

ARAKKHANIYA  
(The Unprotected)  
*Translated by Malobika Chatterjee*

1

‘MEJO MASHIMA, MA HAS SENT SOME DIVINE PRASAD FOR YOU—HERE, TAKE this.’

‘Is that you, Atul? Come in.’ Durgamoni emerged from the kitchen. Atul bent down to touch her feet.

‘God bless you with good health and a long life! Gyanada, your Atul Dada has actually returned! Put away the food and lay out a seat for him. Last night I heard a coach drawing up and I wondered who it was. If I had known that Didi had returned, I would have rushed across to touch her feet and seek her blessings. Can there be one like her in the whole wide world? Is Didi keeping well, my dear? Have you just returned from Puri? Why are you taking so long, Gyanada? Your Atul Dada is waiting.’

A twelve- or thirteen-year-old dark-complexioned girl emerged with a mat in her hand. Her head was bowed low as she laid out the mat and when she bent down to touch Atul’s feet, she still did not look up. Not a word did she utter. Picking up the food the girl firmly went inside. But a closer look would have revealed the suppressed laughter held in check with every step she took.

But this was not so merely of the girl. A glance at the handsome young boy too would have revealed a flash of emotion, which disappeared as quickly as a streak of lightning.

Atul took a seat and talked of his experiences during the pilgrimage. His father was an old-fashioned clerk. After amassing a substantial amount of property and money, he had retired on a pension. It was about three years ago that he had breathed his last. After Atul had graduated from college he had set out with his mother on a pilgrimage. They had returned recently from Rameswar via Puri.

Listening to all his tales Durgamoni sighed deeply and said, ‘Look at me—the great sinner that I am, I have not even been able to travel to Kasi and pay my respects to Baba Bishheswar so far.’

Atul said, ‘Mejo Mashima, you must admit that unless you force yourself to leave everything behind and take the plunge, nothing gets done. If I had not forced her as I did, do you think my mother would have been able to go either?’

Once again Durgamoni heaved a deep sigh and replied, ‘You are aware of everything, my dear. Am I in any position to force matters? With the little salary that I get, what remains after paying all the expenses and taking care of some social niceties? Besides, this girl is almost thirteen. I am telling you honestly, Atul, just looking at her makes the blood in my veins freeze! A mother has to bear such a great enemy and nurture her!’ Even as she spoke, Durgamoni’s eyes brimmed over with tears.

But in the face of this tale of distress and worry Atul merely laughed.

He said, 'Mashima, you are overdoing it! Does no one else have a daughter; are all the problems of the world yours?'

Durgamoni answered, 'It is not just a worry, Atul, it is a mortal dread! I know society only too well. If I am not able to get my daughter married, I will be a social outcast. But how can I get her married? Money is needed—where will I get that? Besides this little bit of land, I have absolutely nothing, my dear.'

Only half an hour ago there had been a dispute between husband and wife about this girl. The husband had pushed away his half-eaten plate of food and left for office. That anguish put Durgamoni in turmoil and tears trickled down her cheeks on to her lap. She wiped them away with her hand and said, 'I must have committed a great number of sins in my last birth to have borne a daughter this time.'

'Mejo Mashima, I had better take my leave, or else you will just not stop.'

Wiping her tears dry, Durgamoni spoke. 'No, my dear, don't go yet. It lightens my load to weep in your presence. That's what I say—O Almighty, if bearing a girl was my fate, why couldn't you have made her fair? She is so dark that nobody wants to marry her. Everybody is looking for a beautiful girl! What kind of society does not look at lineage or character—only because she has a dark complexion, you refuse to shelter her in a marriage! If such is your decision, why trouble her parents?'

Atul responded, 'Your dark girl is unable to find a groom? The birds and bees are also dark, but are they treated with any less regard? These are eternal examples, Mejo Mashima!'

Durgamoni continued, 'Only the examples are eternal, my dear, there is nothing else. But that no longer affords me any consolation or strength, Atul. Having seen Girish Bhattacharjee's daughter's wedding, my heart quails in fear. Their condition was just like ours—there was virtually no money and the girl had no looks to speak of either. The groom was no less than sixty! The mother's sobs are still ringing in my ears.'

Amazed, Atul asked, 'Close to sixty? What are you talking about?'

'Definitely so, my dear. Hari Chakraborti's granddaughter married Nitai Chatujjey. And she has an eight- or ten-year-old daughter. You do the calculation for yourself!'

This information made Atul speechless.

Durgamoni went on. 'If that daughter consumes poison out of disgust, hangs herself or tarnishes the family name by running away—can I, as a mother, curse her from the bottom of my heart?'

Atul remained silent. All of a sudden Durgamoni grasped his hands and said, 'Atul, my dear, these days everybody says that you boys are compassionate. Please find out in your school and college, whether out of kindness someone will give shelter to this girl of mine.'

Hurriedly Atul pulled himself free; respectfully and in an emotional tone he said, 'Why are you panicking, Mejo Mashima? I give you my word—'

But he could not complete what he was saying. Out of sheer embarrassment the very tips of his ears grew scarlet and it was impossible for him to speak. Though Durgamoni did not notice this, anyone else present there may have grown suspicious about the nature of the promise Atul had been about to make so impulsively before he curbed himself just as hurriedly.

Checking himself, Atul stood up. He said smoothly, 'Let me try my very best. Where are you, Gyanada, give me a paan or something—I'll have to head home now.'

Durgamoni shouted irately, 'Geni, why don't you give your Atul-da a betel leaf? The wretched girl has neither beauty, nor is she talented. Are these simple rules of hospitality meant to be taught? Having once entered the house with the prasad, she seems to have vanished for good! Hurry up with the paan.'

'Doesn't matter, let me fetch it myself—which room are you in, Gyanada?' Atul entered the house, calling out loudly.

The girl was sitting quietly with everything set out in front of her. As he went in Atul said gravely, 'Mejo Mashima says Geni has neither beauty nor talent. She will have to be married off to a sixty-year-old man.'

Gyanada did not reply; with bowed head she held up two paans.

Atul approached her from behind, took the paans and said, 'If the betel leaves have been dressed well, you will be forgiven this one time. Perhaps the age of the groom can be lowered from sixty to about twenty or twenty-one.'

Gyanada almost sank through the ground in embarrassment. Lowering his voice, Atul said, 'I was on the verge of revealing all to Mashima! All right then, it is getting late, let me take my leave.'

Gyanada made no response to this either. She sat in a huddle as before.

'Cat got your tongue? Fine then—.' Atul tugged at the open tresses of the girl and said, 'But let me warn you of the advent of an old man like Hari Chokkotti!' Laughing, Atul left the room. As soon as he stepped into the courtyard he called out loudly, 'Mejo Mashima, Mother bought a pair of bangles for Gyano from Bombay, come out and have a look.'

'Let me see.' Durgamoni emerged from the kitchen. Atul took out two pairs of bangles from his pocket and held them out.

Taking note of the colour and the artistry, Durgamoni launched into fulsome praises of the person giving the gift. True, the bangles were of glass, but were not so fancy or decorative as had been seen either in the village or even in the city of Kolkata. In reality, greatly impressed by their shape and glitter, Atul had bought them with his own money, using his mother as a mere front.

In response to her mother's summons, Gyanada came out. As she accepted this first token of affection in silence, her hands trembled. Then, slowly touching her benefactor's feet, she walked away. Though not a word was spoken, only the Almighty was aware that day of all that her

heart held. Just for a few minutes these two people stood and gazed at this young girl as she walked away, their eyes brimming with affection.

## 2

GOLAKNATH, THE ELDEST BROTHER, PASSED AWAY; HIS WIDOW Swarnamanjari, who had no siblings, sold off the remnants of her own inheritance and sought the protection of her youngest brother-in-law Anathnath. Unable to bear the sting of this insult, Priyanath—the second or ‘mejo’ brother—came to blows with Anathnath. The previous year on such a day, Priyanath had picked a quarrel with his brother, raised a wall right through the centre of the courtyard and set up a separate establishment. He had not even felt the necessity of constructing a door in the wall. The Almighty must have enjoyed a good laugh at his expense even as all this happened. Not even a year went by before Priyanath succumbed to a seven-day fever and breathed his last, practically without any treatment, thus putting paid to the very purpose of the wall.

The day before he died, when there was no doubt at all that the end was close at hand, everybody in the village clustered around in the room, mourning and wailing. Priyanath had still not lost consciousness. Atul was not in the village at the time. The news having reached him in the hostel at Kolkata, he rushed down immediately. As he was trying to make his way through the crowd and enter the room, Gyanada rushed towards him from somewhere, threw herself at his feet and struck her head on the ground repeatedly. Those who had gone there to amuse themselves were somewhat taken aback at this unexpected source of diversion and tongues started wagging. This emotional and public display, in front of so many people, made Atul cringe in shame and sorrow.

A little later, when he had somehow composed himself, he tried to pull her up. Gyanada clung to his feet firmly and said, ‘At least go and console my father on his deathbed. No matter what might later lie in store for me. Free him of all his worries for me, about leaving me behind unmarried. Never again will I ask anything of you.’ She continued to weep piteously. Gyanada was no longer conscious of what she was doing.

Her unlucky father, burdened with worry, was dying an extremely untimely death. Gyanada was no longer mindful of her behaviour—she did not even think how she spoke or reacted in front of so many people, but continued to beat her head wildly against the ground. However, Atul was more restrained. No matter how disturbed he might feel about such a public display of emotion, in the glare of public attention he grew stern. Atul pulled away his feet abruptly and chided her gently. ‘Shame! Be calm, do not weep—I will definitely say what has to be said.’ He went and took his place at one end of the dying man’s bed. Durgamoni

was sitting by her husband; she looked up at Atul in silence and started weeping.

Nilkantha Chatujey was standing at the threshold of the house. He observed Atul's hesitation and said, 'Priyanath still has some remnants of consciousness, my dear; take this chance and shout out as loudly as possible. He might then be able to hear you.' Needless to say, this advice was immediately seconded by one or two others present.

The sight of the mob had initially angered Atul; added to it, their unseemly curiosity had greatly roused his ire. 'There is absolutely no gain in all of you crowding around like that. If you just step outside for a while, I can say what has to be said.'

This roused Nilkantha's indignation. 'What do you mean, no gain? It is a neighbour who comes to assist a neighbour in trouble. What is your great ulterior motive in taking your seat on the bed, my dear?'

Standing up, Atul answered determinedly, 'Even if I cannot help, at least I will not allow you to cause further discomfort by blocking the passage of air. Please step out, all of you.'

Taking note of his attitude, Nilkantha took a step backward and said, 'Just a young boy, and look at his audacity!' Someone from behind him commented, 'And all this is just because he has passed his MA, BA!'

A young lad of about ten years or so was peeping in. Without replying, Atul pushed him and he fell on someone. The man on whom he fell muttered imprecations under his breath and left. Nilkantha and the other men present gave up all hopes of eavesdropping on the conversation, and they took their leave, muttering curses all the while.

When no outsider remained in the room, Atul leant over the sick man and called out, 'Meshomoshai!'

Priyanath looked up mutely with bloodshot eyes. Atul raised his voice and asked, 'Can you recognize me?'

His eyes closed, Priyanath murmured indistinctly, 'Atul?'

'How are you now?'

Priyanath shook his head and answered in the same low voice, 'Not well!'

Atul's eyes brimmed over with tears. Somehow he managed to control himself and clearing his throat he said, 'Meshomoshai, let me tell you one thing. Please do not worry any more; from this day forth I am taking all responsibility for Gyanada.'

Priyanath could not understand what was being said. He looked this way and that and asked, 'Where is Gyanada?' Durgamoni leaned over her husband's face and in a voice distorted by tears asked, 'Do you want to see Gyanada?'

Initially Priyanath did not answer and then he said, 'No!'

Durgamoni started weeping in earnest and said, 'Have you heard what Atul is saying? He has come to accept the responsibility of your Gyanada. Do not worry any longer. You have cursed that wretched girl many a time, now just call her and bless her.'

Durgamoni repeated herself as the tears rolled down her cheeks. Priyanath did not speak. He raised his infirm hands with great effort and

touched Atul on the forehead; then he turned back on one side again. Although he did not speak another word, Atul sensed that he had lightened a very heavy load on his heart as he was breathing his last. All of a sudden, overcome by emotion, Atul burst into tears like a child and started sobbing helplessly. The only witnesses were Durgamoni and the Almighty!

The next evening, in conformity with what the majority of Bengali gentlemen do, Priyanath Babu severed all earthly ties at the age of thirty-six. With the skeletal and worn-out remains of what could be likened to an eighty-six-year-old body, he left for the heavenly abode of Hindus, leaving behind him a young widow and an unmarried daughter as the responsibility of someone even more unfortunate.

### 3

ANATHNATH, THE YOUNGER BROTHER, WAS FORCED TO HAVE A DOOR constructed in the wall. After the funeral rites of his elder sibling were over, and almost a fortnight had gone by, he stood by the wall as he chewed on a betel leaf on his way to work and he said, 'It is no longer possible for me to postpone saying this—I am not reluctant to feed you, no matter how badly my elder brother might have behaved. But it is impossible for me to bear the responsibility of such a grown-up girl. It might appear that I am highly paid, but just think about how many children I have! Besides, you must have noticed that my own daughter is now twelve. That's why I think you should take your daughter and travel to Haripal.'

Clutching a post in the kitchen Durgamoni somehow held herself upright. She spoke with fear and trepidation. 'You know my Dada's plight, he has nothing at all. Despite hearing of this great misfortune, he has not bothered to even come and look us up. Besides, if I am not taken there by someone, how will I go all by myself?'

Boro Bou Swarnamanjari was standing behind the fence. She took a few steps forward and said, 'I know that Dada was not well off, but what makes you assume that your brother-in-law has a king's ransom? It might sound like he earns a great deal, but only I know how I am forced to manage! Besides, let me ask you—with such a grown-up hulk of a daughter, who will shelter you? Still, I say, just sulking and feeling hurt will not serve any purpose.'

Durgamoni spoke calmly. 'No, Didi, how can I afford such emotions?'

Swarna pushed her brother-in-law behind her with one hand, stepped forth herself and said, 'There is nothing wrong with what I have told you Mejo Bou, that you are replying so sardonically. Whether it makes you angry or not—let me make it clear that we cannot take the responsibility

of marrying of your unparalleled beauty of a daughter. Chhoto Bou has also borne daughters. But looking at their helpless faces, can anyone ever turn away? Let me tell you the truth, Mejo Bou: considering what your daughter looks like, go across to Haripal and accost some lout of a farmer and be done with it. I believe the people there do not care about the looks of the girl—it suffices that she is female.'

Durgamoni remained silent. It petrified her to see the poisonous spirit that had once driven them apart resurface thus. Swarna continued, 'Each to his own, I say! No one can find fault with you. Yes, they can criticize me. If I bring in a son-in-law who is even a little poorly qualified, there will be no end to the criticism that I will have to face. People will say—what have you done? You have deliberately destroyed such a beautiful daughter's future. Tell me, am I not right?' Swarna cast a burning glance at Anath.

'Definitely!' Anath left on the pretext of his getting late for office, having desisted from countering his elder sister-in-law.

Swarna spoke again. 'Persuade your brother and get hold of a groom—no matter who! You need not be ashamed of that, Mejo Bou—there will be no one to criticize you. Your husband had a salary of only thirty rupees, how many people knew him or recognize him still! It was *their* sibling that he was known. Tomorrow is an auspicious day—why not set off tomorrow?'

Durgamoni thought of Atul, but did not say a word in her presence. It was after all through this elder sister-in-law that there was a connection with the boy. Swarna was his aunt.

That day Durga had noted the manner in which Gyanada had collapsed at Atul's feet and wept helplessly. But since she was braving a far greater storm just then, she had not paid much heed to it. Unfortunately in a poverty-stricken household there was no time or opportunity even to mourn wholeheartedly. That is why, from the very day after her husband's death, Durgamoni had begun to worry about this matter. She entered the room and found her daughter sitting quietly on the floor. Going up to her she said quietly, 'You have heard what Didi has been saying, haven't you?'

The girl nodded. Durgamoni could not think of what to say further, but it was her daughter who made matters easy. She said, 'You have never been to your paternal house, Mother; why not pay them a visit at this time?'

Her mother answered, 'My mother is no longer alive and my brother has never expressed any concern. Despite hearing of such a great calamity, he did not even bother to write a line. What right do I have to go to them, tell me, my dear?'

The daughter responded, 'No one ever asks by choice after the destitute, Mother. They have not done so, but neither have the people here. Rather, here they are encouraging us to leave. All our pride and emotions have disappeared with Father. Let us go and live there.'

Tears began to stream down Durgamoni's face. Her daughter wiped them dry affectionately and said, 'I know it is only because of me that

you do not wish to go anywhere. Or else, after hearing the manner in which Jethaima spoke, you would not have remained here even one more day. You do not have to worry about me at all, Mother—let us go and spend a few days somewhere else. You will not live if you stay here.'

The mother could not restrain herself any longer; she clasped her daughter to her breast and started weeping helplessly. Gyanada did not try to stop her or soothe her; silently she leaned against her mother's breast.

After a long time Durgamoni regained some measure of control over herself. She wiped away her tears and said, 'Honestly Gyanada, but for you, I would have discarded everything and gone away—no matter where—the day he died. It is only because of you that this was impossible.'

'I know that, Ma.'

'Tell me the truth, my dear—that day why did Atul speak in that manner? No, Gyanada, do not hide your face; this is not the time for shyness. I know that he is not one to tell a lie. Then why on your father's deathbed was Atul so reassuring and why did you hurl yourself at his feet in that way?'

Gyanada spoke in a muffled voice. 'I do not know that, Mother.'

Durgamoni tried to lift up her daughter's face by force, but she continued to cling to her. Unsuccessful, Durga reiterated, 'Nothing struck me as long as your father was alive, but reflecting on it all since then, there is a lot that I have understood. There have been so many small comments Atul made that I understand only too well now.' Even as she spoke, Durgamoni suddenly clasped her daughter's hand firmly in her own and asked, 'Tell me, my dear, that what I am assuming is not a lie—that I have not merely been dreaming for the past couple of days?'

Gyanada still kept her face hidden and answered mildly, 'How can I say, Mother, he follows his own path.'

Weeping with joy Durgamoni said, 'Do not torture me with doubts any longer, my dear—reassure me once and let me mourn your father wholeheartedly! He will be able to hear me weep today.'

The girl answered quietly, 'Why don't you cry, Ma; I have never stopped you from weeping. I had told him to inform Father and he did so himself. Now what he decides to do in the future is up to him.'

Durgamoni could no longer restrain her emotions. She forcibly held up her daughter's tearful, scarlet face, kissed her repeatedly, once again clasped her to her breast and wept in silence for a while. Later, she wiped her eyes dry and continued to speak softly. 'Indeed my dear, indeed! May Atul live a long time; of course he has to choose the path he will follow. But none of us forget even for a day that it was you who saved him from death. That year people said it was beriberi. No matter what the disease, there were ugly and unseemly pus-filled wounds. It was his mother first, followed by Atul. There was absolutely no hope for Atul. When the sheer stench drove people away from their house, you—a mere child—battled alone against death and saved him. Can he possibly forget that? Just like we read in the scriptures about Savitri bringing back her husband from the veritable jaws of death, you too brought him



back. Can the Almighty possibly allow him to belong to another? If this is not dharma, can there still be stars and the sun in the sky?’

After a few minutes of silence, she continued happily, ‘Now I will go wherever you tell me to go. But it is unthinkable for you to go anywhere without his permission. Indeed! Indeed! No wonder, practically as soon as they had returned, he came over to meet you on the pretext of giving the bangles. If only your father had lived one more year to see this.’ Somehow Durgamoni managed to check her tears.

‘Mejo Bou, are you there?’

Hastily Durgamoni pushed away her daughter, dashed away her tears and said, ‘Yes, Didi?’

Entering the room Boro Bou cast a stern look at them and said harshly, ‘Grief might be keeping you from feeling any hunger or thirst; but the rest of the household cannot go hungry. Just come out and take a look at Bela.’

Durgamoni hurriedly emerged outside. Looking at Boro Bou she was about to say something when Swarnamanjari interrupted sharply, ‘You can do as you please and try and hold your daughter close and explain all to her, I have nothing to say. But my children are nauseous with hunger. No, it is becoming impossible to tolerate such indecorous behaviour.’

After this display of maternal affection, the childless Boro Bou walked away in haste, emphasizing the great deal of love and concern she bore for the youngest sister-in-law’s children.

Ever since rejoining Anath’s family, it was Durgamoni who had taken over all the responsibilities of the kitchen. As a result, the other two women were at leisure all day. One spent the entire day visiting neighbours and grumbling about the mounting expenses. The other lazed about all day, reading books or gossiping idly.

Anath left for work daily at eight-thirty in the morning. Getting up very early in the morning to prepare his meals was a much-abhorred chore in the household. There was constant bickering and exchange of barbed remarks between the sisters-in-law over this matter. Thanks to a respite from this complication for the past couple of days, the bonds of love between the two had begun to surface again. But those ties were on the verge of being severed once again that morning. The reason was that the maid—having prepared the clay oven—had informed the younger daughter-in-law that it was time to start preparing the meal.

Irritated, Chhoto Bou asked, ‘Why, what is Mejdī doing? Is she no longer aware that it is past seven in the morning?’

The maid answered, ‘Of course! But since very early in the morning mother and daughter are packing their luggage—they will be taking the eight o’clock train to Haripal or some such place.’

Chhoto Bou remembered the conversation that had taken place the previous day. With extreme displeasure she shouted, ‘Is it possible to just up and leave because they have decided to? Have they taken Babu’s permission? Have they informed Didi?’

‘I do not know about Babu, Chhoto Bouma, but Boroma herself had

asked them to leave today.'

'Then tell *her* to make arrangements for the meal at eight-thirty, I don't know a thing.' Furiously, she strode away towards the rear of the house.

The maid said, 'I would if she were here. She has gone for a dip in the Ganges.' She then went about her own work.

Chhoto Bou was forced to enter the kitchen because the office-goer would pay no heed to her ire. No matter what, some sort of meal would have to be prepared, or else her husband would go hungry. One or the other was inevitable. Chhoto Bou returned, stood in front of Durgamoni's door and spoke stridently. 'Of course you have to go, but was such a drama necessary, Mejdj?'

Durgamoni was stunned at this unexpected attack.

Chhoto Bou said, 'None of us knew that you would be leaving in the morning. She has gone for a bath in the Ganges. I have only just got up. Tell me, how can the meal be prepared in time?'

'My respectful greetings to you this morning.' Atul came and stood on the veranda.

Chhoto Bou turned and asked, 'What are you doing here at this hour of the morning, Atul?'

Atul lived in a hostel in Kolkata. The letter having reached him there, he had somehow rushed down and only just reached—he had not even gone home. He answered, 'Mejo Mashima is going for a dip in the Ganges at Haripal, is it possible that I will not come to bid farewell? Haripal! It is practically a breeding ground for malaria. Who made this suggestion to you at this time of the year, Mejo Mashima? Great, so all your packing is complete!' Smiling, he entered the room, only to stop short in the face of a silent message from a pair of tearful, red-rimmed eyes.

Chhoto Bou asked, 'How did you get the news, Atul?'

'I? Oh!' And thus Atul put paid to the inquisition.

All of a sudden Swarnamanjari's voice was heard from one corner of the courtyard. It meant that as she returned from a quiet and peaceful dip in the Ganges, the maid had informed her of the clay oven being ready for cooking the instant she stepped into the house. Hence, loudly proclaiming the real reason for her sister-in-law's widowhood, she was making her way inside the house. She stepped right on to the threshold and said, 'This is what you intend, don't you, Mejo Bou—that Chhoto Korta will leave hungry for the office and will return unfed and feeling sick in the evening. Then the disaster that has befallen you will happen to someone else.'

Durgamoni shuddered and said, 'A person who has suffered this disaster does not wish the same even for her worst enemy, Didi. But, what have I done to you that you abuse me thus always?'

Gesticulating wildly with her hands as her face contorted with anger, Swarnamanjari said, 'Are you a child to be told what you have done? Who will do the cooking at seven-thirty?'

Atul had been listening, astounded, all this while. He was only too

familiar with his Boro Mashi and hence did not converse with her all that much. But unable to tolerate what was going on, he answered the question himself and said, 'Unless someone has truly been struck down by misfortune, no one would willingly return to your household—this is a fact well known by a lot of people in the neighbourhood. But today, on the day of departure, it would not have made any great difference if these poor unfortunate people had been spared.'

At this sudden verbal attack, both the sisters-in-law were stunned. For a few seconds no one spoke. Then Swarnamanjari said, 'Have you come from Kolkata for the purpose of fighting with us?'

Chhoto Bou said, 'Why should he come to fight, Didi? We are sending his Mejo Mashi for a dip in the Ganges at Haripal—he has come to meet her one last time.'

'Oh really?'

Chhoto Bou carried on, 'Exactly so, Didi. That's what I have been wondering about for a long time—when none of us was aware of it, how is it that your nephew in Kolkata came to know of the departure? This does mean that the rumours circulating are not false.'

Losing all sense of control, Swarna screamed, mocked and created a furore. She began to say, 'If you are so concerned, why allow your almost-mother-in-law to go on a pilgrimage, why not shelter her in your household? All the people in the village will praise you volubly.'

The sting of these poisonous barbs also inflamed Atul. He retorted, 'That's fine, Mashima. They are your own people, if they have come to know a little beforehand, there is no harm done. If she is willing to accompany me, the honour of sheltering her will be all mine. It does not matter a whit to me whether the people in your village laud me or condemn me.'

Immediately upon making this statement Atul almost shrank in embarrassment; his elders too were no less stunned. It was as though a sudden whirlwind from nowhere had gathered force and broken through all barriers of modesty and decorum and in a flash had thrown all restraints to the four winds. There was no safe haven for anything to be hidden any more.

Silently Atul took his leave. Jadu Bagdi brought the bullock cart and said, 'Ma, it is time; load whatever you are planning to take. Unless you set out now, it will be impossible to board the train.' He then entered the room and proceeded to take out the tin trunk and other luggage that had been kept out in front. Boro Bou and Chhoto Bou also rapidly took their leave. Durgamoni locked the door after her and taking God's name entered the cart with her daughter. The girl lay quietly with her eyes closed on her mother's lap, as if she had lost consciousness.

## 4

DURGAMONI WAS VISITING HER PATERNAL HOME IN HARIPAL AFTER ELEVEN years. The evening of this dank season hung over the village in such an unhealthy fashion that her heart quailed as soon as she stepped inside the premises. Her parents were no longer alive—only her elder brother lived in the house. Shambhu Chatujjey was unwell and had taken to his bed as soon as the sun had set. Hearing news of his sister's visit, he stepped out, wrapped up to the gills.

'Is that you, Durga? Come on in . . .'

Shedding silent tears, Durga entered and respectfully bent down to touch her brother's feet.

Gyanada followed her mother. 'Is this your daughter? Have you not got her married?'

Hesitantly Durga said, 'A marriage has not been possible so far, Dada—soon, wherever possible . . .'

'What! You have not got her married? But isn't she is all grown up, Durga?' The slight warmth that had been there on seeing his sister after such a long time hardened in a flash. He said, 'So! The wicked people that live here—if they come to know . . . there is no need for her to enter the kitchen or the prayer room. This is after all a village . . . Haripal particularly—is there such a vicious place anywhere on earth? Come into the house. Such a grown-up girl—if you had left her behind with her uncle you could have spent a few days here in peace. If you remain here, you understand, Durga—now go and have a wash.' Calling out to his wife, Shambhu Chatujjey re-entered his house. Only the Almighty was witness to the manner in which Durga and her daughter followed him in.

This was Shambhu's second marriage. Durga had seen the first wife, but had not met the present one. The lady was as dark as she was tall and thin. Thanks to a bout of malaria her complexion had a blackish tinge, like that of burnt wood. She had just finished cleaning the courtyard and was about to light the lamp; approaching at her husband's call, she came to an abrupt halt.

Shambhu was feeling feverish; making the necessary introductions, he left his wife to take care of the visitors. His wife's name was Bhamini and she belonged to the Midnapore district. Her manner of speaking was a little strange. Bhamini smiled, baring her upper and lower gums; taking her sister-in-law by the hand, Bhamini seated her in front of the kitchen. Her manner of laughing and speaking made Durga cringe in fright. Durga had brought with her a large amount of sweetmeats. She had barely put it down when, like a flock of locusts, they were surrounded by hordes of children. There was a great deal of pushing and shoving—it was an absolute fracas. Their mother handed some out, pounced on the container and put it away, out of reach, in the bedroom. Finishing every bit of what they had got, the children left, licking their fingers.

Having been born in the village, Durgamoni was somewhat familiar with the customs. But seeing even ten-year-old boys without a stitch of clothing on, Gyanada practically sank through the ground. The girls were in almost the same condition. The little clothing on display was barely adequate. Their own village was no city, but there were roads there—such a cluster of fruit trees did not cause it to be dark all around. There was no dried cow dung or anything that caused such a stench. It was still not dark; seeing a fox in the courtyard, the eldest son chased after it. Innumerable fireflies all around caused an eerie buzzing noise. Suddenly a horrific sound emerged from near the wall; terrified, Gyanada quietly asked, 'What is that noise, Mother?' Bhamini, her Mami, replied, 'That's just a type of snake.'

Gyanada could only shudder.

Her Mami continued, 'The tree is full of them!'

At this Gyanada stole a glance at her mother. She was barely coping, with the tears held in check. Now she all but collapsed on to her mother's lap and burst into tears saying, 'Let us go away from here, Ma, I will not survive here even for a moment.'

Her aunt was amazed. 'What is there to be afraid of? They are virtually gods, and never harm anybody. Besides, how many people die of snakebite? Rather, it is malaria that is more frightening. Once you are affected, it just refuses to set you free. It has been about twenty days since your Mama has been affected and already he is absolutely worn out. In a very short while there will be no one in the village who will have escaped its clutches.'

Gyanada compared this to what Atul had said and fell silent. That night she found it impossible to sleep. Huddling close to her mother, Gyanada awoke several times with a start.

Dawn broke; there was no joy at the break of a new day. Rather, the ambience all around made her feel even more claustrophobic than she had the previous day.

The village folk were greatly shocked at seeing such a grown-up unmarried girl. In Bengal it is not the custom to give the correct age of a daughter. It is a well-known fact that one or two years have to be kept in hand. Hence when Durga said thirteen, people assumed that Gyanada was fifteen. Besides, being the only child, Durga had been very particular about feeding and clothing her daughter, even if they themselves went without. Her healthy looks weighed against her and was yet another proof of how old she was in reality.

No sooner had a couple of days gone by than Shambhu told his sister in the course of conversation, 'Thanks to the girl, it is becoming impossible to move about in this locality. There is a very good groom in hand—are you interested in getting her married?'

Durga answered, 'Her groom is already chosen, there can be no other.'

Shambhu said, 'That is rubbish! But, I am warning you, very rarely does one come across such an eligible groom. He is the owner of a large tract of land with gardens and ponds and is educated to boot.'

Not allowing her brother to finish, Durga interrupted, 'No, Dada, there can be no question of looking anywhere else. By the time this year draws to a close, I will have to get my daughter married there.'

Shambhu said, 'But, to my way of thinking, around the following November she should be married off.'

Durga did not senselessly argue any further and waste any more time. Instead she left the place. Gradually it was revealed that the groom he was talking about was his present wife's brother-in-law. Since the death of his wife, he had been without a job for six months—no one thought it a very good idea for this situation to continue. Particularly since there was a household full of small children, a woman to look after them had become absolutely necessary.

This was probably the reason why, in spite of Durga's repeated refusals, this very eligible groom suddenly made his appearance one day. Needless to say he returned after informing them that he had liked Gyanada. In a very short while, Shambhu's affectionate recommendations to his sister assumed the form of very harsh persecution. One day he clearly stated that in Priyanath's absence, at present he was his niece's true guardian. Hence, the following November he would get her married, forcibly if required.

After a verbal skirmish with her brother, Durgamoni stepped into the room and it was obvious that her daughter had overheard the entire conversation. Gyanada's eyes were swollen and red. Drawing her daughter close, Durga said, 'What is there to be afraid of, my dear, as long as I live?' Despite reassuring her daughter, Durgamoni was petrified of what the future held. She was aware that in these climes it was not unknown to forcibly marry off girls in this manner. Hiding her face in her mother's bosom Gyanada began to weep copiously. On touching her, it was apparent to her mother that she was burning up with fever. Wiping dry her tears she asked, 'When did the fever come on, my dear?'

'Since last night.'

'Why did you not let me know? This is a very bad time for malaria.' The girl remained silent and did not answer.

Durga had not made any efforts at an intimacy with her brother's wife all this while. It was not merely because of her terrifying looks and even more eerie smile; she found it virtually impossible to tolerate her harsh and strident tones. In general women of rural society are prone to talking loudly; but hearing her brother's wife talk from a distance, it would seem as though she was bickering. Further, she was as verbose as she was quarrelsome. But, Durga was aware of one quality that she possessed—she did not deliberately provoke a quarrel. If she was left to her own devices, she would say nothing at all—she would remain engrossed with her own family and not bother about anything else.

Soon after coming there, Durga had attempted to assist her with the cooking one day. In response Bhamini had said very clearly, 'You have come to visit for a few days, there is no need for you to work. I cannot allow anyone else in the larder or the kitchen.' Ever since then Durga had not given a thought to such matters.

Presently, seeing that it was late, her sister-in-law asked in her usual shrill tones, 'Will you not eat today—do I have to remain in the kitchen till the end of time?'

Durgamoni looked up. 'My daughter is running a fever. You finish your meal; neither of us will eat today.' The answer came promptly, 'It's your daughter who is ill, what is the matter with you? Who does not come down with fever? Come on then, get up.'

Wretchedly, Durga repeated, 'No, Bou, do not ask me to eat—without my daughter it is impossible for me to take a mouthful.'

'Must you overdo everything!' She left with this remark. From the kitchen Bou spoke up again, 'If she is unwell send for the doctor and get him to prescribe some potions. Who stops eating if they are down with malaria? In our village there is no custom of fasting and all that.' She then set about doing her own chores.

Towards the evening she herself prepared a potion and called out, 'Come on then, Geni, sit up and have this. I have kept a meal ready for you—come and have it.'

Gyanada was very scared of her Mami. She sat up without a word, gulped down the bitter potion and threw up immediately. She then lay down once again. Durga was not in the room; hearing the noise she came rushing back and silently witnessed all that was going on. Angrily, Gyanada's Mami went to the courtyard and said in a voice loud enough for the entire neighbourhood to hear, 'Why do such ladies come to spend time in a poor rustic household like ours!'

Since then Gyanada's condition began to deteriorate rapidly. Her Bhamini Mami had said right at the outset, 'My dear! In a rural society how many people die of snakebite? It's malaria which causes the maximum damage. Once it has you in its clutches there is no respite.' It was not long before her words came true. Within a very short while Gyanada was completely bedridden.

It was the day of some religious festival. Durga entered the room and was amazed to find Bou sitting by the bed and gently caressing her daughter's forehead. As it was, Bou barely had any time to spare for such mundane tasks; added to that, such feelings of compassion for another's daughter seemed to be totally alien to her nature. It seemed so unnatural that Durga recollected her brother's threats with regard to Gyanada's marriage and her heart quailed in fear. There was no doubt at all that Bhamini's concern stemmed from this source. Durga was very sure that Bhamini had instigated Durga's brother and raised a furore for it to happen soon.

Lowering her voice a notch Bou said, 'There is a qualified doctor from Tarakeswar. I have asked your brother to send for him. The fever seems to be increasing every day and that is not good.' Durga's incoherent response was barely audible because even this bit of good news did not really please her.

Then Bou went about her household chores. Gyanada pulled out a letter from under her pillow and said, 'He has replied.'

'Let me have a look!' Durga snatched it to read the contents. But

instantly she managed to check herself; she clasped the letter in both hands and sat there in silence. For a moment she thought of opening the letter. Then again she reflected, 'My daughter might have virtually handed it to me, but as a mother how shall I read it?' She asked gently, 'What has Atul written?'

In the meantime Gyanada had turned to one side. She said briefly, 'That I should not have come and all that.' Just these contents of the letter brought tears to Durga's eyes. She recited to herself—should not have come and all that. Recollecting Atul's face as she had blessed him innumerable times, Durga was awash with maternal affection and she thought, 'How much hurt and pain must be hidden in these two lines. Gyanada has come down with a fever here—that day he had been angry and he had said, "I have come down to witness their trip to the Ganges." True enough! It is altogether another matter what I do or where I go. But coming here with my daughter was absolutely wrong. No matter what the trouble, we should have borne it all and remained there.'

Rustling the bit of paper in her hands with untold affection, so many thoughts came to her. The promise that Atul had made on her husband's deathbed—that visit on the pretext of handing the pair of bangles and the prasad and particularly the quarrel with his aunt on the day of their departure. His mother had heard about it and so had the people of their neighbourhood. By now everybody had come to know why he had rushed down from Kolkata for a visit. Her heart swelled with happiness and maternal pride. She mused, 'Let people witness the pride and dignity of a dark girl! Even a nightingale is dark!' She called out, 'Gyanada, how are you now, my dear?'

'I am all right, Ma.'

'Has Atul mentioned anything about me?'

'Why don't you read the letter?'

She could not contain her curiosity any longer and held up the paper in front of the window. Seeing only a couple of lines on such a large sheet of paper at first Gyanada thought that her daughter must have handed her the wrong bit of paper by mistake. And then, seeing the respectful mode of address, she laughed to herself as she realized that the letter was addressed to her! It said: 'I had mentioned earlier that the place was famous for malaria. I was sad on hearing of Gyanada's illness and hope that she recovers soon. We are well. Please accept my respectful salutations.' Etc, etc.

Durga was a bit hesitant about asking, but being a mother she could not help herself. She edged closer to her daughter and running her fingers through her daughter's rough tresses she asked softly, 'My dear, has Atul then expressed anger in your letter?' Taken aback, Gyanada stared at her, 'What letter for me, Ma? He has written only to you.' Durga smiled a little and said, 'I do not want to read the letter, just listening to the contents will satisfy me. I can understand that he is angry . . .'

'No, Ma, he has not written to me separately. Whatever he has written is all there.' Her daughter then turned on her side.

A mere two lines? Nothing else? Durga was lost for words. The fingers



that had gently been caressing her daughter all this while grew stiff and hard. After remaining silent for a long while Durga got up and left.

Once again the days continued to fly past.

## 5

THE FIRST CHILLY WINDS OF WINTER HAD BEGUN TO BLOW. A CHILDHOOD friend of Durga had come to visit her parents. Seeing her daughter somewhat better, Durga had gone out in the afternoon to spend some time with her. She ran into the postman on the way back and she asked, 'Dasu, why am I not getting any letters?'

Dasu smiled and responded, 'If there are no letters, how will you get them, Didi Thakrun?'

Durga asked suspiciously, 'No letters for me or for my daughter Gyanada Devi—there are no letters for either one of us?'

Dasu said, 'If there was anything I would have reached them to you personally, Didi Thakrun.'

Durga said, 'No, Dasu, look through your bag carefully—there might be something. Not to reply to three letters—my Atul is definitely not that kind of boy.'

Not wasting his time on fruitless labour, Dasu repeated, 'No, Didi, there is nothing—you will get it as soon as there really *is* something.'

As he was about to go on his way Durga stopped him and said, 'It is possible, Dasu, that the letter has been left behind in the post office itself—the postmaster does not know our names. Perhaps it has fallen off the table or some other place and you all have not noticed it? Everybody knows me here—can't I go and have a look for myself?'

Noticing her desperation Dasu answered, 'Why not, Didi Thakrun, but it will be a waste of time. All right, I will go and search today once again.' Not wasting any more time, the man walked away rapidly.

Mentally pledging all the wealth in the world to the gods and goddesses, Durga said aloud, 'O God, let at least one letter be found. Is it possible to believe that despite hearing of Gyanada being so ill he will not write! He has definitely written; there must be some complication somewhere.'

Alas for man's futile hopes! In the midst of all the imaginary scenarios and wild dreams, it never once occurred to Durga that in all this time Atul might have changed his mind. She did not once think that the emotions that Atul had once nurtured in sheltered privacy and which had thus rapidly flowered would wither and dry in the harsh glare of publicity that it was suddenly exposed to.

Durga returned home somewhat early, entered her daughter's room and asked, 'Has Dasu brought any letters?'

Awkwardly the girl answered, 'No, Ma.'

For the past two months there had been no response to the three consecutive letters. With dreadful suspicions Durga said, 'Perhaps you had fallen asleep. Not getting an answer from you, maybe Dasu went back. I was not at home—could you not manage to stay awake for one day, my dear?' Sulkily Durga left the room.

Gyanada did not speak. She did not argue that not only was she far from being asleep, she had actually been awake all the while. To make the same response to the same question that her mother asked her every day made her feel like sinking through the ground in embarrassment.

Durga returned almost immediately. She stood at the door and said, 'Why did Dasu have to tell me that he would search for the letter and bring it to me?' She had somehow managed to convince herself that day that there would definitely be a letter from Atul.

The girl did not respond, burying herself deeper inside a worn-out blanket. But Durga did not stop there. She sent her nephew off to the post office and found out that Dasu had not turned up.

Durga spent the next couple of days on tenterhooks, waiting for the imminent arrival of the letter—but there was nothing at all. Finally in desperation she sent a letter to Atul's mother. In a brief letter the lady wrote back to say that Atul was fine and he was continuing with his studies from the hostel in Kolkata. A hint of contempt in the response struck a false note in Durga's mind.

Some more months went by in this manner, but there were no more letters from Atul. Towards the middle of the month of Magh, although the daughter recovered somewhat, the mother fell ill. She could not cope with the devastation of the hope that she had been nurturing all this while. Besides, there was no end to the distaste she felt for Bou. Referring to her derisively she would either say, 'burnt wood!' or 'demon!' As the days passed, her revulsion only grew. There was another reason for this strong emotion—this 'burnt wood' had come to feel a certain degree of affection for Gyanada because of her soft-spoken nature and she even took care of her. But, getting whiff of a hideous selfishness in all this caring, Durga simmered with helpless fury. She had tolerated a lot and hence there was no dearth of patience, but any further forbearance was impossible. Towards the end of the month of Magh she took to the bed. The girl wept and pleaded, 'We have had enough, Mother, now let us return home. Whatever is in store for us, let it happen there.'

Durga agreed. There was no particular reason for her assenting. It was just that she wanted to escape from her sister-in-law's excessive caring and nurturing, no matter what the cost.

As soon as Shambhu heard that preparations were being made for the journey, he protested stubbornly. It was around seven or eight when, after finishing his prayers, Shambhu approached noisily and called out, 'Durga!'

Durga had been leaning against the post, washing her face. Gyanada was sitting close by, helping her. Durga responded to her brother's call. Shambhu said, 'You cannot leave now.'  
'Why, Dada?'

'Why Dada! Why should I make a promise on your behalf and then be branded a liar! That is definitely not for me.' Though Durga did not know what he was taking about, turmoil raged within her. She asked mildly, 'What promise, Dada?'

Shambhu answered, 'Geni's marriage. I cannot support her any longer. I had no other option but to finalize her wedding to our Nabin on the fifth of the following month. They also say that a fair amount of jewellery will be given. I found that it will be very suitable on all counts.'

The news brought the world crashing about Durga's ears. Tearfully she spoke, 'Why did you promise without speaking to me, Dada? I cannot permit this marriage as long as I live.'

Livid with rage, Shambhu asked, 'Do you think just refusing is enough? I am the Mama, her uncle; whatever I say will have to be done. Just because you do not agree, there is no chance of my breaking my resolve.'

At this Durga started sobbing earnestly. She said, 'No, Dada, even if I die, I will not get my daughter married here. Do not be even a little concerned on my account, Dada.' Her voice choked and she could not complete what she was going to say.

These tears irritated Shambhu no end; he snarled, bared his teeth and said, 'Do not cry senselessly on a joyous occasion. What is not possible cannot come to pass—'

The 'burnt bit of wood' appeared on the scene. Both her hands were soiled with cowdung—she had probably been cleaning the cowshed. She stood in the courtyard and suddenly addressed her husband. In half-broken, rasping tones she called out, 'And who does this eligible groom happen to be? Why don't you just tell me?'

Shambhu was somewhat taken aback at his wife's appearance. But, masking his discomfiture he persisted, 'Whoever it is, what does it matter to you?'

Vigorously shaking her filthy hands, Bhamini appeared to make the entire courtyard tremble. In those same coarse tones she said, 'A Mama, her own uncle, is asserting his rights! He will get her married to Nabin—then will not the monetary debt be completely repaid? Is that why he is so eligible? My own brother and don't I know? Intoxicated, he kicked his eight-month-pregnant wife, the mother of his five children, and caused her death. And he is the most eligible groom? Can't you find a rope to hang yourself? Shame! Shame!'

Shambhu could not control his rage at this public betrayal in front of his sister and niece. He took his wooden clogs off his feet and screamed, 'Shut up, you wretched woman!'

The wretched woman now flared up. She began gesticulating so ferociously and bellowed in such a fashion that it had to be seen to be believed. 'What! I a wretch! The next time I hear such abuse, if I do not force a burning ember into your mouth, I cannot be called Panchu Ghosal's daughter. You will coerce her to get married? Who are you to do so! She has come to rest for a few days with her mother—why do you persist in terrifying her all the while? Have you seen this knife in my possession?'

I will slaughter you if required! Keep in mind that I am Bhamini!

Shambhu could not carry on in the face of this virago and he slunk back to his room.

The woman resembling charred wood then turned to Durga and said, 'He is no mean scoundrel, Thakurjhi! Ever since your arrival, he has been plotting on how to settle his debts and free his land by arranging a marriage of this innocent and lovely girl to that wastrel. He then has the audacity to call himself her Mama, her uncle!'

After pausing to catch her breath she continued, 'You would be hurt and so I did not say anything. I told him that the girl is on the verge of dying, send for a good doctor. He said—I do not have so much money. All I had was some silver and that is what I mortgaged to get some money and called a doctor. He then has the gumption to say that he is the uncle and will do as he pleases—rascal! There is no need to be scared as long as I live, Thakurjhi! I will make all the arrangements today—go back home and get your daughter married. Then, come back again whenever you please.'

Durga remained leaning against the post as if she was turned to stone. Tears streamed from her eyes continually.

Lowering her voice Bhamini spoke, probably addressing her absent husband, 'Why will Thakurjhi be persecuted? Just because she has no parents—is there no God? What I say is—manage with whatever is available to you. Why do you have to grab what belongs to another and fatten yourself in that manner? The Almighty is never kind to such people.'

That very afternoon all arrangements were made for the journey.

Just before climbing into the bullock cart, Durga bent down and touched that unsightly woman's feet. She wept copiously and spoke with great feeling, 'Bou, you are my elder and so I cannot bless you—but may the Almighty always take care of you. You have done so much for me.'

Her sister-in-law smiled, again baring her gums. 'That's rubbish! Just pray that I might breathe my last as a married woman, having served everyone. You are weak now, do not stand there any longer—go and sit in the carriage. Geni, you have had a hard time with your Mama-Mami; but come back again, do not forget us.'

As the coach drew away, Durga wiped her tears dry and said, 'In my ignorance I have sinned many a time against you, please forgive me.'

Bhamini did not grin as usual; rather, she too wiped her tears and said, 'Fate! It is we who have sinned, Thakurjhi. Geni, you must not be angry with your Mama-Mami. During the mango and jackfruit season next year, you and your husband are invited.' Once again she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands.

## 6

AS THERE HAD BEEN NO NEED TO INFORM AHEAD, DURGA HAD RETURNED without a word to anyone. At the sight of Gyanada her Jethaima was highly amused. 'O Geni, who is responsible for your sunken cheeks? What a shame—why are there bald patches on your head? Chhoto Bou, hurry up—come and have a look at our beauty Gyanada here! Have your Mama and Mami also singed your skin and darkened your complexion?' Gyanada stood in silence with her head bowed. When her Chhoto Khuri arrived, she rushed to touch her feet.

Chhoto Bou shuddered, 'What has happened to you, my dear!'

Jethaima could barely contain herself; she went on, 'She looks like a witch—one will shudder in the dark.' She started giggling. But Chhoto Bou did not join her. If nothing else, she was also a mother. The emaciated, dark visage of this girl pierced her maternal heart to the quick. Drawing her close, she caressed her tenderly. When she came to know of Gyanada's illness, Chhoto Bou heaved a deep sigh and said, 'Why did you not come away immediately, my dear? No one forbade you all to return. Where is Mejdi?'

'Ma was feeling feverish in the coach, I have made her lie down now.'

Swarna said, 'Why not? After all, I *am* the eldest sister-in-law—can there be any good if one leaves in such a huff over my words?'

Chhoto Bou had taken Gyanada by the hand and was moving inside to have a look at her mother. She found the tasteless remarks of her older sister-in-law so repulsive that she felt compelled to remark, 'You have been praying and fasting for more than two years now—but there is not a vestige of sweetness in you.'

Swarna was stunned and bemused at this unexpected attack. But the next minute she screamed vengefully, 'At least that is good, Chhoto Bou, at least that is good! After all this while you are developing some feelings for your other sister-in-law. You make dissembling look like child's play!'

Not deigning to reply, Chhoto Bou moved inside with Gyanada. But that exit proved to be disastrous for Gyanada. As it was, Swarnamanjari felt a vitriolic disgust for her and her mother, and Chhoto Bou's recent behaviour added fuel to the fire.

At Haripal, Durga would lie down when the fever came on and get up when she felt a little better. If she felt up to it she would even have a bath and after her prayers, perhaps eat a mouthful too. But on her return to her in-laws', the situation changed. With an excess of sympathy the women of the locality made her bedridden within a day or two. Nilkantha Mukhujey's wife came for a visit and nearly collapsed with surprise. Astounded, she asked, 'What is this you have done, Mejo Bou, when will you get your daughter married? It is impossible to look at her any longer.'

Durga raised her weary and ailing eyes and answered faintly, 'I do not know, Pishima—whenever the Almighty will be merciful.'

'That is true, but don't you have to try? God cannot bring a groom and hand him to you on a platter!'

Durga made no further response.

After waiting for a minute or two she spoke once again, 'You went to your parental home; did your brother not make any effort? What does the brother-in-law say?'

'God only knows.' Durga turned on her side.

About an hour or so later, Adorini came for a visit; she stood at the threshold and asked, 'How are you today, Mejo Bou?'

Gyanada was sitting at the foot of the bed, gently running her hands over her mother's feet. She answered, 'The fever is still there, Pishima.' Durga turned around and said, 'Take a seat, Thakurjhi.'

'No, Bou, it is getting late, I will not tarry any longer. Just a suggestion Mejo Bou, but now you must look for any sort of groom and get her married—do not be choosy. In the past at least the girl had some vestiges of looks, but after the bout of malaria she looks no better than burnt embers. Tell me then, Geni, has your hairline receded because of a lot of loss of hair?'

Gyanada nodded and sat in silence with her head bowed. Adorini lowered her voice and said, 'I believe that in the neighbourhood Gopal Bhattacharjee wants to remarry. Why don't you send Anathda and ask him to find out the details, Mejo Bou?'

'All right, I will.' Durga sighed and once again turned and lay facing the wall.

And thus, countless well-wishers arrived with an abundance of good advice. But, the ones for whom Durga waited with intense anticipation did not show up. Neither Atul nor his mother came.

Chhoto Bou had a kind heart, but she was extremely lazy and also happened to be expecting a child. So when Swarna told Gyanada one day, 'The excuse of having lost weight has run its course. I can accept that your mother cannot work any more, but surely a grown-up hulk like you can put together a meal for your Kaka.' Chhoto Bou was well aware that it was an unfair demand, but she remained silent. She empathized with others' misery; but to actually make the effort to do something to wipe out the problem was beyond her.

Gyanada immediately acquiesced and said softly, 'I will do the needful, Jethaima.'

Though she still came down with fever every night, Gyanada kept quiet about it since she was loath to upset her mother. It was very difficult for her to drag the empty shell of her listless body up and around; but she did not dither even once and never pulled a long face.

Although she was born of parents who were not well off, Gyanada was the only child and she had been brought up with a lot of love and affection. Since her childhood, there had been no one like her to accept without an argument whatever her elders commanded—whether right or wrong. She nursed the ailing with tenderness, bore everything in silence and was unique in her qualities. But presently, no one except Chhoto Bou understood what a heavy burden she had taken on. Although this

unfair and unjust demand of her elder sister-in-law made Chhoto Bou fume, she lacked the courage to protest, for fear that she would then have to do the needful, and wake up early to cook.

The next morning, seeing her Kaka return from his bath, Gyanada was about to serve his food, when Jethaima swooped down from somewhere, squawking loudly in a shrill voice, 'What do you think you are doing, Geni?'

Gyanada was startled, 'But Kaka has just finished his bath . . .!'

'How is that relevant to you?' Jethaima screamed loudly. 'Have I not forbidden you to serve him? Can any man accept food from your hands?'

Durga had just got up and she was sitting at the threshold—she looked around fearfully in the direction of all the screams and shouts.

Chhoto Bou stepped out of her room and asked, 'What is the matter, Didi?'

Not paying the least attention to anybody, Swarna continued to shower harsh rebukes on the silent and unmoving girl. 'Carrying a plate of food for your Kaka will move him to dance with joy—he will bring home a prince for you to marry, isn't it? How you have learned to gratify men even at this age!' She then proceeded to snatch the plate and move away.

Having tolerated more than her share of pain and agony, Durga's patience snapped. Addressing her daughter she cried out tearfully, 'Wretched girl, if you cannot obey your elders why don't you just die!'

Silently Gyanada moved back to the kitchen. She did not mention even once that she had not received any instructions to this end. She probably did not even know how to defend herself.

Chhoto Bou was the only one who could have protested. But she knew her elder sister-in-law only too well and hence she did not say a word. Boro Bou was as quarrelsome as she was shameless. Even if a thousand faults were pointed out to her, she would not be ashamed; far from that, she would behave with greater cruelty. Instead Chhoto Bou silently followed Gyanada to the kitchen; she held her hand with tender affection and said, 'Why did you not obey Didi, my dear?'

All this while Gyanada had withstood the harsh insults, but this affectionate touch of love was too much. She merely looked up once at her Chhoto Khuri and broke down at her feet, 'Nobody forbade me, Khurima,' and she started weeping copiously.

Chhoto Khuri drew her close and wiped her tears tenderly, but could not find any words to console the girl.

In this manner, the unlovely, wretched and unmarried girl continued to pass her days. Relatives and acquaintances all around were generous with the scathing criticism, but no one tried to come forward and extend a helping hand.

## 7

PRESENTLY DURGA BEGAN TO HAVE DIFFICULTY IN MOVING ABOUT WITHOUT physical support. Besides her daughter there was no one else to help. So, despite being weighed down with work, Gyanada would make the time to sit by her mother every now and then. This morning too, finding a little time to spare, she sat close to her mother and rubbed her back tenderly. All of a sudden the sound of a familiar voice made her heart beat wildly.

It was the day of Holi, the festival of colours. Atul had come home for his holidays. Accompanied by a couple of friends and carrying some coloured powder in his pockets, he entered the room, calling out, 'Mashima!'

Durga would spend the better part of the day in a kind of stupor; Gyanada grew tense and alert fearing her mother would awake at the sound. She was well aware that this was the person that her mother was waiting for and longing to see. But she also knew that Durga's habitual patience, gravity and self-respect no longer appeared to exist. Her intelligence and powers of reasoning were also playing tricks on her. Gyanada had observed that her mother, who had earlier trembled at the thought of a quarrel, no longer feared a confrontation. She knew instinctively that a meeting between the two would only result in an ugly and unseemly clash. Gyanada desperately thought of a way of avoiding this imminent disaster. She tiptoed and was about to close the door to her mother's room when Durga called out, 'Gyanada, was that not Atul who spoke?'

Gyanada came back in to the room, 'I am not sure, Ma, it is probably not him.'

'I'm quite sure that's him! Just go and check for me, please?'

Knowing that her mother would flare up at the slightest sign of argument, Gyanada got up and tried to peep outside. But nothing could be seen. From across the veranda she heard his voice along with a number of others'. She could have returned with that much news; but an overwhelming desire to look upon his face just one more time propelled her forward.

She stood silently behind a pillar and watched Atul putting a handful of coloured powder on his Boro Mashi's feet, laughing all the while. The boys of their locality followed suit.

Chhoto Bou was not there. A kind of pain had kept her firmly confined to her room. On the verge of returning, Gyanada had probably missed a beat; all of a sudden she realized that it was exactly as she had feared—her mother was taking wavering steps in that very direction!

Gyanada ran up to her, embraced her tenderly and pleaded, 'Do not proceed, Mother, please go back.'

Durga looked at her angrily and asked, 'Why?'

'I do not know why, Mother, but please come back. There is no hope



from him, Ma . . .'

'Let me go, you wretched girl, let me go!' Durga freed herself brutally and moved forward. Following her like a puppet, Gyanada went and stood behind her. Everyone turned and looked at Mejo Bou with amazement.

Her emaciated face made her look like a hungry tigress. Meeting that burning and fiery glance, Atul dropped his gaze fearfully.

Durga said, 'Atul, what did we do to you that you have destroyed us in this manner?'

Far from making a reply, Atul could barely look up, beleaguered with the burden of his crimes.

It was Swarna who took over. She did not have a heart to begin with and hence was easily able to look up and say, 'Why, what disaster has he caused?'

Durga answered, 'What kind of answer will I make to you, Didi? The person I am addressing knows exactly what he has done.'

Swarna continued, 'We are not daft, Mejo Bou. But, did he enter into any sort of written contract with you to marry your daughter that you have come charging him in this manner, in front of all these people? Please go away—on this joyous and festive occasion do not come to my house and cause an unpleasantness.'

'It is not I who wants to make a scene, Didi,' Durga continued, glancing at Atul. 'You are not aware of the manner in which this past one year has gone for us, Atul, but the Almighty does. If this was what you had intended all along, why did you make that promise on his deathbed? Why did you not let us know at that time?'

Swarna flared up and retorted, 'Do not talk of God to him, Mejo Bou, I am warning you. As long as we are alive, he is in no position to make promises.'

In the presence of so many people, Atul felt humiliated. Finding his aunt speaking up in his defence he said, 'Was my promise to marry her given of my own free will? She did not let go of my feet, stuck her head on the ground and pleaded with me, "Please take an oath in my father's presence!" What could I do? It was so embarrassing! If I did take recourse to a little guile in order to free myself, how can you hold it against me?'

Swarna giggled. 'What are you saying Atul, such a shameful matter! The girl cast herself at your feet and begged you to marry her? Really!'

Atul responded, 'Why don't you ask her whether it is true or false? Let Mejo Mashima answer whether or not she saw Geni striking her head on my feet. Or else would I agree to marry that girl? Would I be fool enough to sign my own death warrant?'

Atul's companions looked away and laughed. Like a crazed woman, Durga shouted, 'So cruel! Such an ingrate! I will make arrangements for your death—why don't you kill yourself? You deserve to die. The girl you are insulting in front of all these people with such impunity is the one who brought you back from the jaws of veritable death. Have you forgotten everything?'

Hearing all the commotion Chhoto Bou forgot all her pain and came

running outside. Swarna jumped up. 'What, you wretch! Get out of my house—just leave!'

Gyanada stood still. It was as though she had been turned to stone—shame, disgust, hurt, insult, good or bad, nothing appeared to touch her. She seemed to have gone beyond all this and stood staring blankly. 'Look at her.' Chhoto Bou gave her a little push and cried out in fright, 'Gyanada?' She had heard some of what was going on from inside the house.

'Yes, Khurima?'

'Why stand here any longer, my dear, go back to your room with your mother.'

'Come, Ma.' Taking her mother by the hand she led her away steadily.

Swarna commented, 'Did you see the sheer audacity, Chhoto Bou! This is called reaching for the moon.'

Atul bared his teeth in unseemly laughter and said, 'Did you hear all that has happened, Chhoto Mami? How shameful!'

Swarna continued shrilly, 'A slip of a girl—what have times come to!'

Chhoto Bou smiled a little and said, 'The saving grace is that the times are bad, Didi. Or else the earth itself would have crumbled into oblivion in shame, Atul.' She left.

Swarna, immune to the veiled jibe, said in a pleased manner, 'That is exactly what I say, Chhoto Bou!'

However, Atul's face darkened. He had understood the underlying meaning of Chhoto Bou's remarks. After waiting in silence for a while, he left; he felt that on this festival of colours, someone had doused him with crimson, and blackened his face at the same time.

The actual facts had remained hidden all this while, but were a secret no longer. Durga came to know from several well-wishers of the neighbourhood that Atul had established ties in this very household. His marriage had been finalized with Madhuri, Anath's eldest daughter. It was Swarna who had negotiated and Atul was apparently very happy with the girl.

## 8

SINCE HER CHILDHOOD MADHURI HAD BEEN BROUGHT UP BY HER MATERNAL uncle, her Mama. She had studied in the Mahakali School and had some knowledge of English, Bengali and Sanskrit. Madhuri could sing, play an instrument and weave mats; she could also chant mantras and fashion idols from clay. In addition she was extremely attractive. She had come home for a couple of months during the Durga Puja and that was when the match had been fixed. It had not been necessary to chase after such a fine catch, as Atul himself had expressed an interest. Of

course Swarna had been the mediator.

Chhoto Bou's brothers were all well-to-do. Her mother was still alive. She had sent for Chhoto Bou, who was with child. Madhuri accompanied the escorting party. She had not seen her Mejo Jethaima for a long time and immediately on arrival went to pay her respects to Durga.

'May you live long, my dear!' Durga gazed at her unblinkingly. Not only was she good-looking, her Mama and Mami had also taken extra care over her dressing. Her Mami was from Kolkata and was well versed in the art of dressing well. Madhuri wore a few gold ornaments, a sari with a broad red border and her hair was flowing down her back. Durga could barely look away. Along with a deep sigh she could not help thinking this was no girl, but a golden image of one! Immediately her eyes fell on her unkempt, gaunt and unattractive daughter and she was cut to the quick. She turned away and said roughly, 'And I have borne an ugly owl!'

As soon as Madhuri entered the room her beauty and her clothes made Gyanada cringe in shame and all but merge with the ground. Madhuri said, 'Didi, come let us talk for a while.'

Gyanada's muttered reply was not clearly audible. But hearing the sound Durga spoke up in bitter harsh tones, 'Do not show that face to people, wretched girl—stay right where you are.' Gyanada continued to sit in silence.

After Madhuri left, Durga groaned a few times in the throes of her own agony. Gyanada asked gently, 'Shall I massage your forehead, Mother?'

'No!'

'Some medicine . . . ?'

'No, no, just go away from my bedside, you witch. Your very presence enrages me.' She kicked away her daughter with some force.

Gyanada had put up with a lot, but the kick was too much to bear. Silently she climbed down and sank to the ground, crying helplessly. Holding out both hands piteously, she thought, 'O Almighty! What sins have I committed that I am the bane of all eyes. Is it my fault that I have no beauty, fancy clothes or a father? Is it my fault that this ailing and skeletal body and this worn-out, pale face cannot attract anybody? Is it also my fault that while I am getting older, there is no one to arrange my marriage? God, if all this is my fault, please send me to my father—he will never be able to discard me.'

'Gyanada!' Durga turned to face her. The young girl scrambled up hurriedly on hearing her mother's voice.

'You are so thin, why do you sit on the floor, my dear?' Durga sat up herself, suddenly anxious about her daughter. 'Oh, have I scolded you?' In a flash, the mother stretched out her arms and embraced her daughter, sobbing loudly.

In the evening Anath entered Durga's room gloomily and asked, 'How are you feeling today, Mejo Bouthan? No, no, do not bother to get up! You do not take medicines properly. If you carry on in this manner recovery will be impossible!'

What he said was true. Some medicines had been prescribed, but it made no difference. Durga had given up all pretences of taking any medicines. She had neither the hope nor the desire to live any longer. These days Durga spoke in such a low voice that it was almost impossible to hear her unless one drew really close to her. She was a little anxious at this sudden display of concern by her brother-in-law. Anath bent down and tried to hear her low and indistinct reply.

'What you are saying is true; Bouthan. What is the sense in life as a widow; which Hindu can deny this fact? It is a matter of somehow eking out the last few days instead of consciously committing suicide. I should not be bringing up such a subject in view of your condition, but unfortunately it is imperative that I do so. I have spared no efforts, but nothing seems to materialize for this wretched girl. A number of matches just did not come to fruition after they had one look at her.'

Durga did not say a word. After pausing for a while Anath continued, 'You have entered my family after Mejda's death. All the confusion is arising because of that. I know Nilkantha Mukhujey only too well—he is going from door to door campaigning against me. They cannot be faulted either—after all, the girl's age is apparent even to them. I also say—in the city all these problems are not there, it is only in our rural society that people are so judgemental and talk so much.' Anath heaved a deep sigh.

Unable to grasp where this preamble was leading or to gauge the trend of his conversation, Durga gazed at him in silence. But on her wan and washed-out face there was the shadow of concern and worry.

After some coughs to clear his throat and some more hesitation, Anath proceeded to come to the crux of the matter. He said, 'It is not possible for you to move anywhere in this condition, and that is not what I am saying either. But you know what, Mejo Bouthan, I also have a daughter of marriageable age in the house and everything must be taken into consideration. What I am saying is that you must make some arrangement for Geni to live elsewhere; keeping her here any longer is impossible. There is too much of a furore.'

Durga's faint, reedy voice melted away. 'Where can she go, Thakurpo?'

'Let her stay in Haripal.'

'How will she go there and what will she do there anyway?'

Anath was somewhat angered. 'This is wrong of you, Mejo Bouthan. It is not fair that you only think of yourself. The well-being of one who has sheltered you in a crisis must also be considered.'

Durga could make no reply and only heaved a deep sigh.

The only reaction to that was that Anath's tone was gentler as he continued, 'I appreciate your misery and your troubles, but you must also understand my position. What other choice is there? You are also at fault, Mejo Bouthan. I had written to your brother. He said clearly that a marriage had been settled, but chasing after an impossible dream, you quarrelled and came away with your daughter. If you had agreed to that, by now . . .'

Anath did not reveal what could have happened by then. But it was clear to Durga why he had approached her with the intention of driving Gyanada away. Anath was not one to let go of an opportunity to rid himself of a responsibility, sparing himself any complication or spending any money.

When Gyanada entered the room after finishing her chores, she started in fear at her mother's condition. Durga's deep, sunken eyes were red-rimmed and puffy with weeping. No sooner did she see her daughter than her weeping increased manifold. Gesturing her to draw closer, the mother started weeping as helplessly as a child.

A long while later when the tears had stopped, Gyanada said, 'Do you not know me, Ma, that you think it possible for anyone to drive me away from you? This is not my Kaka's house, Mother, it belonged to my father. If he refuses to feed us, there need no longer be any shame—somehow or the other I will be able to take care of you.' The girl held her mother close, like one would cradle a child. Some time later the mother fell asleep wearily. However, the young girl stayed awake till well past midnight, but she could not come to any conclusion about what this 'somehow or the other' would be. How would she be able to take care of feeding and looking after her mother at such a moment of crisis!

On hearing of the plans to get rid of Gyanada, Chhoto Bou called her husband aside and spoke to him. 'Have you lost all sense that on your sister-in-law's advice you went and advised a mother and her daughter to be separated in these circumstances? Even butchers, whose profession is slaughtering, have more pity and kindness than you.'

As the matter was practically impossible, Anath remained silent; or else even his worst enemy couldn't have accused him of ever heeding his wife on any matter. Durga might still have left for Haripal with her daughter. But even the thought of the prospective groom who had kicked his pregnant wife and the mother of his five children to death made her heart beat wildly in fear.

The next day, sending for Anath by her bedside, Durga clasped his hands and pleaded tearfully, 'If I were not older than you, I would have fallen at your feet and pleaded—no matter where you decide to dispose her of, at this juncture of my life, please do not separate us.' Picking up Gyanada's hand, she placed it on top of her Kaka's.

Pulling away his hands in irritation, Anath responded, 'Taking on another's responsibility will cause me to become an outcaste from my own religion. Am I being negligent in any way, Mejo Bouthan? But even a veritable vulture refuses to marry this corpse! Tell me, what have you done with those two gold bangles that you had?'

'That was used at the time of your brother's funeral, Thakurpo.'

Anath shrugged. 'Well then, what can I do? You will not spend any money and neither are you willing to let go of your daughter—all that it means is that you want to drag me down!' He stomped away in anger.

After he left, Durga suddenly pushed away her daughter's hand and said, 'You are still sitting here! Isn't it time for the evening prayers?'

Probably the discussion that had just taken place had made Gyanada somewhat absent-minded. Before she could reply, her mother said harshly, 'Look at all the show of hurt anger. You, Geni, even all this does not push you towards death? Jadu Ghosal's son passed away after a three-day bout of fever; you have been battling against malaria for over a year now, but even death has not been able to make you his own! It is only you who can still face people; any other girl would have drowned herself in shame by now. Move your carcass from my presence for a while, let me breathe a little. You seem to cling to me all the time like a bloodthirsty leech.' Pushing away her daughter, Durga turned and lay facing the wall.

What she said was true, any other girl would have killed herself in shame and disgust, as many had already done. But, for some unknown reason, the Almighty had fashioned this young girl to be as patient and as tolerant as Mother Earth herself. In silence she went about her household chores. At this cruel chastisement, Gyanada momentarily lost control and said, 'No, Ma, I too know how to die. It is only because you will feel pain that I do not take the ultimate step.'

On completion of the evening prayers and the sprinkling of holy Ganga water in the room, she went to the courtyard carrying a small lighted lamp. From a very young age, this Bengali girl born into a Hindu family had mastered all the intricacies of worshipping the Almighty. Coming to where the lamp was placed on the raised dais, she collapsed and, losing all control, started weeping helplessly with her hands splayed in front of her.

'O God! O Almighty! This is where you took my father away; now please accept my mother and me in your fold. Things are unbearable for me.'

## 9

SINCE THE MONTH OF CHAITRA—WHEN IT IS CONSIDERED INAUSPICIOUS TO leave one's home—still had a few days to go, Chhoto Bou had not left for her parental home. No sooner did the month come to an end than her younger brother came to fetch her and Madhuri.

It was an auspicious day and the time for the journey was fixed after the meal. Since Atul had come down from Kolkata, Swarna had also invited him.

When these two young men sat down for lunch, Swarna took her seat close to them. She had deliberately made arrangements for Madhuri to do the serving. In the morning, it was easy to have the fish cooked by Gyanada, but in secrecy. Should anyone ask any questions, Swarna would respond unhesitatingly, 'My God! What are you talking about! I do not even permit her to enter the kitchen.' Hence for Geni to serve was

absolutely impossible. Besides, in acute shame, she herself did not emerge in front of people—she avoided attention as far as possible.

Atul would be getting married to Madhuri. On the one hand the beautiful girl, with all the awkwardness in the world, began to serve inexpertly and was affectionately chided by her aunt, who taught her the niceties amidst a lot of laughter and jokes. On the other hand, another young girl sat in quiet solitude as she cooked efficiently with her head lowered, only for the proceedings to go on smoothly.

No sooner was Madhuri's marriage mentioned than she ran into the kitchen. Gyanada asked, 'Was there something you wanted?'

'Nothing, Didi; this is unbearable!' She forcibly threw down the empty plate and glass on the floor and rushed out of the room.

At the next instant Swarna called out, 'Bring in a little salt, my dear!' But Madhuri did not return. She called out once again, 'Where are you, your Chhoto Mama is waiting.'

And still no one came out.

At that Swarna grew angry and cried out shrilly, 'Does nobody hear anything? Will these people then have to leave their meal?'

When Madhuri still did not show up, Gyanada could not remain still any longer. She thought that since salt was not something that could be contaminated by her touch, perhaps the order was for her to bring it out. Then, drawing her soiled and tattered sari carefully around herself, she went up to the door with the salt. The two boys could not see her. Jethaima looked her up and down and then asked coldly and harshly, 'Who asked you to fetch this? Where is Madhuri?'

From outside the room Gyanada whispered, 'I do not know where she has gone.'

'That is why you turned up? How many times do you have to be reminded that even a glimpse of your face can send a man to hell? Do not appear in my presence. Just because Atul is sitting here for a meal, you must come and show your face, right? Keep the salt here and leave.'

Gyanada went away. The only reason she could do so was because Mother Earth did not part and accept the young girl in her bosom.

Swarna herself gave out the salt and taking her seat, addressed Atul, 'You are a man, why do you sit with your head lowered, eat your fill!'

Madhuri's Mama asked, 'Who is she, Didi?'

Swarna smiled a little and said, 'That is nothing—you carry on eating.'

But Atul's entire meal had turned to ashes. He found it impossible to swallow any food. How could he? A short while ago the sight of Madhuri had enchanted him; but he had also come to know Gyanada well. Though Atul was not sure whether Gyanada now loathed or loved him, there was no doubt that at one point of time she had held him dearer than life itself. But even then, she had never deliberately thrust herself forward. Then how could he possibly believe that at this juncture she would do so?

In the evening Chhoto Bou left for her parents' home with her daughter. But she did not go to meet Mejo Bou before that. She entered the kitchen

hastily, tucked some money into Gyanada's hands and left surreptitiously. She did not even wait to bless her.

This one person in the household who had glimpsed this wretched girl's inner thoughts left for an unknown period of time. It was not that she had done a great deal for Gyanada—there was after all a vast difference between commiserating with someone's misery and taking concrete steps to end it; very few people could do the latter. Even so, watching her Chhoto Khurima leave, an overwhelming darkness clouded this young girl's entire being.

One day towards the middle of Baisakh, as Anath was about to leave for the office, Boro Bou came and stood in front of him with all the worries of the world etched upon her face.

Anath asked in trepidation, 'What is the matter, Bouthan?'

Swarna answered, 'What are you doing, Thakurpo, Mejo Bou's last moments are almost at hand.'

Anath put aside his hookah and said feebly, 'What are you saying? I do not know a thing.'

Swarna responded, 'No, no, it's not as if she is dying today; but she does not have many days left—I am warning you. She will definitely not live more than ten to fifteen days. Then, there will be no way of getting the girl married for six months to a year, but Madhuri must be married within Ashad—by whatever means. It will be impossible to find such a groom, besides which there are no problems as regards gifts and what has to be given. The boy has made his own choice and so the mother cannot demand this, that or the other. How can we let go of such an opportunity?'

Apprehensively Anath shook his head. 'No, of course not! You are everything in my household. You are getting your daughter married—how, when and in what manner you do it is up to you—I will never interfere, Bouthan.'

Swarna said proudly, 'I know you will never interfere—you are not that kind of a brother-in-law. That is why I am saying, do as I say now—do not be slothful; drive her away by any means at hand. Otherwise, getting Madhuri married will be impossible. As it is, the people in the neighbourhood are gossiping, who knows what problem will arise then? Consider her the corpse of your family—throw her out or live with the stench.'

Pondering on the matter, Anath went to office and from the very next day arranged for such a motley collection of prospective grooms to get rid of the living dead that even Swarnamanjari would probably have had to gulp before uttering their names aloud.

That afternoon, after a very long time, Swarna entered Durga's room, 'And how are you today, Mejo Bou?'

Turning to one side, with great pain, Durga gestured with her hand and said, 'What does anything matter now, Didi?'

Swarna responded very sympathetically, 'No, no, don't worry, there is no doubt at all that you will get better.'



Durga was silent and did not demur. Swarna then came to the point. 'Since the girl is all grown up, now a young boy will not be right for her. The groom will come all the way from Mogra, to have a look at the girl; he has sent word that he will come himself, since his parents are no more—needless to say, at his age they'd have to be immortal to be still living!' Swarna continued, 'Now, if the goddess Kali is merciful and he likes the girl, all the running around that Chhoto Thakurpo has done will have been worthwhile. Then, there is also the question of dowry! My suggestion is . . .'

Before she could say anything further, Durga sat up expectantly and said tearfully, 'Please pray, Didi, that this match too does not slip through our hands. Let me at least see her married before I breathe my last!' Her eyes brimmed over and tears trickled down her cheeks.

Swarna answered, 'Why not, Mejo Bou? Day and night I offer prayers that some sort of arrangement can be made for your girl. I assure you Mejo Bou, you will definitely see your son-in-law's face and only then . . .'

Silently Durga wiped her tears with the end of her sari. Swarna smothered a yawn and casually said, 'The father of children, you know, your Thakurpo may appear to earn a hundred and fifty rupees—but it all melts away. He is extremely worried about marrying off his own daughter, and added to it is this girl. You understand everything, Mejo Bou, Thakurpo was hesitant about bringing up the subject—unless you mortgage your house, meeting the expenses will be impossible. You will not have to do a thing, just put your signature on a bit of paper. No one wants to lend money without any security! The world is such these days no one can be trusted—'

Durga responded immediately. 'How much longer do I have anyway, Didi—I will do whatever you say. But please, just make sure, Didi, that she is taken care of.'

'Yes of course, Mejo Bou; are khuros—her uncles—any different from her father or is her Jethaima anything short of a mother? If that were so, why would we spend so much time worrying about her future? Gyanada and Madhuri are the same to me. My dear Gyanada, wipe away your mother's tears and fan her a little.' She left after thus showering hopes and reassurances profusely.

After a very long time, Durga's face was tinged with a glow of happiness peering through the shadow of death that had been cast on her face. She took the fan from her daughter's hands and said tenderly, 'Why don't you try and sleep a little here, my dear.' She forcibly drew her close and continued, 'You were born to such a wretched mother that at this young age you have worn yourself out worrying and slaving hard all day. If you had to be born, why weren't you born a son, my dear?'

On hearing her mother speak to her affectionately after such a long time, tears rolled down the young girl's cheeks. Both had fallen asleep for a while when Gyanada sat up on her mother, prodding her urgently.

'Get up, my dear, it's getting late. There is probably a little soap in that tin box. Take it and run to the pond and have a quick wash, my

dear. No, that is one fault you have—you just refuse to obey. Hurry up, I tell you.'

On her mother's instructions, Gyanada took out the bit of soap and gloomily walked towards the pond. Her mother chimed, 'Do not be careless, scrub yourself well . . . and hurry back. One can never say when the groom's party will arrive.'

On her return, Gyanada was amazed. Her mother, who was virtually on her deathbed, had somehow not only managed to get up, she had also opened a box, taken out a printed sari and was holding it in her hand while waiting for Gyanada. No sooner did the daughter arrive than she said, 'Oh no, I should have done your hair before you went for a bath, but never mind—sit down here and let me do it now.'

The girl pleaded piteously, 'No Ma, I beg of you, you will not be able to manage, I will do it myself. Please, Ma.'

The mother smiled at her daughter's words today; she said, 'Hmm! I will not be able to manage? Do you know, Geni, girls from the village used to line up to have this Mejo Bou do their hair. I will not be able to handle this simple task? Now sit down and do not delay.'

She seated her daughter gently and began to help her dress, probably for the last time. There was not a jot of neglect in all the rituals of making her daughter look pretty. All of a sudden a thought occurred to her—'Who says that my daughter is not good-looking! She might be a little dark, but who has such a face or such beautiful eyes?'

She never stopped to wonder—which mother had a daughter who loved her so intensely? Which daughter regarded her mother as the crux of her existence? Which girl's loving nature masked all her lack of appeal and shone through to the surface? True, Durga was not aware of all this, but the regret that had accumulated because she had been unable to adorn her daughter with even one bit of jewellery vanished all of a sudden. The lack of jewellery did not seem such a major factor to her any more.

Though there was still a long time to go, Mejo Bou found it impossible to lie in bed any longer. Forgetting everything, she sat with her daughter in front of her.

On hearing that a prospective groom was arriving to have a look at Geni, their neighbour Nilkantha Mukhujey's wife and Tarangini Thakurjhi arrived. When the girl was called out, they went to the next room and peeped out for a glimpse of the proceedings.

Just as a mother waits, edgy with anxiety, for news of a beloved child going through an extremely complicated surgical operation, Durga sat upright on her shabby bed and waited tensely.

She was aware that the prospective groom and Ghatak Thakur, who was arranging the negotiation, had finished the snacks and had left the house. She also heard the sound of their carriage drawing away. Then, Tarangini Thakurjhi entered the room, heaved a deep sigh and said, 'No, they did not like the girl.'

Durga lay back with her eyes closed and did not ask a single question. Thakurjhi continued in pitying tones, 'Would anyone ever like that

skeletal girl? Mejo Bou, why don't you see that Geni eats proper meals for the next few months? Thanks to a prolonged bout of fever, all her ribs are showing—wait for a year, tend to her a bit and then see what she looks like! Then rejecting her will be next to impossible.'

What she said was right, but where was the likelihood? Where was the money? Where was the time to wait for a year and add some flesh to her skin and bones? The girl had already turned fifteen. Her forefathers were undoubtedly distressed, God bless their souls. The village people threatened to ostracize them. There was no question of waiting—'get rid of her, get rid of her' was the persistent demand. No matter how, no matter to whom she was married—knowing full well that widowhood and all its anguish were inevitable—religious niceties and social decorum had to be maintained.

The evening lamps were yet to be lighted in the room. Gyanada entered silently, to divest herself of the accoutrements of her shame. Durga lay like a corpse. A short while later, when the girl silently came up to her and sat at her mother's feet like a guilty criminal, Durga pretended to be unaware of it. After a long time, exhausted and hungry, the girl fell asleep there. Despite knowing and sensing everything, the mother was beyond feeling even a scrap of pity for her daughter.

## 10

DURGA'S CONDITION WAS SUCH THAT THE END COULD COME ANY TIME. NOW, the elders and expert exponents of the religious scriptures decreed that the girl was not only the bane of her dynasty and her family, she would also be of no use to her mother when she died. The grown-up unmarried girl would not be allowed to perform any of the last rites of her mother and neither would the scriptures allow her to offer her mother the last drink of water or to light the funeral pyre. Hearing the pronouncement of the scriptures, this woman on the brink of journeying to the other world turned as white as a sheet.

Coping with one blow after another, all the affection in her seemed to have withered and dried. Now she would flare up as soon as she saw the girl whom she loved with her entire being. This last information turned Durga into stone—not a vestige of love, caring or warmth remained.

Sending for Anath Mejo, Bou said, 'I believe there is some Gopal Bhattacharjee in the neighbouring locality who is planning to get married again. Will you try one final time before I breathe my last, Thakurpo?'

Anath scoffed at the rumour and responded, 'Oh no! Gopal Bhattacharjee marry again—who has been joking with you, Bouthan?'

Durga sighed deeply and answered, 'Who will jest with me, Thakurpo? He is a male—who bothers about their age? No, no, there are plenty who get married at that age! I beg of you, please make enquiries. I have

got nothing while I lived—must I be deprived even in death?’

At present that was the cause of her greatest concern. She could only brood continually on the fact that having borne and reared a daughter with such hardship she would gain nothing in the end! What was the sense of having a daughter who did not even have the right to perform the last rites for her mother?

In acute anxiety she almost sat up and said, ‘No matter where and no matter in what household, just see that she is married off. You will be blessed, Thakurpo, I promise you . . .’

Thakurpo himself was no less anxious about the matter. That very day he went in search of Gopal Bhattacharjee and on hearing that the rumour was indeed true, was dumbfounded. It was not only a fact, but already fathers burdened by daughters had come and pleaded with him.

Although it was the fruit of such hard penance, this match elicited no positive comments from anyone who heard about it. But the mother did not waver in her resolve. She was about to set off on the last journey—and the scriptures cannot be ignored!

A daughter born in a Bengali household had been sacrificed time and again on the scaffold of religious dictums—why would it be any different now? But to add insult to injury, Gopal sent word that he would marry only after seeing the girl. In this miserable country he too had the right to look around and take his pick.

Just as a blade of grass wilting under the heat of a scorching summer suddenly springs to renewed life with the first advent of rain, this faint ray of hope brought back some life to the hapless and dying Durga. She grasped Anath by the hand and pleaded, ‘Thakurpo, do this much for me as a younger brother—please see that this wretched girl is sanctified and able to light my funeral pyre. Let the coming auspicious date not slip by, whatever the cost. Please go and tell them to come and have a look at the girl and finalize matters immediately.’

Unless she was married, Geni would not even be permitted to perform the last rites for her mother—that was what the scriptures said. On hearing this injunction, the girl stopped eating and drinking. After all, she too was born into a Bengali household and knew well the intrinsic meaning of the funeral pyre and its flames.

In the evening, alone in the kitchen, she was preparing a potion for her mother, when there were summons for her beauty to be tested yet again.

Swarna herself rushed in saying, ‘Geni, put that down and hurry up and come here. Just put on any sari and come—they will have a look at you as you are.’ Just as rapidly she left the place.

Anath had not yet returned from the office and hence looking after the guests and taking care of their needs was her responsibility. The prospective groom himself had come, accompanied by a distant nephew. The younger generation had a better sense of beauty and so Gopal had shrewdly brought him along. It was on the nephew’s suggestion that the girl was brought forward as she was—because dressing up and embellishment could lead to deception in some form.

The groom had to return by the six o'clock train and he began to hurry matters along. Swarna began to call out in hushed tones, but there was no sight of Gyanada. Then the maid was sent to check on why she was taking such a long time and to drag her out by force if necessary; at the sight of Gyanada her Jethaima screamed out in an uncontrollable rage, 'Take everything off! Who asked you to dress in this bizarre fashion? Get rid of it all and come back soon!'

The visitors were taken aback at all this hullabaloo and they peeped from behind to find out what the matter was. The boy assessed the situation quickly and said, 'It is impossible for us to delay any longer, let her come in as she is.'

When the maid brought her forward, the young boy controlled his laughter and rose to leave, saying, 'We will be in touch tomorrow.' He left quickly. Some food had been organized, but for fear of missing the train, nothing was touched.

The meaning of being informed the next day was only too apparent to everybody. In no time at all Jethaima had the entire household and neighbourhood in a tumult with her abuses and shouts. Mejo Bou was in a critical condition; fear of some calamity made a few neighbours rush in and accidentally Atul happened to enter at the same time. He too was travelling to Kolkata by the six o'clock train and fearing the worst, he entered the house.

On seeing Atul, Swarna's rage, regret and disappointment knew no bounds. She dragged the emaciated, awkward and almost dead-with-fright unfortunate girl and held her face up for Atul to inspect, saying, 'Just take a look at that, Atul! Look at the face of this unlucky, wretched ape!'

Truly, one could barely control one's amusement at the sight. Her face was a riot of colours, the result of trying to dress herself inexpertly in the dark. She had dabbed on some oil in her hair, perhaps in an attempt to plait her rough hair, and now it trickled down her cheeks. A couple of girls passing by giggled aloud. One of them carried a child who lisped, 'Gini Pishi has dressed as a clown!' Everybody around enjoyed the joke at the unfortunate girl's expense.

But Atul felt as though he had been seared by hot iron. It had been a very long time since he had looked on Gyanada's face in broad daylight like this. But that ugliness could be so absolute, he had not even imagined. Once when he himself had been on the verge of death, he had fallen in love with this face. It was not a visual infatuation, the exuberance of gratitude—he had loved with no restraints and with all his heart. When on that same face he now saw death preparing to strike, he faltered for a moment. He was on the verge of saying something, but his words got muffled in Swarna's shrill tones.

'Look at the audacity of the clown! You dressed in this fashion to entice someone who has one foot in the grave! Were you successful? He just kicked you and left!'

Someone asked, 'Who turned her into this joke, Boro Bou? Did the old man reject her then?'

Glancing in Gyanada's direction Swarna roared, 'She dressed up herself—who else is responsible? The mother is all but unconscious. I told her only to wear a sari—but no, she couldn't do that. Besides, her entire costume consists of that printed sari and those bangles given by Atul. She takes them off and puts them on about a hundred times a day. Don't you feel ashamed to come out in public wearing those bangles? Go on, get out of my sight.'

People left, discussing just how shameless the girl was and how brazen her behaviour. Perhaps only the One to whom nothing is a mystery, shed a few tears. Only He knew what it had cost a girl—who out of sheer timidity had never raised her eyes and talked—to try and dress her unseemly body in an attractive fashion and attempt to sell herself to that old man. But, the sale fell through—the man could not be conned! That was the only reason why everybody all around chided her and there was no forgiveness. But perhaps the Eternal Judge would finally take the burden of this unfortunate child on to His own shoulders!

Gyanada stood up. She had never cried in public; drying her eyes stealthily, she walked away slowly.

As there was no other train to Kolkata, Atul returned home that evening. On the way, over and above everything, his Chhoto Mashi's words rang in his ears. The day she left for her father's house, she had called Atul aside and told him that one who cast aside a true jewel in favour of imitation glass never lived down the regrets that were bound to plague him. He had not grasped the meaning of her words at the time; but presently it became more than apparent that the remark had been meant for him. The extent of her shamelessness and decorum of one whom everyone castigated as shameless set him wondering.

Dawn had not yet broken, Anath came with the news that Mejo Bou would have to be cremated.

Atul accompanied him immediately. He saw that Gyanada sat, just as she had about a year and a half ago mutely holding her dead father, in silence this time too, gently cradling her mother's feet in her lap. Only once in her life had anyone seen her publicly display emotion—when she had repeatedly beaten her head at Atul's feet. Hence, no one thought anything of her solemn silence. No one even paid any attention to her; they were engaged in making arrangements for the funeral.

In due course, Durga was carried to the crematorium. Gyanada too trailed behind everybody. As they were very poor, nobody even thought of escorting or accompanying her.

The swollen and turbulent Ganges flowed just below the cremation grounds. The girl performed the last rites of her mother in silence. When the funeral pyre was alight with flames, she pushed away from the crowd of men, climbed down a few steps and stood right at the edge of the river. Nobody forbade her; there was no one to do so. Rather, some people sighed in empathy at the girl trying to shield herself from this painful plight.

There was no concern or worry that this eternally patient and stoic girl could ever take any drastic step—not even Atul was worried on that

count. And yet, watching her sit at the edge of that swiftly flowing current of water, his heart quailed. He thought of approaching her and comforting her, but a sense of shame and impropriety prevented him from doing so.

Atul went and joined the others who had gathered some distance away, trying to escape the searing heat of the flames. Gazing at the burning pyre, all of a sudden the eternal question rose in his mind anew—one who lived was now no more; the earthly remains of one who had been here, even at the beginning of the day, was gradually being destroyed and could barely be recognized now. But there was so much hope, so many desires, so much fear and so many worries focusing around this corporeal body. Where did they all go? Did everything disappear in a flash? Then, what was the value of it all? And how long did death take to obliterate an existence?

His own life suddenly flashed before Atul's eyes. Three years ago he too had been on the verge of death, but had not died. His vision penetrated the dusky curtains that surrounded the flames of the burning pyre. He recollected that on that day death for him had been warded off, thanks to that shadowy figure of veritable mourning that sat by the waters of the Jaharvi, whose rough, untended hair and the shabby end of the sari fluttered in the breeze.

Atul's eyes brimmed with tears. He said to himself, 'Beauty be damned!' If that commodity was indeed of such high value, he would have been left totally bereft three years ago. That day, in disgust, even his closest relatives had not spared him a second glance.

He was not aware of how the time passed. Atul had not even noticed when the flames of the funeral pyre had died out. All the while his entire attention was focused on that motionless figure that sat there in mute silence.

Anath said, 'Why stay here any longer, my dear! Come, let us finish the remaining last rites.'

Shrugging off his wakeful dreams, Atul stood up in the light of the dusk.

The sun had almost sunk in the horizon. In that falling light, his gaze fell on some broken shards of the bangles that lay on the steps of the landing stage. He stopped short. This was a trifling, worthless gift that he had once bestowed. Despite all the insult and chastisement, Gyanada had been unable to let go of the compelling pull of the bangles. By shattering them with her own hands today, she had answered the unasked question.

Atul moved hastily and gathered them up gently. The bangles which had been of no worth to him when whole were rendered invaluable to him as shattered bits and he held them close tenderly.

Hearing footsteps behind her, Gyanada turned around.

Atul could not bear her gaze. He tried to take her hand in his, but checking himself he said, 'Everyone makes mistakes, Gyano, but . . .'

No sooner did he open his fists than the dying embers of the sun fell on the bits of broken glass and they glittered and sparkled brightly. He continued, 'What you broke and discarded today, I have gathered and

brought back from the cremation grounds.'

Gyanada could not grasp what he was trying to say; she gazed up at Atul from the depths of sadness and after a very long time addressed him directly and asked mildly, 'Why?'

Trying to answer this, Atul's eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. However, controlling himself he said, 'You know, today in the flames of Mejo Mashima's pyre I noticed one thing that has remained unbroken and can never ever be severed. Some glass bangles can be broken, but neither you nor I have the ability to sever the ties that have been forged between us. What I have failed to do will not be possible for you either; and because I have come to realize that fact, I have gathered these bangles and I am taking them home.'

Gyanada gazed in mesmerized silence. Abruptly Atul extended both hands and pulled her shrunken hands into his own; but Gyanada remained as still as before.

After many long minutes of silence Atul continued in a voice choked with emotion, 'No matter who else punishes me, you do not do so, Gyano. No matter how much I have sinned, you must accept me back. It is simply impossible for you to mete out a punishment by discarding me!'

At long last Gyanada dropped her gaze, but no words emerged—her weak and emaciated hands fluttered in Atul's grasp. After both had remained silent for a while Atul gently released her hands and said, 'Come home, they have all gone ahead.'