

## 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, 'Buliiii, 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 – 'Buliiiiii, 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.

Muddled 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 bikri-walla), 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 – 'Buliiiiii, 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?'