PROLOGUE

May 1966

A third of the way through the half-mile walk from the landlord's house to his hut, Nitai Das's feet begin to sway. Or maybe it is the head-spin again. He sits down on the lifeless field he has to cross before he can reach his hut. There isn't a thread of shade anywhere. The May sun is an unforgiving fire; it burns his blood dry. It also burns away any lingering grain of hope that the monsoons will arrive in time to end this third year of drought. The earth around him is beginning to fissure and crack. His eyelids are heavy. He closes them for a while, then, as sleep begins to take him, he pitches forward from his sitting position and jolts awake. Absently, he fingers his great enemy, the soil, not soil any more, but compacted dust. Even its memory of water has been erased for ever, as if it has never been.

He has begged all morning outside the landlord's house for one cup of rice. His three children haven't eaten for five days. Their last meal had been a handful of hay stolen from the landlord's cowshed and boiled in the cloudy yellow water from the well. Even the well is running dry. For the past three years they have been eating once every five or six or seven days. The last few times he had gone to beg had yielded nothing, except abuse and forcible ejection from the grounds of the landlord's house. In the beginning, when he had first started to beg for food, they shut and bolted all the doors and windows against him while he sat outside the house, for hours and hours, day rolling into evening into night, until they discovered his resilience and changed that tactic. Today they had set their guards on him. One of them had brought his stick down on Nitai's back, his shoulders, his legs, while the other one had joked, 'Where are you going to hit this

dog? He is nothing but bones, we don't even have to hit him. Blow on him and he'll fall back.'

Oddly, Nitai doesn't feel any pain from this morning's beating. He knows what he has to do. A black billow makes his head spin again and he shuts his eyes to the punishment of white light. All he needs to do is walk the remaining distance, about 2,000 hands. In a few moments, he is all right. Some kind of jittery energy makes a sudden appearance inside him and he gets up and starts walking. Within seconds the panting begins, but he carries on. A dry heave interrupts him for a bit. Then he continues.

His wife is sitting outside their hut, waiting for him to return with something, anything, to eat. She can hardly hold her head up. Even before he starts taking shape from a dot on the horizon to the form of her husband, she knows he is returning empty-handed. The children have stopped looking up now when he comes back from the fields. They have stopped crying with hunger, too. The youngest, three years old, is a tiny, barely moving bundle, her eyes huge and slow. The middle one is a skeleton sheathed in loose, polished black skin. The eldest boy, with distended belly, has become so listless that even his shadow seems dwindled and slow. Their bones have eaten up what little flesh they had on their thighs and buttocks. On the rare occasions when they cry, no tears emerge; their bodies are reluctant to part with anything they can retain and consume. He can see nothing in their eyes. In the past there was hunger in them, hunger and hope and end of hope and pain, and perhaps even a puzzled resentment, a kind of muted accusation, but now there is nothing, a slow, beyond-the-end nothing.

The landlord has explained to him what lies in store for his children if he does not pay off the interest on his first loan. Nitai has brought them into this world of misery, of endless, endless misery. Who can escape what's written on his forehead from birth? He knows what to do now.

He picks up the short-handled sickle, takes his wife by her bony wrist and brings her out in the open. With his practised farmer's hand, he arcs the sickle and brings it down and across her neck. He notices the fleck of spit in the two corners of her mouth, her eyes huge with terror. The head isn't quite severed, perhaps he didn't strike with

enough force, so it hangs by the still-uncut fibres of skin and muscle and arteries as she collapses with a thud. Some of the spurt of blood has hit his face and his ribcage, which is about to push out from its dark, sweaty cover. His right hand is sticky with blood.

The boy comes out at the sound. Nitai is quick, he has the energy and focus of an animal filled with itself and itself only. Before the sight in front of the boy can tighten into meaning, his father pushes him against the mud wall and drives the curve of the blade with all the force in his combusting being across his neck, decapitating him in one blow. This time the blood, a thin, lukewarm jet, hits him full on his face. His hand is so slippery with blood that he drops the sickle. Inside the tiny hut, his daughter is sitting on the floor, shaking, trying to drag herself into a corner where she can disappear. Perhaps she has smelled the metallic blood, or taken fright at the animal moan issuing out of her father, a sound not possible of humans. Nitai instinctively rubs his right hand, his working hand, against his bunched-up lungi and grabs hold of his daughter's throat with both his hands, and squeezes and squeezes and squeezes until her protruding eyes almost leave the stubborn ties of their sockets and her tongue lolls out and her thrashing legs still. He crawls on the floor to the corner where their last child is crying her weak, runty mewl and, with trembling hands, covers her mouth and nose, pushing his hands down, keeping them pressed, until there is nothing.

Nitai Das knows what to do. He lifts the jerrycan of Folidol left over from three seasons ago and drinks, his mouth to the lip of the plastic canister, until he can drink no more. His insides burn numb and he thrashes and writhes like a speared earthworm, thrashes and writhes, a pink foam emerging from his mouth, until he too is returned from the nothing in his life to nothing.

CHAPTER ONE

1967

Around six, the zoo starts to shake itself up from its brief sleep. Lying in bed, wide awake, Purnima hears the stirrings of life, each animal, each part of each animal, becoming animated in slow succession. Under the mosquito net the September humidity is already beginning to congeal into the suffocating blanket it will soon become. The fan, running at its top speed of five, battles away, unmindful of its futility. The only thing it circulates around the room is the sound of the fluttery pages of the Ghosh Gold Palace calendar hanging from a nail on the cream-painted walls. That calendar is a sign of her defiance; by some silent understanding reached a long time before she arrived in this house, all tokens of Ghosh Gold Palace are forbidden here, so she has made a point of having their calendar on the wall in her room.

Beside her, Priyo sleeps the sleep of the sinless. His early-morning snore has a three-toned sound to it – a snarly growl in the inhalation, then a hissing during part of the exhalation, completed by a final high-pitched insecty whine. She hears the scouring sound of a broom sluicing out with water some drain or courtyard. Someone is cleaning his teeth in the bathroom of a neighbouring house – there is the usual accompaniment of loud hawking, coughing and a brief, one-note retch. A juddering car goes down Basanta Bose Road with the unmistakable sound of every loose vibrating component about to come off – a taxi. A rickshaw cycles by, the driver relentlessly squeezing its bellows-horn. Another starts up, as if in response. Soon an entire fleet of rickshaws rackets past, their continuous horn shredding what little sleepiness remains of the morning.

Now she can hear other vehicles: the toot of a scooter-horn, the bell of a bicycle. This is how this world begins every day; noise is the

way it signals that it is alive, indomitable. The sparrows send up a chinkless wall of manic cheeping. The doleful remonstrations of the pigeons, shuffling about on windowsills, sometimes tumble over into an aggressive chorus; they have the same merciless presence. The sound of water loops like a liquid thread through the other sounds; someone is beating their washing against the stone or concrete perimeter around a running tap. The clatter of metal buckets; uninterrupted cawing of crows; wrangling stray dogs; a distant conch-shell being blown three times in the prayer room of a house nearby . . . Here, up on the first floor of 22/6 Basanta Bose Road, all sounds converge as in an amphitheatre. Had she, her husband and their daughter, Baishakhi, lived on the top floor, where her parents-in-law and their favourite son, their eldest, Adinath, and his family have their quarters, it would have been so much less noisy, she knows. And away from the onslaught of mosquitoes, which would never have been able to ascend to the third floor. And, of course, more distant and safer from the troubles in the streets, bombings and murders, the terrifying stuff she hears about, that have started erupting in the city. Who can say that their street will not be the scene of such action?

From the thought of that one minor instance of preferential treatment of Dada to the real cause of all the rankling is a negligible distance. Dada, her elder brother-in-law, had been groomed to enter the family business, Charu Paper & Sons (Pvt. Ltd), from his school days and had obediently followed the path set out for him by his father, a trajectory as natural as the cycle of seasons. If family stories and reminiscences are to be believed, her husband, Priyo, however, had never shown any interest in the business, despite receiving the same training and indoctrination that his older brother had. If this had once caused ructions and displeasure, they are long vanished now, or almost vanished, for it is so obvious and accepted that Adinath is going to inherit the greater share of the family wealth in all its forms – business, money, house – that it is, like the air one breathes, not noticed, not remarked upon.

Despite the pervasive chatter of how the Ghoshes have fallen on hard times, how the business has been doing badly for years now, resulting in the selling-off of most of their mills, even most of her mother-in-law's jewellery, Purnima has never quite believed these

crafty, convoluted North Calcutta people. Well, maybe they don't live there any longer, Purnima concedes, but her parents-in-law were originally from North Calcutta and these traits are difficult to eradicate and, she's convinced, even passed down the generations, irrespective of location. Everyone knew what a big gap existed between what they said in public and what they did in private.

On paper, Priyo appeared to have equal standing with Dada, certainly as far as the burden of work went, but it was Purnima's unshakeable belief that Adinath drew a significantly bigger salary than her husband. While she had a fair idea of the amount Priyo brought home, she was still in the dark about her elder brother-in-law's takings; this ignorance was not for lack of trying on her part. It was made even more maddening by too much information from another, opposite side: Priyo's contributions to the running of the household, which kept rising. Over and above paying the electricity bills for the entire household, which had been his responsibility for as long as Purnima had lived here, and paying some subsistence money to Purba, his youngest sister-in-law, he was now expected to increase his regular contribution to the family purse. The rest of his salary was deposited in a State Bank of India account held jointly by Purnima and Priyo. Part of this balance was cashed and kept by her in a locked drawer of their Godrej steel almirah, to dispose of and use as she deemed fit.

Despite being wholly in charge of this subset economy, Purnima felt that neither the money for her use nor the sum in the joint bank account was enough. She never reconciled herself to the fact that an increase in one meant a proportional depletion of the other. She wanted both to go up, and the mathematical impossibility of it irritated her so much that she often fell back on haranguing her husband. This, however, did not take the form of direct complaints about the meagreness of his income – it was not meagre – but about the inequitable nature of the levies imposed on her husband's salary. Why did he have to shell out so much? Adinath practically owned the family business, so he should shoulder most of the costs. Besides, being the eldest son, it was his duty to look after the younger ones. Did he, Priyo, *know* for certain that Dada's share of the costs was significantly larger or did he simply believe what he was told? How naïve was that? And

what about her younger brother-in-law, Bholanath? He was the sole director of Charu Books, an entire company in itself. All his income seemed to go on the expensive education of his daughter in a fancy English-medium school. Where were his contributions? Exactly how much were they? And talking of dependants, shouldn't Dada have the sole responsibility of looking after that hapless widow, Purba? If all the brothers contributed equally, why should Dada get preferential treatment in the family? It was still the case that no meal could begin without Dada taking a big spoon to the virgin mound of cooked rice and breaking it, yet another irritating North Calcutta affectation.

These and other related questions had accumulated over the course of their seventeen-year marriage and now found expression in ever-longer sessions of nagging. If Priyo had tried, in the past, to answer a few of them with reason and accuracy, he had long since given up, faced with the proliferating queries; now they went in through one ear and left through the other. And yet this is not the nub of Purnima's dissatisfaction. That lies in the future.

It is evident that after the deaths of Baba and Ma, her parents-in-law, Dada will become head of the family. But who will the house, this big, four-storey house with a rare back garden in the heart of Bhabanipur, be left to? Will the entirety of it go to Dada or will it be divided amongst all the brothers? If divided, how? Equally or commensurate with the differential treatment they have received?

Years of trying to extract solid information from Priyo had yielded nothing. He was either evasive and lackadaisical in his responses, saying, 'Let's wait and see', to which she always said that that would be too late, they couldn't do much *after* the division; or he sided with his family. 'We've all lived together happily in this home, sharing everything; the question of dividing it into units for the use of one and not another does not arise. We'll continue to live like this. Everything belongs to every one of us,' he'd say.

Purnima took this badly. A threatening cloud would settle over husband and wife until its inevitable precipitation into tantrums and shouting. 'I'll see who looks after you and your daughter when you're left with nothing,' she'd rage. 'They'll take everything, counting each and every brick of the house, each and every single brick, you mark my words.' The 'they' remained nebulous and unspecified.

The seven o'clock siren from a distant factory now adds its wail to the symphony outside. Like another clock, the blind beggar and his daughter begin working this particular patch of their beat, the sound of small cymbals accompanying their devotional duet, 'Let my soul blossom like the hibiscus at the feet of my mother-goddess'. Purnima reluctantly gets out of bed to begin another day in her prison.

Late that afternoon, Adinath, sitting on a tired cushion – battered and leaking dirty greyish cotton – on his favourite planter's long-sleever in the seldom-used drawing room on the ground floor, nervously contemplates the edgy story that the slim sheaf of papers left at a careless angle on the cane-and-glass coffee table is trying to tell him. Samik Sarkar, head of the State Bank of India, Eastern Region, had come in with the papers in the afternoon to guide him through that story; Adinath asked him to leave the documents behind. He fingers the packet of Wills Filter – several rungs down from Rothmans and Pall Mall, his brands of choice during easier days – but decides not to light up another one. The room is blue with smoke. Samik-babu had switched on the tube-lights before leaving and, in their depressing white glare, Adinath can see the oily iridescence of the film that has formed on the remains of the milky tea in the cups on the coffee table.

An extreme tiredness, seemingly from nowhere, suddenly clings tight to him; he lowers his head, takes off his glasses and passes his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair, once, twice, three times. He is happy to have the papers sit in front of him, unyielding with their slow, poisonous information. Numbers never lie; one can make them, of course, as one can make anything speak another story in another tongue, but they do not have the inherent falsehood that words carry. The moment he looks at the figures, whatever little scrap of peace there is in his mind, trying to hold on to some fragile ledge, will be dislodged into an abyss for ever. Suddenly the taste of exhaustion changes and modulates into fear: he almost feels that swift somersaulting of taste on the sour-bitter fur coating his tongue. Samik-babu had brought himself to utter the word 'repossession' and then quickly skated over his own embarrassment by suggesting that both outfits be sold to some Marwari buyer at whatever price they were willing

to pay. The creditors won't be put off for too long now: that will be the pointed truth at the heart of the thicket of numbers waiting by his side, resilient and impatient at the same time with their dangerous, whispery story.

The botched modernisation of technology at one of the factories, all that high-risk borrowing against capital – what enormous reach they had into the future, like those she-ghosts in the stories they were told when they were little, ghosts with nasal voices and long arms that could traverse fields and houses and ponds and grab your neck. There is labour unrest and unionism in the mills and, given the fragility of the coalition government and the way the left party is strong-arming, where will they be if the Communist Party, the CPI(M), actually comes to power? Which could be any day now, he suspects. Charu & Sons will have to accede to every demand of the unions; their contacts with the rapidly attenuating Congress Party will not be of much help in troubleshooting; the prospect gives him the gooseflesh of terror. But for how much longer can they continue hanging on to a factory locked up for two years now? The business with Dulal last year, that unthinkable gherao, all those workers swollen in numbers by lumpens brought in from the outside, all of them shouting, chanting, *You must, you must, you must listen to our demands. Break and crush the black hands of the owners* . . . There, another ripple of that gooseflesh rakes over him.

He hears his brother Priyo's wife, Purnima, upstairs cry out to her daughter, 'Buliiiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you.'

He knows what he needs now, while the siren numbers wait. He needs protection, insulation, someone, something to shore him up and whisper another provisional truth to him: that the world can look different, kinder; that it won't always be a merciless landing on a bed of nails, but sometimes a silky easing onto a lawn of down feathers. He needs a less vulnerable eye with which to see the world. He gets up from his long-sleever with some difficulty, his knees sending out an audible crack (his father's arthritis, could it be? is arthritis hereditary?), picks up a hollow terracotta Bankura horse standing on the coffee table, removes its detachable ear and upends it. A little key clinks out. With that clutched in his slightly shaking hand, he makes

his way across the room to the glass-fronted book-cupboard. He unlocks it, reaches for the topmost shelf, which houses the collected works of Rabindranath Tagore nestled tightly against each other, a uniform brown-spined army, and deftly removes volumes five to seven. The gap created by the removal of those three soldiers from their ranks reveals his pint-bottle of Johnnie Walker.

He hears the front door open, then the sound of his younger son, Suranjan, entering the house: that erratic, charmless clatter could belong to no one else. The boy would now thud his way up the stairs and shut himself in his room for the . . . But no, before he can complete his thought, the loud advancing footfalls alert him that his son's destination is no place other than the ground-floor drawing room. A nervous hurry ruins the ephemeral grace for which Adinath had reached out his hands.

On the second floor, Chhaya sits on the low stool in front of the dressing table in her room, looking into the gloom of the heartless mirror. She opens the drawer on her right and takes out a pair of tweezers, her heart beating out a hot tattoo of shame: what will everyone think if they find out that she plucks her eyebrows?

She nearly jumps off her stool when she hears Purnima's loud summons – 'Buliiiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you' – reach her, muffled and diluted, one floor up here. That coarse, vulgar, low-born woman, she thinks; braying all the time, not a whit of class about her, typical of her South Calcutta origins. Her voice is like a split bamboo. You can take the girl out of Behala, but you can't take Behala . . . Her familiar thoughts run along the runnels made deep by the ceaseless flow of these very sentiments for the last seventeen years. She gets up hastily, shuts the door to her room, turns on the light and sits on the stool again. The open drawer, a tongue stuck out in shame, mocks her. The crowd of cosmetics on the table – face powder, creams, snows, skin-whitener, lotions, eye-pencils, perfumes, lipsticks, even, improbably, a tiny pot of rouge – didn't quite carry, collectively, the single charge of . . . of . . . *immorality* that the tweezers sent through her fingers.

After years of plucking and shaping her eyebrows, she still feels this heat of shame flushing through her. Oddly enough, no single act of

her elaborate evening toilette – before she sits on the front verandah of the second floor for an hour or two until the light gives out, a ritual she has followed for seventeen years now, with only a brief interruption at the beginning – fills her with the kind of self-reproach that this does. The application of snow or cream to her face followed by face powder, then the painting of her lips and eyes, placing a beauty spot on her chin, wearing jewellery and an expensive, dressy sari, spritzing herself with perfume – none of it carries that sting. She wishes her face were a blank canvas on which she could compose her features anew every day, but she has been given, instead, an almost indelible painting, which she tries to paint over, brush out, erase and correct in order to have a more pleasing picture; every afternoon she fails and is left contemplating the unbending stubbornness and tenacity of the original.

She ruffles her brows, letting the unruly hairs stand out. Like weeds, they're going to be rooted out. She steadies her trembling hands, leans forward towards the mirror and brings the tweezers up to her face. Her hands won't be still and obedient, so she waits while she lets the old poison of her low sister-in-law surface again. It is best to think of something else while she plucks out the refractory hairs, and hatred is an ever-reliable friend.

Her hand inches closer to her right eyebrow, *for seventeen years she has had to, the whole family has had to, put up with that woman, that serpent*, one, there, the first one out, with that pricking twinge; two, the pain isn't negligible, it all depends on how toughly they are rooted in; three, ouch, *perhaps no one really knows the true depths of her evil, that crow pretending to be a cuckoo, but she has known, from the very beginning*; four; five, easy enough; now her left, *anyway, what does one expect, from a low-caste family, a Saha, all charm on the outside, 'Didi this, Didi that' on the surface, sticking the knife in afterwards* one, oh god, this is going to set her sneezing. She drops her tweezers, her face a comic mask in the first moments of being seized by an imminent sneeze, mouth open, jaw turned down, eyebrows furrowed, face lifted in expectation, as the sneezes arrive, one after the other, racking her short, pudgy frame in their cathartic succession.

Suranjan walks into the seldom-used drawing room on the ground floor, the LP held in his sweaty hands, almost clasped to his thin chest,

as if he were guarding the elixir of immortal life. From the entrance to Basanta Bose Road he has heard Boro-kaki call out to Buli to come in from the verandah. Hopefully, at this time of the day, about to fold into evening, the drawing room will be empty and he will be able to listen, uninterrupted inside the still centre of concentration, to this album, *Revolver*, borrowed from his friend Bappa-da after weeks of begging, wheedling, cajoling, even offering money as security against damage by scratching or accidental loss. He is going to have to guard it with his very life. Not that that is going to be a problem, for ever since he heard the mournful strings of 'Eleanor Rigby' and the jubilant harmonies of 'Taxman' he has felt as if he has watched his own rebirth into a new being. The record in his hands is not an LP, it is his beating life itself. It is where all the soiled trade of human life passed through and emerged as prelapsarian truth.

Enmeshed in purple rhapsodies, Suranjan takes a while to identify the sharp bouquet of spirits in the drawing room as he enters. Part of the reason for his slowness may be because he is thrown by his father's presence there. It seems Adinath has been waiting for his son, looking expectantly at the door, almost willing him, or anyone, to walk in. Frozen for a few moments by this unexpected and wholly unwelcome encounter, both father and son fall back on a default embarrassment – staring at the floor, mumbling, groping for excuses – until the smell of alcohol brings Suranjan back his presence of mind. It embarrasses him further and releases a sudden squirt of fear and shame in him, as if it is he who has been caught doing something illicit.

Muddied in his mind are two strains of thought; first, if he can smell the tang of alcohol in the room, does that mean that his father can detect the occasional whiff on him when he returns home after a bout of furtive drinking with his college friends? The second, even more disturbing, is the question of whether his father is going down some slippery slope; it is one thing to indulge in the forbidden pleasures of alcohol at the age of eighteen, quite another for that eighteen-year-old to discover that his father drinks too. What for him is both pleasure and transgression, a matter of guilty delight, can surely not be the same for his father? In the older man it is almost certainly a sign of dissolution. He looks at his father with hooded distaste, the

LP in his hand, its promises of a transporting salvation lost in the very quicksands of family that he had been seeking to escape.

Arunima, seated on the floor, restlessly arranging books according to size, sharpening pencils to points capable of stabbing a small creature, cannot rid her mind of the image of the pencil box Malvika Tiwari brought to class that day. Meanwhile, *her* sharpened Flora and Apsara pencils, ranging from 2H to 2B, are all going into the old, dented, lustreless Camlin pencil box. Malvika's shiny new pencil case, brought all the way from Singapore by her father, had a picture of a wide-eyed, golden-haired girl standing in a field of closed yellow buds, but if you tilted the box the girl winked and all the buds bloomed into a blaze of unfurled flowers. Ever since she had seen that, everything had flown out of Arunima's head, as from an open window, to make space for only one thing: desire. While the other girls had sat oohing and aahing, and some had even been transparent in their envy, she had fallen into a trough of silence, sad that such a thing existed, but not in her possession.

The only way she can have it is to ask her father to buy her one. But it has to be done without the knowledge of her mother. If she ever finds out that Arunima wants a flash pencil box, she will go out of her way to ensure that her daughter doesn't get it. She will tell her husband that his contribution to parenting consists solely of spoiling their child: *Before the words have left her mouth, you go and get her whatever she wants. You are eating her head. Can't you see what she's going to grow up to be, how much trouble she's going to cause all of us?* She can practically hear her mother's snapping words. Then she will add the clinching detail, a final, shaming cut, like that from paper and as annoying: *And in these straitened times, too. Do you think money grows on trees?* Her father will then sheepishly tell her, *Without Ma's permission, I cannot do anything*. That is what it always comes down to: her mother like an unassailable wall between her and everything she ever wants.

It seems to her nine-year-old mind that her mother had her so that she could have someone to punish, scold and thwart. And to stand between her and her father. Now, sitting arranging pencils in descending order of size, from left to right, in her unlovely pencil box, irritated already at the sure prospect of them changing their assigned

places during the journey to school tomorrow morning and upsetting the beauty of the ranking she has given them, she reaches inside herself and feels for the ever-present crystal of anger, commuting effortlessly between the minor pique with unruly pencils and the bigger frustration with her mother, and finds herself moved to a bitter joy at the hardness of that gem. She breaks the sharpened graphite points of each of the pencils, one by one, and starts sharpening them again with a rigorous fury.

The swish of sari, the rattle of keys tied to her aanchol, and the tinkle of bangles heralds the approach of Jayanti.

'Is your homework done?' she asks. 'Arunima, I can only see tools of study, but not a single open book or exercise copy. You think I won't notice?'

Arunima does not bother to look up.

Jayanti raises her voice: 'Arunima, I'm talking to you, look up. Why don't you have a book open in front of you? Don't you have homework to do? Am I to believe it's all done by half-past six? Where is your Bengali book? You got four out of twenty in your Bengali spelling test last week. Shameful, shameful! You can't seem to get your head around the difference between the short and long 'i' sounds. And you're now sitting here wasting your time sharpening pencils.'

Arunima has this all sorted out in her head, including the trump card she slaps down in front of her mother. 'There's no Bengali class tomorrow, Ma, only homework for Eng. Lit. and Drawing. I was sharpening the pencils for drawing class. You know how angry Sister Josephine gets if our pencils are blunt.' Pause. 'If you want, I can start on the Eng. Lit. homework instead.'

Arunima knows, with the confident cruelty of a child, that her mother increasingly fears all her subjects except Bengali, because everything else is in English and, therefore, outside her reach; the downside of sending her daughter to the English-medium Carmel Convent. Only after she has said that does she look up to note the hesitating deflation of her mother, then she lowers her eyes, seemingly absorbed again in preparing her pencils exactly as Sister Josephine likes them. The jewel inside her flickers and gleams.

Jayanti, the wind taken out of her sails, aims for a swift rebuttal that would save her face, but all she can come up with is, 'Well, then,

after you're done with Drawing and English, I want you to go through "Shiladitya" from *Raj Kahini*. I'll be back to test you on it.'

Feeling a sense of bathos at what she has just said, Jayanti adds, 'I don't want you sneaking out of the room before you're finished with your lessons. No inattentiveness' and huffily leaves the room.

Sitting on a battered rush mat on the floor of the dingy room, which she shares with her mother and her brother, Kalyani looks at the open book in front of her with a familiar mixture of bafflement, indifference and boredom. That dreary, unfathomable story again about those two impeccably good children, Hashi and Tata, and their strange relationship with a king with a toothsome name, Gobindamanikya. For all that she can make out, the lines in front of her could be the effect of a swarm of insects, their legs dipped in ink, let loose on straight, closed tracks on the pages; the letters and words, one after the other, make no more sense to her than that. She has difficulty reading on the very basic level of individual words. If she fails again this year, she will be thrown out of school. For two years running she has remained in Class Three of their local school, Katjunagar Swarnamayee Bidyapith. Without the help of her elder brother, Sona, she would have been expelled last year, for she had failed in every single subject. But Dada is busy preparing for an exam that will help him move, if he is successful, from the government school, where he is now, to the better, more prestigious Calcutta Boys, and it has been decided that his fees are going to be paid by Mejo-jyethu, so Sona is putting in extra hours after school at his friend Sougata's home.

Which is just as well, because if he stays on late enough he is at least going to get a proper meal there, with most likely two kinds of vegetable dishes, fish, even mutton or chicken if he gets lucky, not the unchanging watery dal-rice-mashed-potatoes that they have every evening, unless someone from upstairs sends something down. By some unspoken agreement their dinnertime has been pushed further and further back, even within Kalyani's short living memory, so that they eat after ten o'clock now; perhaps in the hope that salvation in the form of leftover cauliflower-and-potato fry or egg curry or even stale, old food that the people upstairs won't eat any more will get sent down. Often, that does not happen.

She hears the call – 'Buliiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you' – in her aunt's ox-bellow of a voice, and the residue of guilt and fear that is left in her, pricking her to apply herself to the insurmountable nature of her school work, vanishes, replaced by colourful dreams of all the cosmetics that Buli-di has and which Kalyani so cravenly desires. Lipstick and nail polish are magic words to her: they can make the entirety of the known world disappear. As far as she can ascertain, Buli-di has one shade of lipstick – a pomegranate-flower red – and two bottles of nail polish: hot pink and scarlet. Buli-di isn't allowed to wear lipstick – Kalyani saw her hastily and brutally removing it from her mouth one evening last year during Durga Puja, standing at the corner before entering Basanta Bose Road; she had been out with her friends, doing the evening tour of the different pandals of South Calcutta – but nail polish, while not exactly endorsed by her mother, does not carry such a flagrant charge. She is not even sure if Buli-di owned the lipstick or was wearing one of her friends'. If the former, she would certainly have to keep it stashed well away from the prying eyes of her mother. If only Kalyani can discover where that secret place is . . . But she is not even allowed to go to any of the floors above without being looked at as if she were a mangy dog that has strayed indoors, so rooting around in Buli-di's room on the first floor is a wild dream, no more. Besides, if Kalyani's mother finds out that she has been upstairs without her permission, she will be 'beaten to the shape of a plank', as her mother never ceases to remind her.

They have to stay hidden away, all three of them, in one room on the ground floor of this big four-storey house, as if they were servants and not what they really are, true family, she and Sona first cousins to Bor'-da and Chhor'-da, Buli-di, and Arunima. Each of the brothers and their families got a whole floor to themselves, while she and her mother and brother had to remain cooped up in what was nothing more than a hastily emptied-out junk storage room, with one low bed and a cracked, smoky mirror, both rejects from upstairs, a rusting metal wardrobe with doors that did not stay shut and a rolled-up mattress and folded-up mosquito net that sat in one end of the room and were spread out for her and her mother before bedtime every night while Sona, being the son, had the pallet.

Not that Kalyani has ever thought this set-up to be unfair, in the sense of assigning it that particular term and being consequently moved along the path of enquiry on causes and reasons. The situation is as it is, she has known no better and she has unconsciously imbibed, from her mother and from the very air circulating in this nether region of the house, not to ask questions or even think of them in the first place, so the incongruence in the conditions of the families of the three brothers upstairs and her mother's hardly ever strikes her as anything other than an ineluctable fact, as given as the fact of a tree rising upwards from the soil or of rain falling in the direction of the earth.

Or the fact of the fawn-coloured lizard edging closer and closer, with utmost furtiveness, towards the cockroach perched under the tube-light on the wall she faces. The sight freezes her; fear mingled with a repulsion that gives her the sensation of a whole forest of tiny hairs along her spine and back rising to attention. Her stomach heaves, yet she cannot take her eyes off the atavistic scene unfolding two yards in front of her: the cockroach seems unaware of the predator inching closer, or is perhaps hypnotised by the prospect of imminent death. Suddenly, so quickly she thinks she has imagined it, the lizard flicks out its gummy tongue and swallows the cockroach whole.

She has started shivering now: the hind legs and the wing-ends of the insect still stick out of the reptile's mouth and then disappear as the peristaltic movements within the lizard, something she can clearly see as a slow ripple of convulsions, convey the prey inside. A dry heave goes through her, as if in answer to the motion she is witnessing. Another heave. The lizard stays still, bloated at its centre, its skin so thin, almost to the point of translucence, that she thinks she can see the struggling cockroach – or is it dead by now? – inside. Then, in an unimaginable moment, the reptile ejects the brown wings of the ingested insect through its mouth. As the wings float down to the floor, Kalyani, paralysed as a creature in a malign myth a few seconds before, throws up all over her Bengali textbook. At that exact moment her mother, barely able to suppress her sobbing, storms into the room.

Three floors up, in the bedroom of her parents-in-law, Kalyani's mother, Purba, is making their bed as her mother-in-law, Charubala,

stands by, watching her as a falcon watches a quivering rabbit. Purba has done this, every single evening, for the last eleven years, but she knows that the possibility of slipping up is infinite. A pleat not smoothed down, the sheets on the bed not pulled tightly enough before being tucked under the mattress, the bolster and pillows not fluffed up perfectly . . . it surprises her that these ambushes can still trip her up. Today, the slowly ticking silence in the room since she has entered it makes her prepare herself for something worse than the usual corrosive nagging. God alone knows from which direction it is going to come. She hears her Mejo-jaa call out to her daughter, 'Buliiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you', weakened and muffled in its passage two floors up, and as if on cue the barrage begins. And, as always, it begins with finding fault with the task at hand.

'Cataracts!' Charubala barks, 'have you suddenly developed cataracts in your eyes? Can't you see the dustball in that corner, or do I need to point everything out to you? Who is doing the cleaning: you or I, hyan?'

Purba dutifully takes up the broom, resweeps the corner of its imaginary dustball and resumes making the bed. But before she can touch the sheets, Charubala shrieks, 'Touching my bedsheets directly after touching the broom? You sewer-witch! Go wash your hands immediately. Use soap.'

Purba, silent, head bowed as always, enters the bathroom, runs the tap at the sink and stands watching it, without washing her hands, for what she considers a seemly duration, then turns off the tap, counts up to five, comes back into Ma's room and carries on with making the bed. She knows that Charubala's outburst has been only a prelude, a kind of clearing of the throat before the real singing begins. She continues lifting and tucking, waiting for the inevitable; what makes her jittery is not knowing the particular form it is going to take.

'Have you gathered the dry washing today? It's getting dark, I have no idea why you leave it till so late. The evening dew will make it damp. You can't be trusted to do anything properly nowadays. What's got into you?'

Purba cannot work out where this is leading, so she hesitates before replying.

'What, someone's put a lock on your tongue?'

'I was going to do it after I'd made your bed,' Purba bleats, her head still lowered. If she so much as dares to look up, she will be accused of being disrespectful and intransigent.

'To time it with Shobhon Datta's cigarette break on his terrace next door. Do you think we're blind?'

Purba reddens instantly. The accuracy or incorrectness of what her mother-in-law is accusing her of is irrelevant; the fact that it has been articulated means that a certain set of assumptions has been made about her character and given public existence in the form of an utterance. It is in the nature of flung mud that some of it sticks.

Charubala takes her youngest daughter-in-law's blushing as evidentiary proof of a guilty soul. There is no stopping her now. 'Chhee, chhee! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You are a widow, a mother of two. You'll bring shame and scandal on our family, more than you've already done . . .'

'But, Ma, this is not true,' Purba manages to speak out, before Charubala cuts her short.

'So you're accusing me of lying? Oh god, I had to live to see this, accused of being a liar by a girl from another family. Was this what was written on my forehead?'

Purba hastens to negate this, but knows it is pointless. If she does not choose her words carefully, she will dig herself in deeper, but if she remains quiet, locked in the incredulity at what is being thrown at her, she will condemn herself equally.

Charubala, on the other hand, is on a roll. 'Shame! Shame! I see that I shall have to keep a sharper eye on you. God knows what's going to happen if anyone finds out' – Purba knows that she is going to make sure that everyone does – 'the good name of the Ghosh family will lie in the dust. Haven't you done enough to make us suffer? I knew from the very beginning that you were trouble, I told your father-in-law, when the match was being made, *Listen, she comes from a lower-caste family, her father is a mere postal worker, it's not right that such a girl should come into our family*, but he didn't listen. Now we are all reaping the cost.' Charubala, of course, was mindful that the Ghoshes were not perched on a high rung of the caste-ladder, so she

was grateful to have a few upon whom she could look down. The gratitude expressed itself as venom for those below.

Years of this kind of unceasing torrent have somewhat blunted but not eliminated, not by any measure, the keenness of the hurt and humiliation Purba feels when faced with it. She wants the ground to open up and swallow her. She shuts her eyes, hoping that when she opens them, she will discover all this is a bad dream, but the trick fails her yet again.

'If I see you on the roof in the evening, I will have to take other measures. I shall see then how much appetite for secret love you have when you're starving.'

If she had any residue of dignity left, she would have long run out of the room, Purba thinks, but she has fallen far, far below that. Even anger at being treated like this has been burned out of her. What remains is a dead weight of darkness. Her eyes rest on the powder-blue sheets and pillowcases and the stripy blue and yellow tasselled bedcover. If she looks up, she knows she will see the rolled-up mosquito net, a large, crumpled, brooding bird, above the bedposts, but she cannot move her head or her eyes to glance upwards. There is no salvation to be had from the objects in the world.

Supported by his silver-tipped cane, Prafullanath hobbles to the room adjacent to his bedroom, towards his daily ritual of early evening tea, unchanged for the last twenty years. It is the second and last time he leaves his bed during the day, for an hour, to sit, imprisoned in the hardened angularities of his pain, staring at the Charu Paper & Sons (Pvt. Ltd) calendar on the opposite wall, a cup of unsweetened, milky tea in his hands tilting slowly to spill out half its tepid contents onto the saucer and sometimes onto his pyjama.

Prafullanath waits for Madan to bring his tea and a couple of Marie biscuits and with them, invariably, he notes with mounting dread, the compulsive jabbering. Ever since the upheavals involving Madan's son, Dulal, last year, it has been deeply uncomfortable for Prafullanath to be alone in a room with him; and these teatimes, where Madan, in blithe denial, has not eased off his habitual pointless chatter, as if nothing in the recent past has happened to make him as uncomfortable as Prafullanath in each other's presence, have been especially

excruciating. The old man has toyed with the idea of asking Madan to stop jabbering, has spent months appearing to be conspicuously restless and impatient and distracted, often cutting him short and changing the topic, but the cook has persisted with such terrier-like tenacity, apparently oblivious to the signals being given out, that Prafullanath has accepted this small defeat and has locked himself away deeper inside his own head, while Madan has wittered on about chicken stew and how fish in mustard sauce gives you hyperacidity and about Patit, the driver, drinking, and Gagan, the general dogsbody, being caught gambling at shatta in the slums across the railway lines . . . Does Madan seriously think that Prafullanath, at the age of almost seventy, arthritic, diabetic, with an ischaemic heart and two heart attacks already behind him, is interested in these paltry nothings? Besides, domestic servants are the women's domain; he does not remember if he has ever had a word with Charu, his wife, about this excess in Madan, now grown so trying. He must remember to talk to her tonight and see if she can arrange for it to stop; Madan has always been her creature, while his role has only been to pay his salary.

Madan walks in, teapot, cup, saucer, milk, sugar, plate of Marie biscuits all on a tray, sets it down and proceeds to pour while beginning his daily bulletin. 'Chicken ishtu for you today. Light like water. Ma's orders. With toast. No butter. The rest are having deep-fried aubergines, dal, spinach balls stuffed with cottage cheese, fish fry. Soaking the pieces of bhetki in marinade now, have to take them out in the next hour. Said to Ma, one or two pieces of fish fry won't do Baba any harm, she wouldn't listen to me. Well, we are poor, illiterate people, what do we know, but since when have people died of eating, I ask you? They die of hunger. But if Ma says it's bad for you, then it must be. But what harm can a couple of pieces do? Want some with your tea now? Could quickly sneak in a couple for you, no one would be any the wiser.'

Prafullanath blows on his tea, thereby avoiding answering the question.

Madan continues, 'So it's Durga Puja next month. I will be going to the country after Kali Puja for twenty days, as usual. That Gagan will be bringing you your tea. Will probably forget it half the time, not bring it on time, you'll have to keep nagging. Said to Ma, whatever

gets done, or doesn't get done more likely, see that they don't slip up with Baba's afternoon tea and bishkoot. Gagan's mind is like a sieve, nothing except bad habits stays in it, that and finding money for cigarettes and god knows what else, wouldn't be a tiny bit surprised if it wasn't just cigarettes. Even saw him whispering to Suranjan-da by the stairs that day, very close they were too.'

Prafullanath coughs, shifts around on the sofa as far as his creaking body will allow, shuffles his feet and starts pouring out the tea onto his saucer to cool it faster. The tea dribbles out and drips into a small brown puddle on the low table; a few warm drops fall on his pyjama and, in trying to avoid more of them falling and staining the white cotton, he moves his shaky hand quickly, only to have the drops now fall on the floor, on the edge of the sofa, on a different spot on the table, on the tray that holds the tea things.

Madan pounces at once and starts mopping up the spilt tea with a dishcloth that he always carries, slung on his shoulder. 'Eeesh, eeesh, let me, let me, I've got it.' With that only concession towards what he knows to be a deliberately engineered distraction, he reverts to his monologue. 'Don't get me wrong, but Suranjan-da is at an impressionable age, and Gagan such a ne'er-do-well, such close whispering under the stairs; and then that other time on the terrace, I swear I saw something pass hands, could have been I saw wrong, but as they say, a poor man has four eyes and four ears.'

Prafullanath sips his cooling tea, coughs and tries to say 'Achha, achha' dismissively, but it comes out as a pathetic croak.

'Saying this to you and no one else, he doesn't earn that little, thanks to your generosity and Ma's and Bor'-da's, but where does all that money go? Don't think he sends any to the country, doesn't have a wife and children to support, but every month, without fail, *Ei, Madan-da, can you lend me ten rupees, can you lend me twenty rupees, will return it the very minute I get paid, swear on Ma Kali*. I say, where does all his money go?'

This time Prafullanath manages a gruff, 'All right, all right' before beginning to dip his fingers for the dregs of the biscuit, which has become too soggy after being dunked into the tea to make it to his mouth and has dropped instead into the cup. Madan notices the mishap, feels a small surge of joy inside him and continues without

a pause, 'But anyway, who am I to say anything? To each his own. My interest is to look out for Suranjan-da. Nowadays people of many hues seem to be all over the place. Take the Datta family next door, their maid, Parul, Parul this, Parul that, there was no end of talk about her endless virtues' – he notices Prafullanath getting fidgety, being overly fussy about dunking his next biscuit in his tea, clearing his throat to prepare himself to say something to him, but paralysed in the attempt – 'and then one day, right in the middle of the street, at two in the afternoon, in full view of the world, there she was, screaming her throat cracked, tearing out her hair in clumps and shoving them into her mouth, handful by handful, swallowing it all. They had to send her back to the country.'

He pauses to inhale the odour of small triumph that has suddenly suffused the room. The old man will not try to send out hints asking him to stop again this evening; maybe tomorrow, but that will be a new battle. Today, he has broken the old man's back, he has won. Again.

He resumes his recounting of the scandal with the insane maid-servant next door. 'Much whispering, much talk about how a young woman could go mad suddenly like that. So many people said so many things, I kept my mouth shut, as always, the wise never talk, only listen, all this gossip about something that may have happened to her in the Datta house, after all with that young man there, I didn't say anything, of course . . .'

Prafullanath fixes his eyes on the tattered, yellowed calendar opposite and attempts to shut out the low babble in the only way he knows: by concentrating on the fact that the year it is from, 1957, was the year his life began to turn to rubble.

'C-o-n-j-u-g-a-t-i-o-n,' Dibyendu-da writes on Sougata's exercise book. Sona copies it diligently, awaiting an explanation. 'From the Latin *conjugare*, meaning "to join together",' Dibyendu-da adds and Sona writes that down too, as if he were taking dictation. He hopes that this will ease his path towards mastering it; at the moment, it is an impenetrable forest from a particularly malevolent fairytale. Standing at the edge of that darkness, where 'be' becomes 'am', 'is' or 'are', depending on who one is talking about, and thorny thickets of 'has

been', 'have been' and 'had been' – where does this 'been' come from? what does it mean? – Sona is stabbed momentarily with despair that he is never going to reach the illuminated freedom on the other side: English *is* going to defeat him. But a pluckiness, born from that very despair, reasserts itself: if there are rules, as there are in mathematics, then he will master those rules, and their exceptions, and the truth will reveal itself. He just has to concentrate and a world different from numbers will unfurl slowly and invite him in.

The private English tuition had been the idea of Mala Saha, Sougata's mother. News of Sona's preternatural mathematical abilities – at the age of eleven he had already mastered differential calculus and was champing at the bit to get to integral calculus – had spread quickly in the closed world of Basanta Bose Road. It was she who had suggested to Sona's Boro-jyethima that the boy should look in a couple of evenings a week to help Sougata with his mathematics homework; Sougata was not the brightest of students in his famous English-medium school, St Lawrence, especially in arithmetic, and the prospect of starting algebra and geometry next year was terrifying. The matter could have been idly mentioned, within the course of aimless chit-chat, and could have died an equally idle death, so how exactly it managed to translate into action remains a mystery to Sona, to a large measure because he has not grown up with good or favourable things happening to him, from new clothes and proper meals to fancy, fee-paying, English-medium schools and private tuition. They happen in the lives of the lucky ones, like all his cousins, but he and his sister, Kalyani, have not been born into it. The world is as it is, and Sona makes do with Suranjan's hand-me-downs, and Chhoto-jyethu's algebra books from his college years (nearly twenty-five years old, saved from a clearout sale to the bikriwalla), and scraps of leftovers sent down irregularly from upstairs, and Khastagir, the free government school down the road, on Mahim Halder Street, where the teachers have trouble solving elementary quadratic equations and the pupils have to sit cross-legged on the floor, being cooked in the heat in the summer because there are no fans. Such is the way his world is configured and he cannot yet put a shape to the lineaments of his desire to escape it, let alone articulate the desire. Not yet.

Someone has done some bargaining behind the scenes so that Sona is expected to give maths tuition to Sougata, his thick neighbour, in exchange not only for dinners, but also for tuition in English, his weakest subject; the flimsiest subject in his school, in fact, for the English teacher in Khastagir hardly knows how to transpose a sentence from the simple present tense to, say, the past continuous, such is the state of government schools. But Sona has been asked to soak up the lessons passively, not actively participate; just an audience of one witnessing the English classes between Sougata and his tutor.

The English tutor, Dibyendu Majumdar, a second-year undergraduate in the English Department of Presidency College, does not think that the deal is as good for him as it is for his employer. A stereotype of the Bengali *aantel* – the word, with ironic appositeness, is a bastardised form of the French *intellectuel* – Dibyendu has all the appurtenances to go with the role, straggly beard, glasses, khadi kurta, jute shoulder-bag, and resents being made to be on the giving end of the two-for-one offer. He takes out his resentment, in so far as he is intrepid enough to do so, in pathetic dribs and drabs, on Sona, the added extra. Dabbling in fiery left-wing politics in college has clearly made him more sympathetic to the lot of the have-nots further afield than the one right under his nose. Instead of resenting Mala Saha, which would have been the logical thing to do, since it is she who foisted Sona on him without increasing his pay, he diverts it to focus on the wrong person; money breeds a lot of attitudes in men and a particular stripe of obsequiousness is high on the list for people of his kind.

So Dibyendu takes pains to explain a point over and over again to Sougata, but a rare question or request for clarification from Sona – rare because he has been told obliquely but repeatedly, so that there can be no ambiguity in his own mind about it, that he is only a watcher – will be met with silence, or with an expression of irritated reluctance, sometimes even a mocking 'I see your head is full of cow-dung.' Dibyendu puts petty obstructions in the way of Sona, such as not allowing him to share Sougata's textbooks, or setting Sougata homework while making it obvious that Sona is not going to be given any.

Sona, electrically alive from the earliest time that he can remember to being excluded to the margins, from where he watched everyone else get their share while he only looked on in silence, has sniffed this politics of mean-mindedness in the air from the moment he walked in on his first class.

Already hobbled by the sense of obligation this exchange tuition entails, he is further humiliated by Dibyendu-da's gratuitous cruelties and, as always, recoils deep inside himself to nurse the word so frequently used of him, 'beggar', as if it were a talisman, in a prolonged, introspective agony, his soul's equivalent of pushing his tongue ceaselessly against a wobbling tooth that hurt. And then, suddenly, over the course of a few weeks, he crosses the line as he knew he would, an invisible fence beyond which it does not hurt him any longer, or even touch him: he is deaf and blind to it. All that remains within that insulated self are his mother's words, the words that have been embossed on his impressionable soul – 'If you study hard, very, very hard, and do nothing but study, and do well in school, be the "first boy" in class every year, there will be an escape from this, escape for all of us.'

The words save him yet again from an intractable situation. He knows he has been invited to Sougata's to give, not to receive. He bites down hard on the fact, steels himself and takes all the barriers in the way to his one chance of acquiring English as challenges, much as getting his head around trigonometry or logarithm had been. Once framed that way, he knows he will keep at it, with the doggedness of a switched-on machine, until he gets the better of it; in this, algebra is no different from the cheap exclusionary politics that the world plays against him. After Dibyendu-da leaves each evening, when it is Sona's turn to teach maths to Sougata, he deliberately sets problems well above Sougata's ability to solve. While the other boy is thus occupied, racking his brains and chewing the end of his pencil, Sona borrows his English books and concentrates on the lesson recently finished with Dibyendu-da with such ferocious will that he has his jaws locked tight and his temple throbbing by the end of it. He knows he is racing against the great winner, time.

In four weeks, Sona has wrestled to the ground all forms of tenses, including the supremely eloquent and difficult future perfect continuous,

has begun to get the hang of clauses, and has started grappling with the capricious and illogical absurdities of English prepositions.

As eldest daughter-in-law of the Ghosh family, married to Adinath, Sandhya has a set of elusive duties no less binding for their status as tacit and unformulated. They lie in a nebulous notion of tradition, of the way things are done and have been done for generations, of the overweeningly important idea of what the world thinks, especially if that world consists of her elders. Of the several of these duties, one is being in charge of the prayer room (a miniature temple, really) up on the terrace, and all the rituals of daily worship – cleaning out the room in the morning, giving the deities fresh water, cut fruits, crystallised-sugar sweets and flowers, watering the tulsi plant, then repeating the same chores in the evening, except then it is a more ceremonial affair involving the ringing of a big brass bell, sprinkling of water from the Ganga (kept in a frog-green plastic water-bottle), more flowers, the lighting of incense sticks and copra and frankincense, which fill the whole room with dense, aromatic smoke, lighting small terracotta lamps, carrying the brazier of copra into each room in all four storeys of the house and sanctifying it with the holy smoke . . . The rituals have their own shape and place and rightness, and over her twenty-three years in the Ghosh family, Sandhya has devolved and delegated a lot of tasks to the other daughters-in-law, but this she keeps to herself, although she is beginning to find the business of climbing up and down the stairs to take the brazier into every room of the house laborious and harsh on her legs and tightening knees.

This evening she has been uncharacteristically late with the evening worship, but her jaa Purnima's call – 'Buliiiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you' – has elbowed her out of her reverie. The prayer room has a white marble floor, a large bell suspended from the ceiling and a whole fleet of statuettes, framed pictures and figurines of a dozen gods and goddesses and saints arranged along two raised stone daises set against the wall. Her older son, Supratik, at the age of fourteen, had once impudently said, 'Ma, there are thirty-three crore Hindu gods and goddesses. You seem to have a fair few of them here. How do you know that sending up prayers to all these different deities won't cancel each other out?'

At the centre of the wall facing east a niche has been carved out, with symmetrical ascending curves on either side that join in a final point at the top. Inside, in a blaze of red silk and gold, is housed the reigning deity of the Ghosh house, the gentle goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, with her faint, inscrutable almost-smile, her sheaf of paddy and her docile barn-owl. Sandhya had heard long ago that in her father-in-law's family home in North Calcutta – there is very little mention of that chapter in his life – the goddess was stripped of her clothes after the puja and left naked throughout the year so that she couldn't run away.

The conducting of the annual puja on a full-moon night in late October was the most honourable duty that had been bestowed on Sandhya when she married into the Ghosh family. In time-honoured fashion, this is really the eldest daughter-in-law's investiture as the earthly, domestic symbol of the goddess. It is she who channels Lakshmi's blessings on the family. In her is vested, by an understanding of priestly transference, the household's economic prosperity, well-being and harmonious daily life. Beside it, her other daily chores as eldest daughter-in-law – supervising the cook and cleaners and servants and household accounts, caring for her elderly parents-in-law, looking after their meals and medication, deciding which tasks can be ceded to the wives of her three brothers-in-law, keeping a family of twenty (including the servants) ticking over without hiccups or mishaps – all these appear as milk-and-rice, as uncomplicated, bland and digestible as infant fare. Now that Lakshmi Puja is a little over a month away, she can feel the gathering thrill again.

But something is clouding the excitement this year and she already knows its name: Supratik. Over the last year he has lost so much weight that the shadow he casts, in all light, is nothing more than a thin line. She can swear that his eyes have grown bigger as he has started to look more cadaverous; set deep within his bony face, all sharp angles and a luxuriant black beard, they make him look like a starving mystic, a Naga sanyasi on the banks of the Ganga in Gomukh. He has certainly grown as quiet and uncommunicative. Never the most garrulous of children, Supratik, now a young man of twenty-one, barely speaks and, when he can be bothered to, it is only in monosyllables as if he is conserving all the energy he needs to hold

on to his cage-like frame. There is an incandescence about him: the large, blazing black eyes are devouring in their intensity, and the opacity of his inner world, its unknowable resilience, makes Sandhya fear far more for him than any mother should for her child. When had the change begun? She cannot put a time to it. Does that make her a bad mother? Where does he disappear to for days on end? Where is he, out until so late at night that she has long lost any handle on when, or if, he returns? Why has he become like a furtive ghost? How can one's own son, her flesh and blood, nurtured in her womb for nine months, become such a stranger? Who is he?

Sandhya's hands shake as she refills the terracotta lamps with oil and she spills some of it onto the marble counter. She has the cast of mind that sees omens in the number of birds congregated on telegraph wires and portents in a child's killing of a scurrying spider or touching food with the left hand – nothing falls outside a predestined design – and the small spill grips her heart. Is Ma Lakshmi trying to tell her something? Is she offended? Has she, Sandhya, not done something right in the daily ceremony or in last year's big puja? The very contiguity of her worries about Supratik and the oil spill makes her think of the minor accident as heaped with meaning about some imminent evil related to her son, maybe some danger that is about to befall him. As she mulls on this, a cold fear rises in her and she forgets to ring the bell that announces the evening in auspiciously.

I

I want to set down an account of all that has happened and is happening. When you hear different voices chattering away afterwards, all with their shadows and half-truths and lies and fiction, you can come back to this and think that you and only you have the truth. That is all I can give you. But after you've read it, burn everything. On no account must a shred of these letters and journals be found on you or in the house. You will soon find out why I'm asking you to do this.

Did you know that Calcutta was the capital of British India until 1912? The English built this city by bringing together mosquito-infested swamps and marshes and mud. Today, walking down Chowringhee, with its rows of palatial buildings and arcades and shops on one side, the huge Maidan on the other, the towering Monument off Mayo Road in Esplanade, can you tell that this was just a vast expanse of silt? The British left our country twenty years ago, but their handiwork will remain for ever.

You may never get a chance to walk up and down Chowringhee, so let me try and put it into words for you. The grandeur of the Great Eastern Hotel alone would make you slack-jawed with awe. On the street level of this part of Chowringhee, it's one long colonnade, sometimes interrupted by cross-streets: the paved footpath gives way to Chowringhee Road and Bentinck Street on one side; on the other you have shop after shop selling jewellery, fancy goods, liquor, clothes, luxury items, imported food, watches, shawls, carpets and rugs, chandeliers, lights and candelabra, carved wooden boxes, antiques . . . whatever money can buy you can get in these shops. An endless fountain of things. They can dazzle and blind you. Left off north Chowringhee, on the colonial splendour of Old Court House Street, sits the Great Eastern. The first floor of this blindingly white building is above the colonnade, as if to lift its elite guests and residents a few feet above the torrent of ordinary life outside.

I have never been inside its rooms or to the restaurant, the ballroom, the bar, the shops that still display the sign of the British crown and the words 'By appointment to HM the King Emperor and HM the Queen Empress', the tearoom where waiters in full regalia – cinched waistband; high, pleated headgear; sash; brass buttons; cuffs; starched uniform – bow low and bring in tea that you and I will never drink. But you can walk around – if you're properly dressed and do not attract the suspicion of the uniformed guards and staff – and see the gravelled drive, the blue swimming pool, the stone and marble and glass of the building, the gardens, the well-tended lawns, the flowers . . . even Nature seems to oblige the moneyed.

But my concern is not with the inside. I have tried to give you the tiniest glimpse of it, so that you can better imagine the world that is my concern – the world beyond the walls of the Great Eastern Hotel, the world immediately outside, at its doorstep. If you walk down the colonnaded arcade below the hotel at dawn, just as the dawn chorus has started, long before the luxury shops have opened or the mad bustle of life in Chowringhee and BBD Bag has begun, you will see a very different view. Here, lying on their gamchha, a jute sack, a piece of tarpaulin or plastic or whatever scrap of cloth they can spare after wrapping their bodies, is a row of sleeping men curled up like foetuses. Those who have sandals use them as pillows, otherwise they will be stolen. Those who don't, do without, resting their heads on the concrete. Their vests are full of holes, they wear dirty, threadbare lungis that ride up while they are asleep, exposing their shame to the world, the soles of their feet are so cracked that they look like parched land during a particularly bad drought, they have nothing to protect them from the morning drop in temperature. Extreme exhaustion clings to their faces and the shadows under their eyes, even when they're sleeping the sleep of the near-dead. Only ten feet separate them from the world of extreme wealth. Inside-outside: the world forever and always divides into those two categories. Inside, the amount of water used daily to keep the lawns and gardens so lush could provide drinking water to each of these men for a month. Outside, these men have to walk miles sometimes to get to a public hand-pump. On the way, if they collapse of thirst, even dogs won't piss into their mouths to slake their dried tongues and throats. These men piss on the road, shit behind a bush or by a railway track, eat one meal of muri or chhatu a day, if they are lucky, rummage in the footpaths and drains surrounding New Market to see if someone has left a stub of banana in its peel or a corner of a shingara in a sal-leaf plate. They fight off the swarm of beggars who are also looking for food thrown away by the sated rich, they wash in the muddy brown water gushing

out of broken standpipes. Do you remember that poem I read out to you? 'Poetry, I bid you goodbye today. / The world is prosey with hunger / The full moon is like a piece of singed bread.' You might see the pale bronze-coloured full moon, but they see, in its round shape, something to eat.

Who do you think they are? They are not beggars, and they are certainly not the worst-off in our country – they have the clothes on their backs and the physical ability to work, at least for now. They haven't yet found a foothold in a slum, but the lucky ones among them will. A slum will offer them a roof made of sheet plastic, maybe of bundles of hay held together by wooden stakes to form a tent. They won't always have to sleep in the open like this. But, in a few years, most of them will contract a disease – TB, cholera, dysentery, malaria – and die like animals. Do you know what happens to their dead? To take them to a crematorium would mean paying the cremation fee, registering the death. That means a death certificate and money; in fact, more money than they earn in a week. It means a name, an address, a next of kin, a date of birth. They have nothing. So they are slipped into the Hooghly in the dead of the night. There the corpses rot and bleach and bloat, wash up ashore, get half-eaten by dogs and foxes, rot on land for a while, then get pulled back into the water during high tide . . . even in death their blighted lives won't let go of them.

They come from the suburbs, the villages, the mofussils, to look for work in the big city. From Uluberia, Bansdroni, Ghutiarishwari, Medinipur, Birbhum, Lakshmikantapur, Canning. The lucky among them will become rickshaw-pullers, balloonwallas, streetside snack-sellers. The less lucky will dig ditches, carry bricks, sand, cement, stone chips on their heads on construction sites. Some will be reduced to begging. You may ask: why don't they go back to where they came from, if this is what the city holds for them? I will answer with another question: do you know what life holds for them back home? We don't see them, so we don't think about them. But I have seen their lives, I have lived with them. For a while. I will tell you all about it.

But a small digression before that. You come from a lower-middle-class family from a small town. You've told me about the overstretched resources, the pinched lives, the relentless calculation of making ends meet going through your parents' heads, the need to think long and hard, say, before you could be given five paise to spend on jhalmuri. You've talked about the look of fear in your parents' faces when you came down with a cough or fever: where was the extra money for a doctor, to buy medicines, going to come from?

What did I know of such lives, sheltered, bourgeois boy that I was, living in the cushioned vacuum created by my grandfather's temporary boom of

minor-mode prosperity – four-storeyed house, cars, many servants? Nothing. Yes, I was a communist activist from my very first year in Presidency College, but there is a large gap between being an activist out of the idealism that comes from books, conversations, the fire of youth, and being one because you have lived through the depredations that life has thrown at you.

Last year, I witnessed riots outside a ration shop on Beniatola Lane on my way to college. Had you heard of food riots erupting everywhere in the city? Food prices rising like a baneful wind, no jobs, no prospects, no future – how could we not have heard the pervasive murmur outside our walls? And when the murmurs turned to shouts and slogans and angry processions and bus-burnings and violent demonstrations, did they impinge on our world at all? Yes, but as other people's stories, as gossip, as tales told to fill the time.

One day on my way to college I had to get off the bus near Pataldanga Street because a huge procession was making its way down Harrison Road. 'We want jobs, not diplomas!' they shouted. Trying to avoid the big road where that giant, angry river in spate, a river of black heads, was inching its way, taking up all space, I started walking down side-streets. On Beniatola Lane there was another angry crowd, more shouting, furious tussling and stampeding. Occasionally, from that jostling clot, a man carrying a huge jute sack peeled off and tried to run away, hampered by the weight of his load. It took me a while to realise that a ration shop was being raided. The line between spectators and participants had been totally erased: anyone entering the street would have taken me, in the first few seconds, as part of the angry crowd too. Apparently the ration-shop owner had opened the shop, only to announce to the restive queue outside that he had no rice, kerosene or wheat to sell, only jaggery. Someone had shouted out that the shopkeeper was stockpiling staples to sell on the black market, and the idea had caught like a burr to soft wool. The people who had been waiting for hours every Thursday and Friday for over a month, only to go back home empty-handed, their food supplies depleted to practically nothing, had reached the end of their patience. A couple of local mastaans had leaped over the low gate in the front and started ransacking the shop. Others had joined in, distrustful of the mastaans, suspecting them of making off with the grains themselves to sell on the black market.

Ordinary, middle-class people, like you and me, scrabbling like dogs over food. How did we get to this?

Yes, as a student in Presidency College, I was 'doing politics', as the slightly shaming, slightly dirty expression would have it. I was, briefly, a member of the

Students' Federation, the student wing of the CPI(M), the Communist Party of India (the Marxist wing, as they like to think of themselves), and while I was their bright, short-lived star, I cut my teeth doing the usual. If posters had to be put up, if slogans had to be painted on walls, I provided copy ('Exploited peoples all over the world are waking up today', 'Change the world, change yourself', 'Today is the day to burn like fire, to repay the debt of blood with blood', 'Poor, landless peasants have given their lives and blood to build this country. It's our duty to repay that debt'). I decided who among us was going to work in which segment of the college or the city, I worked out the most favourable time to do it, safe from a possible crackdown by the police or Congress foot soldiers. If a procession or a sit-in needed to be organised, or a road-blockade or a bus-burning, I planned the route and logistics and exact manner of its execution, complete with fallback options, working out the possible weak points and allowing for those eventualities. There were class boycotts, and marches to the American Embassy to protest against the war in Vietnam, chanting, 'Break and crush the black hand of American imperialism' or 'Your name, my name / Viet-nam, Viet-nam'. Another popular one was 'Blood-bright Vietnam is Bengal's other name'.

Coinciding with these standard issues of student politics there erupted the troubles in Presidency College over the expulsion of students from the Hindu Hostel. I was an active participant in the movement that rocked Presidency and genteel Bengali society in those six months in '66 and '67. Chucking a few young men out of the Hindu Hostel seems like such a small stone to have caused such endless ripples. The Food Revolution agitations in the city in '66 morphed seamlessly into this front of our war: the gherao of the college Principal, the subsequent lathi-charge by the police against the students standing guard at the gate of the college (since the police had no right to enter), the arrest of 150 of them, the angry ransacking of the science laboratory by the agitating students. Yes, I was part of the group that shut down all of Calcutta University for one and a half months and Presidency College for four. Unprecedented, this. All of these events, or their telling as stories, seem just a spark now, a tiny one; in time that spark will appear even tinier, dimmer. The blaze it lit, however, will far outlive the originary ignition.

I played a similar role here too, but with a difference, as you'll see. All our actions, initially, were under the aegis of the CPI(M). I devised plans to get around Section 144, under which all of College Street had been placed during that period, meaning that the police could arrest you if they didn't like your face. How to avoid them during processions? If they were stationed on Harrison

Road and near the Medical College, I decided that going down College Street in one big crowd wouldn't do. So the marchers were divided into two groups: one would start from the gate of Hare School, the other from College Square. If one set was obstructed by the police on this side, then the other could proceed past Eden Hostel towards Colutolla.

It'll become clear shortly why I wasn't part of that group of twenty-two, including 'names' such as Kaka and Biman Basu and Ashoke Sengupta, who picketed the college, sitting at the gate on mats for a month. Members of the Chhatra Parishad (CP), the student wing of the Congress Party, a synonym for the Establishment, threw a bomb at them from the roof of the Coffee House to scare them away. In the early days of our agitation, when it became a badge of honour to be arrested and beaten up in a police cell in Sovabazaar, a thought struck the less volatile among those of us who were planning strategy on a daily basis: if everyone is arrested, especially everyone in the leadership, who is going to continue the movement? On the day of the gherao, at 10 p.m., seven hours after it had begun, three of us were smuggled out of the police cordon surrounding the college. We knew its nooks and crannies, the porous bits of its boundaries, better than they did. It was done before the lathi-charging began, so we escaped untouched.

As for the twenty-two recalcitrant strikers who took to sleeping on the college lawn – yes, I attended to them, sat with them, spent hours in their company, as hundreds of others did, but from the beginning it was clear that it wouldn't do for me to be part of them. An invisible shadow separated me from the rest. I had severe misgivings about it, as did several others, who taunted me about how safe I had kept myself, how unbloodied my hands were, how full my stomach when they were having to eat their six-anna meal in the slums of Kalabagan, or in Bagbazar, where the beggars of North Calcutta paid thirteen paise to eat bread, vegetables, onion and pickle. Some of these criticisms were spoken to my face; most of the murmuring was behind my back. Trained as an economist as I was, I held on to the lifeline of pragmatism and efficiency: would you, I asked them, damage your head or your fingers? In a war, as this clearly was, would you sacrifice a pawn or the king? How would you find your way in the densest of forests if you lost your compass?

I didn't think of myself as the king or the compass, but I knew I couldn't extinguish myself in the fray of student politics. This was a side-show, a diversion. It was one of the biggest lessons I learned; the inevitable end of innocence, you could call it, so necessary to growing up. All these strikes – student strike, tram strike, bus strike – all this great ferment to close down all of Bengal, to

search for alternatives . . . with what immense hope we began, that we could change the world, not one little thing at a time, but in one great unstoppable propulsion, as if we could stand outside the whole planet, put a giant lever under it and set it rolling in a different direction altogether. Throughout my two years in CPI(M) student activism (embarrassing now, in hindsight, and amateurish), one thought became steadily inescapable: we could only poke the government into a kind of low-grade irritability, but never scale that up to something life-changing, something that would bring the system crashing down. All this hurling of bombs, burning of trams, headlines in newspapers – to what avail? The condition of the people remained unchanged. Life carried on as before, restored to its status quo, like the skin of water after the ripples from a thrown pebble have died away, as if the surface retained no memory of it.

And what drove home that lesson? The short answer is: the impossibility of staying within the fold of the CPI(M). When the general election was called in 1967, the Party tried to rein in the more militant and idealistic amongst us, for fear of losing the chance to be part of a power-sharing government. Orders arrived from the Party head office that we had to call off these strikes; it was of greater importance to win the elections, to wage our war softly-softly and by the rulebook written by the Establishment, by the powerful. So it boiled down to that dirty thing – power. To be part of government, of the established order of things, on the side of institutions, those very ones we thought we were taking a giant wrecking-ball to.

But things have their own momentum: union leaders who tried to follow orders and call off the strikes were beaten up by their supporters. Those of us who didn't want to be designated as traitors, as unthinking servants of the Communist Party, which was rapidly becoming every bit as power-hungry, as establishmentarian, as compromised and complicit as the rest, decided to continue with our sit-ins, our roadblocks and bus-burnings.

I spoke little, and silence is always taken to be a sign of strength. As my fellow revolutionaries raged and shouted and talked blood and fire, my coldness seemed somehow more solid, more reliable than banging on tables, burning trams on the streets, lobbing bombs, shouting slogans.

Where to source the raw materials for our bombs, where to buy the cheap pipe-guns that were beginning to appear on the market after the war with China, in which warehouse or garage or back room of which house in a tiny alley to assemble explosives without anyone becoming suspicious, where to lob them at CP activists and at what time and at what stage of the clash, where to hide in any given area once the police vans came speeding . . . I became

very good at these details, so good that it was decided I should not be visible. This was as much protectiveness on the part of the breakaway, truly left movement as clear, strategic thinking. I was valuable to them, therefore I couldn't be exposed to the dangers of the frontline. (All this makes it sound as though we sat around in a circle in College Street Coffee House or some tea-shack in Potuatola Lane and worked it out over endless discussions. No, it wasn't like that. It just came about. Events fall into a pattern that we can only discern retrospectively. We credit ourselves with far more agency than we actually possess. Things happen because they happen.)

I have come to think of all this ferment as boring and inconsequential compared with what I really had in mind – armed peasant rebellion, an entire and comprehensive rehauling of everything, of land reform, food production, wealth distribution, of realising the full meaning of 'The crop belongs to those who cultivate it'. Placed beside this aim, all this student unrest was like flies buzzing around a horse: the irritation caused was so ephemeral, it could be dispersed with one lazy swish of the tail.

It became clear to me that the last thing the CPI(M) was interested in was radical change. I tested how much dissent against this sell-out would be tolerated by articulating my unease as innocent questions. None, it emerged. They even quoted Chairman Mao to justify their betrayal: 'Battles are waged one by one and enemy battalions are destroyed one at a time. Factories are built one at a time. Farmers cultivate one plot after another. We serve ourselves the total amount of food that we can consume, but we eat it spoonful by spoonful; to eat it in one go would be impossible. This is known as the "piecemeal solution".' Their argument went something like this: a small presence of the leftist parties in government may appear to be insignificant, but this will give the opportunity to manoeuvre for more power and that, in turn, for more, until the nation will be run by a government that is wholly communist. India will become Vietnam.

Towards the end, hearing these words and arguments, especially quotations from Chairman Mao, issuing from the blind mouths of these self-interested, power-hungry, corrupt Communist Party flunkies set fire to my blood. Not a single one of them was truly interested in the revolution to which they paid such assiduous lip-service. All they wanted was power, the rest of the nation could go to hell.

While the spectre of erstwhile revolutionaries becoming Establishment figures within the folds of that great betrayer, the CPI(M), was painful and intolerable, something else was taking shape, something that was going to explode like a thousand suns in an unsuspecting sky – Naxalbari. For those of us who had

been reading Charu Mazumdar's electric writing in Liberation ever since we joined university, the events of May 1967 themselves were not a surprise so much as the fact that they happened.

Being a Bengali, one is surprised when all the endless spume and froth of talk suddenly reveals itself to be the front of a gigantic wave of action.

CHAPTER TWO

1967

The autumn mildness is just beginning to set in. The blue sky is dotted sparsely with cottony white clouds. Children are on holiday and the skeleton of the puja pandal – a wondrous structure made of bamboo and planks and coir ropes and coloured cloth, stretched and ruched and concertinaed across the bones of bamboo, covering them decoratively in furls and drapes – has already been constructed in the piece of land that abuts the Durga temple of 23 Pally. This cathedral of fabric will house the goddess Durga and her four children, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik and Ganesh, two on either side of her, for nearly five days. On the final evening, the clay effigies of the goddess and her children will be immersed in Tolly's Nala or the Hooghly at Outram Ghat, marking the end of the biggest festival in the Bengali calendar.

For the last six weeks volunteers organised under the banner of '23 Pally Sharbojonin Puja Committee', consisting mostly of teenagers and young men of the neighbourhood, have gone from door to door, collecting donations for the festival. The intricate, sometimes baroque, light displays have started going up along the street, on trees, on the water tank on the roof of number 11/A/2. This year, the most numerous of them, along the whole length of Basanta Bose Road, all the way to Jogamaya College, are in the form of a fountain tree: a tall column of yellow fairy lights exploding in a six-veined fountain, three on each side, parted in the middle like a child's drawing of a palm tree. The coloured lights of the cascading head, green, blue and red, blink on and off, as do the yellow lights of the column, and the whole thing gives the magical impression of an upward-flowing capital of water spewing into a polite fountain at the head. This is the *pièce*

de résistance of the lighting display. These displays are competitive affairs between neighbourhoods, but this year everyone in Basanta Bose Road looks smug in the knowledge that they have the edge over their rivals' parsimonious offerings of coloured fluorescent tubes and strings of fairy lights hung on trees and across balconies. The lighting will be turned on in three days' time.

A welcoming arch at the entrance to the pandal spells out in lights 'Sharodiya shubhechha', autumn good wishes, and the fixture, again made out of lights only, on the water tank on the top of the Dasgupta house features an animated boy kicking a football. The football appears in staccato stasis in three different points of its parabolic trajectory, then reappears, in a slightly Sisyphean manner, at the foot of the kicking boy, for him to start all over again. There is also the light-installation marking the twentieth anniversary of Independence: the Indian tricolour, flanked by one freedom-fighter, Netaji Shubhas Chandra Bose, and one poet, Rabindranath Tagore, has been made to do an impression of stop–start fluttering. Gandhi is, of course, pointedly left out and the light-manufacturers have not tried to simulate a breeze waving Tagore's long beard. Words of light on top say 'Twenty Years of Independence 1947–1967'. But everyone agrees that although this has its novelty value, it is nothing compared to those flowing palm trees of light.

In the brimming light of the early morning a gauzy mist lies on the ground in shreds and patches, a mist so thin that you have to look away and then quickly back to perceive it; gazed at for too long, it disappears. The garden at the back of the Ghosh house is full of fragrant shiuli, some flowers having fallen on the grass in the night, making that small section of the garden look like a green shawl flecked with white in one corner. If you look minutely, you can pick out the orange stalks of the flowers; a subtler, more delicately patterned shawl.

There is the smell of puja in the air: a crisp, cool, weightless sensation. In the collective Bengali imagination, fields of kaash phul, with their enormous plumes of satiny cream flowers, bowing gracefully to the clement autumn breeze, are easily visualised, although there are no patches of pampas grass to be seen anywhere, not in this part of the city anyway. And to the collective ear the sound of the dhaak, beaten to a whole complex repertoire of rhythms and syncopations

by the dhaaki, is already veering on the air, phrasing a sudden sentence in the mind of someone here, a group of words spoken by someone there, to follow the beat and curve of its percussive line. With one voice, the choir made up of the grass, the drum, the sky, the dew sings out, 'Holiday, holiday, holiday'.

Knowing well that there will be a possessive rush to grab the puja special autumn issue of *Ultorath* between Ma, Pishi, Boro-kaki and herself, Baishakhi picks up the family copy, which has arrived that very morning along with bumper issues of *Nabokallol*, *Anandamela* (for the children, she thinks derisively) and *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, and smuggles it to her room. She has a quick flick through it – novels by Ashapurna Devi, Bimal Kar, Bimal Mitra, Shankar. Two years earlier the serialised novels in *Ultorath* and *Nabokallol* would have been forbidden reading for her, on the grounds that they were for adults, and she would have been asked to stick to *Anandamela*, but those rules have now been relaxed somewhat, although she is not wholly confident that her mother or Pishi will not tell her off if she is caught with her head buried in either of these magazines. She hides the copy under her pillows and decides to avoid any possible impediment to her reading by taking it up to the roof terrace after lunch and reading it there, away from the traffic of people in the house, while sitting with her back to the sun, drying her long hair. Possibly with a bowl of mango pickle by her side. Thrilled at the prospect of the treat she has just planned to give herself, she skips to her parents' room to consolidate her joy by going through the new clothes she has received for Puja, which is only ten days away.

A similar thought may have occurred to Chhaya, for she decides to take out her new Puja clothes from her almirah and arrange them in order of the five days of the festival. But what should have been gloating joy quickly topples over into a restless bitterness as she contemplates the saris laid out on her bed: two pure silks, one tangail, one tashar, one kota, one for each of the five days of Puja. Last year she had had seven, the year before that, eight. She does not take into account the two she has bought herself: those do not count; only the things given one as presents truly matter.

This year her brother Priyo has given her one sari. One only. The tangail. Admittedly it is from Adi Dhakeshwari Bastralaya on Rashbehari Avenue, but Purnima, his wife, has been given four saris. That is four times what Chhaya has received from him. And it is only by guesswork, with a bit of judicious snooping, that she has arrived at that figure. There are only four that she has been able to ascertain; in reality it could well be more, say, seven or eight. The truth will be discovered only over the five days of Puja. She will be watching her sister-in-law's outfits like a hungry vulture.

As if this were not enough, Buli, her niece, has boasted of ten – ten! – sets of new clothes, including two ghaghras, which are all the rage, and four saris, which Chhaya thinks the girl is too young to wear. No doubt most of them are from her father. They, or to be more accurate, she, *she*, the mother, has spoilt the girl rotten. Chhaya can already discern the incipient signs – a defiance somewhere in Buli's eyes, an immodesty in the way she holds herself, a growing tendency to answer back and a complete indifference to her studies, a fact corroborated by her school reports: she barely scrapes through each year. Her secondary-school results are due shortly after the Pujas. It is Chhaya's belief that the girl will perform so miserably in her first public examination that she will be asked to leave Gokhale Memorial and join an inferior school to continue for the school-leaving certificate. This is exactly what happens when one has an uneducated mother, Chhaya thinks. She has been honing and sharpening the words she will let slip at a family dinner one evening, after the proof of the girl's failure arrives. She rehearses the tone and inflection every day, perfects the pauses, moves one word here, two words there. She is waiting to pounce. Lately – and Chhaya cannot put her finger on it – there seems to be a . . . a . . . an air of furtiveness about Buli. She needs watching, that one.

But that is not Chhaya's business. She has evidence of something rather more urgent right under her nose, in the form of that mocking tangail sari. If Priyo can buy his wife four saris – *at least* four saris – and his daughter ten outfits, then giving her one sari is like a slap to her face. She feels the familiar pressure in her chest, the pressure of dammed-up water pushing against the sides that contain it. Her throat closes up, she lets herself go and prepares for a great deluge. But after

several minutes of coaxing and trying, her eyes remain uncompliantly dry, which maddens her even further. She sits on her hands to prevent herself from tearing into strips of ribbons the poisoned tangail sari given by her brother.

Even Madan-da and Gagan and the other servants have got *one* article of clothing from her brother for puja. Has she now been demoted to their level? Is this the lot of the unmarried sister who has overstayed her welcome at her parents' house? Has she become unwanted because they have not been able to marry her off? This time the tears oblige, although only for a short while: it is a momentary light drizzle rather than a downpour and, instead of feeling relieved, something coils and loops and knots and reknots inside her.

In the time she would come to remember as her two years of blazing brightly, Chhaya had received, on average, one marriage proposal a month. Much later, after the steady parade of suitors had fallen from ten a year to eight, then to four, and finally to one every two or three years, as the clock had ticked on and time had raced and rushed, it was openly said that being a graduate, having a BA degree, had harmed Chhaya's chances of finding a husband. She did not know if it was in defiant retaliation or for consolation that she embarked on an MA after the flow of suitors had thinned to a trickle with all the volume of a newborn's piss. Priyo had announced that he would not marry until someone was found for his sister first. That resolve, it transpired, had clearly not been set in stone, although, to be fair to him, he got married only when Chhaya had reached the age beyond which the issue became irreversible. Next, it was the turn of her younger brother, Bhola, to make a similarly rash promise. He had reneged the year his sister hit the point of no return: thirty.

It had all started off with not insufficient promise. Chhaya was the only daughter of the wealthy Ghosh family, so the dowry and attendant gifts such as jewellery, consumer durables, kitchenware and clothes would have been very attractive; she was reading for a degree (at the initial stages this had been a positive thing, something to be proud, even boastful, of); she had 'Spoken English'. More importantly, she

had the right sun-sign with the right planets in alignment – Pisces with Venus ascendant in the fifth house of Jupiter – to make an auspicious bride.

But the dizzying, whirling, magical roulette of matches, so rich and teasing with possibilities, had proved to be a slippery wheel. The laws of probability, while seeming so amenable to providing not one but a whole suite of matches, seemed disobliging when it came to achieving that one crucial hit of success and had somehow always tricked and wrong-footed her so that she remained outside the circle of the favoured. Some element in the whole set of required or desirable qualities had either not been satisfied or had been lacking. If the family of one prospective groom approved of everything and the marriage deal seemed almost closed, suddenly the question 'And do you cook?', or the demand that she would be forbidden to work once she was married, would have the effect of a ghost entering the room, chilling everyone to silence, ushering in the instant end of that particular match.

On a couple of occasions some incongruence during the matching of Chhaya's horoscope with the suitor's, discovered at quite an advanced stage of the matchmaking process, had finished off things. Charubala had raged, 'Why did they not bother to find out earlier? Why did they get our hopes up, leading us on this merry dance? Low people, I say, low, common people! Good thing that our daughter didn't go to the home of such lowlives.'

In moments of tremulous, private introspection a shadow of an admission flitted through her mind that it was not such a good thing after all, that on the balance of things it was better to have a daughter married than to carp about such hair-splitting on the part of the suitors' families. It also struck her that circumstances had so tumbled over to their opposite that *they* were now the party with the suit, they were the real and true suitors, not the steadily diminishing stream of men who came to see Chhaya.

The family was forced to set their sights lower once they realised that the high noon of matchmaking had inexorably passed. First, they relaxed the category of the groom's profession. In the beginning, nothing but doctors and engineers would do, particularly with the parenthetical word 'London' or 'Edinburgh' after FRCS or MSc, but

a while later that 'London' or 'Edinburgh' clause was silently dropped. Then they relinquished their hold on FRCS and MSc; an ordinary MBBS or BSc would suffice. Soon, those requirements too fell away as the search was broadened (diluted, some said) to other professions – lawyers, lecturers, businessmen. From here, it climbed down further to white-collar worker, bank-teller, government employee, school teacher, even, at the final, desperate stages, clerk.

When even this didn't produce a husband for Chhaya, other variables were tinkered with and revised. The dowry money climbed up by a factor of 1.5 with every rejection; to a refrigerator and cooking range were added a gramophone, a flat in Purna Das Road. Then the age of the candidates was relaxed – it had to be, Chhaya was not getting any younger – followed by an attendant loosening of criteria in the looks department. The words 'fair', 'young', 'handsome' were all deleted from the matrimonial ads in the newspapers. Ads put exclusively in the matrimonial columns of the English dailies – *The Statesman*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* – started migrating furtively to the Bengali broadsheets, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, even *Jugantar*. Charubala had a new set of portrait photographs taken of her daughter by Robin-da, the neighbourhood's professional photographer. It emerged during these sessions that her face had looked too polygonal in the previous pictures, her chin and jaws too prominent, her forehead too broad. Quantities of make-up and snow and powder were applied so that the fact of her dark complexion would not be revealed to the groom's family, at least not right at the beginning. The lighting was ramped up, cruel suns were shone on Chhaya's face and she was made to look very slightly away from the lens, as if something was just beginning to catch her attention outside the frame, so that the camera would not be able to capture the fact that she was cross-eyed.

Herein lay the rub. Chhaya had been born preternaturally dark and with a squint that was not immediately noticeable – it depended on the light and the angle of her head and how obliquely she turned her gaze on something – but once it was detected it was impossible to unknow it. All those crucial final questions, such as 'And do you cook?' or 'Will you stop working once you get married?', were really an occluded reaction to that detection; an irreversible decision had already been made.

Her very name, which meant 'shadow', was a backhanded acknowledgement by her parents of the undeniable and omnipresent fact of her complexion. Through her girlhood and adolescence the less well-behaved girls in her school and the less decorous people of Basanta Bose Road had called her by several derogatory names, *Kali*, *Kelti*, all to do with her skin colour. Never to her face, of course, but they also did not make a great secret of it; a stage-whisper, a catcall, an overheard remark as she passed the loafers gathered outside Bhawanipur Tutorial Home: all these brought home to her, relentlessly, the inescapability of her skin colour. Stringent regimes of applying to her face ground red lentils, the cream top of whole milk, and dried orange peel made into a paste with cream had not wrought any change. The patented and unpatented whitening creams and lotions available in the shops had proved equally deceitful. Throughout all this, Charubala consoled and encouraged and empathised, holding out dark-skinned women who had made it in public life as role models, trying to overturn familiar habits of thought by making her daughter aware of some of the positive associations with negrescence – 'Have you seen a cloud that is not dark? It is because of dark rain clouds that life thrives on earth', or 'The kaajol that women wear around their eyes is always black, never white', or rhyming *kaalo*, black, with *aalo*, light.

Ever since Chhaya had learned to identify the face looking back at her from the mirror as her own, she had been intimate with the fact – hard, unchangeable as fate and as merciless – of her own ugliness and, harder still, with the awareness that the world outside shared the knowledge too. To know that you are ugly is one thing, but to grow up with the imprint that it leaves on others' thoughts, facial expressions, murmurs, talk, gossip is quite another; the former is a reckoning with one's self, the latter an instilling of that most adamantine knowledge of all: that the world is as it is, and knocking your head against its hard shell is only going to break you, not dent the world.

So the storm-fronts of girlhood – tears, capricious cruelty, tantrums, envy, brittle self-consciousness – had seemed to pass eventually after an unseasonably prolonged stay, but more intractable, more sustained damage was left behind in their wake.

After five years of the drama of diminishment that was her matchmaking were played out, the neighbours started talking. Like

all such examples of this genre, there was a great deal of histrionics about protecting the subject of gossip from unkindness, but drama, that is, fiction, was what it was, for it was seen to that Chhaya came to hear of what was being said about her via some circuitous route or the other. The usual, predictable things: she would die a spinster; the Ghoshes would never be able to get her off their hands; she would bring bad luck; that kind of dark skin ('black, really, coal-black, ink-black, soot-black') surely pointed to a dark fate; if the first face you saw after waking up was hers, your day was certain to be ruined; maybe there was something else wrong with her, something other than her dark complexion . . . and so it went on. Several kind-hearted people made ameliorative gestures: there were regular remarks along the lines of 'What if she is so dark, she is remarkably well educated' and the gradual currency of euphemisms for her skin colour – *warmly glowing, a radiant darkness* – that they thought shielded Chhaya from the misfortune she was born with. But all this was as leftovers from a small dinner party offered to a region ruined by famine: the gesture was noted, but the effect was nil. In the eyes of her suitors and their families, Chhaya had seen the instant knowledge, shocked, flickering, imperfectly repressed, as soon as she had walked into the drawing room. Beside that knowledge, everything was like her name – just a shadow.

Armed with comb, *Ultorath* and a small stainless-steel bowl of mango pickle, Baishakhi stealthily runs up the stairs to the roof terrace. Lunch is just over, so most of the household is getting ready to go to bed for a light snooze. She is fairly certain that no one has seen her coming up here. Still on tiptoe, she makes her way to the west side of the prayer room; here she is sheltered from the eyes of any casual visitor to the terrace – someone coming up to hang out the washing, or clean out the prayer room. They would have to know she is up here to find her. She positions herself so that her back catches the October afternoon sun, loosens her still-damp hair and settles down with *Ultorath* in front of her. It is nearly three o'clock and her mind is very far from reading. It is almost time for Shobhon Datta, who lives next

door, to come out onto his roof for his sneaky post-lunch cigarette. This is what Baishakhi has been really waiting for: the book, the bowl of pickle, even her comb and damp hair are just props in a pre-emptive drama of deception. If anyone finds her sitting here, with Shobhon on his terrace, the suspicion that she is romantically entangled with him will alight instantly on her. The props will then give her performance of wide-eyed innocence some credence.

Without this deception, perpetrated by daughters and inevitably discovered by parents, aunts, servants and neighbours, played out, it would seem, since the very beginnings of family and society, the entire fabric of Bengali family life would be marred by a huge hole. There are 'arranged marriages' – the real, respectable, acceptable form of union between a man and a woman – decided by parents and families, *not* by the people getting married, and sanctioned by centuries of tradition and practice that say the daughter is her father's property, to dispose of as he sees fit. A marriage is a social transaction; individuals come into it later, if at all. And then there are 'love marriages', where two people conduct their romance with the furtiveness of a shameful, sinful act, then take their hearts in their hands and decide to break the news to their families. They are transgressive, discordant, with all the desirability of the ruptures and havoc that a cyclone creates. They are also forbidden, and such a huge force of morality is brought to bear against them that they are practically irresistible. Baishakhi has taken the first steps in sowing the storm.

Shobhon, twenty, reluctant BCom student at City College, only son of the Datta family, which has made money recently in the catering business; Shobhon, who wears his hair long, wears a gold chain around his neck, has a reputation of being a Romeo, and leaves his shirt unbuttoned nearly down to his stomach so that the chain can be seen nestling in his chest hair like an iridescent snake in dark grass, duly emerges on the terrace of the Datta house. Baishakhi, who has been staring unblinkingly at the green-painted wooden door through which Shobhon will make his entrance, instantly looks down and pretends to be so deeply absorbed in her novel that she is oblivious to the sound of the door, to his appearance a mere fifteen or twenty feet away. Shobhon, a seasoned player, pretends too that he has come to the terrace merely to have a smoke away from the eyes of the elders in his house. The acts of lighting

his Capstan Gold, of cupping the match in his hand to shield it from the breeze, of flinging the spent match away all seem to be done with a slight excess of movement, more than the actions themselves demand. He starts walking up and down the terrace, Baishakhi still apparently unnoticed. Baishakhi, breath held, blood pounding in her ears, eyes fixed unmovingly on the meaningless black scrawl of letters on the page, can hear his footsteps pacing back and forth. And then, without any prelude or warning, he comes over to the side of his terrace that she is facing, places his elbows on the parapet, leans forward and whispers, 'Ashtami evening, eight o'clock, behind the puja pandal.'

Baishakhi jumps out of her skin at this sudden violation of the tacit rules of the game. On no account are they supposed to look at each other in public, let alone speak. She stares at him, then gathers her wits about her and hisses, 'What *are* you doing? Someone will see us. Don't stand on this side of the roof.'

He answers back, still whispering, 'Who will see us? If anyone appears on your roof, I'll see them before you do, I'll move away immediately. They'll never know.'

'We can be seen from Mala-mashi's roof, from Namita-di's, Sunil-mama's . . . If they look up, they'll see you. Please, please don't stand here.'

'How will you love, if you fear so much?' Shobhon asks, neatly inverting the opening line of a popular Hindi film song. He is given to such smart wit at moments of great risk. As a result, Baishakhi finds him almost unbearably attractive. She colours furiously at the word 'love', floating so openly, so publicly, between them – a secret thought suddenly embodied and exposed by being spoken aloud – and cannot find a way to answer him.

'Don't forget, eight on ashtami evening, behind the puja pandal,' he repeats, debonairly blows out some smoke rings, blue and fragile, and leaves the terrace through the green wooden door.

Throughout lunch Chhaya has watched the movements and actions of everyone, like an undercover surveillance agent. Purnima has, as usual, eaten as much as a Bihari guard or a rickshaw-puller, almost up to her wrist in the mound of rice and dal and vegetables and fish curry; Baishakhi has, uncharacteristically, toyed with her food, her

mind altogether far away; it seems that Arunima, monosyllabic but jumpy and lit up somewhat dangerously from within as if plotting grand arson or regicide, is following her older cousin into a private no-man's territory too. It never crosses Chhaya's mind that others could be thinking similar thoughts about her unnatural silence: where is her relentless carping, her flurry of barbs let loose at everyone, the measured drip of acid from her tongue?

Chhaya had started off being unusually animated, asking everyone, nicely for a change, what plans they had for the rest of the afternoon, whether anyone would be interested in joining her for a few rounds of Ludo afterwards. When she had established what everyone was going to be doing – no one was remotely interested in Ludo or snakes-and-ladders – she lapsed into silence and let the viscous plan move up and down in her mind like the meniscus of an exotic poison.

Malati, the maidservant, comes rushing upstairs from the kitchen just as lunch is ending and says excitedly to Purnima, 'The knife-and-scissors sharpening man is going down the street now.' Purnima gets up, energised and active, goes to the kitchen downstairs and orders, 'Quick, quick, gather all the stuff, don't forget the bonti. And all the scissors – all of them, they're all blunt. Call Gagan, ask him to carry the stone mortar. Quick-quick, I don't want to miss the sharpening man this time, he's been quite elusive, we keep missing him. The sheel has lost its friction. Call Gagan, what are you waiting for? Here, I'll take the rest downstairs, let me first wash my hands. Call out to the man to stop.' And in a whirling vortex of activity, Purnima thud-thuds out, carrying a clattering, clinking armoury of assorted knives and scissors.

Now that the sudden frenzy has blown over, Chhaya can hear the raucous cry of the dharwala cycling down the street, his call so stylised over time that you have to know what it is in the first place in order to identify it as the knife-sharpening-man's call. An opportunity sent by Ma Kali, she thinks, as she too rises from the table and announces calmly, 'I'm going to wash my hands now, I'm done. Arunima, if you're going to watch all this sharpening, don't stare at the sparks for too long, you'll go blind. I know you like watching it, but be careful.'

She leaves the table and goes to the sink in one corner of the room to wash her hands. Then she goes to her room one floor up, picks

up a bottle of red nail polish and walks out again. Moving calmly and confidently, she takes the stairs down, back to the first floor, then goes to Purnima and Priyo's room. New clothes are strewn on the bed lavishly. A quick look tells her that they are both Purnima's and Baishakhi's. She empties the bottle of nail polish on as many of the garments on the top layer as the small volume of cosmetic will allow. Then she returns upstairs to her room, the empty bottle held in her hand. The burn in her is still unassuaged.

A small fear begins to form: she has to dispose of the empty bottle; what if they find it in her room? She lets the fear grow to the point where the accusing bottle glows with reproach. She picks it up and, calmly again, makes her way up to the roof. She is going to fling it far onto someone else's roof and run away from the terrace as soon as the deed is accomplished. When she reaches the top landing, before she can push open the door to the terrace, she hears Baishakhi's unmistakable voice, 'If they look up, they'll see you. Please, please don't stand here', followed by something unintelligible in a man's voice. She begins to turn back to escape downstairs, but some knowledge gives her pause. She stands still for a while and the embers of the burn inside her suddenly flare up into flames of unexpected joy.

Earlier that day, while Purba had been filling up a bucket from the tap in the corner of the courtyard, the maid, Malati, had surreptitiously given her some Vim, which she had smuggled from upstairs in a small newspaper pouch.

'You do your washing-up here with ashes and charcoal, seeing that makes me feel small, I do their washing with Beem, so I bring some down. Hide it, hide it, if anyone finds out, I'll be kicked out,' she whispered to Purba, slipping her the packet of powder. Noticing Purba's hesitancy and fear, Malati added, 'Take, take, quickly.' Both women looked upstairs with guilt and fear.

Touched by this gratuitous act of kindness from a servant, Purba's eyes pricked with tears. But sentimentality was a luxury, she knew, and fear had the upper hand. She whispered, 'Come into my room. If anyone sees you standing here talking to me, you'll have a lot of questions to answer.'

The two women scuttled into Purba's little room. 'You'll get into trouble one of these days,' she said to Malati.

'Only if I get caught. But I'm careful.'

'Why take the risk? I manage fine with charcoal,' Purba said, trying to keep her voice steady; she felt soft, malleable.

'What can I say? We are servants, illiterate, poor people, it is not our place to open our mouths. But we too have eyes and ears, we can see and hear what goes on.'

Purba could only remain silent in the face of such empathy.

'Do you think we don't know that Boro-boüdi secretly sends down used clothes and other stuff for your son and daughter? They're growing up on leftovers and bones, those two; they'll come good one day, you mark my words. Those who suffer, win.'

At the mention of her children, Purba couldn't restrain herself. She covered her mouth with her sari to hide her trembling chin, her twisting mouth.

The timing for doing the washing-up has been calculated by Purba with the utmost deliberation: late afternoon, when everyone upstairs will be deep into their siesta, so there is no chance of getting caught using Vim. She will have to be very quiet too; no clanging and clattering pots and pans that could wake up her mother-in-law.

While doing the washing-up, Purba hears a commotion break out upstairs. A few minutes of straining to listen – and it does not require much effort, for Purnima's voice carries for miles – establishes the main facts: Baishakhi has spilled a bottle of nail polish and ruined three saris and two salwar-kameez sets. Alight with rage, Purnima has mercilessly thrashed her daughter. Everyone in the family is now assembled on the first floor to witness the show and contribute their two-anna worth of opinion.

Kalyani comes out of Purba's room and listens, wide-eyed, thirstily soaking up the sounds of the circus upstairs until Purba shoos her away: 'Go inside, someone will see you gaping and grinning.'

Perhaps Purba is only trying to protect her daughter from the knowledge of how many new items of clothing the people upstairs have received and given, a knowledge that will extinguish the joy her daughter is clearly deriving from the drama. For the three of them,

a separate household really, have received only one set each, the obligatory one bought at the last minute, from cheap shops and hawkers in Gariahat: Sona, a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of trousers two sizes too big for him; Kalyani, a salwar-kameez set; and Purba, a block-printed cotton sari. They will shrink, their colours will run, they will look like floor-swabbing cloths after the first wash, then they will start falling apart at the seams; you can predict all this by taking one look at the garments.

Washing-up completed, Purba crosses over to her side of the courtyard and enters her room. She feels like a nap, but there are a hundred and one things to be done – darning the holey mosquito net alone will take up the rest of the afternoon. She decides instead to fold the dry washing and put it away.

'Kalyani, why don't you give me a hand with folding the big things?' she asks her daughter.

When all the folding is done, Purba starts putting the clothes away in the small wooden cupboard that houses practically all her earthly belongings. In it, tucked carefully under a bedsheet so that it does not stick out egregiously, is a flat parcel wrapped in paper and string. What is it? she thinks; how did it get here? She takes it out and, in her impatience to open it, knots up the string, so she lifts it up and holds it to her mouth to cut the string with her teeth. A piece of paper flutters to the floor. She picks it up and reads the austere note that does not give much away: *Didn't have enough money to buy you a puja sari, forgive me, but here's something for Sona and Kalyani*. She opens the package with trembling hands, barely able to swallow the growing lump in her throat. Inside it are a shirt and a pair of short trousers for Sona and a frock for Kalyani. She turns to face the cupboard, pushing her head inside, pretending to be busy sorting clothes, to hide her wet face from her daughter.

From seven o'clock on ashtami morning, the priest has been conducting half-hourly public prayer sessions at the pandal. The PA system, which has been rigged up for the loud dispersal of music day and night from the two ends of the road and from the pandal through the five days of puja (a mandatory practice, this), is used for the purpose of worship only on this day. Flocks of residents, all got up in the finest of their

new clothes, go in family groups or with friends and neighbours to congregate in orderly rows inside the pandal, face the stage where the statues of the goddess and her children stand looking at them and, led by the priest's chanting, repeat the Sanskrit slokas and throw tufts of flowers to the deities in worship. Those who cannot go, such as the infirm Prafullanath, sit on their balconies and hear the priest's voice, intoning the verses, issue from the PA system and feel comforted and consoled.

Baishakhi goes with her parents to the pandal for anjali around noon. She sees Shobhon, an ardent worker in the Puja Committee, as busy as clockwork with some other young men, and looks through him. She has known that she will see him and, though she does not give the slightest indication of having done so, he knows that she has clocked him and she knows that he knows. As she stands at the bottom of the stage, between her parents, trying to gather her mind to the gravitas of communal worship, she notices that Shobhon has taken it upon himself to distribute the flowers for anjali to the people gathered for worship. The sudden thudding of her heart is raucous to her own ears: what is he *doing*? She imagines every eye there in the pandal on them. She is certain Baba and Ma, flanking her closely, almost touching her sides, can feel the heat radiating off her. When Shobhon reaches them, she can barely bring herself to put her hand into the big basket of flowers to pick out a small handful of marigold petals. She imagines a spectral brush of his arm against her fingers as he moves on to her mother, and then to the next person and then the next along the row, perfectly composed, cool and unruffled, as if she were only just another familiar neighbourly face. Baishakhi keeps her head resolutely down. Her face is burning. Coursing through her heart and mind is a seam of a delicious mixture of outrage, fear and awe at Shobhon's foolhardiness.

What is said about the darkest spot being directly under the light is nowhere more true than of the area behind the puja pandal: all that crammed symphony of festival lighting barely a few yards away does not have much effect on the dark here. Here the jutting ribs and carcass of the pandal have not received the care of being covered up with yards of coloured cloth; here you have the feeling of being in

the wings of the makeshift stage of a travelling theatre company in the provinces, all bamboo, old tarpaulin, discarded nails, coiled snakes of rough ropes, damp earth, patchy clumps of tough, unruly grass. Here Baishakhi stands, on ashtami evening, quivering with fear that someone has spied her slipping into the shadows at the back of the pandal. If someone has noticed a young girl negotiating her way through the narrow gap on the side of the big tent, they would indeed have been alerted enough to ask themselves why she was heading for the back, the discarded side as it were: a tryst with someone perhaps?

Chhaya has lured Priyo into sitting with her on the balcony on the first floor – *Let's go and look at people from the verandah before we go out later in the evening, the crush of people will be terrible now, it'll certainly ease* – and from their vantage position they have an unimpeded view of the milling crowd, the pandal, the sea of faces and heads where the known mingle with the unknown. The PA system airs songs from the hit film *An Evening in Paris*. Chhaya chatters on, 'Look, look, Rupa-boüdi is wearing a parrot-green silk-tangail. Gorgeous! Pity her face is so scarred by that terrible teenage acne. O ma, Pushpa-babu has come out too, he's using his cane, someone's helping him. Priyo, isn't that Pushpa-babu? Not very considerate of them to have let the old, ill man out at this peak sightseeing hour.'

Priyo gets up and peers. 'Yes, it is. His first time in years, no?'

'First time since we heard he was not well. We should persuade Baba to go out too.'

Then the meandering aimlessness of all this ends as the grail swims into view. Chhaya tugs at Priyo's sleeve and says in a voice pitched perfectly between surprise and uncertainty, 'Priyo, look, isn't that Buli? Why is she trying to go to the back of the pandal? Quick, quick, she's about to disappear.'

Priyo asks, 'Where? Where?' before he manages to pick out the flash of an orange kurta, which, like a rare visitation from a species of butterfly assumed to be lost, disappears almost as soon as it has been spotted. 'Couldn't make out anything, it's so dark. Are you sure?'

Chhaya, with measured casualness, then says, 'Now look, isn't that our next-door neighbour's son, Shobhon, going there now?'

Priyo, suddenly alert, sharp, looks again, this time with more focused intent.

Yes, it is.

Baishakhi, after much coaxing, has laid her head on Shobhon's chest. He has clinched the embrace with an apposite line from a new film, *Aamne Samne*, starring Shashi Kapoor and Sharmila Tagore. He holds her close to him, trying to move, as subtly, as imperceptibly as he can, from stroking her back to stroking her sides. All he wants to do is fondle her breasts, but he will have to be very, very slow and cunning. Baishakhi, beginning to feel as if she is free-falling towards a floor that isn't there, has at last relinquished her nervous attention to all kinds of sounds that could announce an intruder.

A sudden crashing, like a miniature stampede, and rapidly advancing voices make them spring up, but, frozen by utter panic, they remain entangled when Baishakhi's father and mother appear like vengeful, unappeasable gods.

To the background music of *An Evening in Paris*, distorted ever so slightly by the volume of its amplification, thrilled neighbours see a weeping Baishakhi being frogmarched home by her parents, both of whose faces are black and brimful with imminent thunder.

Severe weather rips through the Ghosh home and, when not inflicting damage, it sits brooding, umbrous, threatening, a pall over day-to-day activity. The frenzy first. Several rounds of immediate disciplining follow the discovery of Baishakhi: intense interrogation by her mother, physical punishment in the form of generous slapping during the questioning sessions, locking the girl in her room. All of these are accompanied by hysterically raised voices. Crueller measures follow. A lock is added to the door to the terrace. It remains shut day and night, and Purnima holds the only key to it. Baishakhi is forbidden to leave the house. When school reopens after the puja holidays, she is to be accompanied there and received at the gates after school is over and chaperoned back home. She cannot meet any of her friends unless they come to see her at home. These visiting friends are questioned fiercely by Purnima and asked if they are carrying letters or acting as go-betweens in any capacity. If she could, she would have frisked

them. There is a clotted silence in the house, pulsating with reproach and judgement; Baishakhi feels she is being treated like a pariah, which indeed she is. All eyes are upon her, the elders' dark with accusation that she has brought shame upon herself and the name of the Ghoshes; the children's awed, embarrassed and a bit frightened, because they know she has done something terrible, but what exactly they have not been told. They are shielded from the whole truth in case it corrupts their morals. There is nothing new or unusual in all this; it runs along the well-ploughed furrows of middle-class Bengali life.

Chhaya seems to be the one who is most eloquently upset. She speaks of it at every mealtime and will not let the topic drop off the conversational horizon. 'Eeesh, how shaming the whole thing! What are people thinking about us? Being caught with a loafer . . .' and lets the silence carry the rest. At other times, she tries another tack, her voice modulated to the articulation of sympathy: 'But I hope the girl is all right. Who knows what advantage has been taken of the poor flower by that immoral man?' The silence after this is even more damning. No one notices how animated she has suddenly become, how buzzed, as if a hidden ecstasy is exerting her to too keen and bright an enthusiasm.

As a consequence of this unfolding drama, bijaya, two days after Baishakhi is caught, is a muffled affair. But tradition has to be upheld at all costs, so the annual practice of buying quantities of assorted sweets from Girish Ghosh and Putiram is observed faithfully this year too. Adinath is driven to North Calcutta and back by Gagan, the boot of the Ambassador full of terracotta pots and paper boxes and cartons. Certain things cannot be done this year, such as allowing Baishakhi to go to the puja pandal to watch the enormous statue of the goddess being transferred by the young men of the neighbourhood from the stage to the lorry that will take it to Babughat for the immersion ceremony. Not a single person stays at home during this dismantling; it is the one event of the festival that comes close to a spectacle. This year Purnima stays indoors with Baishakhi, guarding her with the vigilance of a trained dog. They do not go to their balcony to watch the preparation for the final immersion, in case Baishakhi and Shobhon catch sight of each other. The rest of the Ghosh family stays in too, and misses seeing off Durga and her offspring on the three tempos

hired for the occasion, because they are apprehensive of the neighbours' acute curiosity, their weighted, probing gaze. They watch from their respective verandahs.

The tempos, packed with scores of men and children holding onto the effigies, leave Basanta Bose Road at a crawl. They are preceded by an entourage of people, a band, and a group of locals who dance along to the music the band plays as the pageant makes its creeping progress to Babughat. When this farewell crowd departs, bijaya is officially declared. In the Ghosh house, wives bend down to touch the feet of their husbands with their right hands and bring the hands forward to their foreheads and then to their chests in the gesture of pranam; sons and daughters do the same to their parents and elders, younger relations to older, and the men embrace each other three times in quick succession. The sweets are distributed and the stricken looks resulting from Baishakhi's intransigence two days ago – it is difficult to estimate where the genuine strickenness ends and its self-conscious enactment begins – are relaxed enough to allow the usual bijaya practices to proceed.

Purba, on the one evening she is suffered to come to the grand living room on the first floor and mingle relatively freely, so that everyone else can have the desirably short-lived luxury of playing One Big Happy Family, is, in reality, on menial duty, as always; she stands in a corner and hands out plates of sweets, clears away empty cups and saucers, refills glasses with water, even though there is a small fleet of servants to do these chores. For once, Charubala does not bark at her, but files away, for later use, the fact that she gives two pantuas each to Sona and Kalyani when she knows she is not supposed to give them more than one. Charubala chooses to ignore that it is Supratik who insists that Purba gives extra sweets to her children; she does not have to, thinks Charubala, just because someone is persistently asking her to do it, does she? Purba could have been equally obstinate in not giving in. A hot flash of irritation blooms inside the old woman, but now is not the time. She cannot even have the satisfaction of baring her teeth at Sona and Kalyani; Supratik is teaching them a game that involves paper and pen and they are absolutely rapt. It will have to wait.

On the morning after, a few minutes into her matutinal duties in the prayer room, Sandhya discovers the following note in a sealed envelope at the foot of the statuette of the goddess Lakshmi:

Ma, I feel exhausted with consuming, with taking and grabbing and using. I am so bloated that I feel I cannot breathe any more. I am leaving to find some air, some place where I shall be able to purge myself, push back against the life given me and make my own. I feel I live in a borrowed house. It's time to find my own. Trying to discover my whereabouts won't get you anywhere, so save that energy; you might find you need it for something else. I'll write periodically to let you know I'm alive. Forgive me. Yours, Supratik.