first question put to the parrot cost eight annas. All subsequent questions were four annas each.

One morning, when Punditji was walking towards the pipal tree, he saw young boys going to school. The boys were on their bicycles and one of them shouted: "Oi Pundit, your Mithu has come back? We thought he

had flown away with your wife." The other boys laughed and they all went away. Punditji disliked such ill-mannered boys and considered it inauspicious to see their faces in the morning. When he arrived under the pipal tree, he found two women already waiting for him. But he was in no rush to serve them. After he had settled he looked at the women. One of them was old and was dressed in a cheap cotton saree that stopped short at her ankles. The other, probably her daughter or daughter-in-law, was young and in an advanced stage of pregnancy. Punditji knew what these women had come for. They wanted to know whether it would be a girl or a boy.

"Punditji, this is my daughter-in-law," said the older woman and began to cry.

"When you finish crying, tell me your problem," said Punditji, fiddling with the cards indifferently.

"Forgive me," said the older woman, touching Punditji's feet, "just tell us if it is going to be a boy this time. She already has three daughters. A fourth daughter will kill us," she continued.

"Shantih! Shantih! Peace! Peace!" Punditji told her. Mithu was called upon. Punditji closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. He sang:

Bol Mithu Bol

Kismet ke taale khol

Punditji opened the little door of the cage and Mithu jumped out. He walked all over the cards which were neatly spread out on the mat. Up and down, up and down he walked, as if enjoying the morning air, turning his head with quick jerks.

"Mithu!" Punditji scolded the parrot. Mithu finally picked out a card. Punditji read from it and smiled, "Mithu says, the prayers will be answered. It will be a boy, Mataji. What is the girl's name?"

"Sita Rani".

"I will write in my red notebook, under Sita Rani -- boy," said Punditji.

The two women paid Punditji eight annas, said Namaste and went on their way, smiling.

Punditji opened his red notebook and wrote, "Sita Rani -- girl." One had to play safe. Chances were, if it was a boy these women would never come back. If it was a girl, they might come back to quarrel and expose what a fraud Punditji was. But Punditji had not been born yesterday. If something like that happened, he could always open his notebook and show them where it was written -- girl. Surely the women hadn't heard right, or there was some misunderstanding.

Punditji's next clients were an elderly lady and a young, obstinate-looking man. The lady sat down on the ground and started telling her story. Punditji let her speak for about fifteen minutes without interrupting her. For fifteen minutes he allowed her the emotional luxury of dwelling on and speaking about her grievances which centred around poverty in general and her unemployed son in particular. Only once, when the lady was making a crucial point about poverty, did Punditji interrupt her.

"Yes Maee, even God belongs to the rich. This is no doubt a cruel world for the poor," said Punditji, adding fuel to her fires. From her talk Punditji gathered the information that the young obstinate-looking man was the youngest of her offspring, unemployed and undoubtedly the trouble-maker in the family. The family had made the mistake of getting him married before he even had a job. As a result, the boy had made his wife pregnant and was not yet ready to shoulder his responsibilities.

"Help us, Punditji, help us," the old lady said. She sounded very distressed.

"Does he look for work?" asked Punditji.

"He says he does -- speak, you owl, tell Punditji the lies you tell us!" The boy lowered his eyes.

"His father found him a job in a factory. He worked

two days and left, said he wants to work in an office,-- become a sahib. Ask him, ask him, Punditji, if his father has ever seen a sahib. Wants to become a sahib of somewhere!" continued the lady.

"Do you have his natal chart?" asked Punditji.

"Yes," said the lady and took out a scroll written in Sanskrit.

Punditji began to study it carefully, looking at it from different angles to get a clearer picture of the planets. Birju, the cloth seller thought it to be an appropriate moment to do some business of his own. "O Mae, see this cloth -- very cheap -- three Rupees a yard -- but for you only two Rupees a yard -- only two Rupees," he addressed the lady.

"Shh -- don't eat my head. Don't you see Punditji is working?"

"Hmm," said Punditji meaningfully. The lady looked hopefully at Punditji, as if he was going to hand her son a job.

"Mae," Punditji spoke to the lady, "your son's Saturn is sitting in the house of the moon. His moon and Saturn are enemies. This position will last for two months. Does this boy disobey you?"

"Always!" said the old lady, beating her forehead.

"Hmm. His Saturn is the trouble-maker. Now try to understand. His Saturn is very strong and is sitting in the 'enemy's' house. It will not let this boy listen to anyone."

"Is there any remedy?" asked the old lady.

"Yes, Yes, we will have to find a way to please Saturn Maharaj. Every Saturday morning let your boy feed a brown-coloured dog. Make sure to include seven types of grain in the food, like wheat, corn, rice, gram. Do this for two months. It will please his Saturn. But remember, after two months his Mars will move into the house of the moon, then even I cannot help you. For three years then, there will be no chance of his finding a job," said Punditji.

A look of panic crossed the boy's face.

"Are you listening?" said the old lady to her son, "Will you still eat the dust of the streets or will you go back to the factory now?"

"I will see," the boy replied.

"What will you see? First he comes to this world and brings with him such a strong Saturn, then he tells his mother, he will see. Now I will see how you don't go back to the factory," said the lady.

"Boy, do as she says," said Punditji.

"Yes," the boy replied.

"Good -- that will be eight annas, Mae," said Punditji. They paid and left.

After they had gone, a couple came with their son in a rickshaw. They got down from the rickshaw and told the rickshaw puller to wait. "Wah! Wah! Punditji," they chanted.

Punditji was pleased, even though he didn't know why they were praising him. They reminded Punditji that their son had run away and Punditji had told that he would be found in the direction of the east. Their son had come back home on his own accord. Punditji accepted a small bag of sweets from the couple.

Punditji had several more clients after that. Two brothers came with their father's natal chart. The father was in prison for selling illicit liquor. Punditji advised them to wait a week before taking any step, because the moment wasn't right. After that, a woman came with her sick mother. The mother was so old and weak, she could hardly sit up in the rickshaw. Punditji told the woman to go to the Government hospital instead of knocking her sick mother around in rickshaws.

Later, some men who were having tea at Sunder Lal's tea stall decided to have their palms read.

It proved to be a busy day for Punditji. It was only two o'clock and he had already made five Rupees. He saw some young boys returning from school. Four of them slowed down their bicycles. Punditji recognized two of them. They had hurled insults at him in the past. In fact one of them had teased him only this morning. Punditji became alert. The boys very humbly folded their hands and said Namaste.

"Namaste," said Punditji, "Yes sons, what brings you here?" The tallest of the boys, whom Punditji had not seen before, took out an eight-anna coin and offered it to Punditji.

"I have come to ask the parrot a question," he said.

"The exams are coming near?" asked Punditji.

"Yes, please ask the parrot if I will pass my exam," said the tall boy.

The boy who had teased Punditji in the morning was shifting from side to side. Punditji eyed him suspiciously. But he had accepted the money and had to make a prediction. He sang to the parrot:

Bol Mithu Bol

Kismet ke taale khol

Punditji opened the door of the cage and Mithu jumped out. He began to take a walk on the cards. Punditji waited. Mithu defecated on the cards. Punditji

gently smacked Mithu on the head.

"Come sister, come sister," Mithu cried.

The boys began to laugh. Punditji grew nervous. "Mithu!" Punditji scolded the parrot. Mithu lowered his head and picked out a card. Punditji took the card from Mithu's beak and read it, "Efforts will be rewarded, it says son. Work hard, God will pass you."

The boy who had teased Punditji in the morning, sprang forward and snatched the card from Punditji. "Hmm -- efforts will be rewarded! Liar! Is this what is written on the card? Friends, it says -- your wife will be blessed with a son. People of the town!" The boy began to shout, "Come people, come. Come and see this Pundit cheater -- this thug, how he loots your hard-earned money!"

Punditji, meanwhile had begun to pack his things in a hurry.

"Bastard -- where are you going?" asked one of the boys.

"Bastard, you call me bastard? Bastard you! Bastard your mother! Bastard your father! Sons of dogs, sister-sleepers!" shouted Punditji and began to throw stones at the boys. Sunder Lal came running and shouted at the boys, calling them loafers. A crowd had gathered

and Punditji began to run, his bag in one hand and the cage in another. The straw mat and the tin board were left behind.

"Catch him!" said one of the boys.

"May ashes fall on your heads. May you lose everything you have, Haraam-zaade, bastards of somewhere," shouted Punditji from a distance.

The inquisitive crowd wanted to know all the details of the incident. The boys obliged every new-comer who joined the crowd. The crowd listened with interest and was divided in two. Some were angry, some sympathetic. Sunder Lal picked up Punditji's mat and took down the board from the tree. He went back to the shop and wondered how on earth he would return the things to him. He didn't even know where Punditji lived. The thought that he might never see him again saddened him. He could only look helplessly at the distant figure of Punditji, disappearing down the railway road.

### An Evening in Delhi

It is past six in the evening, but Delhi is still blistering under a May heat wave. I stand on the lawn, in front of our house in Hauz Khas. I have just come back from the Safdurjung Hospital, where I saw Dilip Joshi die.

Dilip was not only the son of our tenants, but also my friend. In fact we went swimming in the Gymkhana Club this afternoon. He developed cramps and drowned -- just like that. He was an excellent swimmer. Everybody there thought he was trying to break his own record for staying underwater. By the time someone got worried about him, it was too late.

The gardener has watered the lawn. I remove my Kolhapuris and feel the wet grass under my feet. It

feels cool.

Sounds are coming from all over the house. Our tenants in the left wing of the first floor are preparing for the evening tea. Mrs. Advani is setting out cups and plates on the table in the balcony. Advani's servant is coming down the stairs. He is counting the change in his hand.

"Bahadur, where are you going?" I call out.

"To the Hauz Khas market, to get samosas and rasgollas for them," he says, pointing towards his master's balcony.

"Bahaduri!" Mrs. Advani calls out from her balcony. She looks like any other Sindhi lady living in a metropolitan city. Slim and fair. She wears her hair short. Today she is wearing a pale blue chiffon saree and is looking very fresh. She waves to me.

"Don't forget the tamarind chutney," she reminds her servant. Bahadur does not reply. He is upset because he has to count the change all over again. He opens the main gate and goes out. He is still counting the change.

Since our house is on the corner of the main road and the Hauz Khas road, the sounds of the main road can be heard clearly. Buses rush by, the whine of their heavy, overheated tires approaching and then fading into

the distance. They are packed with people returning from work. The sidewalks are crowded. The evening air is thick with smoke and the whole atmosphere smells of petrol.

In Joshi's balcony, in the right wing of the first floor, the servant boy is removing ticks from a dog. The dog, a white cocker spaniel with long brown ears, is firmly grasped between the boy's legs. The dog barks every time a tick is pulled out.

An autorickshaw stops near the main gate. Suman Joshi, Dilip's sister, gets out and pays the driver. She has come home from work. She works with Johnsons and Johnsons in Connaught Place.

"Hello," she says to me, smiling.

My heart beats faster. I feel, it is beating in my mouth. "Hello Suman," I say, the words drying up in my throat.

"Gosh, it is so hot. The auto stopped twice, the engine was boiling and it is getting so humid now," she continues.

"Yes," I reply. I want her to go upstairs, because I feel my head will burst if I talk to her any more.

"I think I'll go and take a bath in cold water," she says, wiping the perspiration from her forehead with a

hanky.

Meanwhile Mrs. Advani, who has set the table and is probably waiting for the servant, spots Suman and waves to her.

"Hi, Suman." Mrs. Advani smiles at her neighbour.

"Hi."

"That's a nice outfit you have. Where did you get it stitched?" asks Mrs. Advani.

"Over in South-Extension," says Suman, looking down at her outfit. She smiles and goes upstairs.

I go near the gardener and pretend to see what he is doing. I don't want Mrs. Advani to think I'm hanging around doing nothing.

The Sardarji, our tenant from the second floor, comes down. "Hello, is Madanji home?" he asks me.

"No, Father is not home. Is there anything I can do?" I want to be of some assistance to him.

"No, No, it's not urgent. Its about the paint, it is peeling off everywhere. When he comes back, I'll remind him," he says and starts to clean the seat of his motorbike with a damp cloth.

Actually the whole house needs painting. The white exterior has yellowed and it looks as if it is recovering from an attack of jaundice or some tropical fever. The

Sardarji will have to wait because Father said, that only after the monsoons would he have any repairs or painting done. The Sardarji's beard is shining. He must have applied fixo.

"Madam, are you coming down or not?" the Sardarji calls to his wife.

"You are going somewhere?" I ask him. I badly need to talk to someone. I hope he will ask me about Dilip. I want to tell him that Dilip is dead, lying dead right now, in the morgue.

"Yes, I am taking my madam to see 'Coolie', the latest Amitabh Bacchan movie. I have heard he looks dashing even as a coolie. Really, that man is too good."

The Sardarji loves his wife very much. He takes her out for movies and Chinese food. The Sardarji's wife comes down. She is dressed in a pink printed salwar-kameez. Her face is heavily made up.

"Look! Look!" the Sardarji addresses me, "Look at my madam, how she dresses up for that saala Amitabh — for him she will do anything." The Sardarji's wife pretends to be annoyed.

"Oh, come come beautiful one, I am just joking," he says, adjusting his turban. The Sardarji starts his motorbike and his wife settles on the passenger seat.

They wave to me and leave. I have made a mistake. I should have spoken to the Sardarji. I'm sure he would have advised me how to handle the situation. Now I have to wait for Mr. Joshi. It's always better to break bad news when a man is around.

"Hello again," Suman Joshi calls out from her balcony. I am startled, as though my forehead has struck against something.

"Can you ask your servant to switch on the motor, please? There is no pressure in the water today. I will fill the tub and the buckets. Daddy will be coming home soon and Dilip too."

No, not Dilip. Please don't talk about him like that. Don't go for your bath -- the telephone might ring any time. They were supposed to call from the hospital. Please don't let your mother answer it.

"Yes, I will switch on the motor myself," I say. I go through the house, to the back veranda to switch on the motor. It makes a roaring noise. I go back to the lawn and go on waiting for Mr. Joshi. Suman has gone to the bathroom and turned on the tap. I can vaguely hear the splashing of water beyond the wall.

Bahadur has come back from the market and is in a better mood. The man is a scoundrel. He must have

already eaten one or two samosas from the paper bag. Maybe I should go over to Advanis and advise them not to have tea and the sweetmeats on the balcony, in full view of the Joshis. I'm sure if I explained the whole situation they would not want to have any tea at all. I'm debating about that when I see the gardener get up to open the main gate.

A white Fiat pulls up in the driveway. Mr. Joshi gets out and tells his driver not to go, because he will be needing the car later in the evening. He has many files in his hand.

"Hello son," he says to me. The word 'son' startles me.

"Why, hello, Uncle," I pretend I just saw him.

"Everything okay?" he asks but does not wait for my reply. He seems to be in a great hurry. How can you tell such terrible news to a man who is in a hurry? I start to follow him upstairs. He enters his apartment. The door is open and he does not close it behind him. I can hear the phone ringing. I hope it is from the hospital. They said they would call at six and it is almost quarter to seven now. Mrs. Joshi gets to the phone before her husband does. She says "Hello," and then there is a long silence on her end. The receiver

slips from her hand and her face breaks into a thousand pieces.

How carelessly they must have broken the news to her. I instructed them to speak to Mr. Joshi only. I feel people should be more sensitive to other people's griefs. I turn away to come downstairs when I see Bahadur rushing down. Really, the Advanis make their servant run around a lot.

"Bahadur!" I call out "Where are you going now?"

"I forgot the tamarind chutney," he says, rushing out of the gate.

### Encounter

"Where are you going, brother?" he asked me. The question struck me as very odd since I had never seen him before.

"I don't think I recognize you," I told him politely.

"How can you recognize me when you have just met me? I asked, by the way, where are you going," he said.

I don't mind strangers asking me the time or even commenting on the hot weather of Delhi but he irritated me. I didn't like his tone of familiarity.

"What do you mean, by the way? It should be of no interest to you where I am going," I said. I thought that would discourage him from talking to me.

"What has this world come to -- brother does not

trust brother," he said to himself, but loudly enough for at least twenty people in the bus to hear.

At this I exploded. "I am not your brother," I told him. I was truly amazed at his audacity.

"Are you my enemy then?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"What nonsense are you talking. We just happen to be travelling in the same bus for a short time and you are eating my head," I told him.

"Eating your head? All I wanted to know was where you were going and I am subjected to such humiliation," he said nudging another passenger who was standing near him.

I felt if a third man got involved in our worthless conversation, it would get embarrassing, so I decided to ignore him. The world is full of worthless people, so why bother. I looked out of the bus which had stopped outside the Regal cinema. People were already lined up to see the evening show.

"So you are not going to tell me where you are going?" he asked, touching my shoulder.

I could not believe he still wanted to pursue the conversation. The bus conductor meanwhile came to our seat and demanded, "Where are you going?" I waited for my fellow passenger to speak up first. He did.

"First him," he said, pointing towards me, and beginning to fumble for his wallet.

I don't like bus conductors in general. They don't have any respect for people and act as if they own the bus. I was once bodily thrown out by a bus conductor after attempting to board a moving bus.

"India Gate," I said. I felt trapped. I paid my fare and he returned my change with the ticket.

"India Gate for me also," said my co-passenger. For the sake of convenience I'm going to call him Mr. S.

"What a coincidence! We are both going to India Gate," said a surprised Mr. S.

"It is no coincidence. You just want to follow me," I accused him. You should have seen the expression on his face. He pretended to be shocked.

"Follow you?" he said. "You do not look rich to me, otherwise you wouldn't knock around in buses."

I had a great desire to be rude to him. "Oh, so you are a pickpocket?" I asked.

"Nor are you a beautiful woman that I should follow you," he said quite in the same tone.

My accusation had had no effect on him whatsoever. In fact he appeared more casual. "So you follow women? It is people like you who have made outdoor life

impossible for decent women," I said with a lot of emotion. I am basically an emotional person and I get even more worked up on the subject of women and their rights. That is because I feel a great deal for women. In fact I was on my way to meet one -- Nita, my fiancé.

At the mention of the word 'women', other passengers turned their heads to look at us. Mr. S. looked at me intently, compelling me to say more. I responded. "If we don't have respect for women, how do we expect them to function as good sisters, good wives and good mothers? You -- you are a threat to womanhood -- to this very society," I said, lowering my voice because I didn't know what the hell I was talking about.

"Don't lower your voice please. Let these good people also hear what wise things you have to say. Please don't hesitate, they are my brothers also," he said.

I felt as if that worthless man was crushing me. I already felt drained and he was provoking me to say more. "Please don't call me your brother. I don't like people patronizing me," I said. India Gate was still a good twenty minutes away.

"How old are you?" he asked me in exactly the same tone he had asked the first question.

I was very sure the man had a screw loose because his next question had no connection with the previous one. "I think there is nothing to be gained by this conversation," I said evasively.

"We will talk of gain and loss some other time," he said, as if suggesting to meet again over coffee or something. "Just tell me your age," he said. "There is a reason for asking -- I am forty-five years old and not married, yet I am ready to call you son if you are twenty years younger than I am -- these brothers are my witnesses," he said pointing to all the brothers in the bus.

People in the bus stared at Mr. S -- what was he, some kind of a jerk, forty-five years old and not married? One of the passengers remarked, "Who will marry him?". I thought Mr. S was playing a practical joke on me. I hate to be made a fool of, especially in public. I felt cornered. One of the brothers came to my rescue. "He is mad, pagal hai, pagal," he said, screwing his own head with his finger.

"Okay, don't tell me your age," said Mr. S, making a concession. "You don't look more than twenty-eight or twenty-nine anyway. Tell me, are you going to India Gate to meet some friend -- maybe a girlfriend?" asked Mr. S.

The nerve of that man. "Are you in your right mind? How dare you ask me such personal questions?" I imagined scratching his face, putting both my hands in his mouth and tearing it open, or just pulling his hair right out of the roots.

"Your over-reaction is a clear indication that you are going to meet a girlfriend," he said confidently, and cackled.

A wave of anger swept over me and I don't know how, but a slap landed on his face.

This created a commotion in the bus. People who had been watching us silently and had also considered Mr. S worthless and stupid now turned against me.

"Oh, Sahib, what do you think of yourself? You can't go slapping people in the bus --" said a young man and held me by the collar. I stood up and he pushed me towards the door.

"Call the conductor -- let's throw this man out -- jungle of somewhere," someone shouted at me.

I looked at Mr. S. He was rubbing the cheek I had slapped. He just looked out of the window, unconcerned. Somehow he had emerged as the hero of the scene. I suddenly felt very stupid and as soon as the bus had slowed down at a traffic light, I jumped out.

India Gate was at least a kilometer away. I began walking fast. I know Nita does not like to wait alone. It's not good for a girl to wait alone in a public place. People start getting all sorts of ideas about her character. Since I could not get an auto-scooter, I ran nearly all the way. I was panting when I reached the park. She was already there.

"Why were you running? Why didn't you take the bus?" she asked me. I could hardly speak. "What's the matter? You look shaken up," she said in a very concerned tone. That encouraged me.

"I am."

"Why, what happened?" she asked, caressing my hand.

"I met this man in the bus. I can't tell you Nita, how worthless he was -- so talkative."

"Are you upset about a man you met in the bus?" she asked unbelievably.

"He was asking me questions -- intimate questions."

"Intimate?" she asked playfully. "What intimate questions?"

"He asked me where I was going," I said. It didn't sound right, the way I told her. I was still feeling crushed by the encounter.

"That's not an intimate question," she said, quite

perplexed.

"You can't ask a stranger where he is going." I got mad at her for taking someone's side she had not even met. She was supposed to side with me.

"Why not? Just wait," she said looking around. "See that old man coming towards us?" she asked me. "Watch me now," she said.

When the old man came closer, she went up to him and joined her hands. "Namaste Babuji," she said "Where are you going?"

"Just to India Gate, child. I go for a walk every day," he said smiling. The old man was so pleased that someone had stopped to speak to him. "God bless you, daughter," he said and went on his way.

"See?" she said childishly. "Let's go and eat ice-cream now," she said tugging at my arm. I followed her listlessly.

All week I had looked forward to meeting her and now my whole evening was ruined. Over ice-cream I wondered how she would have reacted if I told her I had slapped the stranger. Perhaps one day I will tell her, after we are married.

## Neighbours

Even as a child, Keshav had been ugly. Compared to his body, his face, hands and feet were disproportionately large. The skin on his face was uneven, and it seemed as if there were not enough features on it -- maybe not enough nose, or lips. His arms and chest were extremely hairy. He was twenty six-years old but looked several years older than he really was.

He was a ticket collector's son. His father worked for the Indian Railways and was known as T.C.ji to his friends and neighbours. Keshav's mother, Sheela, who had never called her husband <sup>by</sup> his real name, also called him T.C.ji.

Keshav lived with his parents in a semi-circular compound. There were sixteen houses in the whole

compound. Almost in the centre of it was a huge neem tree.. The women of the compound sometimes brought their charpoys and sat under the tree, spending leisurely afternoons, gossiping and eating peanuts.

The houses were built in such a fashion that if you stood on the roof of your house, you could see directly into your neighbour's courtyard.

On the left side of Keshav's house lived Maya with her son. She was a rich widow and had lived in Bombay before. After her husband's death, she'd moved back to Pūnjab, into the modest house her father had lived in. She detested the shabby neighbourhood and found that life in a small town was very boring and quiet, as if life itself had come to a standstill.

Maya spent most of her free time standing in the kitchen window, which overlooked the compound. She was extremely interested in her neighbours' affairs, their quality of life, the kind of visitors they had. The inside information she got from Kali, the sweeper girl, who cleaned everybody's toilets and courtyards. Kali was fairly compensated for her services. In return she got old clothes, left-over vegetables and sometimes even a little bit of money, usually in coins.

Two houses away from Keshav's house lived a

middle-aged couple. The husband was a dentist and had a private practice in a crowded market. He was always to be found sitting in a chair outside his shop. Nobody had ever seen him with a patient. He left in the morning on his bicycle and returned late in the evening. The dentist's wife wore white clothes, much to the horror of the old women of the neighbourhood. She held prayer meetings in her large courtyard, and every evening people (none from the compound) came from all over the town to listen to the preachings of their guru. The guru lived in an ashram in the Himalayas and came once a year to visit his followers.

The prayer meetings were very noisy -- often interrupted by the loud chanting of religious songs played through the loudspeaker.

The dentist and his wife had two daughters, whom they had very generously donated in the service of their guru. The followers who came to their house to sing those religious songs based on popular film tunes, saw the giving-away of the daughters as a supreme sacrifice. But their neighbours, the people of the compound, were secretly critical of the dentist and his wife, because in their opinion it was a sin to give away daughters except in marriage. The neighbours had come to the conclusion

that the couple had wanted to save on the dowry money. They also spread rumours that the girls had been sent against their wishes and that one of them had even eloped from the ashram.

The house on the right side of Keshav's house was lying vacant. Though most of the houses were occupied by tenants who had lived there for generations, there were one or two houses which were let out to tenants holding transferable jobs.

The vacant house was the smallest in the whole compound. It consisted of two dark rooms, each with just one window. It had a small veranda and an even smaller courtyard. The only redeeming feature of the house was a hand pump, from which water could be pumped out even during a water shortage. People who did not have pumps in their houses often borrowed water from the tenants of that house.

Keshav had failed several times in the matric. However he tried, he could not pass his exam. He and his mother believed that his stars were not favourable, otherwise how was it possible that a bright boy like Keshav could not pass his exam? His father, however, did not share their views, and held his son in great contempt. Because his father would not feed a grown-up

son for nothing, Keshav had taken up a part-time job in a general store selling ladies underwear, brassieres, talcum powder, etc.

Keshav had begun to take great interest in his job. He would gently unwrap cotton and nylon underwear and bras to show to his shy customers. At first he had felt awkward and often drove the customers away by smirking or smiling slyly -- a smile clearly indicating that he knew where that garment would be worn. He learned, however, that it paid to be serious in the presence of lady customers, but that did not stop him from making passes at women in the street. He often indulged in sexual fantasies and blamed his evil desires on the exposure he had to feminine underwear.

One day, after having worked the evening shift, Keshav came home to find his mother perched on the roof trying to look into the house on their right. "What are you doing, Ma?" he asked.

Sheela was taken by surprise. "Shh..." she said and beckoned him to join her.

Keshav climbed the stairs and looked. Oh! the new neighbours had moved in. It had become a little dark so it was not possible to see their faces clearly. But they could see that it was a young couple. The man was being

helped by two rickshaw pullers to whom he was speaking in Urdu. The woman was running in and out, bringing little bundles to the rooms. Keshav and his mother came down.

"Hai Ram, that man was talking in Urdu," she said.

"So?" asked Keshav.

"It can't be, it can't be," she spoke to herself.

"~~What~~ can't be?"

"Our landlord is not a fool. He too is a God-fearing Hindu. He can't do that," Sheela rambled on.

"Have you a fever that you are talking to yourself?"

"Oi hoi, didn't you hear that man speaking in Urdu? Do you think they are Moslems?" she asked.

"Moslems? You stay here, I will go and look again. You serve my food, I'll be right back," he said and went upstairs. Keshav came back to confirm his mother's suspicions. "You were right, Ma -- they must be Moslems -- he was calling her begum."

"Wait till I tell Maya," his mother said excitedly.

"There is no need to talk to that husband-eater. By morning she will know more than you anyway," he scolded her.

Next day, Sheela found out the names and other information about her neighbours from Maya. The man's name was Abdul Ali. He worked for the Indian Overseas

Bank and had been transferred from Hyderabad to "this hole", as he had remarked in front of Kali, the sweeper girl.

The new neighbours proved to be very mysterious. Unlike other people, they always kept their door closed, even during the day. It was opened only for Kali. The woman did not come out even to buy vegetables from the vendor. Her husband bought all the groceries himself and they cooked a lot of meat, much to the disgust of Keshav's mother, who came from a Brahmin family.

Nobody went to call on the new neighbours. In ordinary circumstances, the women of the neighbourhood would have gone in the afternoon to pay a visit to the lady of the house. The closed door of the new neighbours indicated that nobody was expected to pay a visit. Everybody was curious, though. The women sat under the neem tree and wondered what went on behind the closed doors. Only the dentist's wife made a few attempts to call on the woman. It was later learned that she wanted to convert her to her guru's religion.

One night, not too long after the new neighbours had moved in, Sheela woke up to the sounds of muffled screams. She woke up her husband, who had returned that day from Delhi, where he had been working. Four days out

of the week T.C.ji was away from the station. It was a ticket collector's job.

"Wake up, T.C.ji -- do you hear that?" she said.

"What?"

"What -- the screams, what else. I think that Moslem is beating his wife," she said.

"Go to sleep, woman. It is husband-wife business. She is his wife. He can beat her -- he can do what he likes," replied T.C.ji.

Keshav too heard the screams, and felt vaguely disturbed. He wanted to see the Moslem's wife. He was surprised he hadn't seen her yet. She always remained in purdah. Maybe she was ugly, he thought, and that is why she was getting beaten up.

Next morning, when his mother had gone to the market and his father had left, he went to the roof and looked down into his neighbour's courtyard. He knew Abdul Ali wouldn't be home. He could not see her but he decided to wait. He heard the splashing of water. She must be in the bathroom. He waited a few minutes, getting nervous that his mother might come back any time. He heard the bathroom door opening, and she came out dressed in a wet muslin kurta. She lay down on a string cot in the courtyard, soaking in the sun, perhaps drying her hair.

Keshav thought the Gods must be on his side, because she kept her eyes closed and she wore nothing underneath the kurta. He stood there, rooted, his eyes focused on her breasts. Then she opened her eyes and noticed Keshav staring at her.

"Hai Allah!" she said, and ran inside, clutching her breasts.

Oh you stupid fool, Keshav said to himself. But he was pleased that his neighbour's wife was such a beautiful woman.

Keshav began to spend more and more of his free time on the roof, much to the surprise of his mother, who in the past had never stopped complaining that her son preferred to eat the air and the dust of streets to her food. Keshav told his mother not to disturb him when he was on the roof, because he was preparing for the matric exam. He wanted to try one last time.

The beatings next door continued. Abdul Ali would come home drunk and beat his wife. At least once a week she got a good beating. All sorts of rumours spread in the neighbourhood, but nobody interfered. It was husband-wife business, and besides the people were from outside their community.

Once, late at night, Keshav overheard his mother

whisper to his father, "Oh T.C. ji, that poor woman, how lonely she must be, away from her family, her own people and how that demon beats her. You know why?"

"No, why?"

"Because she has not given him a child. I don't know, Maya was telling me," she said.

"Keep your voice low, the boy will hear you," he said.

"We must do something," Sheela said.

"We must do something," mimicked her husband. "Why must we do something? Have we taken out a contract for everybody's happiness? It is her fate, she must face it," he said.

"Maya was saying we should at least go and pay her a visit, when her husband is not home," she said.

"Maya! Maya! Maya! So many times I've told you I don't like your talking to that husband-eater Maya. Not one more word will I hear from you. It is bad enough that we have to live next door to Moslems on one side and that husband-eater on the other, and now this woman says we must do something," he scolded her.

Sheela did not pursue the matter any more. Keshav, who was listening to his parent's conversation, prayed for a water shortage.

His prayers were answered in a very strange way. A few weeks later, when the interest in the new neighbours had almost died down, he learned from his mother that Abdul Ali had left for Hyderabad. His father had been taken ill and he had gone to see him, leaving his wife behind.

Next day, in the evening, after seven o'clock when the water stopped flowing in the taps, Keshav went to the kitchen and emptied out the pitchers. His father was in Delhi, and his mother had gone to the temple. He went to his room and waited for his mother. When she came, she exclaimed, "Oh, Keshi son, what happened to all the water?"

"Ma, I saw a lizard in the pitcher, so I threw away the water. I think you should clean all the pitchers with ash," he advised her.

"Where will we get water to drink now? I have not even made dal yet," she said.

"Should I get water from the neighbours?" he offered.

"Have you gone out of your mind? Will we drink water from a Moslem's house?"

"The water is the same everywhere -- you are so old-fashioned, Ma."

"You are my son, stay my son. Don't try to become my father."

"Ma, think for a moment -- the water is coming from the earth. When Krishna and his family were living there, didn't we always get water from them? Water is water, what have those Moslems got to do with it? I promise I will wash the pump first," he said.

"Okay," she relented "get only one pitcher. I will not drink from it. I will use it only to wash hands, and to make dal for you."

"Keshav picked up a pitcher, went and knocked on his neighbour's door."

"Who is it?" the woman asked.

"We are your neighbours and need some water from the pump," said Keshav.

After a little hesitation, she opened the door and let him in. Keshav closed the door behind him.

\* \* \*

"What took you so long?" asked Keshav's mother when he came back.

"Their pump handle was broken. I had to fix that first, then the water was so muddy, I had to wait for clean water."

"Okay, okay, which dal should I make for you?"

"No I am not hungry. I'm going to sleep." Keshav went and locked himself in his room.

"The boy is strange. I will tell his father to find a match for him. Let his wife cook for him and put up with his moods," his mother said to herself.

Next morning, Keshav left early. When he came back in the afternoon, he saw a crowd gathered outside Abdul Ali's house. He panicked and broke out into a cold sweat. Something terrible must have happened, he concluded. "What happened?" he asked one of the men.

"Poor woman!" the man said and walked away shaking his head.

"What was left for her to do?" asked Maya, who was the most excited of all.

"The beast used to beat her -- ask Sheela, she heard the screams with her own ears. For how long can one take it?" she continued.

"He will rot in Hell," said Sheela.

"Did anybody send a telegram to Hyderabad?" someone asked.

"Yes, I did," said the dentist.

"Maybe the fault was with him -- always the woman is blamed," said another lady.

"If she had come to the prayer meetings she would not have come to such an end," said the dentist's wife.

"What end?" asked Keshav.

"Go and see inside, the way she is hanging from the ceiling fan," said someone.

"Don't you think the body should be put on the bed at least?" asked Sheela.

"No, No. It's a police case. We cannot do anything till the police arrive," said the dentist.

Keshav's legs went limp. He began to shake and fell to the ground.

"Poor boy, has he fainted?" someone asked.

"Oh Keshi, my son," said Sheela "he has such a weak heart."

"Rub his feet," Maya advised.

"Take him inside and throw water on him," suggested the dentist's wife.

Three men lifted Keshav and took him inside. The crowd moved and gathered in front of Keshav's house.

### The Princess

When I retired from the Indian Army, I had nothing much to look forward to. My wife had died even before I had retired. She had been a good wife, very good indeed. But her death shattered our dream of buying a small cottage near the mountains and spending the rest of our days there. She had a great fondness for children and had hoped that Sunny, our only child, would fill our house with children of his own. It wasn't a spectacular dream but it was something that gave us security. When my wife died, I was relieved for her, because she suffered a great deal of pain in her last months. That left me with Sunny. Before she died she told Sunny to take care of me and respect me. After her death he showed no inclination to do either. I was quite capable of looking

after myself, but it would have been nice to have respect from my only child. He spoke to me after his mother's death:

"Father," he said, "I have decided to go the United States." Then he looked at me expectantly. I didn't know what was expected of me -- approval or blessing. I gave him both. He had every right to better his life and I had none to stand in the way of his success and his better life. He also expected some money from me.

"How much?" I asked.

"Ten thousand Rupees," he said.

My heart sank. Didn't the boy know I was going to retire? Didn't he understand that? I was furious but I reasoned with myself. He was, after all, my only son. I didn't want him to grow bitter and remark later in life that his father had done nothing for him and had instead deprived him of a better life. I parted with the money and he left me. I prayed that he would get homesick and come back. But who was there in his home to get sick for -- an old father? No, he never became homesick. He never became anything much for that matter. For six months I didn't even know his whereabouts. All I knew was that he had flown to New York. Whether he was dead or alive or living in some jail for sneaking into the

country illegally, I had no idea. After six months I received a postcard from him saying he was well and was enjoying life in Houston. How he was making a living or filling his life with enjoyments, which obviously cost money, he chose to keep from me. He wrote to me occasionally and I, like a dutiful father, replied likewise.

One day I received some photographs of him in bathing trunks with several girls on the beach. The bastard. Wanted to show off to me, to his own father. In the next letter he informed me that he was getting married to Lisa, an American girl. He didn't ask for my permission or blessing, just informed me. It would have broken his poor mother's heart to see how much respect he was giving me. I rushed to the post office in the hope I might be able to cancel the wedding. Marry and consider yourself orphan, I cabled. He must have decided to consider himself orphan because in the next letter I received some wedding photos. My daughter-in-law, may God bless her, was a beautiful girl. I wrote back congratulating him on his success in America and I asked sarcastically if he had considered turning Christian. I should not have written that, because that was the last I heard from him for a long long time.

It was in those days that I moved back into my home town and rented an annex of a huge bungalow belonging to Sehgals, a local business family. The annex was very modest. It had a sitting room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom and a small room in the backyard for the servant. I employed a servant boy to do my cooking, cleaning and laundering. I had some distant relatives scattered around the town whom I rarely visited, but I had no real friends. The ones who had retired with me went back to their own hometowns. They had wives and children. I had nothing but endless time on my hands. I took to reading and taking long walks in the evening. In short, I became a gentleman at large.

Next to my landlord's bungalow was an old mansion. The light yellow walls of the exterior were covered with creepers. The creepers, the old house itself, the untended lawn, and the uncut hedges had a dilapidated look about them. Only two women lived in that big house -- the Princess and her mother.

The Princess, I learned from my landlord's wife, was an illegitimate child of the Maharajah of Patiala. That the Maharajah had had a harem full of beautiful women was no secret. The fact the old lady must have at some time belonged to that harem intrigued me. I felt strangely

curious about our neighbours. Both mother and daughter lived a secluded life and it became my ambition to somehow invade that seclusion, to talk to them, to become their acquaintance. I began to take a great interest in their activities. I noticed they often sat in their lawn and spent long evenings in each other's company. They also had three cats. I never saw the Princess and her mother laughing or even speaking loudly to each other. In fact I never saw them talking to each other at all. When I went for a walk, I made sure to walk very slowly when I was passing their gate. I hoped they recognize me as their neighbour and would invite me to join them in drinking those endless cups of tea which their lady servant brought them. But that did not happen.

One day, when I had already contemplated buying a pet to occupy some of my time, a dog strayed on to my side of the lawn. It looked like a friendly but a very ordinary dog. I ordered the servant boy to get some food for the dog. The servant boy was reluctant. He said that very soon all the dogs of the street would line up in front of their house for free meals. When I scolded the boy, he grudgingly brought some stale chappatti. The dog gratefully ate it and left. Afterwards the dog, being a dog, started coming every day. I fed him chicken

bones,, which he crunched with delight. The day I fed him real meat he refused to leave. He stayed and I let him. I washed the dog, sprayed him with disinfectant and named him Jackie. The servant boy resented me for that, and always had fresh complaints about the dog. The dog, (he never called him Jackie) ate dirt outside and kept company with other street dogs, he said. I always dismissed the complaints and let Jackie accompany me on my walks.

After returning from my walk one day, I noticed that our neighbour's gate was open. I slowed my pace and Jackie entered their grounds. At the time only the mother was sitting outside, reading. The two cats got excited and began to make strange noises.

"Jackie! Jackie!" I shouted and went after him. I caught him by the collar and profusely apologized to the mother.

The mother was quite frail. Her hair was like salt and pepper. She wore an off-white silk saree and gold rimmed spectacles.

"I am really sorry," I apologized again. She smiled. She actually smiled.

"They are not used to visitors," she said, gathering her cats.

"I am Major Dilwri," I said.

"Pleased to meet you," she said but made no attempt to introduce herself.

I was about to leave when I saw the Princess come out of the house, carrying the third cat. Her reaction at seeing me there was of vague surprise.

"This is Major Dilwri," said the mother to her daughter and briefly explained the excitement of the cats.

"And this is Princess," said the mother to me.

"Enchanted," I said bowing lightly.

I could see the old lady was already charmed by my army manners.

"Won't you join us for tea, Major?" asked the mother.

"That is very kind of you," I said, accepting the invitation.

The mother ordered the lady servant to bring a chair for me and some tea for us all.

The Princess, I observed, was very unprincesslike. Frankly I was extremely disappointed in her. Nothing but her fair complexion and a strange quietness which seemed to have settled on her face betrayed that she might have royal blood in her veins.

Her hair was thin, almost scanty, and tied in a bun

at the nape of her neck. The bun was stuffed with dyed wool to give it a bulky look. She wore a brown silk salwar-kameez and looked not a day younger than forty years.

The lady servant served the tea and respectfully backed off. A very unobtrusive servant indeed, so unlike mine who interfered in all my affairs and had an opinion about everything, the jackass of somewhere.

I showed interest in their cats. All three were female -- Sheba, Cleopatra and Minou. The black one looked particularly handsome. I felt ashamed of my dog, and thanked God they did not ask questions about his breed. Before I left, the mother said:

"Hope to see you again, Major."

"The pleasure will be mine," I said. I bowed and left.

Between their cats and my dog, I managed to establish a neighbourly traffic with the Princess and her mother. I often accepted their hospitality and in return I offered to run little errands for them. I sometimes took their cats to the vet or returned books to the public library for them. Soon, I discovered I had begun to spend almost all my evenings at their place. Actually it was always on their lawn we sat, I never had the

chance to see the inside of their house.

We sat together and drank tea out of fine china cups. Sometimes there would be long silences, while they stirred their tea and sighed. And when we talked our conversations centred mostly around the writers they were currently reading, their cats, or my life. The only segment of their private lives that could be touched upon was the time when the Princess used to teach in the local Convent school -- a career which had abruptly and mysteriously come to an end. Endless questions nagged my mind. The one that particularly bothered me was why the Princess had never got married. She must have had some admirer when she was younger. Instead, I answered questions about my life, my career, my son and his American wife. They expressed a wish to see photographs, if I had any, of my son and daughter-in-law. I was delighted they took so much interest in me. Since they never accepted any invitation for tea or drinks at my place, I had to always go to theirs. But I tried to compensate by bringing them freshly-baked biscuits from the bakery or cheese from the Army canteen.

One day our conversation drifted to English movies. I was surprised they had such keen interest in films. So impulsively I asked if they would like to go to the

movies with me. The Defence cinema was run by the Army and was the only theatre in town to show English movies. The movies were of course mercilessly censored, but nevertheless, they attracted the elite of the town, for whom the theatre was another prestigious spot to visit and to be seen at.

The mother declined my invitation, saying she was too old, but insisted that the Princess go.

"My Princess used to be so fond of English movies," she said with a world of depression in her voice. The Princess agreed, but not very enthusiastically. But then the Princess was never enthusiastic about anything, so I did not let that dampen my spirits. I promised I would see if any good movie was coming in the near future. I found out that 'Gone with the Wind' would be shown the following week. I broke the news to my neighbours.

"Oh, but we have seen that one," said the mother.

"But I would love to see it again," said the Princess, dreamily.

The way she said that and the look she had in her eyes afterwards, stirred my heart. For that fraction of a moment there was romance in her eyes and in her voice. She looked almost beautiful. I trembled for her. I was convinced that she had a secret locked up in her -- maybe

a wild lover-affair she had had in her youth.

To my dismay, I discovered I felt attracted to her. I was in my mid-fifties and should have been ashamed of harbouring such inappropriate feelings. But the more I tried to battle my feelings, the more I thought about her.

For my own peace of mind, I came to the conclusion that it was her friendship I wanted, her confidence. I wanted her to open up her whole life to me. Yes, that's what I wanted. And yet the day I had to pick her up for the movie I took great care in dressing up. I made sure my shirt was freshly laundered and my shoes polished. I felt strangely self-conscious being alone with her. We did not hire a rickshaw because it was not dignified enough. Since I had no transportation of my own and the theatre was only a mile away, we decided to walk. We walked silently. I think we hardly spoke to each other. I was wondering if she too was feeling a little uneasy being alone with me. But it was hard to tell what the Princess felt. She hardly ever expressed any emotion. But during the movie she was a different person. She was like a little girl. She surprised me with the display of emotion. "Wait till you see the next scene," she whispered excitedly before a lot of scenes she had

particularly liked. She laughed when Scarlet, dressed in widow's clothes got up to dance. "How beautifull" she said to me. She fell in love with Clark Gable and muttered to herself over and over again -- "Oh I love him, just love him." She wept when Bonnie died. For the first time I saw the Princess come alive. I was overwhelmed with her, as much as she was with the movie. When the movie was over and we came out, it had become pitch dark. The tropical night had fallen suddenly and there was a slight chill in the crisp October night. When the cars, scooters, and rickshaws had left, we two were quite alone on that lonely road. I took hold of her hand. It was so small, and cold.

"Did you enjoy the movie?" I asked quite unnecessarily.

"Yes, very much," she said and let me press her hand, out of gratitude, I think. I don't know what came over me. May my dead wife forgive me for what I did afterwards -- what shame I brought upon myself. I stopped and pulled her face to mine. I kissed her hard and long. Her body was tense and her lips dry, but she kept quite still. She had a beautiful smell, more mysterious and feminine than anything I had encountered before. She did not respond, but didn't try to disengage

herself either. Either my courage doubled or some devil possessed me, I put my hand on her breast. Then she responded. I felt nails digging into my arms. She spat on my face, actually on my chest and ran wildly into the darkness.

"Princess! Princess!" I shouted after her.

"Please let me explain," I pleaded with her, but in vain.

I was very upset. I came home and found the servant boy in a bad mood. When I asked him what the problem was, he said that he should have been told that I was going to come home late. I shouted at him and told him that it was none of his business to know when I was going, or coming back. He left me alone and I heard him go outside and kick Jackie for no reason at all. The dog was not even barking. But I could not be bothered with them. I was restless and could not sleep. I walked up and down the garden and through the house, talking to myself and sometimes striking my fists together. I was filled with remorse, but somehow I knew she would not forgive me. I was right. Next day, the Princess and her mother stayed indoors. I didn't see them for many days. And all the time I was waiting for them to come out and just look in my direction. If only I could apologize.

The day they resumed their normal routine of sitting outside on the lawn, two things happened to me. They ignored me, of course. I got a letter from my son and I paid a visit to Mrs. Sehgal, my landlord's wife. My son wrote that I was now a proud grandfather of a beautiful baby boy, whose picture he had enclosed. My heart burst with joy and my first reaction was to go over to the Princess and her mother. Instead I went to the market, got a box of sweets and paid a visit to Mrs. Sehgal. She congratulated me and offered me tea. I accepted. The conversation drifted from babies to pets and consequently to our neighbours. I picked up courage and asked her why the Princess had never got married.

"Why Major sahib, why do you want to know?" she asked.

"Just curiosity," I said.

"It's a sad story," she said and sighed while she made some sympathetic noises.

"What do you mean?" I asked with alarm.

"Many years back, I don't even remember how many -- she used to teach in the Convent and there used to be an Air-Force pilot who was interested in marrying her. But then, as Fate would have it, her mother went away to

Gwalior for a few days. She had gone to see her dying sister."

"Then?" I asked.

"Something very bad happened," she said and made some more noises and wished that such a thing should happen to none, not even an enemy.

"Well?" I asked, impatient with her to get on with the story.

"Their own servant raped her," she said.

"No!" I said.

"Yes, it is very sad. Everybody in the town knows. You know how these things travel. That is why she left her job and no one ever saw that pilot again," she continued.

I quickly disengaged myself from the conversation and took my leave. I took Jackie and went for a walk. I went to the park and sat on the bench. I saw Jackie poking his nose in the park dustbins. The servant boy was right. The dog had begun to eat filth again. I decided to get rid of the dog as soon as I went back. I took out my son's letter and re-read it, and gazed at my grandson's photograph for a long time while my dog moved down the road from one dustbin to another.

ashram	A kind of hermitage for a guru and his followers.
babu	A title, usually indicating respect.
beedie	Tobacco rolled in a dry leaf.
chappatti	Unleavened wholewheat bread.
dal	Pulse or lentils, usually eaten as a kind of sauce with rice or chapattis.
ghee	Clarified butter, more expensive but preferred to other cooking oils.
ji	An honorific suffix attached to Indian names or titles.
jungle	Beastly.
kameez	Shirt. A woman's kameez is usually about dress length and is worn with salwar pants.
kurta	A long loose shirt.
memsahib	Respectful term of address for a woman, especially a modernized or Westernized woman.
paratha	A layered fried bread.
rasgolla	Cheese balls in syrup.
salwar	A woman's pyjama-pants, tight at the ankles and worn with a long shirt - the kameez.
sardar	Literally "chief"; respectful term for a Sikh.
samosa	A spicy fried pastry containing vegetables or meat.
tonga	A carriage pulled by a single horse -- driver faces forward and the passengers face backward.