CHAPTER TWO

The Stray Cloud

1

Thomas Green, the self-proclaimed polygamist was happily enjoying his conjugal life with not one or two but with his five wives! But it faced opposition from the court of the state of Utah. Green was accused of polygamy. During the time of the verdict from the juries two of Green’s wives were personally present in the court. Both of them were sobbing. Both of them let the court know that they were satisfied with their polygamist husband and were devoted to that husband. Tom Green, the father of twenty-nine children felt very distressed at the decision of the juries. He was thinking of appealing to the higher court. In this connection it is to be mentioned here that polygamy is banned in the state of Utah since 1890. And in the last fifty years this was the first instance of filing a suit against polygamy

While preparing the copy of the catchy and spicy news, sent by Reuters according to its measurement Deya was simpering within herself. She was trying to visualize the scene with her mind’s eyes. Wearing gowns two voluptuous middle-aged memsahibs (Yes, must be middle-aged. When the sahib is the father of twenty-nine children his wives would certainly not be little girls. But each of the wives would have given birth to five to six children on an average. There was a chance that they might be a bit young. But the scene would become apt if the wives were middle-aged or fatty.) Both were seen embarrassed, resting their heads on the shoulder of each other, wiping tears of each other with handkerchief, and tapping the back to console each other. Seeing this, did the juries sit wonderstruck? Or did they fly up in jealousy? Or were they uttering ‘bravo bravo’ within themselves seeing the great courage of Mr. Tom?
Sukanya, standing in front of the table said, “Hey, how far?”
Deya didn’t wear the watch on her wrist. With the winter departing Deya can not wear a watch. She gets rashes on her skin even at the accumulation of thin layer of sweat around her wrist.
Lifting her eyes she asked, “Is it already six?”
“Long back. It’s six forty.”
“Wait a bit. Let me give it to Asheshda.
She took out the print out of the news from the computer.
“Have a look at the news.”
Sukanya frowned. Pouting her lips in contempt she said, “Stupids. The wives should have been kept in the prison before everything else.”
“Yes! If the lady wishes to stay with the co-wife…”
“Shit. If I had a grip over him I would have ejected the venom of that Tom Green within two days.”
“Whatever you say. The sahib has guts. Look at his gall. Most guys are polygamists at their hearts. How many of them can make an open declaration of it boldly? Think of his caliber. Handling five wives at a time…”
“Is this a hard nut to crack? He must have followed the divide and rule policy. He must have played the idiots against each other and sat idle stroking his mustache.”
“Don’t speak rubbish. Then why did they cry in the court hugging each other? The man must be a clever lover, I bet. The heart of the man must be very big, five times bigger than the normal size.”
“Are you talking about a dilated heart? Ha! Ha! But that’s a disease.”
“A man leading a family life with five wives is a kind of a sick person.”
“I have no idea dear. You have a husband, you will understand better than me.”
“Do you think so? Deya ogled taking the printed copy from Sukanya’s hand. While getting up she said, “Wait, I will catch hold of Soumya on reaching home. Let me see how he reacts at the news.”

It was the end of the afternoon and the beginning of the evening. The newspaper office was buzzing with activity, especially the news section. Around twelve newspaper
employees were working with focused attention. Most of them were young and three of them were aged. Some eyes were on the computer-monitor, some were writing making a kind of rustling sound. The layout was running in the computer, the dummy was getting ready, in the air-conditioned room, there were various sounds heard. Clattering sound of the fax, teleprinter, telephone and the keyboard of the computer were there. All useful conversations. News were being received from the internet continuously. The Nabaprabhat was getting ready for the next day morning.

Deya went to the table of Ashesh Dattagupta, the co-editor. Ashesh was fifty years old with a dry and experienced look with disheveled curly hair on his head. One could see a thick silt of seriousness on his triangular shaped face. Many of the colleagues expected that on the last day of his service span Ashesh would give his first smile.

Print outs were piled up on Ashesh’s table. Ashesh was preparing dummy for the sixth page. Though he was about to keep the paper given by Deya in the pile, he ran his eyes over the paper loosely.

“What is this? Why didn’t you give heading?”

In a soft tone Deya said, “I am wondering as what to give! Should I choose ‘Hail the love of a husband!’?”

“No, it will be light.” With his eyes closed and with a bitter expression in his face Ashesh said, “Choose ‘the price of polygamy’.”

Deya mumbled, “No wonder that people call you the sour faced person.”

Outwardly Deya said, “But Asheshda the news was very funny.”

Ashesh did not pay heed to her words. Putting down the spectacle on the table from his eyes he said, “Don’t you have evening shift from tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow, day after tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Tomorrow is my day-off.”

“I see… I am telling you something. Listen carefully. In the evening shift don’t be eager to escape. It can drag on to eleven in the place of nine. Don’t whine then.”

“Do I ever complain? Last April there were elections in six states. Then I had stayed everyday up to 8.30. Did I ever say anything?”

“You may not have said anything.”
“Then why are you telling me harshly?”
Deya was laughing in her sleeve, “Don’t I know when the boys of the evening shift are in or out?”
“You should know. It is you whose interest to work in the evening shift was the highest. Your wish is fulfilled. Now concentrate on your work. In his garrulity the tone of sarcasm was vivid. If Ranen Samaddar would have spoken in this tone one could accept. He was the one who ran Nabaprabhat. Isn’t Asheshda happy with the new regulation?”
Coming back to her seat Deya composed the heading quickly and gave it to Asheshda. She picked up the huge vanity bag that was hanged on her chair. Sukanya was also ready. Standing near the door she was talking to Tathagata, nodding her head forcefully. Beside the six feet one inch tall Tathagata, the very sweet Sukanya with her chubby cheeks and four feet eleven inch height appeared like a talking doll. Today moreover Sukanya is wearing jeans and a kurta shirt. She looks very tiny in that. One shouldn’t be misled by her size, she was of high spirit. She is very outspoken; in fact the whole office was scared of her.
Coming from the toilet in quick steps Deya stood between Gulliver and Lilliput. She made Sukanya move quickly, “Are you not going home?”
“One second”, saying this, turning her head, she looked at sky-scrapping Tathagata.
“So? Then there is no scope left for you to grumble?”
“What grumbling?”
“Incidentally it is remarked that we are the privileged class! We don’t have to work at night, no evening shift also; we come at twelve and slip off at six.”
Tathagata had slight similarity with the film star Sanjay Dutt in his looks. And Tathagata was also quite conscious about that. As usual in a fashionable way he suddenly flicked his hair. It is just the beginning of your evening shift and immediately you have started rattling dialogues? Let some days pass and slowly let it move towards night then…”
“So? If I am allotted night shift I will do. Am I scared? Girls are doing nightshifts in so many newspaper houses.” “Okay, okay. So far you have got the discount. This is a fact. Think why you have got. Slip off while thinking about it. Now I have appointment with the tunnel-faced person.”
Deya simpered. The poor Ashesh Duttagupta! Mr. Glumtherium, Mr. Hotheaded, Mr. Constipation, so many names are attributed to Asheshda! What a pity! If Asheshda could know!

Outside the air-conditioned hall there was a long wide passage. It was as if the unbelievable metamorphosis of a handkerchief to a cat. The inner verandah of the second floor of a reputed huge two-storied building changed its look and took such name. On one side of the passage were newsrooms, the office of the supplement, drawing section. On the other side were accounts, cash, administration, circulation….On one division sat the editor and on the other was the owner. On the first floor were advertising section and press. The two divisions were connected through culvert shaped over-bridge, above it was green roof made of wood and notched green sun-shed. The owner Mohit Mallik had a good taste. There were not many changes done than the minimum requirement for the newspaper office. Or one could say that there was no fool’s interference in a wise man’s act. The high ceiling, huge windows, even the artistically decorated railing and the fickle wooden staircase remained unaffected. The house with its thick walls still now has retained the smell of the Victorian period.

Deya and Sukanya got down through the staircase with low sound. Once they crossed the gate and stepped on the footpath they could feel that it was very hot outside. Sitting inside the Nabaprabhat office one can not guess. Even though it was a misty evening outside it was very hot! There was no wind and the level of humidity was extreme. Within a second they started sweating.

Jaistha has already set in, yet there is no trace of Kalbaishakhi. On this side of the Elgin road there was not enough light. For some reason the streetlights went out. Her eyes became glazed as the vehicles drove with its headlights dim in the twilight. While walking Deya said, “Could you see how Tathagata had scurried away with his tail between his legs? Today I have cut the guy down to his size.” Deya was wiping her throat and neck with her dupatta. She smiled a little, “Even I have taught Asheshda a lesson. Though lightly.

“Why? What was he telling?”
“He was scaring me by telling that it could be eleven instead nine. And I couldn’t complaint then. I told him on his face not to tell me such things.”
“Ah, I wish he had told it to me.”
“Actually he was teaching the guilty a lesson by railing the innocent.”
“What do you mean?”
“You mean Jayashree.” Deya frowned, “I am afraid if Jayashree would let us down. The poor girl is very nervous.”
“Why?”
“Regarding the time of leaving the office. If it becomes quite late.”
“So? If it is late the office will provide a pull car.”
“Transport is not the problem. The problem is her in-laws. Mainly her mother-in-law. It seems if the daughter-in-law returns in the midnight she will get heart attack. First of all, that is a conservative house and moreover a joint family.”
“Leave the matter of the joint family. Main problem is her husband. Is he also opposing?”
“It seems his is the condition of Switzerland. Neither has he supported the allies’ power nor the axis. In the misunderstanding between the mother and the wife he is golden neutral.”
“So he is a perfect mamma’s boy. What can be done? Let her quit the job. Let her keep her masters degree in amulet and tie it on her hand, sit in the house pulling veil and teach her child twinkle twinkle little star.”
“In our profession Jayashree is a real misfit.”
“Absolutely. Girls of this type should choose school teaching.” A pedestrian crossed Sukanya in hurry. Perhaps he had a slight collision with Sukanya. In the semi-darkness of the twilight she tried to see the man at a glance. Again turning her face she said, “Actually the weakness is in Jayashree’s mind. Her in-laws are mere excuse.”
Gossiping in a light mood the two friends came in the crossing of Elgin road. Sukanya would go Tallygunj. Diagonally crossing the road she went down to catch the metro rail. Deya’s destination was Santoshpur. To get the mini bus she would have to walk little more.
Even after starting, Deya waited for a minute. It is only seven or quarter past seven. Can’t she visit Gopalnagar today? Even today morning ma was telling that baba’s health was not very sound. He had become peevish. Poor ma! Already she was troubled with thakuma and now baba. Dada and boudi were also not around. After visiting Dehradoon, Musouri and Hardwar they might take ten days more to return. The lonely mother is under much stress. Even if Deya goes today she won’t be able to sit for long. Tomorrow there would be no office, let it be tomorrow.

Coming in front of the Lower Circular Road fortunately she got a mini bus headed for Santoshpur within five minutes. It was very crowded. Pushing others Deya managed to get into the bus. Behind the driver’s seat she managed some space. Next to her, touching her body was standing a man above fifty. Holding a briefcase in hand his looks and dressing were quite cultured. Deya wasn’t too conscious about her body. Yet smartly she moved a little. In buses and trams she usually prefers to avoid the middle-aged persons.

The mini bus speeded. Quite an odd speed. It switched intermittently from the movement of a snail to that of a mad ox. The driver was shaking the vehicle like a tin full of puffed rice. The passengers by the window were cowered with fear. Some protested as usual and the conductor and the driver were also as indifferent as a matter of routine. Coming near Bekbaagaan the bus braked dangerously. The people in the bus fell over each other. The traffic sergeant swore in an indecent way, while the driver did not take any notice of it. With all his teeth out he laughed. All of it was routine. Deya is used to it. But today the goddess of fortune is pleased with her; she luckily got a seat at Minto Park. The familiar city was faded away behind her; she was not focusing on anything. Haphazard thoughts regarding the office moved in her head. The news section of their Nabaprabhat had three women altogether. theirs was almost a routine work. Coming at twelve and leaving in the evening. Barring the incidents of war, flood, election, earthquake or death of an eminent person, the women’s jobs were only to prepare few copies of news or to sit and create puzzle words, entertainment, daily horoscope, weather forecast, diary and write about some trivial and page-filling news regarding meetings and
associations. For the last four years it has been the same monotonous job of putting old wine into new bottle. Anyway this time the situation has changed its color. Then why is the grumpy boss angry on her? Certainly Asheshda does not prefer evening shift for girls. And he thought that it was Deya who had brought in the rule.

However, Deya herself had let the editor know about the pattern of the work and its monotony. Ranen Samaddar had drunk water from many rivers. He had a heart laugh on hearing the agony of the new sub-editor. He said, “Does the job of newspaper mean only adventure, eh? Remember that newspaper is actually a big family. There are so many trivial nitty-gritties in a big family! Women are inborn homemakers; they can handle these particulars well. Do you know how many letters the newspaper has to handle even if there is little mistake in the daily column!”

Was Ranenda trying to console her? No matter whatever he said Ranenda specially asked for Deya and assigned her a lot of work other than her routine work. Taking an interview of the governor, tête-à-tête with Girija Devi, visiting the hospital to question the superintendent about the issue of the stealing of a baby- all these she did herself. Moreover, last year the job of observing the parliament election in the district of Howrah was given to Deya.

However, Soumya said that the works were thrust on Deya, not seeing her enthusiasm but because of a lack of reporters. Right at that moment there was no male next to hand. Might be. Quite possible. The manpower in Nabaprabhat was less. Four years ago when Deya had joined Nabaprabhat the paper was in its initial stage, circulation was only twenty to twenty-five thousand. Then there were not sufficient employees in the news desk - Deya, Kanad, Sukanya, Tathagata, the four trainee sub-editors. With them were three sub-editors, assistant editor and the news editor. The number of permanent employees in the reporting section was very less. After appointing Ranen Samaddar as the editor, replacing Deepak Sen, Nabaprabhat flourished in quick pace. Now the circulation had touched almost 1.5 lacs. But in comparison with the increase of circulation did the number of employees in the news section increase? Including the news editor and the sub-editor now they are nineteen permanent employees
in total. It was the plan of Mohit mallik, the owner, not to let increase the number of permanent employees. Mohit was a shrewd businessman. The Malliks had their iron business from three generations. Mohit himself had expanded his family business. Including export house and generator manufacturing there were many other things. In the business community of Kolkata, Mohit was a shining star. Who knows why he had suddenly stepped into the world of newspaper! Perhaps it was with the hope of increasing the social and political influence. Yet the sense of profit was in Mohit’s blood. He understood it well how to get the maximum work out of minimum manpower. Perhaps to some extent, with this intention he introduced the evening shift for women. No, not to some extent but to a large extent. In the newspaper office the work pressure increases from afternoon and evening. Till now the males had shouldered the responsibility at night. The burden can be lessened if the duty is rotated among the staff. Today Nabaprabhat possesses a good reputation. Perhaps the doubt has dawned in Mohit’s mind that agitation may burst if people are made to work with less payment and the efficient males also may fly to the big housed spreading their wings. But Ranenda was behind their plan. No matter what Mohit might have thought nothing is going to be implemented in Nabaprabhat until Ranenda wants it.

Whatever it might be there is no doubt that a change has come. By rendering responsibility to Deya, Ranenda also must have understood that there is no point in neglecting and side tracking them. Deya had proved that. Though Sukanya might babble nonstop but she was not the girl to go ahead and take on responsibilities. If she were sent to jungle she would go, given an evening shift she would do with a smiling face and even in the night shift she would not protest. But voluntarily? No! The girl was as if too much of matter of fact. As an unmarried she should show some more enthusiasm but no… The very thought, that Deya herself had made a contribution, however little it might be, behind the sudden decision of the authority, refreshed her mind. On other days after her work she feels quite tired but on today getting down from the bus she went for some shopping with a pretty light mind. It was Deya’s duty to do the regular shopping for the household. Did Soumya have time for that? He would run to office gulping his breakfast by eight-thirty and often he wouldn’t return home before nine. And on holidays he
behaved like a prince. He would furnish with all kinds of odd excuses even if asked to go to the nearby shop. Deya bought a big loaf of bread with half-a-dozen of eggs from the shop near the crossing of her house. Soumya was not addicted to tea or coffee. He preferred milk with cornflakes. The cornflakes were about to get over. She bought a packet of a reputed brand. These days the shop kept a variety of frozen items. She took some ham, as she wanted to prepare sandwich for Soumya the next morning.
The house was not very far from the main road. As soon as she went up to the third floor and rang the bell, Laxmi opened the door. She was an old maid servant. She was in Deya’s father’s house for a long time. After marriage Deya kept her in her house. Deya handed her the packets in her hand and hanged her vanity bag on Laxmi’s shoulder. While putting her slippers she danced her eyeballs, “Has sahib returned”?
“No.”
“Give me quickly a glass of water. My throat is dry as a wood.”
“No wonder. It’s so hot.”

Laxmi treaded slowly while talking. Hers was a loose and free gait. She was pretty aged. These days she was suffered from knee and hip pain. She was unable to work fast now. Deya did not go inside the room straight. Switching on the fan she lounged on the sofa, drying the sweat. She was feeling relaxed. Lifting her feet up on the center table she danced them slowly. She yawned opening her mouth little.
Laxmi bought water. As she touched the glass Deya shrank her nose like a little girl, “Oh no! Why are you giving this ordinary water? Give me from the fridge.”
“Drink this without fuss.” Laxmi sounded like a guardian.
“You have entered bathing in sweat. You need not drink anything cool right now. You catch a cold.”
“Nothing will happen. Just give me, please.”
“You disobedient girl! You just don’t listen to anyone.” Grumbling as usual Laxmi brought the bottle of cold water from fridge. Being displeased she said, “Drink. Drink it to your heart’s content. You will face the music when are down with fever.”
“Are you cursing me?” Deya stooped in between gulping water. She gave a fake expression of sorrow, “I just returned after a day-long toil. You should be giving me a plateful of hot *luchi* on my hand and you are scolding me instead.”

“Would you really like to have *luchi*?” Right at the moment Laxmi’s tobacco-stained teeth were wide open. I have already kneaded dough.

“No, leave it. If I eat *luchi* now, the dinner won’t be any fun. Rather give me a cup of tea. By the by, why did you suddenly knead the dough?”

“I thought of preparing *parota* tonight. Meat is there. The other day *dada* was telling that *parota* goes better with meat than rice.”

“Aha, only careful about *dada*’s taste, huh! Don’t I exist?”

“Oh, as if you eat so much! You are on a diet, eh!”

“What?”

“Slim. You are working hard to be bone thin. I really don’t understand how you work the whole day eating so little!”

“Me, and slim?” Quickly Deya sat straight. Pinching her tummy over her *kameez* she said, “See how much has accumulated here!”

“Married girls look better with that much of fat. They look a little rounded and filled.”

“Oh really?”

“Then? Don’t you see the married lady of the first floor? Her collarbones have become prominent. The jaw line is pushing out… Malina was telling that her *boudi* does not eat rice at noon these days. She mixes some powder in water and drinks that. How long will a husband stick to such a vulture?”

“Why? Why will the relation not last long?”

“Guys like a bit plump girls.”

Deya was trying very hard to control her laugh, now she burst out. She was seeing Laxmi from childhood. Laxmi *di* was always little plump. It did not seem that Laxmi *di* was any less plump when her husband had gone missing deserting her!

Probably Laxmi was embarrassed a bit seeing Deya’s laugh. She took the bottle from the table and while entering the kitchen she constantly looked back. Switching on the TV Deya again sat on the sofa with the remote in her hand. Her body was sweating profusely.
She must take a bath. Yet she did not want to get up without drinking tea. She started surfing channels. Her eyes got fixed on a Bengali channel. The news was being broadcasted. Again a new-born girl child had been rescued from a dustbin. This morning, in Shyambazar. Didn’t Nabaprabhat get the news? At least up to six o’clock the news had not reached the office. If it had come early she would have heard. It might be late but certainly somebody would cover the news in brief. The readers digest this kind of thrilling news very well. What a horrible news it is! Perhaps including this at least four children were found out in the last six months. Strange, all of them were girls! Was the society progressing or regressing?

Laxmi was telling something from kitchen, “You got a phone call. Just sometime back.”

Pressing the button Deya decreased the volume, “Who? What is the name?”

“That very friend of yours from college. Sujit…”

Deya dropped from the blue, “Sujit? But I don’t have any of friends with that name, Sujit?”

“Oh is it? Then it must be Tapan.”

“What are you saying? Try to remember please.”

“That boy who whenever comes, opens the fridge to check what food is inside…. very jolly.”

“Ritam?”

“Yes, yes, Ritam.”

“Strange! You have been seeing him for such a long time. Why can’t you remember his name?”

“Sometimes I forget”, Laxmi smiled shyly. “He was saying that he has some urgent work with you.”

Ritam is absolutely crazy. He is always in his fancy world. He starts talking gibberish whenever suddenly he goes nuts. Once in a while he emerges like a comet and visits her house. On the day of Deya’s wedding he came with a huge bouquet. It was so huge that the door was literally small for taking it inside. “There are as many roses as the days of our friendship in it. Count them!” Who else could be called crazy other than him! He was off his head because of his excessive craze for literature.
What could be Ritam’s urgency? Forget it! Who would listen to the useless talk of this crazy fellow!

Drinking her tea Deya entered the bathroom attached to her bedroom. Their two roomed flat was well arranged. The rooms were of moderate size, the drawing cum dining hall was also not bad and the kitchen was also pretty good. There was a balcony beside the bedroom, narrow and west facing. Though the other toilet was bigger in size the bathroom was better arranged and decorated. After taking this flat in rent, Deya, according to her choice, got a glass-rack, beautiful basin, attractive towel-rod and telephone shower fixed there. She also fixed an oval rot iron framed mirror over the head of the basin. Deya was very luxurious about her bathroom. Had she got a bit more space, she would have fixed a complete bathtub. A decorated veiled small tube light made the mirror brighter. A bathing Deya was reflected in that mirror. Before she was lanky, after marriage her figure had become quite full. Her complexion was not fair, rather a bit dusky. Yet that dusky complexion suited her. Though she was not a dazzling beauty she was quite charming. Her face had a glow untainted innocence. It was because of that innocence that her age stood still. It was hard to take her more than twenty-five even in twenty-nine.

After bath Deya wore a light nightgown. Now there is no chance of outsider coming in. This nightdress would give her the best comfort. Running the comb loosely on her hair she switched on the TV again. On the colorful screen, came up a big deck of a ship. The gloomy heroine was looking at the blue sea. The hero came and stood by the heroine. The hero was applying the ointment of happiness on the sorrow of the sad heroine. Deya had seen the movie in theatre. She liked it very much. She did not change the channel and was immersed in the movie with fresh mood. Laxmi came and sat near her feet. On the carpet. She was not addicted to TV. She never switches on the machine when she is alone. If Soumya or Deya turns on the TV she sits sometime. Perhaps now Laxmi did not like the English movie. She was feeling uneasy. Suddenly she said, “I forgot to tell you something. Today my younger son-in-law came.” “Suddenly?”
“Nothing sudden. He needs money. He will buy a rickshaw.”

“How does he suddenly need to buy a rickshaw?”

“He was saying that nothing is left after giving the rent amount to the owner everyday…Tell me what should I do? Should I give?”

Laxmi had two daughters. Both of the sons-in-law have an emperor attitude. The elder son-in-law is a carpenter and the younger son-in-law pulled rickshaw in Sonarpur. Both of them used to squeeze their mother-in-law to their hearts’ content. Laxmi had no scope of saving her salary in the bank. Due to the favor of her sons-in-law money vanishes within a blink of eye.

Deya uttered in her mind, “You will give irrespective of whether I say yes or no. You are not able to overcome your weakness towards them.”

But outwardly she said, “How much does he want?”

“Around twelve hundred.”

“Oh my God, that much?”

Laxmi was to tell something in reply but the phone rang before that. Stretching her arm Deya lifted the handset, “Hello?”

“What’s up, what happened to you? At 7.30 in the evening also one can’t catch you over phone, and even at 10.30 in the morning you are not available…Did Nabaprabhat buy you?”

Ritam talked nonstop, deliriously.

Deya mildly scolded him, “Hey why do you bluff? When did you call me in the morning? Up to eleven fifteen I was at home.”

“I see. Didn’t I call in the morning? Then perhaps I thought of doing so. Leave it…What are you doing now?”

“Just killing time. Watching TV.”

“Idiot box?”

“They are showing a good movie in cable. Titanic.”

“Oh, the hanky panky around the yacht!”

Laughter churned out from the pit of her stomach. What a naming of such film! Really only Ritam could do it.

What was the name that he gave for Jurassic Park? Oh the devil dyno is back!
He gave a strange name to Arnold Shoergenegar, the big Demon.
She replied while laughing, “Yes exactly. What’s happening at home?”
“Home front is silent like a graveyard. Peace prevails.”
“Have you abandoned story writing and started with poetry? Do you tend to speak in rhyme?”
“You don’t read even poetry, do you?”
“Why?”
“Had you read, you would have known that those rhymes had been discarded from the eighteenth century. Now the rhymes are strict prose.”
“Okay understood. What’s new with Shrabani? How is the little one?”
“Why do you hurl so many questions at a time? There is nothing to tell about anybody.”
“What do you mean?”
“I mean they are fine, as usual. Tuski is growing, Shrabani is shrinking and ma is in the same state.
“What a mean way of talking! By the way what is your urgent matter?”
“Financial. How much does your paper pay for a story to be published?”
“Is your story going to appear in Nabaprabhat?”
“Don’t you take any interest in literature? It is such a big literary event. Ritam Sengupta’s writing is going to be published…”
“Tell me, how I will come to know about Sunday’s page. It is completely in a different room. When is it coming out?”
“This Sunday or next Sunday. It has already been composed. I have information.”
“Do you often visit our office? But you don’t meet me.”
“I went only once. To submit the story. Two months ago. You weren’t there that day. Don’t speak rubbish. Come to the point. How much will they pay?”
“Can’t say. May be three or four hundred. I have heard that they generally pay this much.”
“Only this much? Don’t they pay even a four figure amount?” Ritam sounded disheartened. “Yours Mallik fellow is a big miser, I must say.”
“Not miser, frugal. You people will cook story and expect him to squander money after you? Being a new newspaper they pay enough.” Deya wanted to make fun of him.
“Tell, tell, it’s your time. Let me get the Nobel. Then you will come to know whom you are teasing.”

“Are you only running after literature? What about of your job?”

“I have it till now. At least till today.”

“Come one day. It’s a long time since you came.”

“I will. Now I have become a bit free. In between I was undergoing so much of trouble!”

“Trouble?”

“Don’t ask me. There was a big trouble. The daughter of maidservant, Kanan, who works in my elder aunt’s place, was missing suddenly. Kanan fell down at my aunt’s feet, ‘Please search my daughter’. Why does my aunt think that only I can handle all the odd jobs of the world? So get that fellow.”

“Didn’t you inform the police?”

“Everything was done…police station, police, hospital, morgue, grave yard… Like a detective I searched her. With whom she had friendship or if she had any illicit relationship. I heard a rumor and ran to Deegha. Again I received another information and landed in Burdwan. The sixteen-year-old girl has put me in lot of trouble.”

“Then? Could you find her?”

“She came back herself. To be exact, she had escaped.”

“From where?”

“That is a filthy place. Some red-light area in Mumbai. Perhaps Forkland Road. The hero promised to keep the girl in his heart like Karishma and took her across the Arab sea. And then threw the girl in that gutter.”

“Could you catch the man?”

“Are you crazy? He had fled long back. How the girl came back is another thrilling story. Your Nabaprabhat will just grab it.”

“Are you serious?” Deya was moved a bit. “Can we make a story of it?”

“Will you make?”

“It can be easily done if the material is available. Such a story… The life of a girl got ruined….If the matter is written in a proper way the police will be forced to search for the hero.”

“Hmm. It will be really good if the fellow can be caught. The fellow is a real scoundrel.”
Ritam put down the receiver after discussing a few trivial matters. Keeping the handset on her lap Deya started thinking. One must write, it should be written. She has to talk to Ranenda directly. Should she tell Rananda or the news editor, Tirthankarda. The flow of her thought got torn. It was the calling bell. Soumya had returned.

In the scorching heat of the noon Ritam got down from the bus. Even a busy road like Prince Anwar Shah Road was entirely vacant. Having found some shade even the street dogs were dozing. The tar of the road melted, the slippers were getting stuck. A private bus emitted smoke profusely and poisoned the already heated air. The ground out there was swaying like a desert. No, not like a desert but a mirage. His eyes got blazed. Standing still for a while Ritam looked at the sway. He likes the summer very much. Especially the lonely noons. A feeling of loneliness clouded his mind; the brain became very light. So many condensed pains revolved round his heart.

Forget it! What pain? Ritam is very happy now. Ritam ran to cross the road. From today he is again a free bird. He took out the cigarette packet from his pocket. There were only three left. Should he light one? Then only two would be left. That means there is every possibility of getting it over. Problem, real problem. Kali da would not open the shop before five. So if he intended to buy he would have to rush to Naveena cinema hall. But when the desire is strong and vigorous desire one can be lighted. The little desires of the heart should not be suppressed without any reason. Ritam smiled to himself, ‘Smoke, smoke to your heart’s content.’ Again the days of rationing cigarettes are knocking at the doors. How is it to shift to bidi now? He needs to smoke while writing.
Puffing the cigarette Ritam entered his locality in a pleasant mood. The cigarette was not yet over when he reached the doorstep of his house. He didn’t feel like throwing it. This is not time to waste. Carefully extinguishing it he kept the half-burnt cigarette in his pocket.

At the advent of her son in an odd time Atasi got shocked as if she had seen some ghost, “What happened? You? Now?”

“I just came.” Ritam shrugged.

“Isn’t your health okay?”

“Do you think so looking at me?” He carefully evaded his mother and entered the room quickly.

Atasi too followed her son, “Is office duty over today?”

“What’s the sad occasion to be so? The office runs as usual.”

The cloud of doubt in Atasi’s eyes condensed. Such airs of Ritam are not unfamiliar to Atasi. Indistinctly she asked, “Did you leave this job too?” “Yes, I quit.”

“Woe is me!”

“Why? What happened?”

Without changing his clothes Ritam lied down on the bed stretching his hand and feet. Twisting his body he said, “Ma, I was unable to adjust.”

Atasi stood for sometime as if thunderstruck, the way she does every time. The next moment she rudely snubbed, “No wonder that you can’t adjust to any job.”

“Really ma, the job was not good. So many currents and cross currents…”

“Tell me which is a good job according to you? Now should I appoint you as the governor or the president?”

“Please ma, don’t give me that job. My life will be a hell in all kind of protocols.”

“What are you made of? Tell me.” Atasi almost was in tears. She sat on the corner of the bed of her son and daughter-in-law with a thud. The eight-month-year old Tuski was sleeping on bed. She shifted her granddaughter a bit along with the oilcloth. She wiped her eyes with the corner of her anchal, “How will I show my face to Ambar? Even Runu will feel very bad.”
“Then don’t show your face,” quick reply from Ritam. “When didi and jamaibabu will turn up, hide yourself under the bed or behind the cupboard. I will tell them that ma is not at home.”

“You wretch, I’ll give you a tight slap. Are you shameless? You are married and have a baby too…”

“I am really surprised. Is getting married a shameful act? Only human beings get married. You also did. And everybody knows that after marriage one gets a baby, unless one among the husband and the wife is found to be unfit to produce a child.”

“Hey just shut up, no witty remark”. Atasi slapped tightly on the dancing knees of Ritam with anger, “Don’t you feel sad even after seeing the little flower-like baby.”

“Sad and that too looking at Tuski? I feel overwhelmed with joy looking at her”. Just saying this Ritam turned towards his daughter. He stooped and rubbed his nose gently against his daughter’s. He tickled her cheeks with his fingers, “Suntu Muntu Runtu Tuntu…Tuski Fuski Khuski Rushki. Darling why are you sleeping still now? It’s four. Get up. After eating won’t you go out with your grandma?

“Hey, don’t wake her up. With a lot of trouble I put her sleep. Now if her sleep is ruined she will go on whining.”

“Then leave now. Let me enjoy properly the happiness of quitting the job at least for ten minutes. Otherwise I will really wake her up. Then she will play the clarinet with the po po sound next to your ears.”

Atasi was silent. She pulled down her face. Ritam smiled within and pretended to close his eyes. From the corner of his eyes he could see whether Atasi got up or not. No, is ma the person to move so easily! Now he has to bear with the sighs that will spring out from the bosom of her heart. Fonch fonch, fonsh fonsh, fyatch fyatch….! Is this his fault to return home directly? Perhaps it would have been better if he had returned home after completing his tuition after evening and could have announced the news at the dining table dramatically. Then the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law would have sat face to face and none of the two could get the real chance to attack him in front of each other! Ritam covered his eyes crossing his hands. Ambarda was the actual culprit. Why is he firmly determined to spare no pains to demean Ritam? It’s like a game! Competition! Just
to see who ultimately loses the game! To see whether the son-in-law could arrange more jobs or the brother-in-law could quit more! O God! What connections he has! He made him join many places. He joined the sales section in not less than three companies. He had to lie so much about the products that even after coming back home the tongue remained numb. Then he was in the accounts section of a cosmetic company. Ritam never did the work of calculation in his whole life. He has never been a student of commerce but was unfortunate to prepare balance sheets in spite of being an M.A. in Political Science. ‘Keep it up, stick to it, you will definitely learn!’ Of course in six months he learnt good lessons. There were too much of manipulation in the accounts. His palms were hardened in preparing the false vouchers. Whenever he looked into the mirror he could see the face of a sinner in him. What else is left if one’s gets stained? Then Amabarda pushed him to his friend’s farm. ‘You need not do anything, just give company to Shyamal.’ Oh God! That company itself was so dangerous! The whole day he had to run to the sales tax, income tax and excise offices. In the morning he has to go the tension villa, while trouble villa awaits in the evening. How softly and sweetly he had to talk to those fat crooks. Shame! He was very fortunate that there was no need to resign from there. Shyamal Majumder’s business was at a low ebb. His elder sister could not taunt him at least regarding quitting this job. With pain in heart she again played Ambarda against him. And the result was the punishment of being the store manager. He had to take out two kilograms of grease, count six bolts, keep record of each item from a pin to rearing, and what not. From the back door loads of things were getting misplaced but outwardly everything looked just perfect. Even after seeing that one can not speak, one has to just sit blindfold. How much can one tolerate?

While thinking these things Ritam could sense that Atasi’s vocal cords got back to form again, “Ambar told, ‘Ma, this time Babua has secured job in a big farm. If he can stick to this he will progress fast. But it’s my bad luck.’” Depression was very prominent in Atasi’s tone. Ritam felt little bad for her. Why ma is so simple? Why ma can not understand that Ritam lacks all those traits that help one to progress speedily in today’s market.

Closing his eyes Ritam told, “Why does Ambarda do so much? All the people from politics have no sense of limit. Ask him to stop at least now.”
“Do I sit idle? Don’t I do anything?”
“He does because he loves you. He does as he feels bad to see you jobless.”
“What do you do? You just sit idle and go on writing some nonsense and work for others without remuneration.” Atasi heaved a kilometer long sigh, “It’s only me who is in all the trouble. It is nothing but my bad luck. I had so many dreams in life. Have any of them come true? That man happily left for the ultimate abode. Only I am left to endure all the sufferings in this world. When my husband had left I thought what is in my hand. At least my son is there. What the son is giving his poor mother in return? When will death favor me?”

Very raw dialogues. It was just the result of gulping the Bengali TV serials in TV sitting idle in the entire afternoon. Even to reply to these regressions, drenched in tears, would be a useless effort. Without making the least noise Ritam pretended to sleep.
Atasi was not a person to give up. She was pushing her son, “What happened? Why are you silent? Why did you quit the job? What is your problem?”
“You can not understand that.”
“I hope your wife will understand. Let Sharavani return from college. She will teach you a lesson. The poor wife will do all the hard work to earn money and feed us and the man will simply lie down and dance his feet.”
“So what’s wrong in that ma?” Ritam opened his eyes. With a cheerful smile he said, “Time has changed. Always men will earn and feed and women will simply sit idle and wag their tails. No way.”
“Tell this to your wife.”
“We have already settled that agreement.”
“Great! What a mode of talking! My heart is chilled with fear thinking what trouble Shrabani will create once she comes back.”
Now the real cat has come out of the wallet. Surpassing regret, sadness and despondency it is actually the sense of terror, which is reining Atasi’s mind. She was feeling sad but all of it was not for quitting his job. Actually the mother was overcome by the grief apprehending how Shrabani would grind and crush her dearest Babua after returning from college.
Poor ma. She suffered from so much of insecurity. Earlier ma had a better personality. She had coped with many unfavorable tides of the family with a smiling face. Actually the sudden demise of the father has turned the mother to that, somewhat bent and coward type. It is really surprising that this ma once strongly had fought with the elder and younger brothers of baba regarding the division of property. She did not let baba become weak when it came to the question of demanding his due portion. To say the truth baba was more of helpless nature. He could not forcefully establish his views; whether it was at home or at office, he did not have the power to shout and proclaim his desires. Even baba was helpless when he met his death. He went to Bhubaneshwar for official work. And he collapsed by sudden heart attack at midnight. In the morning, breaking the door, people discovered that he was lying dead. Struggling with the pain of cardiac arrest perhaps he tried to open the door or call someone but could not. The healthy and strong man had gone out of the house with smile. Can anyone easily accept his sudden demise? At least the family members? Ritam was then in the second year of his graduation and his elder sister’s marriage was just finalized. Ritam felt as if the sky over his head suddenly had disappeared and his elder sister was under depression for long. But they too came out of the grief. Only ma could not. It was not that ma was in dire need of money. A good amount was drawn from baba’s office. Even baba had life insurance and things of that sort. After collecting the amount there was never a situation to starve. There was no problem in continuing Ritam’s studies; even the elder sister’s marriage was performed smoothly. Only the superfluities were cut down. Yet the feeling of the ground slipping under her feet did not die in ma in any way.

But presently ma is suffering from another type of distress. Her son is not earning much and the family is run by the income of her daughter-in-law. And for this ma is cowered with fear. But why is it so? Does ma feel that with her son, earning more, her position, as the head of the family, will be secured more? Does ma think like that? But there is no reason to think so. Shrabani sometime tries to put her views in practice but she does not have any intention to take away ma’s position. However, in some matters she loves to depend on her mother-in-law. Ritam knows that.
Atasi was sitting with a dull face. Ritam just turned over and gently stroked her cheek, “Why are you so tensed? Let me deal with Shrabani regarding this. I shall face the music. You just see…”
“What?” Atasi blew her nose.
“You just don’t play the same tune with Shrabani. Please go and supply some fuel to me.”
“Tea?”
“Please. One cup, strong.”

Piercing Ritam with a very disheartened look Atasi got up. Ritam too got up immediately. With the matchbox and cigarette in hand he came slowly to the window. The rooms of this house built at the time of his grandfather were quite big. Even the size of the windows and doors were not very small. Hope the lungs of Tuski would not be affected if he would smoke standing near the window! This is too prohibited when Shrabani is at home. Smoking in this room is strictly prohibited.

Lighting the half burnt cigarette Ritam threw the matchstick outside the window, in the garden behind. Though it is called a garden it is actually a bush full of weeds. In a house of four co-sharers the upper floor is for his uncles and the ground floor is for Ritam’s family. One portion of the ground floor is for his two aunts. But their portion remains closed throughout the whole year. In fact the aunts did not demand as such. Though kaku slightly had objected baba and jethu forcefully gave that portion to their sisters. The garden is a joint property, so nobody has much obligation to look after it. Still in a thickly populated area of South Kolkata there is some greenery and this is enough. But the windows facing this side must be closed before evening. Otherwise the mosquitoes from the bushes and the weeds attack vigorously.

A bird was singing in the garden. A strange sound. Pik pik piiiik. Releasing the smoke Ritam looked for the bird in the garden. It couldn’t be seen. While returning home a plot of a good story had struck his head. What was that? What was that? Like the bird it was playing the hide and seek game in the forest of his brain. As of now it is difficult to find it.
Tea was ready and Shrabani had returned by the time he finished the cigarette. Seeing Ritam at home she was not at all surprised. She hanged her vanity bag on the side ring of the dress-stand and put on her slippers. She leant to see her daughter. Shrabani usually doesn’t touch Tuski whenever she comes from outside.

Atasi was standing at door. Her eyeballs were moving from one court to another. Softly she asked, “Shrabani, would you like tea?”

“Sure. Since how long she has been sleeping?”

“Since three. In my lap she has her eyes closed but once you keep her on the bed she starts crying. I think she will get up now.”

“Did she finish the Cerelac completely?”

“Almost. Around two o’clock I have given her fruit juice too. She likes the juice of *mosambi* very much.” Atasi went away. Shrabani was changing her *saree*. Ritam looked sidewise. Even after child birth, Shrabani hadn’t let even an ounce of fat to accumulate in her body. Soon she was back in her slim look. Presently her fair complexion after the sunburn has turned to light copper color. Shrabani’s eyes, face or nose are not that sharp. Yet for her toned figure she looks quite attractive.

Clearing his throat by coughing Ritam said, “Why are you with such a long face?”

There was no answer.

“Did the principal scold you?”

Again no reply.

“Why have you kept mum?”

Yet she didn’t utter a sound. Folding the *saree* she placed it on the dressing stand.

Ritam broadened his smile; “There is a news for you.”

“I know.” Shrabani opened her mouth.

“You can’t know.” Shrabani’s voice was cool. “You have quit the job.”

“Wow! Great! How did you come to know? By smelling?”

“Didi* had called me up in college.”

“Didi*” Ritam was surprised. “How did *didi* come to know?”

“From Ambarda.”

“Ambarda?”

“I can’t say. Perhaps your boss Mr. Debashish…”
“This is called the age of information technology. What a network! Quick phoning and the news spreads from one house to another like the speed of a current. Before giving the news to ma why did didi call Shrabani in college? Didi has the very bad habit of backbiting. She must have incited Shrabani.”

Ritam retained the smile on his face, “I see. This is the reason why you are so heated up?”

“Why should I be? You will live according to your wish. Why should I be angry?”

“Thanks. I am tension free. Now I can devote all my time to writing.”

“Hmm”.

“I really don’t enjoy the game of job again and again.”

“Hmm”.

“Before marriage I had already made an agreement with you. Hadn’t I? I will pursue literature and you will run the family…”

“Yes.”

With that the single word reply hmm, Shrabani went out of the room. Ritam’s eyes got cringed. Today Shrabani is very angry. No, he must please her. He must had to.

Again the bird was singing in the garden. Pik pik piiik. Ritam quickly came to the window. No, he could not see it. Was it playing hide and seek game with Ritam? After searching it for a while Ritam went back. Changing his clothes he came directly to his room. This small room was once the storeroom of the joint family but now decked out with chair, table and rack it is being used as Ritam’s space to cultivate literature. Shrabani’s books of college were also kept there. She too used the space occasionally.

The table was disorderly. Books, papers and newspapers were piled up. After extensive search Ritam took out some written papers tied by a clip. A story was left half-finished. He loosely ran his eyes over the pages. No, no, it was not done. The structure appeared to be loose. It seemed to be too schematic. It would be fine to write again from the beginning. But would it stand if the skeleton was radically changed? Would the readers feel it to be imposed, as there was an attempt to draw a comparison between the broken table made of marble and the present face of India? Would they understand the
allegory in it? Last Sunday the organizers of the story-reading meeting of Anita Memorial Library at Belgharia had sent a letter to invite Ritam. Shubhankar, Dilip and Tamonash will also read their stories; Asit Sanyal will be the president. Asitda is a busy writer. These days one can not find him in any conference of story reading. He really wishes to read his story in front of Asitda. Okay leave it, no need to hurry. If the writing is not up to the mark Ritam does not feel like sending it anywhere, even he does not feel like reading that.

The phone was ringing in the outside room. Ritam was absentminded for a while. Was it didi? What if she again starts nagging? Leave it! Better not to be bothered. Again Ritam concentrated his eyes on the story. He immersed in the writing and started sucking his pen making his lips pointed. Restlessly he ran his pen and cut down a whole paragraph. He changed some words. He was very fussy about using words. No, still nothing seems to be okay. He must re-arrange the whole thing. His hands groped for cigarette over the table. It was not there. He searched the pockets of his kurta. No, it was not there too. Ritam became restless. When the cigarettes are not next to his hands his thirst for it naturally increases more.

He was about to bring the packet from the next room. Shrabani was at the door. In a cold tone she said, “Your phone.”

“Who?”

“Your confidante.”

“Who is that?”

“She is the only one. Deya.”

Ritam laughed out, “Darling, you are my confidante.”

Shrabani still did not cool down. She did not melt. Roughly she said, “Deya wanted your office number. She believes that you are still in the same office!”

Ritam shrugged. Though he wanted to make witty remarks, he managed to control himself. He picked up the phone, “What’s the matter princess? What’s the reason for summoning me?”

“I could not really expect that you would be at home. Have you bunked your office?”

Didn’t Shrabani give the good news? Strange! Then perhaps it’ll be better if Ritam also
doesn’t reveal the news. At least today. At this moment. In a humorous tone Ritam said, “The efficient people need not stay at office for long. Your eight hours are equivalent to one hour for me.” “Yes, very true… Leave it and listen to me. There is something important for which I have made this call to you.” Deya sounded excited, “Just now I had talked with my editor. Ranenda has agreed. He asked me to go first for an interview.” “Interview? Whom?” “How strange! Didn’t I tell you about that day before yesterday? You were talking about that girl in your aunt’s home… in that red light area of Mumbai… I want to meet that girl.” Ritam stumbled. Casually he had told something and Deya took the matter seriously. Oh God what a problem! Why Ritam did not develop the habit of tying his tongue! With much hesitation Ritam said, “Forget about it, is it a subject of making a news?” “Strange, but the other day it was you who insisted. After hearing this even Ranenda was highly moved. He even showed a nice track. Every year so many girls go missing in Kolkata. It’ll be fine if it is possible to prepare a statistics of them along with their economic condition, an account of how many of them have returned, how many of them have no trace and amongst them the girl’s story. If a story is there the feature will not be uninteresting.” “But…” Ritam gulped. “Hey Deya, listen to me. Will it be right to make fuss over the issue of that girl further?” “Why won’t it be right? This is not at all an isolated case. Do you remember, after Puja, a big news came in our paper regarding the rescue of the three Bengali girls from Jalgaon, Maharashtra? They were also misled and forced to plunge into the business of blue films. Presently in Kolkata a big racket of smuggling girls is active. If the case of this girl can be focused the matter will be strong.” “Yet…” “Why are you opposing so much?” Deya gave a bright smile. “Are you thinking that in the smuggling racket of those girls you will also be…?” “No, no. Actually it’s only for you that…” Ritam quickly arranged the logic, “I mean there is no such proof of the matter. Even the police was not informed anything further.
What is the proof that the girl is telling the truth now?"
“That I will find out after talking to her. It is not so easy to cheat women’s eyes. Besides, can a girl lie about her stay in a red light area?”
“Yes, you are right.” Ritam took some time. “Deya, still what is the need? What was to happen had already happened. She is a young girl. I have seen her. She is fifteen or sixteen at the most. And in such a tender age such an accident has taken place.”
“Actually such weak-minded attitude of you people is bad. It is for this reason that the vicious sharks take too much advantage. How will it be possible to unearth these people unless one does not come forward? The police should also be shaken a bit. Shouldn’t we, the people from newspaper carry out our social responsibility?”
“Perhaps the girl may have to face trouble if the news soon gains currency.”
“I will smartly write that. The name and address of that girl will not be mentioned. And if something happens further all of us will be there.” Saying this Deya’s excited voice suddenly got lowered, “Hey, Ritam please don’t change your mind. I myself told Ranenda and he also had showed interest. Now how can I tell him that the girl is out of reach? Try to understand that it has now become a matter of prestige. After this can I ever ask for any assignment? Would you now put me in an awkward situation?
Ritam sighed. He talked to himself, “If you say like that how I can say no to you, Deya?”
“Tell me. Tomorrow, day after tomorrow or three days hence. Oh, I forgot to tell you that now I am working in the evening shift. I am free up to two in the afternoon. Can you manage one day in your office?”
A smile appeared in the corner of Ritam’s lips. Keeping his tone normal he said, “Come tomorrow at 10am. I’ll be at home.”
Putting down the telephone Ritam came back with a quite tensed face.
As soon as he sat on the chair Shrabani told, “Why are you with a long face? What did your girlfriend say?”
Ritam nodded his head in a gesture of negation.
Shrabani cast side glance towards him, “Can’t you tell me?”
In spite of his suppressed uneasiness looking at Shrabani’s face, Ritam burst into laughter. All her emotions of sorrow, anger, pain vanished instantly. There was a suppressed jealousy in Shrabani’s eyes. While pursuing his masters Ritam had a kind of infatuation towards his classmate, Deya. To say the truth Ritam actually fell in love with Deya. But everything was one sided. Deya did not know about it and Ritam too did not tell her anything. There was no question of expressing. Before stepping into the premises of the university Deya developed deep love for Soumya. Shrabani knew everything. She heard everything from Ritam himself. Before marriage one day Ritam told her this amusingly. After that they had started family together. Tuski came in their life. But still now Shrabani remembers this matter. Still now with the slight meeting between Ritam and Deya the Shrabani’s face gets shadowed.

Crazy girl. Why does Shrabani love him madly still now?

Ritam pulled his wife towards him. He told the reason of Deya’s phone call in brief. He asked, “Tell me dear, what you feel. Will this initiative be right? Deya is pressurizing me obstinately about this.”

“It’s your matter. Your Deya is forcing you.”

“Oh! Why Deya will be mine? Mine is Shrabani. Ritam loosely encircled Shrabani’s waist with his hands. Putting his mouth on Shrabani’s smooth naval point he softly told, ‘Shrabani, Tuntuni, Jhunjhuni, Sonamani.’”

“Hey leave. It’s tickling.”

“I will not leave. First kiss me.”

“What is this? Tuski has woken up. I have to feed her milk.” Shrabani ran her fingers through Ritam’s head “Leave me please.”

“Umm umm..”

“Ma will call me right now.”

“Let her come.”

“Tuski will cry.”

“Let her cry. Ma will see Tuski.”

The bird was again singing in the garden. Pik pik piik. The afternoon was turning magical. He was getting a smell. Wild. From Shrabani’s body.”
There were pigeonhole like houses around a huge mud courtyard. They were brick-built houses but the roofs were made of tiles. Half-naked children shouted in the courtyard; buckets, pitchers and water-pots were lined up at the corporation tap where water came only at a particular time. The place emitted a foul odor. It could not be called exactly a slum but semi-slum. It could be considered that a common courtyard for thirty six houses. Deya noticed that there were TV antennas over the roofs of quite a few houses, even cable cords entered few places. Though dirty and torn, there were curtains hanging at the doors of many houses. Coming in front of the partly opened door Ritam called out, “Shewli?”

There was no response.

Ritam cleared his throat through coughing, “Shewli…Are you at home?”

Couple of faces peeped from the neighboring houses. Especially that of women. A bare bodied man with a checked lungi came out scratching his under arm and stood behind him. Frowning, he inspected Deya and Ritam.

Deya whispered, “Is there no one at home dear?”

The man with the checkered lungi heard that. In an indifferent tone he said, “Call her loudly. She is inside.”

But Ritam did not need to call her again. Somebody slightly opened the door, which was kept ajar. “Who is it?”

“Kanandi, it’s me. What are you doing?”

After long she gave audience. There was surprise in the eyes of the prematurely aged Kanan’s face, who was slim, clear complexioned and wore green colored cotton saree.

“What a surprise! Babuada, is it you? How did you suddenly come here? Now?”

“I have some urgent work. Didn’t you go out for work today?”

“Why? I have already finished work at your aunt’s house. There is no energy in the body. So I was lying down.” Kanan gave a side-glance to Deya. She moved from the entrance giving them way, “Come. Come inside.”
Deya entered the hut following Ritam. Yes, it was really a hut. It would be probably a little larger than Deya’s kitchen. The furniture in the room included a bedstead with a thin mattress; a dress stand made of mango-wood with clothes piled untidily and two almost blackish trunks. Amongst all these on one side of it was arrangement for cooking and eating. There were pots for cooking food, frying pan, spud, dishes, glasses and kerosene stove. Moreover in one side there was a seat for God. On the faded wall were a calendar with a photograph of the goddess Kali and the Bengali words for live happily were colorfully embroidered.

A lot of new blouses were scattered on the bedstead. Beside that were a scissor, thread and a casket full of hooks. And wearing a printed nighty, there was timid Shewli, with huge dark circles under her eyes. The girl was fixing hooks on a blouse. She got up in a hurry.

Ritam smiled, “Why have you got up? Sit down. What are you doing? Stitching?”

Kanan replied on behalf of her daughter, “Actually I used to do that. Now I have handed over to her. I do the hem and fix hooks.”

“Good, very good. How much do you get from a single blouse?”

“One rupee to one rupee twenty five paisa. If it is a georgette blouse I take one rupee fifty paisa.”

“From where do you get the work?”

“There is a shop in Sealdah.”

“To get it do you go all the way from Beleghata to Sealdah?”

Kanan did not give a straightforward reply. She gave a dry smile. “Dada, it’s all for the stomach. I cook in your aunt’s house twice a day and in another house once. I get around nine hundred and fifty. The rent of this house is one hundred and eighty.”

“Hmm, problem.” Ritam nodded, “Even the kerosene oil is eighteen rupees per liter.”

Would Ritam talk rubbish everywhere? It was already quarter to twelve. Deya would have to go to office from here. Deya was getting impatient. In a low voice she said, “Come to the point. I am getting late.”

“Oh yes.” Ritam showed all his teeth. “I did not introduce my friend till now. She is Deya. A very nice girl. She wants to talk to Shewli.”
Quickly like a mother bird Kanan became alert. In a careful tone she said, “Talk to Shewli? Why?”

“Just like that.” Deya quickly spoke out, “Actually I have heard a lot about you from Ritam, I mean from your Babua.”

“She is right Kanandi. Deya works in a newspaper office. They have immense power. If she says the police will…. that man…what was his name? Yes Shyam. They will dig out that Shyam fellow from underground.”

Kanan’s face turned pale. Her voice became dull, “Babua da what will be the outcome of all these things now? My daughter has succumbed to utter ruin which she was destined to.”

“So for this will you let that man go free? Don’t you want him punished?”

“Didi, what is the use? Even if the scoundrel is forced to put to suffer rigorous imprisonment, my daughter’s former state can’t be restored.”

“Who said that she would not get back to her earlier state? Today there are so many rehabilitation centers and homes. There she can learn to make handicrafts. They will help your daughter to stand on her own feet. If she wants she can pursue her studies too. The lives of so many girls are taking a new direction.”

Kanan looked with suspect, “Will they accept my daughter?”

“Why won’t they accept? We are there, we will arrange.”

Shewli was still standing curled up. Kanan looked at Shewli once and the next moment looked at Deya. Then she said. “Didi, why are you standing? Please take seat.”

Ritam said, “Deya, sit down. You carry on with your conversation. I will wait in the junction. How much time will you take?”

“Not much. I think twenty to twenty five minutes.”

Kanan was stretching the ragged bed sheet over the mattress. She kept the blouses, scissor and threads aside. After Ritam’s departure Deya took her place. After sitting she felt a bit relieved. Still she was feeling very hot. In this scorching heat how could these poor people survive?

Perhaps Kanan could read Deya’s mind. She told Shewli, “Why don’t you fan didi with the hand fan?”
“No, no, I don’t need anything.” Deya pulled Shewli’s hand towards her. “Come dear. Sit by me.”

It seemed that Shewli became a little comfortable. She sat by Deya lowering her head. The girl was really quite young. She had a very tender face. Her body was yet to bloom into youth. Those who had dragged this little girl in this dirty business misleading her were heartless fellows.

Kanan sat on the floor folding her knees. There was a small window on the backside of the hut. On the other side the sun was blazing with its scorching heat. But only that heat, and not the light, was entering the room. In that dull light Kanan seemed gloomier. Did Kanan suffer from anemia? Why was her complexion so pale?

To boost both mother and daughter Deya suddenly repeated some clichéd lines, “Listen, don’t think at all about whatever has happened. It is not easy to make one’s body impure. The body is never unholy unless the mind becomes impure.”

God knew what Kanan had understood but she wiped her eyes with the corner of her saree. She said, “Didi, you people are so educated and from a good family. By the way we are also Brahmins by caste. My village is in Fulia. My father was a priest. We were poor, very poor. He couldn’t afford to educate us for long. Yet my two elder sisters studied up to class eight and I studied up to class six. Expecting a son my father got seven daughters. I was the sixth one. So in getting us married our father…. My in-laws are Chakraborties.

Ritam was not wrong. Deya easily understood that Kanan was from a lower middle class family by the style of her talking. She was bored listening to Kanan’s story. But it was good to record it. It would bring color to the story.

Kanan was continuing in the same tone, “Shewli’s father was a school pass-out. He used to sell incense sticks in trains collecting them from a factory situated in that Avinash Mittir road. He was run over by a train in Durganagar when my daughter was six years old. The railway company didn’t give a single paisa as compensation. None of my husband’s brother gave me shelter. From then I had brought that girl up with my own. I wished to educate and make her stand on her feet. Kanan suddenly burst into tears, “Didi,
how will I come to know that the girl who was born to push her father to death had been lying to me in the name of going to school and was absolutely dull in studies and had illicit love affair with bad people! Even cinematographically they exchanged garlands in the temple of Kaalighat too! I feel like putting fire on her face. I was also young once. Even I could go astray. Did I go? That wretch has brought disgrace to our family. Shewli looked down. Deya patted on Shewli’s face, “Ah, why are you saying like that? Did she know that there were so many plans being cooked in his stomach? Isn’t it Shewli, tell me.”

Shewli lifted her face. There was gratitude in her eyes. She nodded her head. “Tell me from the beginning what exactly had happened.” Deya took out the small tape recorder from her vanity bag. Right at the moment the expressions of Kanan’s face changed, “Didi why is this?” “Don’t you think that I should tell the people what horrible torture Shewli had gone through? Let Shewli tell her story herself.” “But didi the neighbors know something else. I told them that the man took her with a promise to marry but eloped leaving her. Babuada has done so many things for me. So only they…” “Why are you unnecessarily scared? Your daughter’s name will not come out in the paper. Your name will not appear either. Do I look having intention of creating troubles for you?” “Yet didi…. Now it’s one kind of scandal but then…” “I am telling that nothing will happen. I am there.” Deya turned towards Shewli. “Shewli, won’t you open up and tell me everything? How did it happen and how did the man abduct you to the place?” Kanan had a strong hesitation in her face. But Shewli got confidence. In a clear tone she told, “Yes, I will.”

On the second day of the evening shift it was eleven at night when she came back home. Quite a lot of important news reached in the beginning of the evening. The militants in Kasmir forced twenty-two to death and the radio station was bombed. The
The income tax department raided the houses of seven reputed film producers at the same
time in Mumbai. The renowned sarod player Rahim Khan breathed his last in a hospital
in Agra. The lay out had to be changed. The two pages were being arranged nicely Two
employees were absent during night shift. Facing a lot of problem Deya herself had to
finish all those works. It seemed as if whenever there are less people they are always
flooded with news. The office van dropped her home. Deya was still not tired. The
excitement of the work still kept her spirits fresh. From below she could see Laxmi
standing on the dark balcony.
Laxmi sounded like a guardian. “Are you aware how late it is at night?”
Deya shrugged, “It’s just the beginning. Hereafter it can get all the more late. Has your
dada had his meal?”
“Is dada like you? He always takes food in time.”
While going to bed Deya smiled pressing her lips. It was the trend of Soumya’s house to
sit for dinner right at nine thirty keeping a sharp eye on the clock. Even after marriage
Soumya could not change the habit created by his mother. Right after coming home,
changing the dress he would sit in the dining table. In the beginning Deya used to face a
lot of problems as in her house they used to eating quite late. Now she had somewhat
adapted. If both of them were at home there was no exception of the rule. Was this
change of the girls called marriage?

Today it rained in the afternoon. After a stretch of hot days the city seemed to be
relieved. Perhaps today was the last kalbaishakhi of the year. Stars glittered in the sky.
Still there was the remnant of the storm. The temperature had lowered down quite a bit.
Deya did not take a bath. It was cool in the office but outside the atmosphere was hot.
She got little cold due to all these. Changing her dress she sprinkled some water on her
hand and face. Laxmi arranged the food on the table. Before sitting for dinner she peeped
in the next room. Deya hadn’t kept her bedroom clumsy but this room was stuffed with
furniture. There were two cupboards, an ironing table, a divan, three short chairs, a
bookcase and a computer. In the divan clothes were lying piled up. There was a heap of
books and magazines on the top of the bookcase.
Soumya was sitting in front of the computer. He could feel Deya’s presence. Turning his head, he said, “How come so late today?”

“Today I was rubbed badly. Rahim Khan troubled a lot.”

“Who is that Rahim Khan?”

“Ustad Rahim Khan.”

“Which Ustad you are talking about?”

“Strange! Haven’t you heard the name of the Sarod maestro Rahim Khan? He is from the Indore gharana.”

“I see, piring piring”

“We got the news late in the evening that Rahim Khan had breathed his last. And that was it. So there was no escape from interviewing one after the other. If one was available, the other was not. Yet I got hold of four, Pundit Bimalendu Bhattacharya, Ustad Nisar Ali, Bishnu Bandopadhyay, Harikishan Shashtri. And Bishnu Bandopadhyay, who does not usually stops quickly after he starts. He went on narrating thousands of stories and thousands of anecdotes from concerts. Then those things were to be arranged properly and composed. The mourning messages of the president, prime minister and the chief minister were to be summarized. Tirthankarda is addicted to classical music. He himself wrote the obituary, quite long, 60-cm. There was new make up for the third page. The main news should appear in the front page. Everything, I did. Read it and see.”

“It seems you are very happy. Then why are you saying that they have rubbed you?”

Deya grinned.

“Go and quickly have your dinner. Laxmi di is dozing.”

Ignoring the frowns of Laxmi Deya got up quickly and gulped two roatis. Again she came back to Soumya. Soumya was still deeply immersed in the computer. In the chat mode he was continuing his mechanical conversation with someone. Soumya was a software engineer. His profession demands to sit in front of the computer throughout the day. He would cure himself of headaches that he got in the office by sitting in front of the system at home. He searches for mutual friends in the computer. Soumya could easily set up mechanical-friendships with the unknown strangers. For Soumya it was a kind of game. Deya also sometimes indulges in this game but it doesn’t appeal to her. Could
anyone make friends with the alphabets that pop on the gray screen?
Deya asked, “Will you not come to bed?”
Soumya yawned, “I just got up. You too are very tired.”
“No. Once you get up I will sit in front of the computer.”
“Now?”
“Yes sir. I have some work.”
“Are you going to open your e-mail?”
“No sir. Office work.”
“The level of enthusiasm has increased, I suppose! Now again you will sit for work?”
“Can you guess what work it is?” Deya had a mysterious smile on her face. “Tell me. Guess. Guess.” Deya spoke out without waiting, “Today I went to interview the girl Ritam told about.”
“Oh really? Then today you people had an expedition. Did you actually succeed?”
“It wasn’t easy to get her open her mouth. I had to tempt her a lot to convince…. Wait. One second.” Running Deya brought out the tape recorder from her vanity bag. “Just listen what a pathetic case it is!”
“Please, not today.” Soumya got up switching off the monitor. Bending his tall and handsome body he touched his lips against Deya’s cheeks, “It’s time to bed, honey.”
“Oh no. Till now you were nicely continuing with your chat. When it’s my work you always… Deya pouted, “Please sit for a while. Tomorrow is Sunday. You will anyway sleep for long.”
“Let’s talk lying on the bed.”

“Yeah, you will snore in a minute! Why are you doing like that? Please listen. You can’t imagine how dangerous the man is. He moved forward with a solid plan. He met the girl in a cinema hall at Beleghata. He gave her cold drinks and took her to a restaurant. He told her that he worked in Mumbai and had come to Kolkata for two months. He also let her know that his parents had arranged his marriage but he did not like that girl and he could not live without Shewli. After marrying Shewli he would take her to Mumbai. He forbade her to let her mother know anything, otherwise she might enquire. And the girl was out and out a fool who melted like anything being mesmerized
by the flute of Shyam! His name also was in keeping with his nature… Shyam! He was number one in cheating in the name of love. Then one day at an auspicious moment marrying her with the holy vermilion he eloped. First he took her to Dharavi. That was a very shabby place. It seemed that it was an endless slum. There along with her he stayed with a family for seven days. The aunt of that family was the king-pin. One day Shyam went out saying that he was going for work and then he was without any trace. Obviously the girl got very upset and cried a lot. And then that aunt ended up in taking her straight to the brothel lying that she would take her to the house of Shyam’s aunt. According to the girl, she initially didn’t agree to do this kind of work. And they literally whipped her. She still has those scars, which she showed me. Then they pushed all kinds of lecherous people in her room. In a single night two, three, four, five…the girl could not move, yet… You can say that it was a continuous rape. She stayed there for around two weeks. A Nepali girl helped her to escape from that place. Perhaps she had pity on her. She might have thought that if it continued one day she would be found dead. In fact, while she was there it seemed another girl died. A girl of her age. It seemed that when they came to know that she had run away two men chased her all the way to the station. As if they smelt her all along the way…. The don and mafias of Mumbai. What a network! The girl hid herself in the bathroom of a train for a long time. Imagine what a traumatic experience it is!
Till now Soumya listened to the long description, without making the least noise or asking a single question. After a long time he nodded, “Hmm. It is highly pathetic. Great tragedy.”
“Would you like to listen to it from the girl’s mouth? Would you?” Deya was about on turn to the tape but Soumya stretching his arm stopped her, “Tell me, what new I will listen to? You have just created a remake of the whole episode.’
“No, I mean the way the girl wept while telling that.”
“Will you make me listen to sobs in the midnight? Leave it and listen to something useful.” Turning the small chair and embracing its back Soumaya sat. Stretching his two legs more on the two sides he said, “Today Indrajeetbabu called me in the office.”
“Why?” Deya was immersed in the story of Shewli. The question came out of her mouth unconsciously as she was absent minded.
“Do you remember last month while taking the rent he was telling that perhaps his elder brother would not return to the country? It seems his elder brother will ultimately sell the flat.”

Deya now came back to her family affairs. Nodding her head she said, “Yes, that’s what he said.”

“Today he revealed what’s actually there in his mind. He was asking if we are interested. He is giving us first preference. If we don’t take he will see any other party.”

“What kind of price does he want?”

“He was asking seven lacs. For us he can cut it down up to 6.5.”

“Total eight hundred and how much square feet?”

“Eight hundred and ten. Per square feet it will come up to eight hundred rupees.”

“On the whole the price is reasonable. Prices are higher in this locality.”

“Will the second hand flat cost like the rate of the new one? No depreciation?”

“But it looks like the new. We can buy. I suppose, we can buy it. It is such a beautiful compact apartment with the lake adjacent to it.”

“Don’t call it lake. It was a pond and when its banks were constructed by cement the pond turned to a lake?”

“Ok okay dear let it remain a pond. At least the wind blows. I think, you will get loan from the office and there is bank too.”

Now Soumya simpered, “I let him know the decision.”

“Are you going to take? Will you?”

“No. Soumya Sinha Roy doesn’t believe in second hand. Car, home, wife, gadget computer, whatever come to my possession has to be virgin.”

“What?” Deya cast angry glances on him, “Am I your possession?”

“It was just to give an example.”

“How do you come to know if your wife was a virgin when you married her?”

“Are you joking?” Soumya did not pay to attention to Deya’s false anger. In an emotionless tone he said, “I don’t want to buy a second-hand car and hence still riding the two-wheeler. And regarding the house I have to have a long term thought. If I buy a house of eight hundred square feet today, I may feel tomorrow that it is small. No… I have to keep in mind two things? I will buy a flat once in life. A flat cannot be extended
or cut to small. So thousand square feet plus should be minimum. My target is fourteen hundred. There will be three rooms, living hall, at least three bath tubs among which two will be attached, kitchen, balcony etc.

And that will be in Kolkata proper. In the South itself.”

“Oh my God. But it will be very costly. It will be minimum fifteen to sixteen lacs.”

“It can be more than that. But I will buy.” Soumya stood up. “I have fixed a deadline for everything. Next year I will buy the car. It will be on two year installment. In the beginning of the third year I will buy a house. I will complete the payment exactly in ten years. When I will be forty-five I will be a free person without any debt. Like our fathers I don’t have to take middle age worries.”

Really calculative. Or faesighted? How far could Soumya see? Up to his old age?

Soumya was yawning like a mini sized hippopotamus. Though he was about to go out of the room he stood in front of the door. With half-closed eyes loaded with dreams he said, “Don’t get nervous. My words are my vows! No earthly force can change my schedule. It’s a matter of will power, honey.”

Yes, Soumya had that will power. Deya knew it to the bone. Sometimes this force was equivalent to obstinacy. What an obstinate boy! The fact that Deya and Soumya have set up a separate home after marriage has been driven by Soumya’s obstinacy. “When ma is unable to accept our marriage, I will not keep any relation with ma!” Strange, was it called breaking the relationship? It was almost three years but he never uttered his mother’s name.

Not even once.

But to say the truth Soumy’s mother was no less than him. As Soumya did not marry the girl of her choice, would she disown her son completely? It seemed she does not utter Soumya’s name even by mistake! After marriage Deya herself took initiative to bridge the gap between Soumya and Supriya. Keeping anger and self-prestige in abeyance once or twice she went to the Fern Road house. Supriya did not misbehave with her but with the cold welcome she made Deya understand that her stepping in the house was highly disliked. Was Soumya this much happy with Deya’s effort? His intentions
were clear. In the battle between the mother and the son the interference of a third party was highly unwelcome.

Poor Soumya’s father! In the battle between the elephant and the tortoise he was a helpless spectator. Debabrata was a genuinely good man. He also loved Deya very much. He used to regularly visit his son’s family but avoided that topic carefully.

What a strange matter! Deya failed to understand. It seemed that once Soumya was an ultimate mamma’s boy and his mother too couldn’t bear not seeing him for a moment.

Willpower is in Soumya’s blood.

Turning on the tape Deya started working. She was listening for a while, thinking for some time and writing on the computer slowly. Oh! The little girl had undergone such a bestial torture. There should not be any more delay. In the coming week before the day-off she would handover the writing to Ranenda. The feature was of thousand words; it would be long. The girl was really a fool. While staying in Dharavi could she not guess anything about that aunt? If she could escape then she would have been able to avoid the ugly world of the Forkland Road. Perhaps the news would not come in the first page. It might have appeared in the third or the sixth page. Third page would be better. Leave it, in whichever page it appeared if the writing was strong there must be some reaction. While describing what an abhorrence came up on the face and eyes of Shewli! A hatred for human beings. A hatred for love. How would that girl survive with so much of hatred?

Deya could somehow manage to arrange Shewli’s words. From tomorrow she would have to start her expedition of collecting information. Malayda regularly used to visit Lalbazar for news. He said that he would take her to the missing persons’ squad. But what about that police stations? Would it be possible to go to all the police stations? Then what was the use of the telephones? But she must have to go to the police station in the area where Shewli lived. It would be necessary to know how far they had proceeded in the missing investigation of Shewli. Tomorrow she would have to get hold of the old Nabaprabhat. She would need the news from Jalgaon.
Turning off the computer Deya entered the bedroom. Her sleep had vanished. Her heart was heavy. Deya slowly came to the balcony. She was filling her chest with the air. The road was quiet at the dead of the night. There was no moon in the sky. The shores of the nearby lake was almost dark. Just in front of that was the silent streetlight.

Deya was looking at the light. Deya could see the darkness too.

Ritam peeped into the small wooden room through the swing door.

Balaram Ghosh was reading something carefully. Was it a manuscript?

Ritam coughed intentionally to draw the attention, “May I come in?”

Balaram lifted his face, “Oh, Ritambabu? What’s up?”

“Just carrying on. Are you very busy?”

“Just a little. Sit down please. Anil, ask someone to get two cups of tea inside.” Raising his voice Balaram threw his order and leant against the back of the old chair, which was wrapped in a towel. “Then? How is your writing going on?”

“Just routine. Sometimes it stagggers and sometimes gallops!”

“Well said. Staggers! Gallops!” Balaram’s tongue played with the words. Stopping his dot pen, with a pleasant face he said, “So what is your stage now? Are you staggering or galloping?”

“I am panting for breath.”

“Why?”

“You people are not filling our pockets. So we have to run continuously.”

“What are you saying? Didn’t you get the money? In which issue was your story published”

“In February. It’s already four months.”
“Is it?” Balaram again raised his voice, “Anil…?”

A very thin, dark man entered the room. Ritam became a little surprised. So far he knew that the boy who used to sit in the small office and see bundles of proofs was Anil! Is this man also Anil? In the office of Mahaakaal there were four or five employees visible. Were they all Anils? Or in the office of Mahaakaal Anil was a code name used daily. Is everyone working here called Anil?
The person holding the possible code name of Anil asked, “Balaramda, were you calling me?”

“Ritam Sengupta’s story was published in February. Why didn’t he get his remuneration?”

The man gave an oblique glance to Ritam. That was not an eye but a metal detector. With a glum face he said, “Now we are only clearing the payments of December.”

“Oh.” Balaram thought something and then said, “Can’t we cash Ritambabu’s?”

“Everything is possible if you say.” The man’s face became gloomier, “But the only thing is that it will be a bit violation of the rules.”

“Let it be. Pay him in voucher.”

As soon as the man left Balaram said, “Bring one more story.”

“Again another story? This time publish something big.”

“Novel?”

“I have a novel ready. Set in the background of Kolkata. On the perspective of the present time.”

“Give it to me. I will read.”

“It means there is going to be a delay again? Give us a chance. Will it be right to run after the famous writers?”

“Look brother, we have to sell the paper. How will the advertisements come if there are no names of the renowned writers?”

“But if you don’t give a chance to the beginners how will they become famous?”

The tea came. Sipping from a small cup Balaram said, “Can anyone make the other big? People become big just like that.”

“I have understood. First one has to be little famous and renowned by writing in the reputed papers and then you people value them.”
“Look brother, why are you getting restless? I regularly publish your writings. Don’t I? I like them and therefore publish them. Let your hand mature a little.”

“You mean to say that for my first major work to come out I will have to be an old man. Isn’t it? Balaramda, in my age Manikbabu’s Putulnacher Itikatha had already been written. Even Dibaratrir Kabya was already published.”

“He is venerable.”

“Where is the opportunity to be venerable for us? It feels while writing only short stories the mind is also becoming short. Otherwise can’t you see why I am coming to remind you about such a small amount of three hundred rupees?”

“It’s not three hundred but two hundred and fifty rupees,” Balaram quickly made the correction.

“Oh I see. Another fifty rupees less. So just give a thought.” Ritam smiled. In the style of giving secret news he said, “Balaramda I want to tell you something. I have quit the job. I want to be a fulltime writer. I mean writing will be my profession. But in the very beginning if by just looking at the age you people pour cold water in our enthusiasm…”

With glittering eyes Balaram observed Ritam for a while. Perhaps he wanted to understand whether Ritam really had a job or not. Then he said, “You have great courage, I think!”

“Then? Will you not pay for this courage?”

Balaram laughed, “I told you to submit the novel. I will see. Can I propose something?”

“Yes, sure.”

“You are sitting just like that. Write something of short feature. Your pen has a good flow; your writing also has a pull which takes the readers till the end. Write something interesting on current affairs.”

“Like?”

“I will not tell you the subject, you have to choose. Politics, film, Kolkata, literature, sports, anything you like. On the whole I will pay on a regular basis.”

“The way you are doing now?”

“Ha ha ha, angry young man.” Saying this Balaram searched the drawer attached to the table and took out a postcard, “Read it, your anger will turn to water.”

Ritam ran his eyes through the letter. It was addressed to the editor of Mahaakaal….
I liked the story, *Rupkathar Mrityu* by Ritam Sengupta very much which was published in the February issue. Convey my thanks to the writer.

Why did not you display the photos of *Salvasan and Bhujangasan* in the *Sareer ebam Swasthya* section? How would the readers be able to understand if the descriptions of the asanas along with their photos were not given? It would have been fine if the photographs in the page covering the news of cinema were colored.’

Ritam could not finish the whole thing. A bald-headed man of around fifty years came in. Perhaps it was another Anil. He handed over the voucher to Ritam. As soon as he signed, the man gave him a bundle of notes tied with a rubber band. With surprise Ritam noticed that it was a bundle of dirty notes of five rupees. Would these notes work? It seemed that, an owner of a chit fund ran the Mahaakaal. Were those notes a collection of that chit fund? Keeping the post card and the money together in the pocket Ritam stood up, “Then I will give you the novel.”

“Keep in mind also the matter of the feature. If you can write adding some spice in it…. You can understand that we need juicy matters for the readers.”

Was there any sarcasm in his words? Were the stories and the novels that people like Ritam wrote things that didn’t matter?

Without spoiling the little piece of happiness Ritam came out of Mahaakaal. The crossing of Fulbaagaan was nearby. While walking through the footpath he took out the postcard from the pocket. He looked at the name and the address. One Mr. Gobinda Chandra Maal had written from Bankura. The man owned a shoe shop.

Under his name he had put a rubber stamp of ‘Padashobha’. No, he should not be ignored, as he was a businessman. The man could have taste for literature. He might be worried about the yogasanas but at least he had read the story. Could this letter be called as fan mail? Including this it was six mails altogether. Such flow of mails would definitely increase. In fact, in this way things would get popular. It was always said that many a penny makes a pound. One day Ritam Sengupta would reach in every household. He could reflect the ingenuous truth with the emotions of his heart. Why would the readers not read him? Balaramda had asked for the feature. It is fine. More the pen runs the more it becomes spontaneous. Self-confidence will increase. As a human being
Balaramda did not appear to be bad. There were many editors who even did not ask to sit; yet Balaram Ghosh gave him time and the money in cash too. Perhaps Balaram Ghosh was a bit afraid of Ritam. In the literary field Ritam had the ill fame of being outspoken. The noon was getting over and the evening was about to start. There were some clouds in the sky, condensed and heavy. The clouds were playing a hide and seek game with the sun. Sometimes it was shade and sometimes there was sunshine.

Ritam bought a costly packet of cigarette from the nearby shop. There were ten to twelve days more left to get the tuition fee, the pocket was about to be empty. Mahaakaal had filled more oxygen in his lungs. But ma gave him money whenever he had asked. Even Shrabani never said no to him. But still… Was it Ritam’s instinct? It was the male ego that has flown in the veins from time immemorial. He must have to overcome it. There was a long way to go now.

While puffing the cigarette he let two buses pass by. Turning the wrist he looked at the watch. It was only ten minutes past four. Would he find anyone in the Coffee House? There was little possibility. No body would come before five thirty or six. Would he return home straight? His writing time was either the dead of the night or the morning. Now he could not sit with the pen and the paper. But he can cuddle Tuski for sometime. The girl’s attractive chubby cheeks, cluster of hairs and doll like limbs demanded his affection. The best part was her smile. Not only pearls but she can shed diamonds and emeralds with her smile. Whenever he took her in his lap, his heart could feel a strange sensation. Perhaps it was called fatherhood.

No way! Perhaps going home Ritam would find Tuski sleeping. From where did these babies get so much of sleep! He could go to Barapisí’s house. The last day when he visited both of his nieces was coughing heavily. Ritam promised that once they recover from coughing he would give them a treat of ice cream. Today his pocket is full with notes. So today is the best day to keep his promise. The aunt’s house from Beleghata is ten minutes’ walking distance from Fulbaagaan. It is a two-storied building. In front of it is an open terrace. There an eight-year-old girl was
skipping attentively.
Entering the gate Ritam asked affectionately.

“Hey Micky, is your body totally fit today?”
The girl said with a tone of false anger. “Babuakaka you are mistaken today also. I am not Micky but Jhicky.”
“How can it be?” Making his eyes big Ritam said, “But Jhicky has long hair.”
“Ma got them cut. She wasn’t getting cured of her cold.”
Did it make sense? Only the hair could distinguish the twins. Making the two sisters identical was Julie boudi trying to test people’s sense of analyses and judgment?
Laughing Ritam asked, “So, where is your counterpart?”
“She went with ma to buy the sports uniform for school.”
“Is there a different uniform for sports?”
“Hi hi…Babuakaka, you don’t know anything.”
“Then why didn’t you go? Don’t you need dress?”
“It will do if any one of us goes.”

In between the conversation Indira came out. Seeing Ritam she frowned,

“When did you come?”

“Just now. I had some work in this side or you can say for a useless work.”
Ritam gave a sparkling smile “Where is pisemoshai?”

“He is inside. Good that you came. Come in, I have something to talk to you.”
Seeing the facial expression of pisi, Ritam’s sixth sense became alert. Something must have happened!
Ritam sat on the sofa of the drawing room. Turning on the fan Indira sat face to face. The fold of the eyebrows deepened, “Is your phone not working?”
“There was some problem. The dial tone was missing. Why are you asking?”
“For the last few days I am trying to get in touch with you. What have you done going to Kanan’s house?”
Ritam became perplexed, “What have I done?”
“It seems you took one girl from newspaper office.”
“Yes, my friend, Deya.”
“She has written something about Shewli. Hasn’t she? Kanan’s life has turned to darkness now.”
“But Shewli’s name did not appear in the paper. She wrote it like a general article. And in that a bit of Shewli’s story appeared.”
“Look Babua, don’t try to convince me with nonsense. I brought the paper and read. Though the name was not given it could be clearly understood that it was Shewli’s story. Do you think people are fools? East Kolkata…half slum…the mother works as a cook…the girl went missing for one month…”
“But pisi, it is wrong. When Shewli’s name is not there in the paper why you people take it as Shewli’s story?”
“Just don’t talk rubbish. Don’t you know the condition of Kanan? The poor lady concealed the incident with lot of trouble. Some people might have passed comment by signs or hints. But now her bad name is publicly declared. The police are heaping sorrow upon sorrow. Now every time they are facing abusive words. Now and then they ask the mother and the daughter to report. Most of the days Kanan is not coming for work, half of the day she is absent.”
“But why do the police drag Kanan and her family?”
“Don’t sound like an idiot, as if you don’t understand anything! Don’t you belong to this world?”

Actually Indira was a cold-headed woman. She loved Ritam very much. But when her temper used to go high she lost every bit of sense. In a heated tone she said, “Don’t you know the police? Once a piece of the news appears in newspaper Kolkata police becomes alert. And do you expect the local police to sleep after reading about what has happened? In actual work they are good for nothing but they very well make people’s life miserable.

Ritam became silent. Reading Deya’s writing did the Lalbazar police butt the local police station? Even Deya personally also went to the police station. From there also the police could have tried to come to a conclusion.
Indira again started, “The police is harassing the mother and the daughter a lot. ‘Why didn’t you inform that your daughter had returned? Why did you not make a statement in the police station? How did that scoundrel look like? Where did he live? How old was he? When did the marriage take place? In which room of Kaalighaat did the marriage take place? Who was the priest? Did Shewli know any close friend of that man?”

Ritam’s tongue slipped, “They could have denied straightly. They could have told that the name which appeared in the paper was not Shewli.”

“Don’t speak like a fool? Don’t you know about police enquiry? Has Kanan or Shewli the guts to hide the things from them? And what is the outcome of all these? Because of the police’s frequent visit the matter has spread badly.”

Ritam again unexpectedly made a question like a fool, “Why, did the police announce by beat of a drum? The police can also call for mere query regarding the missing case.”

Now Indira’s voice was about to choke in anger. Her temper went high.

“Idiot...as if you don’t understand anything. Piklu is right. In your life you will never be matured. The news has come in the paper and you think that nobody will come to know! The police are coming time and again to call them and nobody will understand! Do you know that another dangerous thing has happened? The day before yesterday when Kanan was returning after finishing her work a hooligan had stopped Kanan in her way. He warned about something, which has no ground. He said that if Shewli went on continuous complaining to the police she would be hidden forever without leaving any trace. And after one month her half-eaten body by the dogs and the foxes will float in the Ganges!”

Ritam literally jumped, “How does he dare? Did Kanan inform the police?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because she is not stupid like you. She has to stay with her daughter. Will the police give her protection for twenty-four hours?”
Ritam was silent for a while. He started biting his nail by tooth. In an indistinct tone he said, “But we have concern for Shewli’s safety so that no other girl like Shewli faces any danger.”

“Babua, tell me who asked you people to think about her well being?” The expressions of Indira’s face changed in sarcasm “Do you have sense to understand what is good or bad? Otherwise, you would have asked me once before taking the person from newspaper office to Kanan’s house. Your friend! Bravo! I really cannot describe. In spite of being a woman can’t she understand what is good for a girl or what is harmful?”

Ritam became a bit agitated at Deya’s insult. He protested mildly, “Why are you blaming Deya? I myself had asked her.”

“That I understood long back. You are the brain behind it. It was my fault to call you regarding Kanan’s matter.” Indira exhaled with sound. It seemed as if after venting her spleen on Babua her anger came down. Even her tone was lowered, “See, how you have caused harm to her. Kanan had a bit of respect in the slum as she was from a comparatively good family. Now she has lost that too. Now what Kanan would do with that girl! Even if she goes to some other place is there any relief? And where will she go? Wherever she goes, the news will spread in any way. Now the question of Shewli’s marriage doesn’t arise at all. Her means of livelihood is also closed. At least in this area.”

“Okay okay, I will look into the matter.”

“What will you say?”

“If I can arrange something. Now as she is in problem we should stand by her. If it is required they can be removed to some other place.”

“Babua, I beg you. Don’t poke your nose anymore. It’s already too much.”

“No, no listen to me. Even Deya told that if necessary she would do something for Shewli.”

“Oh really? She has already finished her work. Now she is not under any obligation.”

“Pisi, Deya is not that type of a girl. She is very soft and compassionate enough. When she has written about it taking a responsibility she will certainly do something about it.”

“God knows what she will do! Nothing is striking my brain. Kanan is my old servant and
I am seeing her daughter also for a long time.” Indira again exhaled with sound. “Even I
don’t get the confidence to ask both the mother and the daughter to come and stay here. If
suddenly anything wrong happens! If there arises any problem at home will Piklu or
Piklu’s father spare me! Your pisemoshai has already asked me to stay away from any
sort of problem and let Kanan go leaving the work. Yet Julie and I, with much effort,
made him understand…
Whatever it be, Kanan cooks well.”
Indira became silent. The atmosphere of the room was sad. Jhicky with a sweat-drenched
face entered the room. Standing close to her grandmother she was looking blankly. Ritam
was sitting lowering his head. From the outer corner of his eye he was looking at his
niece. In a low voice he said, “I will go now.”
“Why will you go? Sit down. Have some tea and snacks.” Indira became anxious. In
almost normal tone she said, “Your pisemoshai brought fresh mangoes from the market.
Should I cut for you? Will you eat?”
“Leave it. In fact you have fed me lot, no more hunger is left.” Ritam gave a faded smile,
“It’s all rumbling inside.”
“My boy, tell me why are you getting angry? For a few days my mind is upset. I did not
mean it. See, today also Kanan did not turn up. I had to cook everything in spite of my
knee pain.”
“What was Piklu’s wife doing? Can’t Julie boudi cook?” The words just came to his
lips but Ritam controlled. Standing up in a peaceful tone said, “Pisi, why should I be
angry? You told me the right thing. I should have apprehended how much trouble Shewli
and her family may get into…Today let me go.”
“Won’t you meet pisemoshai once? It seems your pisemoshai has read one of your stories
in some paper. He intended to say you something regarding that.”
“Leave it today. Some other day…”
Gently patting on Jhicky’s head Ritam came out on the street. There was no trace of
cloud. The day was bright. Yet the light appeared pale to Ritam. The pleasant evening
was unbearable to him. Why did he do such a stupid thing! It would have been right if he
had directly said no to Deya.
The public booth was near by. No one was there. Taking out the small notebook from the
pocket Ritam looked at the number of Nabaprabhat. It was not a day-off for Deya. Whichever shift it might be Deya would be in the office.

Nabaprabhat had two numbers. Both of them were engaged. After trying couple of times Ritam gave up. He stood for a while and thought whether he should go to the office of Nabaprabhat directly. Bosh! He was not in the mood. Could he stand in front of Deya with so much of irritation! Ritam came to the Coffee House directly. He bought a cheap packet of cigarette from Ismile’s shop down on the road because the expensive packet would be finished within the blink of an eyelid if once taken to the upstairs.

None of his friends had come so far. Sitting on the corner table of the hall echoing with sound Ritam ordered for a black coffee. He was forcibly trying to drive out the Shewli episode from his head and was trying to think about the feature. How would it be if he wrote about the Coffee House? So many newspapers were springing up and dying here, so many buds of love were blossoming and shedding. Even his first conversation with Shrabani was here. Shrabani was highly fascinated reading his story, Samudrer Swar, published in the Janapad newspaper. With a shy face she came with one of her friends and introduced herself. Then Shrabani was studying in third year in the Scottish Church College. The name of her friend was Arunima. After that both of the friends would come often. The way Arunima used to look at him with her deep eyes that Ritam felt as if she had fallen in love with him and Shrabani was accompanying her. And he was disillusioned after two months when Arunima gave her wedding card in his hand. In this Coffee House itself. Arunima had a jocular smile on her face. “See dear, I would not be between you two anymore. Let Shrabani speak up her mind directly.” Saying this she walked out of the Coffee House with rhythmical steps of a swan. Then Shrabani blushed in shyness. She started sweating. That was a scene!

“Hey, what’s up? Are you scheming a plot?”

Ritam looked with surprise. It was Tamonash, with his spectacle, thickset beard and a hanging bag. He was wearing a saffron kurta. One would surely take him for a saint. Pulling the chair Tamonash sat down, “For how long are you here?”

“For around fifteen minutes. Are you coming directly from the office?”

“Then from where else do you expect! I could not be a vagabond like you. And there is
no such hope that my wife will feed me if I sit idle.”
“Yah. One has to make his skin pretty thick for eating and not doing anything.” Though Ritam tried to take it lightly his tone reflected the harshness a bit. The strong adjectives used by Indira sometime ago echoed in his ears. In a suppressed and sad tone he said, “Everything about being a vagabond isn’t all that good.”
“Boss, has your wife scolded you?”
“Why only my wife, whoever has a chance gives me a piece of their mind.” Ritam smiled with bitterness in his tongue, “Leave it. How far is your story collection?”
“They are saying that it will come out in the book fair. If it is not possible it will come out on the Bengali New Year’s Day. Day before yesterday, I went to the Datta Publishers and talked to Robinda directly.” But the Dattas have a bad name. It seems they cheat the writers’ of their money.”
“That they do with those who have royalty. I am naked. It’s true that in the publishing line the scapegoat is only one. Compositor, press, binder, paper, wrapper everybody has the attitude that if you touch the pot, you must throw penny. So the writer is left to be slaughtered whereas it is because of him that the fellows run their bountiful business.”
“You could have done an agreement.”
“Hmm. But even after agreement they had already bewildered many great writers. Even after saying to print one thousand copies if they print five thousand copies who can catch them? Where do I stand then? If they want they will give and if not they won’t. At least let them be sold. At least they are printing with enthusiasm, isn’t it enough?”

Ritam’s mood became sourer. Last week he went to meet Mr. Suprakash of *Sahityabanhan* and the man behaved so badly. “Do you expect me to publish a collection of stories and leave them in go-down to rot”, he said. God knew how Tamonash had managed the publisher! Though Tamonash was elder to Ritam in age but in the literary field Ritam was senior. There was no reason to think that the number of readers of Tamonash was greater than Ritam. Did he oil that bald-headed Robin a lot? But Ritam would not be able to do so that even at the stake of death. Literature also became a hard competitive field. He might lag behind by one step still he would not be able to do that.
The jealousy was not going from mind. It was giving him a tingling sensation. Avoiding the sting of the insect with a forced smile he said, “Then when are you going to celebrate the great news?”

“All day? What would you like?”

“What you give?”

“But you don’t prefer the water way, I suppose!”

“So what? Once in a while it’s okay to row the boat. Whisky, vodka, rum whatever you like.”

“But I am a simple and chaste man, worshipper of rum”

“Then go for rum. Why should I object in the name of rum?”

Tamonash without replying was lifting his hand like a school student, in a way of saying yes. Turning his neck Ritam saw that Somshankar Majumder was entering the Coffee House. He was in his mid age; medium in stature and even as a litterateur he was medium. For the two decades he has been scribbling but could not earn much fame. But he used to behave in such a way as if he was Rabindranath Tagore and incessantly went on snubbing the reputed papers like the Dinkaal and the Janapad. But he used to give his writings secretly to those papers. But putting himself in airs he used to speak boastfully! “If they ask can I say no to them?” Such clever and double-dealer people were eyesore to Ritam. How Tamonash could melt seeing him!

Somshankar saw the lifted hand of Tamonash. His eyes groped here and there to figure out his friends but as he could not find anyone he came and sat on the table of Ritam and his friends.

In a very soft tone Tamonash asked, “Somda, are you fine?”

“Look brother, to be well is a relative term, I suppose.” Somshankar took a cigarette from Ritam’s packet lying on the table and stretching his arms took the matchbox from Tamonash. Taking a long puff from the burning cigarette he said, “How much fine I am will be decided how unwell you are.”

Tamonash nodded his neck in agreeing, “Yes, very true. You are absolutely right.”

Somshankar with a pleased face, “Tamonash, I read your story. It was going pretty well, but somehow the end became clumsy. Why do you make unnecessary wrangling about
“How strange? In a love story there won’t be love!”
“In fact why do you need to write a love story? Does anything called love really exist?”
“Oh, doesn’t it exist?” Ritam sarcastically commented.
“No. Love is actually a biological concept. The love between a man and a woman means only the body. The love that you cherish for a girl is not love. Actually you want her body. You can call it your secret lust or your subconscious sexual desire. Have you read Henry Miller?”
“No.”
“Freud?”
“A bit.”
“Go a bit deep. Read Joyce too.”
Tamonash again in a melted tone said, “Somda, a collection of stories of mine is going to be published.”
Somshankar stopped for a while. The next moment wearing a prudent smile on face he said, “The publishing of a book is not the ultimate goal. None of his writings came out in the form of a book when Kafka was alive.”
Tamonash became a bit embarrassed. But Ritam flew into rage. In a harsh tone he said, “Somda, can I ask you a question?”
“Yes, go ahead.”
“Do you take the foreign or the country liquor?”
“What do you mean?”
“From then onwards you are only singing praise of only the Sahibs. But I saw you lying down at Taltala being intoxicated by the country liquor! Name a few of our native writers.”
Somshankar in a heavy tone said, “Ritam, control your language.”
“Hey, Ritam, what are you up to?”
“Am I saying something bad? From then he is distributing his knowledge!”
Somshankar’s jaws became stiff. “Ritam, I told about my belief. Literature is above country or time. And each of the persons I named has defeated time. Even if you don’t like, that is a fact. See the life like those great men…”
“Again tall talk!” Ritm suddenly burst out, “Why do you give all those heavy expressions? Have you ever seen your face in the mirror when you are alone? Don’t you think that yours is the face-cutting of a fraud from an inferior class?”

Ritam’s tone rose quite high. The Coffee House was full. It was replete with smoke and noise. Still from the neighboring tables quite a many faces were looking turning at them.

Somshankar also said with gritting expression, “Tamonash, control your friend. He does not know what language he should use with his seniors. Just writing one or two stories he is thinking himself a big gun.”

“And what do you think of yourself, eh, the guru of literature?”

“Ritam, shut your mouth.”

“Why? Why should I shut my mouth? Everyday one has to digest his tall talks?” Ritam’s index finger was dancing in front of Somshankar’s nose. “You are a liar. An absolute liar. A hypocrite. I have read at least a dozen of love stories written by you. Whimpering. Whining and nasty. Aren’t they meant to be served to a gentleman? What do you say, eh? Publishing a book is nothing? Then why do you squat at the house of Mr. Harimadhab for bringing out your own book? Listen, listen to me. Human being has something else other than the body. It’s mind. Heart. And as you don’t have it as a writer you are a total failure. Understood?”

Somshankar’s face was pale. His tongue could not utter anything in anger.

Ritam stood up quickly. He picked up the cigarette packet by tweaking from the table and in hasty steps came down to the first floor. He was walking and walking. He lit a cigarette. Just taking two puffs he threw it. Now he was getting angry on himself. What was the need to talk to Somshankar like that? Every person is living in his way and Somshankar was also like that. Is there any meaning in getting so angry? The other days Ritam did not take his words seriously and took them in a sportive way. Today why could not he do that? Then was the anger inside him today? Which anger? For what? Was the distress of Shewli and Kanan haunting his subconscious mind? His stupidity was eating into him? Or the anger was on someone else? Deya…Deya…Deya!
Placing her mouth near grandmother’s ear Deya asked, “How are you dear?”

Surama was lying down on her antique bed. Her decayed body had become one with the bed. Her once rosy, rose pink complexion had turned insipid and pale white. Now all that remained of her was skin and bones. All her veins were very prominently visible under the skin. The hands could be a real subject matter for medical students. Long-term effect of Parkinson’s disease rendered the muscles inactive. These days Surama was barely able to open her eyes properly.

Nevertheless the eyelids parted a little on hearing the granddaughter’s voice. Her once musical voice has turned husky. She said, “I am fine. Are you okay? What about Soumya?”

Deya finds it strange. She never heard her grandmother complaining of ill health. Last winter she suffered from severe respiratory problems. She had to be given oxygen supply for quite a few days. Even then, in spite of the severe pain her grandmother stuck to the reply, “I am fine.” From where did she get the strength to endure so much of pain? Deya would find her collapsing even when she had a mere stomachache.

Stooping a bit more she said, “Everyone is fine.”

“Why doesn’t my grand son-in-law visit?”

“He will. His duty hours do not match with mine. And he feels shy to come alone.”

Surama nodded her head on both sides. In a meek voice she said, “I really can’t understand you people. You work at a particular time and his office hours at some other. Then when do you guys meet?”

She was very much in her senses. Deya couldn’t stop laughing. “Once in a while we do.”

“What times are these?” Surama’s eyes were closed. “Santu’s wife told that her sister was working in Siliguri while her husband has left for Bhubaneshwar. One leads a family life in this manner!”

“Of course, why not? Do you think clinging to one another the way you people did is the
best way to run a family?” Amused Deya said, “Actually, there was never a need for you to go for any job. You could afford to stay in your husband’s shadow. Why should we live like that? We make out time both for love and work. Ah, don’t you know that to live a happy life in future both need to save money?”

Gouri stood beside and she spoke out, “Ma, their times are totally different. You and I cannot understand.

Surama kept quiet. Her closed eyes were twitching.

For sometime, Deya ran her fingers through Surama’s white mane with a smile on her face. Softly she said, “Thakuma I brought kachagolla for you. Taste it.”

A smile appeared on her lips but faded away instantly. She whined like a baby, “They do not allow me any sweet.”

Gouri said, “What are you saying? Even in the morning you ate a sandesh!”

“Where? You never gave me one?” Surama’s eyelids parted a bit. “Mimi, do you know that they forcefully fed me chicken?”

Gouri lowered her voice, “Your grandmother must have gone crazy. Santu had brought some packed soup. Chicken is a far cry; there is no trace of any non-vegetarian element in it. After we fed her that she has been singing the same tune, “They fed me chicken, they fed me chicken.”

“Don’t give her any soup if she doesn’t like eating it…”

“What else can I give? Now she is unable to chew any solid food. It’s even troublesome even to feed her rice paste. Day before yesterday she was insisting to have mango. I gave her little bit but she wasn’t able to digest that too and had a heavy motion.”

“Hmm, problem.” For a second Deya’s face shadowed. For a couple of years grandmother’s condition remained static. No sign of improvement, there is deterioration with each passing day. Though she was almost without food, she was living only because of her vital power.

Deya sighed. With grandmother passing away, so many memories of this house would sink into oblivion. The pickles, little balls of pasted pulses. the fragrance emanated from her body as Deya clung to her on bed to listen to the stories before sleep…After returning from school once Deya opening the fridge ate some sweets without washing her
hands and seeing that her mother came forcefully chasing her. Deya just hid herself behind the grandmother. Thakuma was really expert in preparing payesh. Deya could still smell the scent of the whole cardamom. Would these memories really be wiped out? Would they grow? Would they be livelier? Would they trouble Deya like the loss of a rare gem? Deya did not know really.

Deya moved into the next room, “Ma, it’s better to employ a day nurse as well. You are also growing old, how long can you drag in this manner?”

Gouri pouted, “Tell the same to your father and see how he snubs.”

“Why so?”

“One should understand that he is a retired man now. Now every time the same tale of sorrow ... I don’t have money falling from sky. How would I manage extra two thousand?”

“Dada is there. He can pay.”

“That’s ruled out. In fact Santu was wanted to chip in. But he won’t relent. His mother would be taken care of by only his money. He will not take any from his son.”

Pranabesh’s sense of self respect was a bit strong. And at times it reaches an extreme point. Deya’s uncle moved out to his newly built house of Thakurpukur, he wanted to contribute for his mother’s expenses on a monthly basis. But Pranabesh ruled out the matter. He asked bluntly, “Can’t you have mother living with you? If not, it is fine but then don’t talk about money. Pranabesh Mittir knows it very well that an ass that is a common property is always the worst saddled.” But Nikhilesh’s intentions were good and he thought that it was his duty. Three years back when for the first time Surama was admitted in the nursing home she had to spend around fifteen days there. Even then Pranabesh had not agreed to accept his brother’s money. There was a pain suppressed in Nikhilesh’s heart because of Pranabesh’s obstinacy. Thereafter post retirement his son’s earnings are unacceptable for Pranabesh.

Deya said, “That means it’s you who has to always look after the patient.”

“It is my fate. Nevertheless Mahua helps me as much as she can. She also has to take care of the kid… what a naughty boy. Is it easy for her to give me a hand? The other day she
was cleaning up along with me when your grandmother had soiled the bed. The moment your father saw, he hisses and said, ‘She is after all a kid. Why are you subjecting her to those things?’ Just think of it. She is already a mother of one and he thinks that she is still a kid! Actually your father wants me to do everything single handedly, at least the nursing of his mother. In fact I have done it silently all my life without a grudge.”

“Who told you to do so? Why didn’t you protest?” Dancing her eyeballs Deya asked, “When will baba return?”

“It’s long since he left for the bank. He is expected any time. Now most of the time, he is preoccupied with his passbooks and bank. Always busy in calculations” Saying this Gouri’s eyes went on the clock, “Oh God, it’s already one? Would you sit for food now? Should I call Mahua?”

“What’s the hurry? Let baba return. Laxmidi stuffed me with parotas in the morning.”

“Did that son-in-law of Laxmi come again? Has he taken the money?”

“Oh, sure. She is a money minting machine…”

“Did he buy a rickshaw?”

“Who knows! As per what he said he has bought it. It seems one day he will take the mother-in-law for a trip to Sonarpur in his rickshaw! And because of that Laxmidi is also overwhelmed with joy.”

In the midst of their conversation Futku scurried into the room. Deya had seen him sleeping when she came but now he is properly awake. Holding a spectacle case he was trying to aim it at his grandmother.

Deya quickly snatched that, “Hey naughty, isn’t it dadu’s?”

Gouri raised a hue and cry, “Oh God, you are right”. Saying this she opened the box and saw that the spectacle was inside. Turning her eyes she said, “Oh hell. What will happen now? He will create a hue and cry on returning from the bank.”

Deya instantly picked Futku up. He was extremely feeble. By no way he was putting some weight. He spent more calories in bustling compared to the amount he ate. Though he was one and half year old he was very light. Almost a feather.

Deya pinched Futku’s cheeks, “From where did you get the spectacle.”

“It was there with me”, he replied indistinctly.

“Hmm. Let dadu come. He will beat you.”
Staying in one’s lap was not Futku’s habit. He was getting restless. As soon as she put him down he ran away with lightning speed.

Gouri was running behind, “Uff, I just bear it. He is sure to disturb his mother in the kitchen now.”

There was a cook in the house. Yet Mahua was in the kitchen. She was preparing something special for her sister-in-law. Deya usually visits this house once or twice every month. Her visits create a stir in the house. Gouri herself would certainly prepare one or two items. Today it was Mahua.

In bed room Futku was seen practicing jumping from the bed to the floor. His grandmother kept a careful vigilance. Leaving her dupatta on the bed of her sister-in-law Deya entered the kitchen. “Hey, what’s today’s special menu?”

Mahua was of the same age as Deya’s. She was chubby and sweet. She wore a salwar kameez and had tied an apron on it.

A layer of smile appeared on Mahua’s sweat strewn face. “I am preparing a new type of item. This is my first attempt at it. Let me know how it turned out once you have tasted it.”

Deya winked, “Is it a TV recipe?”

“You are absolutely right. I got it from a show that I watched last afternoon. The preparation is tricky. It’s a chicken dish. One doesn’t need any spice.”

“Give me the recipe too. I will try it at home.”

“You? It’s better to tell Laxmi di over the phone.” “I too enter the kitchen madam. Don’t you know that Soumya does not relish Laxmi’s cooking over weekends?”

“Do you really cook every Sunday? Don’t bluff.”

“Really. I leave for office once I am through with all the cooking.”

“Okay. I’ll believe if you insist. I thought that you only prepared Soumya’s breakfast.”

“Not just breakfast, I really have to run around in the mornings. The mamma’s boy doesn’t lift a finger. He only yells and creates tension before leaving for office. “I’m not getting my undershirt. Where have you kept my hanky?” I have to even mix the sugar in his milk.”

“Even your dada is like that.”

“Don’t badmouth him. I know that Dada changes Futku’s nappies at night.”
“Soumya would do the same. Let him be under obligation, let there be an addition in the family.” Mahua casted a glance at the non stick pan opening the lid. Turning the flame low she said, “So dear, you have been a free bird for a long time now. It’s time to be tied down. Let the little angel come in the family of you two.”
“It will come definitely. Why are you hurrying?”
“What exactly are your plans? It would be difficult for you once you age.”
“You would see for yourself once it happens.”

With an enigmatic smile Deya picked up a fish-chop from the bowl. She left the room munching it. She smiled to herself. Just like a house or a car Soumya had deadline regarding a baby too. Four years. They had been married for two years and ten months. And after exactly fourteen months Soumya would be on his toes. Not before that. Not after that. Soumya had everything fixed. If Soumya’s service life ends at the age of sixty his child would be of twenty-five. Whether it would be a son or a daughter, he or she would be on his or her own.

Pranabesh returned. Taking out the papers and money from the pocket of his kurta, he kept them in the cupboard.
Deya said out from behind, “You have come back with a hot head, I suppose.”
“Pranabesh was surprised, “Oh, you have already arrived!”
“Yes, it’s been a while.”
“How did you come to know that there was a fight in the bank?”
Taking the spectacle along with the case from the top of the wardrobe of her mother, Deya said, “I think you couldn’t find this in the bank?”
“Forget it. I have another one with me. That I put on when I am at home. I became angry for some other reason. Last Thursday I submitted the cheque of my unit trust. It was credited after six days. I got hold of the manager. And he was telling what the big deal it was if it was one or two days late! I made him sit, calculated and showed him in the computer how much of money interest I lost!”
Deya with a jocular smile said, “How much money did you lose?”
“Not too much…” Pranabesh seemed a little bit embarrassed, “About one rupee forty paise. Money is not a big thing but it is a matter of principle. Why should it be like that?”
“True. Very true.”
“Are you joking? Once you are retired you will understand the value of each *paise*.”
Deya giggled, “*Baba*, what does one or two rupee count compared to the pension you draw?”
Pranabesh did not reply. He was changing his *kurta*. Pranabesh could not argue much with his daughter nor could he show his anger. Deya was Pranabesh’s weakest point. Stopping her laugh Deya said, “Did you check your blood pressure?”
“I couldn’t find time in this week. Who pushed you for that? *Ma*?”
“Why? Can’t I ask? Few days ago the lower one came down at hundred.”
“If I stay with your mother it will become one hundred and fifty.”
“Why do you always pull *ma*’s leg?”
“I don’t pull rather your mother does. Now I am a man without service and therefore, an eyesore. She can’t tolerate any of my words.”
“Why do you talk in an intolerable manner?”
Shrinking his eyebrows Pranabesh looked at his daughter for a while. Perhaps he was trying to guess the possible accusations that Gouri might bring. Then with a heavy tone he said, “Mimi, you know it well that I follow some principles. I don’t understand what is good or bad, but they are in my blood. I can’t change them just because I am a retired man.”
“But *ma* is also growing old. Consider her condition too.”
“In the family now she has only one work. In fact from the other works she is free.”
“But is it less in any way? Is it an easy job to nurse a bedridden patient constantly?”
“See, Mimi, I have already told that I don’t want to be dependent in any matter. And regarding this matter both my brother and son are the same in my eyes. Let your mother tell me that she is unable to do. I will take care of my mother.”
“Ah, why are you getting angry? I am sure that your blood pressure must have increased again.”
Pranabesh sat silent and glum.
Deya was looking at his father with her eyes still. Four months ago her father has retired. Presently except the problem of blood pressure his health is sound. On the day of his retirement from his service in rail he got almost all his dues and the amount was not too small. But suddenly he has developed a deep rooted fear that he might be forced to depend on others. Perhaps that’s why he has become extra careful about his cheque books and with his calculations regarding the interests. What a pride of self-dependence!

Gouri was calling for food. Pranabesh and Deya came and sat on the dining table. Twenty years ago Pranabesh took this house in rent. In the smart and tidy room of the first floor there was enough space. Other than the four rooms the dining space was also spacious. The only drawback was that the house has not abundance of light.

Deya told Mahua, “You should sit with us too.”

The other days Gouri serves and Mahua too sits along with them. Today Futku was almost in his form. After his sleep only for an hour he was in highly energetic form. Gouri is now totally exhausted to control him. Mahua said, “Once you are done with your food hold Futku for sometime. Then ma and I will sit. Baba, break the lump of rice; Shall I give you dal?”

Gouri was trying persistently to feed her grandson a piece of mango. Raising her voice she said, “Give him more. Today’s dal is made just after his taste. It’s prepared with the fish head.”

Pranabesh frowned at her. In a thudding tone he told Mahua, “No. Give me only one spoon.” With a sidelong glance towards Deya he said, “Did you see how she talks to me?”

“Why do you pay heed to her words? You can avoid if you wish.”

“How long can I be silent? Everytime she scolds me. “Take your tea and calculate which round of tea it is! Why do you always prefer the slice of the mango? Can’t you taste its stone for one day?”

“Baba, please. Actually the whole day you stay at home and that’s behind all the problems.”

“So what should I do? Should I stand on the footpath the whole day?”

“No, why so? You can roam around. In fact, you like to see antique items. One day you
can visit the museum, the other day you can go to the Victoria.”

“Then why don’t you mention the zoo?” Gouri interrupted in between, “Do you think that the tigers and the lions will flee away in fear?”

“Ah, ma, stop please. You are no less than him, I see!” Deya mildly scolded Gouri. Softly she told Pranabesh, “Or else, you can chat with the neighbors.”

“That’s your mother’s monopoly. It doesn’t suit me. Slandering and gossiping about others.”

Mahua simpered, “Baba, now you are being rude.”

“Hey, at least you don’t raise the wick of the lamp.” Deya tried to change the topic.

“Baba, today Mahua has prepared a new dish. Taste it.”

The white flag was flying. Pranabesh focused on eating. Deya and Mahua were busy in casual talk. Deya praised the chicken prepared by Mahua. Mahua wanted to know how much Deya’s Lucknowi salwar kameez costed.

In course of conversation Mahua said, “You know, I had been to the university on Monday. I happened to meet Bibhuti sir. Bhubhuti Roy, who taught us International Relations. He suggested that I should start work with him.”

While licking her fingers Deya said, “That’s good. Just start it. Futku is pretty independent now.”

Pranabesh said, “I too told her the same. ‘Don’t sit idle, don’t sit idle’.”

“But with such a hyperactive child. How can I leave him with ma for the entire day? Already because of grandmother…”

“I too am around these days. I can look after Futku.”

“I know what you are capable of. You get impatient after being with him for five minutes.”

Mahua looked a bit disheartened. Deya could subtly feel that perhaps ma did not want Mahua to start her research as of now. The perennial mother-in-law syndrome! In fact, ma is not a super woman. Poor Mahua was a bright student. In M.A. she missed a first class by a small margin. Mahua and dada first met in the Jadavpur campus. Dada joined a job after completing his degree in electrical engineering, and then changed it for another. Mahua finished her graduation, completed her Masters and M.Phil. Thereafter
the marriage was arranged with the consent of both the families. At that time the grandmother was seriously ill. So just after the marriage Mahua could not approach the topic of Ph.D soon after her marriage. Once she was a little settles, she had already conceived Futku.

Women have to compromise so many things! From that angle Deya was quite lucky, as she didn’t live with her mother-in-law. But what about the future? Would it be troublesome for her once she has a kid? But then what’s Laxmidi for? Suddenly an idea flashed Deya’s mind. She said, “Ma, can’t we do one thing? How it would be if dada engages a full-time maid, perhaps a little girl? She would give company to Futku and also could keep an eye on him.”

“That’s up to Santu. He’ll do whatever he feels is right.”

Ma floated her opinion in thin air and went into grandmother’s room. Deya smiled to herself. Ma quite smartly managed to push the ball in her son’s court! Ma knew the tricks of diplomacy quite well! Or did ma have a suppressed pain in her mind as the whole of her life she had dedicated in managing the household in spite of being a graduate with honors in Philosophy. And confining her daughter-in-law in a cage she wanted to avenge. No, Deya must have to sit with ma some day; Gouridevi really needed a good brainwash.

How strange the mother-in-law — daughter-in-law relationship is! The other day Deya’s cousin sister-in-law called her up. She told her that perhaps Soumya’s mother had been gifting all her jewellery to her nephews and nieces! And this pompous gift giving spree was surely not because of her anger for her son. Soumya would not adorn himself with bangles or necklaces! What a strange fear! What a strange terror! Of Deya taking possession of her jewellery once she is no more! What a strange psychology! Anyway forget about it. Deya wasn’t greedy for the ornaments.
Father and daughter were through with lunch. Pranabesh went inside with Futku, perhaps to prove his skill in child care. Gouri and Mahua sat for their food. Now it was Deya’s turn to serve.

Sucking bones of a fish-head Gouri said, “Mahua, did you tell Mimi about your elder sister’s reaction on reading Mimi’s article?”

Mahua is really a good girl. She forgot all about unpleasantness that prevailed a while ago. Mixing curry with rice she said, “Hey dear, Manudi and Ranganda came last Sunday, all praises for your article.”

Deya’s writing was being praised everywhere, in her office, in her friends’ circle and among the relatives. Soumya’s father had also paid a visit to pat Deya’s back. Even Soumya had congratulated Deya on reading the article. For some days Deya too was under a spell of happiness. But things changed after she got Ritam’s call on Monday. These days she feels a prick in her heart. She was a little upset even when she came here. Thereafter Deya couldn’t be all that happy, once the topic came up. In a slight melancholic tone she said, “Although people are saying good things, it has created problem for the girl.”

“Problem?”

“Yes. Both daughter and her mother are amidst an odd situation. I had suppressed the names but somehow the true identities have been revealed.”

Gouri asked, “How did that happen?”

“It’s the police. They have created much uproar about it. The girl’s mother was apparently threatened by someone.”

“Is it?”

“There is nothing much to worry about. I met the police day before yesterday soon after hearing the news. I told the O.C., ‘Why did you expose the girl in this manner?’ They were summoned time and again for interrogation. Does it make any sense?”

“What did the O.C. say?”

“He, in fact, was reasonable… ‘See madam, your job is over once you have written about something. But we have to bear the brunt from higher authorities. There have been strict orders from the higher level seeking proper investigation. It seems it is because of our irresponsibility that the department is being vilified! But just think once where we stood
wrong. The girl came back but they did not inform. We are totally in dark as to what happened exactly. Should we catch the culprit in air?”

“This is absolutely right. Quite reasonable.” Mahua nodded her head.

“So I couldn’t say anything forcefully. Though Ritam asked me not to open my mouth regarding that matter of threatening, I have straightly informed the police about everything.”

“Oh my God!” Gouri startled. “But due to this would you face problems?”

“Forget it. Why should I face any problem? Ma, I work for newspaper office. Nobody will dare to touch us. Even Yama is scared of us.”

“But did you inform office about everything?”

“Of course. In fact, Ranenda said that as the culprit had threatened he must be around. Or his gang. If the police does its job rightly, the scoundrel would fall in the trap.”

Mahua with a tensed face said, “But what about the girl’s future?”

“That arrangement will also be done. I have talked to Anasuadi, the lady who prepares the Saturday page of our newspaper. She has lot of addresses of the rehab centres. Next week I’ll contact all of them. I also intend to meet that girl again. I’ll see when I can make it out. It may be tomorrow or day after tomorrow.”

“Why do you need to go there again?” Gouri stopped eating, “No, no you need not go to those slum areas any more.”

“Ma, what are you saying? The girl is in trouble because of my writing. Moreover, I had given her word…”

“But you have already informed the police. Let them do whatever is required.”

No ma, it is not like that. I too have a moral responsibility.”

“What’s moral responsibility you are talking about? In fact, you told that the girl’s was not all that good; she flirted with every third person! Moreover, she herself willfully eloped with that man!”

“Please, don’t say like that. After all, the girl is pretty young. She stepped into a trap by mistake …”

“Such types of girls are always ready to fall in trap. Even if she wants the girl can’t be good anymore.”

“No ma. I have talked to the girl. In Mumbai she had undergone a shock treatment and
she is changed now.”

“Yet Mimi, I will suggest you not to stir the matter. There are different types of people in the slum. You have written about them. They may have grudge against you. And do you expect the girl’s mother to worship you when she will face you?”

These were all unreasonable talk. Ma might have studied philosophy but there was no logic in what she said. Yet Deya did not argue further. She relaxed for a while on Mahua’s bed. She had casual conversation with Mahua for sometime. She caressed and cuddled with Futku and later made the kid sleep.

Deya too slept for sometime. She woke up in the afternoon. She did not stay for long. After having tea and meeting Surama she came out. Soumya may come early in the evening. If he comes early both of them can go to have Chinese cuisine at night. A new restaurant was opened at Gurusaday Road. The food over there must be tasted once. Many taxis are usually seen waiting at this time at the Gopalanagar crossing. But there is not a single one today. She did not want to get in to a bus by pushing others at least in a holiday. Deya started walking towards Hajra. She would definitely get a taxi there.

The evening is setting in. The color of the sky is fading away. There is no wind at all. The sultriness has increased a lot. One can feel that the rainy season is not so far.

Crossing the bridge over Aadiganga, Deya’s pace of walking became slow. With gaudy makeup the girls of the red-light areas came out. They were roaming at the entrance of Kalighat. Deya never looked at them. Even she did not know why she was looking at them today. The decaying, unhealthy faces with eyes sunken in the sockets had terrible make up. Their eyes were burning! Not for the sexual appetite but in hunger! There were so many Shewlis amongst them!

It seemed suddenly someone poured hot lead inside the ears. A bonny girl with indecent gesture spoke out, “Didi, what are you looking at? Whore watching? Is it fun to watch sluts, eh?”
Shrabani was busy in signing bundles of loose sheets. The B.Ed examination was taking place. The examinees were taking too many papers. It was unmanageable. In the first phase Shrabani signed around fifty sheets. But those were over before the bell of the first hour rang. It was a course of only one year. What do the teachers teach that the examinees need to write so much?

On the second floor of the college building there were the spacious classrooms. There were around thirty benches arranged in three rows. On each bench there were two examinees. Most of the examinees were not very young. Shrabani could easily call many of them *dada* or *didi*.

Shrabani lifted her eyes and loosely ran her eyes around the room. On the second bench at the right side a woman was writing in a stormy speed. She was almost of the same age of Shrabani’s younger aunt. She had the looks of a Geography teacher. What a pain in the middle age! As she was forced to sit for the examination instead of her children! Certainly it would be a case of obstacle in the increase of increment. Poor lady! Why didn’t she close all these chapters when she was young?

Today there are three invigilators in the room. Except Hiren and Shrabani there was another boy. The boy would be elder to Shrabani by one year, but in no way younger to her. Quite often Shrabani was looking at him. But she could not recognize him. The boy was patrolling the whole room with lot of enthusiasm. He kept a serious look on his face, very much unsuitable to his age. Did he join newly? In sciences or what? But Shrabani never noticed him before.

Right at this moment Hiren is not in room. He is a professor of Economics and can hardly be seen in a particular room. While signing, Shrabani was looking at the door quite often. But there was no trace of Hirenbabu. Who could say in which room he was busy in chatting!
The boy walked up to the table and took few signed loose sheets in hand. As his eyes clashed with Shrabani’s he smiled for the first time. A smile with quite hesitation. Showing courtesy Shrabani told, “Now sit for a while.”
“No, I am fine.” The boy’s eyes were running around the room. In the last corner there was little whispering. His eyes got fixed there for a while. Again his eyes turned back. With a shy face he asked, “You are the madam teaching Bengali, I suppose. Aren’t you?”
“Yes…when did you join?”
“In this month of May.”
“Science?”
“Chemistry. Part time.”

Again a part time lecturer joined. Shrabani tried to calculate in her mind. Thirty-eight? Forty? Or more than that? Including all they were twenty-eight full timers. How many were the part timers when Shrabani got the job in the college after passing the SLET examination? Maximum eight or nine. Now the scenario is totally different just within three years. Now they are one and a half times more in number. Often they entered in flocks. The college authority did not have any other way out without appointing them; the government was not giving new posts. Last year Taritbabu from the History department retired. So far nobody came in his place. The government had all the profits. The salaries of the full timers are being saved. The government had so many ways to save money. No, in fact in making roads or bridges, huge money slipped. Only in appointing faculties even a needle doesn’t slip. Giving sheets to the three examinees the boy again came back and stood in front of her, “My name is Dwaipayan. Dwaipayan Mukherjee.”
“I am Shrabani Sengupta.”
“I know. You are S.S…Tell me whose names were S.S?”
“Whose?”
“The police of Hitler, in fear of whom all the Jews trembled.”

Dwaipayan is quite free. Most of the part timers hesitate while talking to the full time lecturers like Shrabani. Perhaps it is their inferiority complex. With almost same
qualification lecturers like Shrabani draw salaries ten or twenty times higher than them. It might be for that reason. Even in Shrabani’s Bengali department two part timers have joined recently, Kanika and Dhriti. They are of Shrabani’s age. But they talk in such a way as if Shrabani is their teacher. The two friends roam around together but don’t mingle with Shrabani.

Shrabani smiled mildly, “I am not any soldier of Hitler. The students are not at all scared of me.”

“That means you are a popular teacher.”

“Who knows! I don’t think so. The students of the pass course bunk my class a lot.”

“Everybody bunks the classes of these courses. Didn’t you bunk? I don’t remember how many classes of Physics I have attended.”

There is somewhere a very close similarity with Ritam in the talking style of Dwaipayan. Now Shrabani observed the boy carefully. A very ordinary face but the eyeballs are very bright. Like Ritam. But Ritam has a different magnetic power in his eyes, which can attract people.

The examinees were not letting to sit for a minute. They had incessant thirst for loose sheets. Again Dwaipayan rushed to distribute sheets. Shrabani too could not sit any more on the chair. She was roaming around the room with loose sheets in her hands.

In the course of the invigilation both of them came to amicable terms. Though in the first hour Dwaipayan was silent, he has started talking a lot by now as the veil of non-acquaintance dropped down. In a short time Shrabani was left with nothing to know about his bio data. Dwaipayan was one year senior to her. Like Ritam. After completing M.Sc. he researched in the field of inorganic chemistry in Burdwan University. In January he had submitted his thesis. From then onwards he is totally unemployed. The part time lectureship in this Vishnucharan Majumder College at Behala is his first job. The government has fixed their salaries at two thousand. There is minimum fund in Shrabani’s college. So it couldn’t give more than thousand. But Dwaipayan did not have much grudge about that. Rather he looked quite excited as he got the job because of his little connection with the principal. His research was over and so now he is free. This
year he would sit for the SLET examination. During the casual conversation with Dwaipayan, Hiren appeared. The moment the aged and roly-poly Hiren entered he made Shrabani move quickly, “Hey Shrabani go, go. Visit the office once.”

“Why?”

“They are giving arrears of the D.A. For three months.”

So Hiren from Economics was busy for economic reasons.

Shrabani stopped though she was about to go out, “Hirenda, should I go right now? But you have to literally run around in the hall.”

“Ah, go, go. I am here. The right hand’s job comes first…Hey, new boy, listen.” Waving his hand Hiren called Dwaipayan, “Madam is going for an urgent work. By that time you wheel around.”

Shrabani went out with a smile. Hirenda did not care the part timers at all, yet because of his simple way of mode and gesture nobody could be very angry at him. Now he would sit tight and would make Dwaipayan run like anything. Even he would not do the sign.

Taking the money from the office Shrabani did not return to the hall directly. From the toilet she came to the staff room and sat for a while. She was ravenously hungry. She was quickly finishing the tiffin. Her mother-in-law gave her *luchi* and curry today.

Though the *luchi* became cool, in a hungry tongue that tasted like nectar from heaven. Suddenly there was shower of money from the sky today. But often it showers in this way. Shrabani doesn’t spend those unexpected amounts in the family’s expenditure. She buys small things of her choice. Last time she bought a costly perfume. Her mother-in-law really took good care of her. Presently she is too involved in religious matters. She would be very happy if she is gifted with a seat for her deities. How much would the wooden thing cost? She won’t take anything for Tuski. Last month Tuski received many dresses, ornaments and toys on the ceremony of her first tasting of rice. Though it was
not arranged in a grand manner, the celebration went well. Tuski’s gifts overflowed. Ritam’s dresses were in a very bad condition. He roams around in the sun and so no shirt lasts for long. Ritam loves T-shirts. She can think of buying two nice T-shirts for him. At some places there were offers of buy two and get one free. The blue color suits Ritam very much…

Shrabani’s mind clouded with the thought of Ritam. Wasn’t Ritam chanting Deya’s name too much these days? Deya calls him up frequently …and he too calls her back. The girl is a real devil. Even if standing in throat deep water of the Ganges Ritam would say that Deya did not know about Ritam’s love, Shrabani would not believe at all. Women can easily read men’s eyes. The queen is very much aware of Ritam’s weakness towards her and that’s why makes him serve like a hired laborer! ‘Accompany me there…Let us go there!’ Why? You will earn reputation through writing and for that why should Ritam be your follower? And why does Ritam act like that? Coming home he sat down lowering his neck after pisi had scolded him. When Shrabani kept on asking about the details he got so irritated but while talking to queen Deya he mumbled …“Deya, this was not a right step. You just look after the matter. Tell me, can we avoid our responsibilities? Deya, I forbade you so many times but you did not listen to…!” He did not even utter the matter of being scolded by pisi!

What does Ritam find in Deya? Shrabani has seen many such fickle minded flirts like her. They can behave coquettishly with friends but get married to only worthy fellows. Computer engineer, handsome, rock size salary and so on and so forth…! How long did the affair between Ritam and Deya continue? Did Ritam lie to her? Or half-truth? Who knows!

Is Shrabani jealous of Deya? No, never. It is just because she feels pity to see Ritam’s foolishness…If someone would take opportunity of Ritam’s simplicity why should Shrabani digest that with honest mind?

“They are you sitting like that? Are you off duty?”

Hearing the principal’s voice Shrabani looked startled. The principal was standing at the door of the empty staff room.
Shrabani quickly closed her lunch box. With a guilty face she said, “Sir, I was feeling very hungry.”

The eyebrows of the middle-aged principal shrank, “It is just a matter of three hours, and you could have taken food once you are done with it. You people are young and if you too come out the classrooms…”

“I am just leaving, sir. I am going right now. I thought that Hiren da was present in the room.”

“Oh. Then it was not at all right to leave the room.” Though he was about to go, he stopped for a while. He said with a smile, “Actually the order is going to be introduced soon.”

“Which order, sir?”

“One must have to be in the college forty two hours in a week. All those off-days will be cancelled. The summer holidays will be less; the puja vacation will also be cut short.”

“Oh is it?” Shrabani gulped, “From when is it going to be implemented?”

“From the coming session.” It seemed as if his smile turned into a secret murderous desire, “Now the college getting vacant by three o’clock will be stopped.”

All thoughts about Ritam and Deya were held in abeyance for time being. It appeared as if the sky had fallen on Shrabani’s head. It’s true that many articles were written in papers. But would the order really be issued? Ah, what would happen to the poor Tuski? Tuski is now completely weaned off mother’s milk. Yet she is always anxious in the class. Did the baby eat properly? Did she sleep? Would she fall down from the bed? The mother-in-law takes good care of her. Even Ritam stays at home at some afternoons. Yet she gets worried. If the order is released Shrabani would have to stay in the college from morning till evening. What would happen? What would she do? The examination was being held in seven or eight rooms of the huge three-storied college. Some of the male and lady professors, who came for invigilation, were in rooms and some were in the corridors. Shrabani gave a dry smile when her eyes met a few of theirs. She returned to the classroom pulling long face.

Hiren was reading the newspaper. Dwaipayan was making his rounds as usual. Shrabani
sat on the chair kept beside Hiren. With a glum face she said, “Will these loose sheets be sufficient, Hirenda?”

Hiren was indifferent, “Ask that new boy to give with a bit restraint.”

Shrabani got a bit angry. She restored at once, “Is it the fish dish of a wedding menu that he will feed miserly?”

Realizing the harshness of her voice Hiren turned to her. He measured the face of the colleague of his daughter’s age. With a smile he said, “Have they closed the cash?”

“No.”

“Then? Have you met Mahaprabhu?”

The principal’s name was Nimai Chakraborty. He was from Nabadwip. And thus sarcastically related to Mahaprabhu.

Shrabani gulped and nodding her head said, “Yes.”

“Did he scold? In fact today he is scaring everyone. Perhaps last night he had a nightmare and that’s why taking revenge of that.”

“Please, don’t joke.” With literally a crying tone Shrabani said, “What shall I do now? You know that I have a little baby at home. I never cheat in the class. Rather, I teach with my best effort.”

“Ah, you people are impossible. Won’t you apply little common sense? Is it possible to run the college forty-two hours a week? For how long does the morning college run?”

“Till eleven o’clock.”

“Then how long should the day college be opened? Up to six o’clock. Is it possible? The morning classes continue for four and a half hours. How will they manage forty-two hours in a week? Will there be a different law for the morning college?”

“But if there is no off-day…”

“Just leave it. Just wait and watch. Don’t speculate in advance. Increasing little bit of salary the government is showing its prowess. Nobody talks about how we endured for the sake of mere survival!”

Hiren’s voice rose a bit high. The examinee of the first bench shouted, “Sir, please speak softly.”
Turning his neck Hiren looked at the man once and immersed again in the newspaper. Shrabani also felt relieved by Hiren’s words of consolation. She took loose sheets in hand. Looking at Dwaipayan she smiled softly. She came at the end of the room and stood for a while. Near the windows. It is the city outskirts. One can still notice much greenery here. There is a big pond on the other side of the wall of the college. A cormorant was swimming in the dark green water. There was the shadow of the cloud in the water. Does Ritam still love Deya? Is Shrabani less valuable in the eye of Ritam as she had offered her love willingly? To get attracted more towards what one can not acquire is human psychology. And if that unattained person is present day and night in front of one’s eyes…!

No, Shrabani won’t be jealous of Deya. If being hurt by Ritam is Shrabani’s fate, let it be like that.

Dwaipayan started giving threads to the examinees. Taking some threads from Dwaipayn Shrabani too distributed them. Coming back to the table she was checking the amount of the loose sheets.

Hiren folded the newspaper. He cast a side glance to the man with beard sitting in the first bench and softly said, “He is scaring the women more. Actually Mahaprabhu has a grudge against women.”

“Yes. He sounds so. Can you tell me why it is so?”

“Female employees mean double income group. His wife is not engaged in any job.”

“Great, is it our fault?”

“It’s not like that. Still you people are comparatively in an advantageous position. Your husband runs the family well and you too are not being taunted as just idling away at home.

Shrabani’s words just slipped from her tongue, “How do you understand that we need not run the family?”

“No, no, I did not mean that. Today our expenditure has increased. The salaries of both are of use. Yet, I think you will agree that the major contribution is of your husband. Your salaries are extra. Consider your case… I just forgot; what is your husband doing?”

To hit Hiren directly Shrabani could speak the truth in a strong voice. But something stopped her tongue. Inhaling deeply she said, “Now he is in a pharmaceutical company.”
“Is he not in sales line? …Sales manager?”
“No, not exactly in the manager rank…”
“Okay, whatever it is he is in the officer rank.” While saying this perhaps the wise professor of Economics could guess something looking at Shrabani’s facial expressions, “May be he earns less than you.” Perhaps uttering the sentence in English Hiren tried to cover Shrabani’s embarrassment. “But isn’t it true that it is quite possible to run a family with what he earns?”
Shrabani unconsciously nodded.
“I am just trying to explain this. You people have that much advantage. After successfully establishing his argument Hiren had a smile of satisfaction on his face, “I have heard that your better half has another quality too. He is a writer, I suppose.”
Shrabani was feeling suffocated. Now she became normal, “Yes, he writes.”
“One of his writings came out in Nabaprabhat few days ago, isn’t it?”
“The story…Have you read?”
“That is not my cup of tea. Your boudi is addicted to that. She voraciously devours stories.”
“Oh. Has she read?”
“Actually we don’t take Nabaprabhat. The other day Urmi was telling in the staff room….”
She could not listen to the whole thing. The warning bell rang up which indicated that there is another fifteen minutes to go. Right at the moment Hiren changed in a strange way. In an odd, shrill and loud tone he shouted, “Everyone, tie your papers. Once the bell rings, no one will be given an extra second.”
After handing over the papers in the office and clearing all the doubts Shrabani entered the staff room along with Dwaipayan. Dwaipayan said with a smile, “I never knew that invigilation is such a laborious job.”
“Go for the hard work now. Later you too will roar like Hiren.”
“Really, what a harsh voice! Very much practised!”
There was an interruption in the conversation. A young man with a smiling face was standing in front her, “Can you recognize me?”
Shrabani shook her head, “No, I mean…exactly…”
“I am Ritam’s friend. His batch mate. Anirban…It’s quite natural for you not to remember me. You saw me only one day. I mean on the day of your wedding reception.”

“Oh, I see…”

“But I have seen you several times. You used to come to our campus of Political Science, didn’t you? You usually waited for Ritam near the gate of the National Library.”

Dwaipayan moved aside. Yet Shrabani felt a bit shy, “Oh! Then how come you are here?”

“I sat for the examination. I thought that it is better to cross the pit as I am already in school teaching.”

“Which school are you in?”

“Naol High School. Near Bagnan.”

“Oh, God! But that is very far. Do you stay there?”

“No. I am a daily passenger. I manage by daily traveling. But now I am on study leave. So how is Ritam now? Is he the same? Crazy? Eccentric?”

“Do you expect him to change?” Though Shrabani replied with a smiling face she was a bit stupefied for the next question.

Nodding head he said, “These days Ritam writes a lot. He is writing brilliantly. In fact I just love to read them whenever I chance to get any. I don’t miss even a single writing.”

Exhaling with much relief Shrabani bloomed. With a delighted face she said, “You are but his friend. You will certainly praise.”

“Honestly I like them very much. In the university life itself I understood that there was something in him. The story, Jatismar that came out in Nabaprabhat, has haunted me a lot. You certainly inspire him a lot. He would talk about you a lot. He told that you are his inspiration…!”

Shrabani again felt shy. She could not find out what to reply.

“Ask the crazy fellow to keep on writing. Tell him that you happened to meet me. I feel proud to think that he is my friend.”

Anirban left. Seeing Sudhirbabu from Chemistry, Dwaipayan also asked permission for departure and moved forward. Shrabani was under the spell of a strange illusion. If somebody praises Ritam’s writing her heart fills with joy to the brim. She
feels as if just to listen to those words, it is worthy to live with Ritam for thousand years. Crossing the college gate Shrabani came down to the street. Is she being cruel to Ritam? The other day Ambar da and didi came down. They were forcing Ritam to start a small business.

“Ritam, seeing your temperament it’s sure that service is not your cup of tea. Now be self-made. There is a company of my acquaintance who prepare fried snacks and potato chips. Take their distributorship of the South Kolkata. Not the whole of the south but a portion. From there itself you can earn in thousands. These days, people eat potato chips more than rice.”

Listening to Ambarda’s proposal Ritam laughed a lot. “Ambarda, why in fried snacks and chips? Can’t I do something in the business of cigarettes? At least I can save the expenses of my smoking.” Listening to that didi got enraged very much. Ma also got angry. Shrabani had also supported them. “Why won’t you do business? At least you can do this!”

The present Shrabani really wished to slap the insensible Shrabani of the other day. Shame on you! Shrabani! Ritam would hawk chips and fried snacks! Would it suit Ritam to go for a job only for the sake of earning money?

Ritam would immerse in the ecstasy of creativity, wasn’t this the only thing that Shrabani always desired for?

Didn’t Shrabani dream that like a desperate and extravagant man, Ritam would exist in her life?

The engrossed Shrabani did not get into the bus immediately. She picked up a T-shirt for Ritam from a shop at Behala. She did not get the exact blue color of her choice. It was the mulberry shade. This one too was not bad. The broad shoulder would suit Ritam very much. She also bought a downward long kurta with fabric embroidery at the center of it. The guys of medium height look good in downward long kurtas.

When she reached home it was already the end of the evening. Basked in the light of the twilight Shrabani returned and saw that Atasi was feeding Tuski a boiled apple. The moment she saw Shrabani, the apple-smeared Tuski had a divine laugh on her face.

Shrabani kept the packet and the bag in her room. Suddenly Atasi called her, “Hey, listen
to me first. Today a gruesome incident took place.”
“What’s that ma?”
“Kanan, the cook of Indira’s home committed suicide.”
“Oh really? When?”
“Today morning. Indira called up at noon. Babua was just lying then. The news made his face pale totally. Right at that moment he phoned up Deya. And just a while ago Deya turned up. She came quickly and left in a taxi along with Babua.”
Atasai was telling many more things. “Kanan…Kanan’s daughter…Indira.”
Shrabani stood like a statue. Nothing hit Shrabani’s ears anymore.

Roads, roads and roads. Uncountable roads. Like a cobweb. Two parallel roads ran side by side for quite a long distance. They broke, took many twists and at a point met together. Again they got separated and ran in their own direction. The narrow lanes clasped the high road stretching their lean hands. The road changed its direction at the turning of a lake. It went on and on and then merged at another turning. The road scanned many nooks and corners. They met, separated and broke again and again. The complicated arrangement of those numerous roads seemed like a riddle.
It was the street map of the Kyoto city of Japan.
After finishing the day’s work Soumya was running his eyes over the street map. Just like that. A reputed company of Japan got the assignment of arranging all the traffic security system of the Kyoto city of Japan nicely.
The assignment was huge and complicated. They have assigned Soumya’s Infocal India a part of the whole work. Soumya and his colleagues would work only on developing and modernizing the traffic signal system of the city so that the speed of the vehicles could be increased more there.
The work was not very easy. The red, yellow and green lights of the main high roads in the city had to be controlled in many ways at different times of a day. Morning, noon, afternoon, night, at every moment the number of the vehicles were being changed. Depending on how they were changing, why they were changing and how much they were changing the employees were to decide which light would be enkindled where, when and for how long. They would have to think in the same way regarding the small roads. At the same time they would have to keep in mind how many narrow lanes merged and at what place. Hospital, school, office, factories, religious places, thickly populated area, comparatively uninhabited places for different place there would be different rules for the traffic signals. Those things would have to be arranged in order in the programming. They would have to be careful so that no unexpected accident could cause an upheaval to any part of the system. Considering everything the software package would have to be prepared.

But Soumya was not doing that work alone. Dividing the work in various parts four engineers of Infocal were carrying on the work. In this project of medium size Soumya’s work more cumbersome. He had to assemble others’ works. He was the co-ordinator of this project. Even the duration of that project was scheduled. Fifteen days. Eight days of that were already over and even half of the work was not over. But it was expected that the project would be over in time.

Shutting down the computer Soumya got up. Bending his tall body backward he stretched it.

Amitav was in the next cubical. Lifting his neck from the other side of the short partition he said, “Are you leaving?”

“Ohmm. Today I will go.”

“So early? It’s only seven fifteen man.”

“I know but I have to meet someone.”

Amitav did not want to know whom Soumya was going to meet. This was the trend. Almost everyone of the office was individual devoid of curiosity. Here conversation other than work was rare and personal conversation was rarer.
The office of *Infocal* was on the third floor of a huge building. Coming down Soumya took his vehicle out from the parking space. For quite a few days the motorbike gave trouble while starting. It was needed to take it once to the garage. But where was the time? For instance, today he came out from the office couple of hours ago. Would Soumya not lag behind a bit? Perhaps he would have to stay tomorrow up to ten to make it up! It was true that nobody in his office bothered about the duty time. They did not even enquire about who had left first or later. But he certainly would have to finish the work within the scheduled time. He must.

Today the motorbike was like an obedient boy. It started roaring only with two strokes. Wearing the helmet Soumya was also on the way to Salt Lake. It rained at noon. The roads and lanes are still pretty wet. Trees stood in rows on both sides of the road. The light of the street lamps created fleeting shadow. There were pits and ditches on the way. One had to drive carefully. But Soumya had no problem. He never drove his chariot in high speed. Soumya preferred the medium pace. His appointment with Bugida was at eight o’clock. Soumya would definitely reach the Little Russel Street by that time. Soumya was remembering Bugida’s face a person with square face, fair complexion, sharp nose, high minus power specs on eyes. The glow of intellect dispersed from his whole face. After how many days did Bugida come to the country? Seven years? No, no, eight years. When *baramashi* had expired Soumya was in the final year of engineering and in fact to perform the funeral ceremony that Bugida is landing on the soil of India. What a brilliant guy was Bugida! Buguida was really a name amongst all the relatives and friends. He stood ninth in the higher secondary and second in computer engineering from IIT Kharagpur! Bugida scored very high even in GRE and left for Illinois State University. The fatherless boy had indeed made his mother’s struggle worthwhile. In the very beginning Bugida would visit every year from America. It created a great excitement amongst the cousins then. Bugida would constantly narrate stories about foreign buses and Soumya alongwith other cousins would listen with gaping mouths. During one of his Kolkata visits he married *mishtiboudi* and took her to the States. He would send air tickets to his mother, and because of her son *baromashi* too went to the
States a couple of times. At present the same Bugida is in Kolkata. But why is he in a hotel instead of staying in his brother’s house? Is there any problem with Chotuda? What problem would it be about? In fact there was no parental property! Then?

With all those fragmented thoughts Soumya reached the Park Circus connector crossing the Bypass. There was light jam on the bridge. The vehicles were proceeding with snail-like pace. Soumya was managing his way slipping through them. But coming to the junction of Park Circus he got stuck oddly. Heaps of vehicles were motionless in the jam. It was such a situation that there was no way to move even with a motorbike. Soumya was frequently seeing his watch. His temper really would go high if he could not keep the time once it was scheduled. In between a taxi searching for space almost fell on him oddly. Gritting his teeth Soumya screamed at him though he usually does not hurl abusive. He was looking around with restless eyes. Where did the traffic police disappear? What a bad traffic system it is! Why doesn’t anybody think of changing it? Being desperate he tried to push the vehicle towards the footpath but could not make it.

After struggling for almost half an hour in the jam he managed to escape. Soumya reached the hotel of his cousin at around eight forty. Tired. Shattered. Bugi was in the room. Opening the door he embraced Soumya, “You are here? Actually I thought you would not come anymore…”

“Tell me what can I do? Everyday the condition of the city is getting worse! Now one has to remove the word punctuality from dictionary.”

“Ah, leave it. The vehicles will increase in the city and you expect that there will be no jam.”

“Really you are right. Suddenly there is a hike in number of vehicles in Kolkata. People have lot of money in their hands now.”

Talking to him Soumya entered the room. He sat on the sofa. Taking out the handkerchief he was wiping his face.

Bugi put the air conditioner on high. He asked, “Which drink would you prefer? Soft or hard?”

The difference of age between Bugi and Soumya was almost fourteen years. Soumya felt
a bit shy with Bugi’s offer. He said, “Give whatever you like.”
“Then taste the whisky. Do you drink? There is no taboo such thing, right?”
“No, I mean…there is no such thing.”
“Then why are you feeling shy? Drink…with soda, right?”
“It’s your wish.”
“Ha ha ha. You will drink whisky and wish will be mine…Somu, you are still remain a kid!”
Bugi brought the flat golden bottle and kept it on the center table. He took out soda from
the fridge. He took some ice pieces too. He mixed the soda with skilled hand. Holding the
two glasses with his hands he kept them at a certain height to measure the level.
Soumya’s surprised eyes were fixed on Bugi. Bugida had changed a lot. He had
accumulated quite a a lot fat in his body. There was second chin on his throat and a thin tire
on his waist. The forehead became quite broad after hair fall.
It was evident that he grew pretty old. That sharpness of his face was not there. Soumya
felt little bad. Time takes away so many things from man! But yes, the style of his talking
was still the same. Lively and sincere.
Bugi was wearing Addi’s kurta payjama. Spreading his legs he leant against the handle
of the sofa. In a homely mood. Taking a sip on the glass he said, “So tell me what’s up?
How are you doing?”
“It’s going. Fine.”
“Still now I didn’t have a chance to meet your wife. It seems that she is very smart and
pretty…?”
Soumya smiled, “You can easily see if you come to our house. Why did you
unnecessarily call me to the hotel? Or you have decided not to go to our house.”
“No, no, nothing like that. Is it possible that I will not go to your house? Actually this
time after coming here I don’t feel like going anywhere. I am only eating, drinking and
sleeping and roaming around a little.”
“Have you come from America only for this?”
“Yes. Rest, total rest. No relatives, no idle chatter. Only for this reason I did not go to
Chotu’s place this time. Dear, I want to enjoy the trip of this time totally alone.” For a
while Bugi seemed to be absentminded, “Leave it. I have heard that your wife is a
reporter. Is she?”

“Not a reporter, sub-editor. In a small Bengali newspaper.”

“That’s good. The girls from this place have become quite bold. They are going for odd jobs too. It sounds really great.”

“But Deya does not do something very outrageous. Almost a routine job.” Soumya smiled detached, “Basically she is shy type.”

“Still. In our time how many girls could work with newspapers?”

“You are saying in such a way as if you are ancient.”

“It is almost like that. I have left the country more than twenty years ago. Twenty years is hell of a time. Just imagine how the world has transformed in these twenty years!”

“That’s true. What’s up with mishtiboudi? Why didn’t she come this time?”

“I have already told you that this time I wanted to visit alone! She may come later. Sometime around December. Actually she gets a long holiday during the Christmas.”

“Is mishtiboudi still continuing her job in school?”

“Hmm. The job suits her.”

“And what about Tup and Tap? What are they doing?”

“Studying. Playing. Going around. They are enjoying in their own away. The way the other American teenagers do!”

“That means they have become very lively! What do you say?”

“Yes, they are. In their own way. With all their vices and virtues.”

Soumya could not follow his words. He was watching Bugi. Did Bugida look little unhappy? Was there a problem with Tup or Tap?

Bugi became active. Shaking his hand he said, “Hey, start now. Will you eat something? Shall I order?”

“No, no, leave it.”

“Why do you say no? You are coming from office. Immediately he ordered the room service for chicken pakoda and prawn balls in the intercom. He got up and brought a plate full with cashew nuts. Sitting on the sofa he lit the king size foreign cigarette. He offered Soumya the packet.

Soumya denied nodding his head, “I don’t smoke. Thanks.”

“Are you telling the truth? Or are you feeling shy?”
“No. Really I don’t prefer.”
“Go ahead. Increase your lifetime. Live for hundred years and die.”

Bugi repeatedly emitted smoke.

Suddenly Bugi cast an oblique glance, “Hey Somu, You could not patch up with sejamashi. Could you?”

Soumya just had the first sip. Suddenly he had an attack of hiccups. With a bitter taste in mouth he said, “Bugida, I don’t believe in a patchwork in relationships.”

“I can see that you are very headstrong.”

“Bugida I follow the straight path. I can not stay with ma with the person whom she dislikes…I can understand that ma is disgusted with me yet with a forced smile I have to stay with her? Sorry, I can’t do that.”

“I find it very strange. When I came to know about this from Chotu’s mouth I really could not believe. I have seen how close she was always to you. I remember once when you got measles sejamashi was going around your friends’ houses to know the lessons taught in your school! My mother laughed a lot at this. ‘This Supu has become really crazy about her son. Does anyone become so anxious about the studies of such a little boy?’ In fact we knew that your exams were actually sejamashi’s exams. She would stop going out of home, take leave from office. She did not come out even at someone else’s call. If someone visited her house at that time she would pull a long face. It seems once she discouraged Chotu at the doorstep. She said, ‘Come later.’ Sejamashi did not know any other world except you. Office and you. You and the office. That sejamashi…”

“Bugida, why are you telling me all these things? Do you want the reconciliation of the mother and the son?”

“I don’t want anything. I was just reminded of and that’s why I told you.”

Soumya took a sip with sound. The wine was gradually casting its spell over the brain. “See Bugida, I don’t discuss about ma with anyone. As now you don’t stay with us anymore I am telling you. Ma has not done anything for me. Whatever she did, she did for her. To fulfill her wishes. Wish fulfillment. My son will become this, my son will become that; I want my son like that…. Only mine. Mine. Mine. Myself was the only priority, not the son. Ma was least bothered about what her son wanted. Ma wished that I
would become a puppet. And *ma* would move the puppet with remote. *Ma* even would decide whether I should marry Deya or Harimati! Strange! *Ma* did not have the least tolerance to show honor to my choice! I don’t care! …You are quite elder to me. I don’t know how you will take my words. Yet I am saying that Soumya cares a damn whether someone’s ego is satisfied in this world or not. Simply I don’t bother.”

“Oh God! You are no less egoist, I see!”

“Quite normal. I am the son of Supria Singharoy. And the genetic factor definitely works. Can you expect tamarind to grow in a mango tree?”

“You have learnt all the tall talks, I see! In fact earlier you didn’t have a long tongue!”

There was sarcasm in Bugi’s tone, “I have heard that a dumb person also becomes talkative once fallen in love. Is it the same case with you?”

Really Soumya became little agitated. He laughed at the joke of his cousin. Bugida never had any control over his tongue. Prior to his marriage at his visits to the native he would tell his cousins, half of his age, with which girl he was going around or who gave him the half soul without any hesitation. Bugida still remained the same.

Enjoying the fun, Soumya also told, “Am I the one to chatter! There is the only one who talks a lot. Nonstop. You can understand that once you will talk to Deya. She will make you completely tonguetied.”

The food was ready. There was lots of salad with the snacks. Soumya could sense his terrible hunger with the smell of prawn and chicken. Dabbing them in sauce he bit the chicken *pakoda*. And finishing it he took a small sip.

There was a piece of cucumber in Bugi’s hand. He was chewing it with much sound. The glass was over. He poured the golden drink again. He extinguished the earlier cigarette after smoking of its one-third portion. Again he lit another one. While tightening the cork of the bottle he asked, “Somu, by the way, how is your office?”

“I couldn’t get you.” Soumya picked up another *pakoda*, “What do you intend to know? How is my boss? Environment? Salary? Or turnover?”

“Tell me everything.”

“There are two partners of *Infocal*. The major share is of a south Indian. Mr. Hariharan. He was in the Far East for a long time. In the software line he is a very experienced man.
It is actually Hari who procures the orders. Mr. Swarnakamal Basu sees the technical side. The working environment is very pleasant. No bossism, no red tapism. Whatever you want would be ready at once. The other day I needed a printer and once uttered it was just on my table. Though small the company has a hardware support. The company’s itself.”

“Come to the main point. How much do they pay?”

“Not bad. In total annually around four lakhs.”

“Only? What is the turnover of your company?”

“In the last financial year it was around ten crores.”

“That means that it is not a big company. What is your stuff strength?”

“Here we are ten engineers. There are around twenty to twenty one employees, pass outs from all those computer centers. And few casual employees in the administration, finance…”

Bugi calculated something in his mind. Then he said, “That means your owner is earning quite a lot. You people are very understaffed.”

“That’s true and that’s why the strain is also there. I can not come out before 8 or 8.30.”

“Ah, I really can not understand this work culture. You all, not only you, all these Asians are so typical. Even in our place I see all the Indians and Japanese working even in the weekends with all the burdens on their heads. What is the logic? No, we have responsibility. Will we not finish the task? But you just can’t make the Americans work on Saturdays and Sundays even if they are threatened to death. Straightforwardly they say, ‘Why should I waste my fun, buddy?’”

“No, no. Sunday is a holiday for me too. I don’t go to office.”

“The other days you work like a dog. Right? They are enjoying the sweet results of ten people’s effort investing only one! Listen to me. It leads to two meanings if you can’t finish your task within the duty hour. Either you are inefficient or overburdened. Am I wrong?”

“What can I do? In our country this is a system that prevails. In the private companies. There is so much of unemployment… There is always a fear that if I don’t do somebody else will do. May be in the less amount than that of mine…”. 
“Hmm.” Bugi again kept another piece of cucumber in his mouth. “After coming here I have also talked to some other persons. Everybody gave me the picture like you. Grim. Unhealthy. Terrifying.”

Soumya shrugged. He extended his hand to take another prawn ball. While eating he said, “Why are you not taking much?”

“Why? See, I am taking salad. I am putting on lot of weight. So I have controlled the intake of fried items and snacks.”

“Yet, take at least one or two. I am finishing it alone.”

“Eat. Shall I give you another peg of whisky?”

“Give. But only one. I don’t drink much. I have to drive back.”

Bugi again filled Soumya’s glass with the soda and ice. With a quite inquisitive tone he asked, “Your result was pretty good. Why did you choose to stay in Kolkata?”

“That was an odd situation. In the campus interview I was selected for a big firm in Bangalore. I think you know the rules of the placement section. Once you are selected in a company you can’t go anywhere else for interview. I was also very happy and did not try in any other way. But when our final results came the company cheated me. I will be wrong if I say only with me, in fact they hanged many. They sent regret letter, ‘Sorry, for time being we have stopped appointments.’ I was very angry. Scoundrels! I will not go anywhere. I worked in a small company for two years and from there switched to Infocal.”

“You did not try anywhere else?”

“I have already told you that I am the son of Supria Singharoy! Once I decide that’s final. There is no deviation from my decision. I won’t go anywhere. No way. Not even in Silicon Valley. I will show what I can do staying back here.”

Soumya took a big sip in the second peg. As not habituated the wine was affecting slowly the brain. He was feeling light. The hesitation of not seeing pretty elderly Bugida for long was totally over. In a soft tone said, “From the beginning it’s only discussion about me. Tell about yourself. How is your work going on?”

Bugi sat still for few seconds. His eyes were at the window of the hotel. Taking the glass in hand he stood up. With bare feet he was walking on the soft carpet.

Bugi went to the window. His eyes were at the city outside. With a quite worried tone said, “It is tough to make you understand in one word. I have started independent business there six and a half years ago. A software business in a location like Silicon Valley. It may be small but I have got lot of works. Money showered and the price of the shares increased swiftly. It seemed as if I would touch the heaven. I got a sudden shock two years ago. It was a situation when the share market was about to crush. Everyday the mercury was falling, falling, falling….I can’t tell you what kind of strange feeling it was. I used to feel as if I was standing on water. On the surface of water. I was drowning as I walked and the blood was getting cold. A cold fear devoured me. Whenever I closed my eyes my ears echoed -your days are going to be over, Pradipta.”

Surprised Soumya asked, “Is your company closed?”

Bugi returned back from the window side. While sitting on the sofa he sighed, “No brother and that is the saddest part of the story. The company survived. The business is running cursorily but not as before. But the memories of those days are not wiped out. That terrible fear is still eating me up. Whenever I close my eyes like an oracle I can hear ‘Pradipta, your days are over’! Suppose I had been ruined, this fear would not have chased me.”

It seemed as if Soumya could not realize the depth of those words. Laughing he said, “Bugida, you are just mourning. Time has changed its face. Again start business with utmost energy.”

“But I am not able to do anymore. I am fed up. Even your mishtiboudi talks like you. She just doesn’t want to understand that I am mentally ruined. I am no more fit for staying in that country.”

Soumya’s eyes blinked. He asked, “Do you want to come back?”

“This time I came to give a thought to my plan of coming back. I am only thinking. Thinking. In my odd days I found that country a lonely foreign land. I cried. I used to feel, ‘Will I be ruined here in this way?’ This time after coming here when I was walking on the roads of Kolkata I could feel a different kind of satisfaction. You know! Whomever I was seeing on the road it felt as if they are very much known to me. They
are my people! It is almost twenty-two years that I have left my native land. But I could never realize it before that still this country is very much in my blood. Your own soil is a tremendous thing, dear!”

Soumya again twitched his eyes, “That means you are coming back?”

“I have already told you that I am thinking. Thinking. It is almost a decade that I am in Silicon Valley. Yet every moment I feel as if I am staying in an unknown city. Why only there, wherever and whenever I had stayed had I ever been able to forget that this was someone else’s place! It is true that I have been dwelling there yet the earth, grass, water nothing of this place is mine.

Compared to the two-storied house out there, the lamppost of that crossing appears to be closer to my heart! God knows why does it happen? Somu, am I getting mad?”

Soumya laughed out loudly, “Ah, why are you going deep into so much of thinking? As your mind wishes come back.”

“Am I thinking in vain? There is problem in that too. Your mishtiboudi, Tup, Tap…”

“Why? Is none of them ready to come? Have you told them?”

“I gave a hint. Your boudi’s consent is fifty fifty. Shedding tears she will come and will adjust again too. But my children…They turned furious as they got the slightest hint.”

“Natural. They are born and brought up there, grown up there. For them everything is there…”

“And the fault is also mine. When they were kids I thought they should be brought up in that culture. If I would try to fuse both Bengal and America they would face problem. Now I can feel the result to my bones. Suppose, after my death if they stayed back there, as the descendants of Pradipto Choudhuri would their children and after them their children have any distinct identity? For them it’s not Choudhuri but Chaudari, something which merely sounds like other American surnames. They know nothing about Bengal. Not even of Ravindranath Tagore. Even they don’t have any interest to know. A Bengali festival was organized there. There were dances, music, theatre etc…They did not go at all. They told me straight, ‘Don’t bore us, papa’. These are things of your clan. We are not interested. To them all the Bengalis are nothing but a clan!”

“Then they are not coming?”

“Slim chance. Even I will not force. I will think that this is my punishment. Seeing the
outward show I had forgotten my poor motherland and this is its result.”
Were the dialogues not becoming very dramatic? Was Bugida totally drunk?
“No dear, my heart is burning. After talking to you I feel lighter.” Holding Soumya’s
hands Bugi asked, “If I come back will you stand by me?”
“Is this a thing to ask? Everyone will be with you.”
“No, not like that. I am planning something. I have earned a good amount of money.
After coming if I open a software company? In fact, I know the shrewd tricks of the trade
well. I have connections too. Can’t you and I together build the business?”
Soumya was not at all ready for such a proposal. Quite surprised he asked, “Me?”
“Yes. You. It is said that all thieves are mutual cousins. And can’t mutual cousins do
business? You can be assured that you will not loose.”
“But I don’t have capital.”
“I told you already that I have. You have to work. Man management, resource
management, everything will be your responsibility. Then even if you work day and night
you will be working for yourself.”
“Hmm. That is true. Yet…”
“What are you thinking about? Uncertainty? Oh darling, this is the age of taking risk.
Think. Think. Actually I called you today to tell this. I am coming in October. Then both
of us will sit together and chalk out the plan in detail. In between I will keep in touch
with. Give me your e-mail address.
From there I will give you some instructions. You have to carry out them. What
happened? What are you thinking?”
“I will see.”

With the thought in head Soumya was returning on his motorbike. ‘Will Bugida
really come back? Will he return uprooting everything? But he told that he did not have
any root there. Quite possible! He is not able to concentrate there. He is getting old too.’
From his mother he came to know that when Bugida became a green card holder mashi
was very upset. Even up to her death mashi could not forget that pain. ‘Bugida is an
intelligent man. Perhaps he knows some of it. Are those old memories causing pain to
Bugida now? Is it so easy to open suddenly a new business here? He told Soumya that he would make him his partner. But in the long run will it end up in a master servant relationship? Labour in lieu of capital. Will Bugida always remember this condition? By the way in such a situation Soumya can retreat. In no situation he will stand in unfathomable water! If the business really runs well Soumya will reach heights! Then no flat, not a flat, a bunglow. Deya loves flowering plants. Deya can do her gardening according to her wish. He will prepare a lawn of Mexican grass. Both of them will own separate cars. For holidaying they will go to Colorado. They will walk on the Grand Canyonn. Or they will enjoy a motorboat ride under the Niagara waterfalls. Deya is very interested in seeing the historic places. They can go to Rome or Greece. Mediterranean sea! The vine orchard by the blue sea. The sculpture of Parthenon. Where will they educate their son? Whatever education he gets Soumya will make him a cricketer. He always had the wish to be a cricketer. It could not be possible in this life.’

Suddenly Soumya became alert. What was he thinking, eh? How could he intend to satisfy his unfulfilled desires through his son? Then what difference has remained between him and his mother?

A sense of pain was crawling in his head slowly, quite lighter now. There was a lump of condensed cough near his throat. Soumya breathed deeply. Does ma remember him even now? Does her heart cry for Soumya? Soumya had suffered quite a few days with fever at the end of winter. Baba came to see him. He must have told ma about this. Did ma become a bit anxious? Did she remember the days of his engineering when she sat the whole night near the head of her son who was down with fever? Why did ma turn so cruel? And why did she make Soumya so cruel?

The motorbike was crossing the Sukanta Bridge. A train passed under it. The shops nearby were closed. The roads were almost lonely. Now the air was little humid. The pale moon was hanging from the cloudy sky.
Covering the motorbike with a plastic Soumya climbed the stairs. He was almost running. Though there was little dizziness all his nerves were totally in control. Ringing the doorbell of his flat he looked at his watch. What a shame! It was pretty late. He did not inform Deya. She must be worried. Actually Bugida’s call was so sudden in his office! Deya had a day shift. He could make a phone call in her office. At least he should have remembered when he was in the hotel. Could he do such a mistake if he had a mobile with him? No, it is high time that he gets a cell phone.

Opening the door Laxmi stood aside. Entering the flat Soumya kept his helmet in its place. Right at that moment he saw a young girl sitting near the kitchen. Huddled up. Oh God! Was she Laxmi’s relative? Soumya was about to ask Laxmi. Deya came out of the room. She looked at the girl once and in a suppressed tone said, “She is Shewli’.

“Who is Shewli?’ Soumya could not understand.

Deya with a meaningful signal of her eye called Soumya inside the room. “It is that girl. From Beleghata.”

“Why is she here?” Soumya was taken aback.

“Her mother has died. Don’t you know?”

“Yes. So what?”

“She was unable to stay there.”

“Why? What happened?”

“It is a very odd situation. People from the neighboring houses were disturbing her; the landlord was threatening. The local guys were troubling her. At any time the outsiders were entering her house unasked. People really do not have any sympathy at all. Hearing the news of her mother’s death all her relatives came running. But everyone ran away as nobody is willing to take her responsibility.”

Soumya murmured, “So you have brought her?”

“What else was the option? What a terrible condition! I could not see.”

“So is she going to stay here?”

“Let her stay here at least for some days. Then I will see what I can arrange for her.”

Soumya was surprised. Sometimes Deya does such immature things.
Laxmi set two plates with rice. Today she had cooked very delicious items. The oil of *hilsa* fish, a curry with the bones of *hilsa* and *puishaak*, *hilsa* in mustard sauce and hog-plum chutney. The other days Mimi created so much of fuss with two handful of rice but today she ate to heart’s content. Eggs had just started accumulating in the fish and there was enough oil in it. Actually the breed of this fish was different! It smelled so nice while cooking! Ah!

Laxmi’s mouth watered. She raised her voice, “Hey girl, come and eat.”

Her nose could smell the curry with the fish bones. The smell of the fish. The mouth watered. Laxmi took another spoon of rice in her dish. This time the rice was very good. Mimi brought it seeing it properly. There were no small particles of stone and moreover it tasted a bit sweet. In this house *Gobindabhog* rice came for Mimi and dada. It smelt very good while cooking. Even the rice was very light. But it was tasteless. Laxmi had tasted. Even if she were given Laxmi would not have relished. Even her stomach would not have been filled. Compared to that, she preferred the plump and full-grown rice prepared by the husking pedal.

Laxmi was mixing the rice with the oil of the fish. Her hand stopped suddenly. Her fat body leant back. Her eyes searched here and there, “Hey girl, where are you?”

There was no response. Forget it! It was a real nuisance for Laxmi! It was a real pain for her to get up once she sat down. God knew where the girl was hiding! Why did the girl suffer the whole day with inexpressible pain? ‘The mother left for the heavenly abode which was a part of destiny. Can you bring her back by crying?’ Even Laxmi’s mother died while giving birth to her brother. Laxmi was hardly twelve or thirteen then. Did Laxmi cry sitting on their corridor for long? ‘And the mishap that was destined has already happened. Even if you pull a long face would it bring back your chastity or transform you into the pious Savitri?’
Even after washing a thousand times with soap the stains of an unchaste woman is not removed! Yet you are lucky that you got the support of Mimi. Just remember the kind of foxes and dogs could not tear your flesh!

Laxmi shouted with much irritation, “Hey girl, how long do you expect me to wait for you with the plate of rice? Don’t I feel hunger and thirst? What do you think?”

Her shouting worked now. Shewli came slowly. She crossed Laxmi by leaping over her carefully. She was sitting lowering her head.

Laxmi said, “Start now.”

Shewli broke the lump of rice. She was not eating properly but nibbling.

“What happened? Eat.” Sucking the bones Laxmi gave an oblique glance to her, “Little girl, hunger is a great evil. The hunger is behind all the happenings in this world. Say it for happiness or misery…”

Shewli did not show any reaction to Laxmi’s philosophical speech. She was still sitting silent.

Laxmi’s tone became softer, “Tell me, what you think the whole day. In fact, didi is now thinking about you. Can’t you see that she is running around to so many places for you? At least you will find a good shelter. Rather as long as you are here enjoy a bit. See, how costly the fish is! Two hundred rupees per kilo! Everyday you can eat fruits, fish, meat and many more things. The people of this house have a big heart. They give whatever they eat to their servants. Didn’t you listen to Shyama, the servant from the second floor, who was scolding her masters last noon? They give her coarse rice, which does not get boiled easily. It is like a goat’s pellet of dung…”

Laxmi’s speech was not yet over. Shewli suddenly cried out.

“Damn it? Why are you creating an ocean again?”

Shewli’s cry increased more terribly. She was sobbing and making sighing. “I am a sinner, maashi. A big sinner. There is no place for me in hell too.”

“Ah, stop. He is the one to judge virtue or vice. Was it your wish to plunge into sin? Can’t God see that?”

“Maashi, my mother died only because of me… My mother…. my mother.”
Leaving the plate of rice in front of the eyes the hungry Laxmi was not at all enjoying the lamentations of Shewli. From the time the girl had stepped in she played a sad tune. ‘Where was the pain for the mother when you had eloped, girl?’ Laxmi could easily understand the torment of that poor mother. If Laxmi were at the place of that mother she would have died consuming poison much earlier.

Yet Laxmi was feeling a bit sorry for the girl. Whatever might be the situation the girl was pretty young and in fact at such budding age girls do such kind of mistakes. Really the mother left the girl to face utter distress. Laxmi tried to comfort Shewli by her words. Words have magical power. They help to lighten one’s grief; even a stone like heart becomes soft.

Nodding her head Laxmi said, “Darling, in this world nobody dies because of other’s fault. Everyone dies because of his or her own fault.”

“But maashi, my mother had not done anything wrong.”

Laxmi murmured within, “Certainly she did. She conceived you in her womb.”

But outwardly she said, “Little girl, can we recognize all our faults? She must have done something.”

“No maashi, I have killed my mother.”

“May goddess Shashti save you! Why do you consider yourself instrumental to other’s action?”

“No maashi, you don’t know anything. On that day I have used so many foul and abusive words for ma.”

“Is it so? What did you say to your mother?”

“Maashi, I can’t tell that. My heart is bleeding.”

“Darling, don’t hide things in your heart. If you tell me you will feel better.”

“On that day ma returned from the money-lender’s house after giving delivery of the blouses…” Shewli cleansed her nose with the backside of her palm. “On her way the scoundrels stopped ma.”

“Who are those scoundrels?”

“They live near the canal. They are the ultimate bastards. They were irritating her very much. It seems they said what the point was in slogging with stitching jobs. They said,
‘Send your daughter to us. We will keep her like a queen. Why are you keeping the girl in the house who has been sleeping around?’ Returning home ma took it out on me. I was beaten by a piece of wood. She told me, ‘Why did you return? Anyway you were doing well where you were. Why did you come back to take my life?’ Maashi, even I could not keep my head cool at that time. People from the neighboring houses were enjoying. Very much in front of them I told, ‘I think in spite of being my mother you want me to plunge in this line. Do you really wish to enjoy the money earned by selling my flesh? Let it be, let it be…’ Maashi, those words really hurt ma’s heart. With a hot head I went out of the house…I did not go very far. I was sitting on the bank of the lake with a heavy heart. After sometime when I came back I found that the door was closed and ma was not opening it. At last people from the neighboring houses broke the door.” Narrating all these continuously Shewli wept aloud, “Maashi, my mother hanged herself by the neck…!”

Laxmi became speechless. It seemed as if the unseen Shewli’s mother came up in her imaginary eyes. It was not a body but a hanging corpse of a woman!

Laxmi could not eat anymore. The delicious hilsa fish tasted insipid. In a heavy tone she said, “Darling, anger is the biggest vice. Anger causes so much of harm to people.”

Shewli was silent. Being able to tell those things her crying also stopped. She was eating little bit. Slowly.

Laxmi asked, “Do you want some more rice? As you don’t eat I gave you less.”

“No.” Because of the lingering after effect of her cry Shewli trembled a bit.

Again her head dropped down. Taking a sip in chutney Laxmi got up.

Washing her own dish and glass in the sink she kept them at their place. She came to the balcony slowly. The color of Mimi’s new bedcover was fading fast. The machine would spoil it more. Sabita washed it in the morning. Laxmi took the dried bedcover from the cloth line. She was folding it. Unconsciously a small breath rolled out from her heart. A sigh of satisfaction. Fortunately her two daughters got married in time. The whole day Laxmi had to be busy in the houses where she worked. Even she could not keep an eye on her daughters properly. This was no less a matter of luck that in spite of that her daughters did not end up in such scandals. Though the elder daughter was a bit
restless and roamed around idly, Laxmi luckily arranged her marriage as soon as she crossed fourteen. Presently Sadhana was the mother of three. Even Laxmi did not have to face much trouble in getting married her younger daughter. Kalpana had bright complexion and a lovely face. She passed the test only in one sitting. Are her daughters living happily? Whatever conditions they might be in, at least they are not in a state like Shewli.

The telephone was ringing inside. Laxmi came inside the hall with heavy steps. As soon as she placed the receiver on her ears her face was filled with joy and smile. It was Mimi’s mother.

“Who? Laxmi? Where is Mimi? Call her. I want to scold her.”

“Boudi, she went out long back. At around eleven o’clock.”

“Why? Doesn’t she have duty in the evening?”

“She told that she would go to office after visiting some place in Behala.”

“After visiting some rehab or so?”

“That’s what she told.”

“Phew, I don’t know what to do with this girl. God knows from where she has brought such a nuisance! Everyone is irritated and angry with her…Mimi’s father and elder sister…”

“Boudi, same is the situation in this house.” Laxmi’s eyes went around and then she lowered her voice, “Even dada isn’t happy with it at all.”

“It is obvious. All of a sudden she brought home that dirty girl. Even there is no guarantee whether that girl brought some disease with her or not.” Gouri’s agitated voice on the other side paused suddenly, “Mimi must be arguing heavily with Soumya?”

“Yes boudi, you are right. Whenever they meet they pick up quarrels.”

“Hmm.” Again Gouri was silent. “So where is that queen?”

“She is crying continuously.”

“And Mimi’s heart must be melting at this, I suppose. The girl is a real fool, a real stupid. She should complete her office job and its problems in the office itself. Why is she bringing all these at home?”

“Very true.” The sympathy that sprang in the heart of Laxmi for Shewli even few minutes back was wiped away imperceptibly. Lowering her voice she said, “In fact the matter is a
big scandal in the neighborhood. Sabita works as a maid in five other felats (flat)…Once Sabita gets to know about it can it be hidden from others at Santoshpur?”

“Who told Sabita? You?”

Laxmi gulped. Though Sabita has come to know most of the incident through her, Mimi also told her the story to some extent! The girl was in trouble, the girl’s mother had died and there was no one to look after her…!

Didn’t she tell?

Hawking Laxmi spoke out the half-truth, “Boudi, don’t you know your daughter? Can her stomach hold anything?”

“Yes, very true. She is the daughter of Yudhishthira! Then did anyone in the apartment tell anything?”

“They are not opening their mouth but everyone is curious to know. Take the boudi next to our flat. That lady who never peeps into this house was so interested in chatting with Mimi yesterday morning. But all the time her eyes were at Shewli. Yesterday I went to bring dried tobacco leaf. The skinny lady from the ground floor asked me so many questions standing near the staircase!”

“Just see. Is it possible for Soumya not to be angry? Does anyone volunteer to bring these problems in a decent household? Whatever late it is for Mimi to return, ask her to call me as soon as she is back.”

“I will tell her. But make it a point not to tell your daughter that you have heard so many things from me. Otherwise she will scold me a lot.”

“Okay. Listen, always keep an eye on that girl so that she can’t run away stealing anything. God knows what her identity is or from where she dropped in.”

Very true. Very true. Putting down the telephone Laxmi stood for a while pulling a long face. Boudi was not wrong. There are so many expensive things in the room. Both the husband and wife are careless about their belongings. Especially Mimi. Sometimes she keeps her earrings on the table, sometimes forgets the gold chain in the bathroom… If anything goes missing now it may bring bad name to Laxmi. They may think that taking the opportunity of that girl’s arrival Laxmidi herself…!

Laxmi came to the kitchen in a hurry. Shewli was not there. God knew in which pit she
was hiding. No, she was exactly where she thought. She was lying down in the small room. In a huddled up state. Near the divan. Laxmi once thought of waking her up. *Dada* usually works in this room. Even if a single thing is displaced he would be very angry. Then she thought that let her be like that. Anyways she has to manage some space for her. At least as long as she stays in this house.

Coming to the hall Laxmi lied down on the carpet. At this time she feels sleepy after lunch. Her eyelids drooped in drowsiness.

Who knows why Laxmi isn’t getting sleep today. Shewli’s mother was peeping in her mind. How could she hang to end her life? Poor lady. How so much of pain had ruined the life of the widow! How did the woman look like? Fat? Thin? When did Shewli’s father die? While remembering all these, another man appeared in front of her eyes. A man, short with a very slender moustache like *Bhringi*’s and with marble like eyes. The man who brought Laxmi from the distant village of Bankati. In the slum area of Gopalnagar. He used to work in the battery factory. He started a life with her but actually had spent his whole life in the burning grounds. Intoxicated with liquor and opium he usually returned home late at nights. He had the strength of a monster then. If anything came out of her mouth he would beat her up mercilessly. Then one day suddenly he disappeared as a disciple of some guru. Since then with the responsibility of her two daughters Laxmi has been working as a maid from one door to another.

Thinking about the man at one point she slept. Under the spell of drowsiness she was seeing fragment dreams. Laxmi was getting married under the tamarind tree of Bankati. The groom with matted hair, a trishul in hand was wearing a conical sponge wood. The groom was laughing very loudly. He was poking Laxmi with the trishul. And just after that he was dragging her by hair. He pushed her inside a room made of mud-plastered bamboo laths. There hundreds of girls variegated in colors were moving in swarms. Men, one after another were coming. They were giggling and taking the girls inside the room. A person forcibly was stripping Laxmi. The naked Laxmi was trying hard to hide herself. She was trying to escape. She was running through the tram track of Gopalnagar. While running she saw her two daughters. There was no single thread on the
bodies of Sadhana and Kalpana. Laxmi shouted, ‘Run. Enter the jail.’ Laxmi’s man was standing in front of the jail gate posing as a guard. He had the trishul in his hand, matted hair on head and was wearing a khaki dress. The man roared, “Hey get me some opium!” Laxmi somehow managed to enter the jail. In front of it there was a huge and lonely field. A rope for hanging was there. Placing the rope around her neck Laxmi hanged. And with that some musical sound was heard. Jhyang jhyang...

Suddenly Laxmi’s eyes opened up. The calling bell rang!

Laxmi got up with half-closed eyes. She opened the door. It was Sabita.

“What happened? Why are you sleeping so deeply? I have been ringing the bell for so long?”

Laxmi was still under the spell. Rubbing her eyes she said, “Wash the utensils properly. Otherwise there remains fishy smell in them.”

Coming to the door of the kitchen Sabita’s eyes were going around, “Where is Shewli?”

“Why?”

“When I was coming out after cleaning the floor of the opposite house, I saw a boy standing on the road. He looked like a rogue.”

“So?”

“He was coming towards this felat (flat). The moment I turned back he started walking in haste.”

Laxmi’s eyes turned thin, “When did you see him?”

“I have already told you. Around twelve or one.” Sabita frowned. Standing near the sink she started cleaning the utensils piled up. Her tongue was also moving non-stop. “I felt as if Shewli was also standing on the corridor. Seeing me she left.”

Sabita could tell a fib without any hesitation. Laxmi cast angry glances upon her. “Don’t lie. Your tongue will fall off.”

“You will surely understand when she will give way to a man in this house! And he will slit your throat.”

Laxmi’s face turned pale. She protested with fear, “Don’t utter useless things. In fact she is leaving within few days.”

“Let her leave first. Such a cosy place, neither the owner nor his wife stays…” She was giggling. “If she stays for ever you will lose the favor of fortune.”
“Then everything, such as scolding me always at silly matters or your permanent right to stay in this house, will be over. Will boudi allow you to work here once she gets such a young girl? That girl will never be married...See, what an opportunity!”

There was slim chance of that happening. Laxmi knew Mimi from her childhood. Mimi loves her like her own mother or aunt. If Laxmi leaves who will look after her family? That girl? No way.

The cleansing of the utensils was over very soon. Sabita came like an express train and left like the Punjab Mail. But unnecessarily she created an atmosphere of fear in Laxmi’s mind. Like fog. With a gloomy face Laxmi moved here and there for a while. She swept and cleaned the room. She stood on the balcony for some time. The sky was cloudy. It was raining pitter-patter. The road was lonely. There was nobody anywhere. Yet Laxmi’s eyes went around. Did Sabita cook up the story? Where was the girl when she called the girl to eat? On the corridor? Should she inform Mimi about this?

The fog was getting thick. Coming in the small room Laxmi pushed Shewli, “Hey girl, get up. You sleep now, cry the other moment...I can’t understand your behavior at all.”

Shewli got up. Her eyes were puffed up.

“Can you light the gas?”

“Yes.”

“Go and prepare two cups of tea. Pour mine in the glass and yours in the cup. That old cup which I took out for you.”

Like an obedient girl Shewli went to the kitchen and put the kettle on the stove. There were two salwar-kameezes on the table meant for ironing. Laxmi got busy. She was about to fix the plug. The calling bell rang again.

Opening the door Laxmi was surprised. “You? Again today?”

Subhash handed over a wet plastic bag to Laxmi. I brought down coconuts today from the trees. Your younger daughter has prepared laddus and sent them for you.”

Laxmi felt happy within. As she gave them money, now-a-days her son-in-law takes special care of her. Otherwise Subhash was not the person to come along way from
Sonarpur to give her laddus. Laxmi knows that Subhash beats up Kalpana cruelly. After drinking up to his throat he even abuses her lot by calling names of her mother and father. But Laxmi got a doubt suddenly in her mind. Shewli came on Tuesday and Subhash saw her on the very next day …! But what could be the urgency of bringing laddu on Saturday?

Subhash didn’t bother for anything. Switching on the fan he fixed his back on the sofa. He was wearing a full pant of butter color and a vest with stripes. He was dancing his feet.

Laxmi sat on the carpet in front of him. What was the need to bring down coconuts in this rainy season?

“Dada is not going through a good time. The rainy season has already started. Nobody is interested in building construction. There is no work in hand. He told me, ‘Subhash, bring down the coconuts. Let us share…’ Even your daughter said, ‘Ma, loves laddus. There is no one to prepare them for ma’.”

Shewli was standing at the door of the kitchen. With a feeble tone she asked, “Maashi, should I serve tea?”

Subhash’s teeth were all wide spread instantly. “What’s up? How are you? Is everything going well?”

Shewli lowered her eyes.

“Why are you feeling shy? I am like your jamaibabu. I am the son-in-law of your maashi. I am her relative.”

Shewli moved away.

Laxmi herself got up and brought tea. She told Subhash, “Drink the tea and go quickly. Today the condition of the sky is not well.”

“Ma, what do I have to do with the sky? In fact, we always drench in the rain…Ma, actually I need to consult something with you.”

“What?” In an alarmed tone Laxmi asked, “Did you pay the whole amount of rickshaw?”

“No, no. It is not about the rickshaw. There is something else. I am planning to build another room adjacent to ours once the puja is over. Just for you. Sunk in sorrow for twenty four hours, your daughter says, ‘the whole life ma has been working in others’ houses’…You are growing old. And now you need returnmen (retirement). At least enjoy
the rest of your life with your daughter and your grandchildren…”
There is a temptation in the proposal. For a moment Laxmi’s heart melted. The next moment she became alert. Like a smart customer she asked, “How much I do have to give?”
“As much as you can afford. There is no compulsion.”
“And if I can’t give?”
“Then what can I do?” Subhash appeared to be out of spirits. “You can stay with us.”
“No dear. I am pretty well.”
Laxmi made her mind strong. The scriptures say that temptation leads to sin and sin to death. She was in a secured place. Why would she walk on the path of uncertainty? Nephews and sons-in-law are none but strangers. One should keep them at bay.
“Then come for a few days at least. Your grand daughter remembers you a lot. You have never sat on my rickshaw.”
“I’ll come. Let the rainy season be over.”
“If you come you must have to stay for some days.”
“I’ll see.”
Lowering her face Shewli came to take away the cups. She was going back with slow steps, “Hey listen, give me a glass of water.”
Laxmi’s jaws became stiff. With a serious face she said, “After tea you should not drink water. You may get acidity.”
Who could say what Subhash had understood? It seemed as if he was hurt a bit. He stood up and said, “I will leave now.”
“See you again.”
Even after opening the door Subhash was standing for sometime. He was thinking something. Turning back he said, “But ma, on Tuesday or Wednesday I may come once again. This time our trees have produced plenty of bottle gourds. I will come to give.”
“No, no. Nobody in this house eats bottle-gourd.” Laxmi spoke out quickly, “Even I get cold if I eat bottle-gourd.”
“But Kalpana was telling that you….”
“Actually she has been staying without her mother for long. She must have forgotten. It is true that I used to like bottle gourd but it is a long time that I have stopped taking any.
Does everything, you like suit your body?”
With a quite disappointed face Subhash left.
The mist in Laxmi’s mind became more condensed. What a disturbance it is! Oh God, may Mimi transfer this girl to somewhere else quickly.
Shewli was standing near the dining table. In a low voice she asked, “Maashi, should I sweep the room?”
Laxmi was quite rude, “Are all these works waiting for you?”
“Should I knead flour?”
“Why darling? Have I become disabled?”
“Then let me iron Didi’s salwar kameezes. I can do that.”
“No. You need not touch anything. If something goes missing…”
Shewl’s face became pale. She was nipping the nail by her feet.
Laxmi concentrated on her work. Mimi may take both rice and roti at night. It would be better to cook another item with roti. Picking few small potatoes she kept them in the pressure cooker. She grinded onion, ginger and garlic separately. She started preparing alur dam. Peeling the mouth of three langda mangoes she soaked them in water. She cut cucumber and onion in round shape and placing them on the plate sprinkled salt over them. Both dada and Munia liked salad very much.
It was getting dark quickly in the evening. The sun could not show its face as it set. The children usually play on the terrace at this time. But today their noise was not heard much.
Finishing her work, Laxmi was going to the small room. Suddenly her feet stopped. Her eyes went to the balcony through and through Mimi’s room. Mimi was standing there. When did she come?
Couple of seconds and she was disillusioned. Where is Mimi! It’s Shewli. Wearing the old salwar kameez of Mimi she looked exactly like Mimi from the backside.
How could she take Shewli for Mimi? Strange!
“Hey, why are you sitting in a thoughtful mood?”
Deya was absent minded. Turning her neck she saw that Sukanya came for evening duty. She was putting the sunglass in her hand in the bag. Casually she said, “Oh, you!”
Pulling the chair Sukanya sat beside her, “What are you thinking so much?”
With a tensed face Deya said, “I am unable to do anything by any means. I am in much trouble regarding that girl.”
“Why? What happened again?”
“I thought that somehow I would arrange something. But nowhere I am seeing any hope. I visited three homes. But everywhere it is ‘no vacancy, no vacancy!’ Those who have the capacity of accommodating thirty have already accommodated forty. Twenty people are somehow managing where only fifteen people can stay. Everyone took me on a round to show the situation. What a miserable condition! All of them are huddling for a shelter. The number of homes is so few in number compared with the number of the destitute girls!”
“You can say it in the reverse way. Compared to the homes the number of destitute girls is very high!”
There was a sarcastic tone in Sukanya’s voice. Deya did not like it. With a gloomy face she said, “I don’t know what to do. It is already more than eight to ten days…! Don’t you have any contact?”
“That day itself I told you. I don’t know anyone. This is Anasuadi’s line.”
“Actually I am roaming with Anasuadi’s reference. But I coul see light of hope in one place. It seems there two girls are going to get married in the month of Shravana. And then on their place…But that means the pressure of another one month.”
“Hmm. Problem.”
“Yes dear. Real problem. In fact all these homes are private. Either some individuals are running through collecting subscriptions and perhaps they get some donation from here and there or they are under some trust. Each of them has very limited fund. Perhaps some
of them get some grant from the government. But that is also very less. These are organizations for noble cause. I can’t force them….”

“Why don’t you send her to the Government Rehabilitation centre? She has already some problem of police case…her mother has committed suicide…once she was abducted…now she is homeless and her life is in danger. Saying these things file a prayer in the court. Once the magistrate passes an order there will be no problem.”

“What are you saying? I will not send her there. Anasuadi time and again forbade me. The atmosphere in those places is so bad that the girl’s life will be ruined.”

“Then what can I say? Unless some arrangement is done, sit idle bearing the burden on your head.”

“I don’t have any problem. But…” Deya stopped.

“But what?”

“Soumya is feeling very uneasy. Everyday coming from the office he has the same question to ask, ‘What have you arranged? Till now nothing could be managed?’.”

“If I were at Soumya’s place I would have said the same thing. No intimation, no permission and suddenly you will bring a stray girl at home and you expect Soumya to clap seeing that? Deya, this is too much of an expectation.”

“Why are you calling her stray? Shewli is a helpless girl. And now as by some way or the other I got an involvement with the girl it is my duty to take her responsibility. Everybody should understand this also.”

“You are thinking from your angle. Only to earn a name in your profession you did too much with that girl and as you are trapped now… Deya, still don’t forget that the household is not yours alone. Before bringing the girl like that you must have discussed the matter with Soumya.”

Of course, Deya admitted her mistake. She did it deep from her heart. And as she admitted her fault, seeing the slant look of Soumya she felt a prick of sensation in her mind. But suddenly she got into such a situation and the girl was crying so terribly that at that moment she did not have any other choice left. How she could live in mental peace unless she managed a good arrangement for Shewli. How could Soumya be so unreasonable!
Sukanya got up and went to Tirthankar. With a sad mood Deya tried to pay attention to her work. She asked Kanad sitting on the table beside her, “Hey, how far? Will you leave the computer?”

“I am done. One minute. While taking printout from the computer Kanad simpered, “What was the Lady Chatterbox telling you? Must be giving you sermon?” Deya turned her hand upside down, “Yeah, something of that sort. As I am so far not able to arrange something for that girl she was telling…”

“But she is very jealous regarding that matter, I suppose.”

“Why?”

“Ah, strange! Your writing was so much talked about. Ranenda has praised it separately…”

“Don’t talk rubbish. What’s there to be jealous about?”

“She is actually of that type. She can’t bear anyone else’s reputation. In fact, yesterday she was laughing with Tathagata saying, ‘See, how she will manage to get another assignment by buttering Ranenda! But I think this time she will not be involved in such type of trouble’.” Taking the printout in hand Kanad left the monitor. “I felt so bad on hearing this!”

Kanad had the habit of indulging in useless arguments. Sukanya or Tathagata might suffer from professional jealousy. But it would be stupid to pay heed to Kanad. He uses to take pleasure in provoking people to lag behind one another regarding silly things. He must be the descendant of Naradmuni! If Kanad had felt so bad he must have protested. Did he do that?

Not extending the discussion Deya started her work. She was editing the long report that was faxed from Dhanbad. It was a report regarding the disturbance caused by the rowdies in the areas of coal mine. The news would not get anymore space beyond twenty centimeters. The correspondent from Dhanbad always wrote a lot. Tirthankarda had asked to prepare another copy. Death of a couple in Nakashipada. A couple married four months ago. The police was suspecting it to be a suicidal case. What might have happened that before dying out of the love-showers of honeymoon the husband and the wife had to consume poison? For a few seconds Kanan cast her shadow on Deya’s mind
but as she went on working it faded away too. The whole news section was extremely active. It was already five. Now the pages would be released one by one. Before finishing the work in her hand Deya was again allotted with another task. Day after tomorrow is Rathyatra. It was a report regarding the assemblage of devotees in Puri.

Handing over the copies with headings in their exact place Deya went to the next room. Into the supplementary office. Though the room was not that huge like the news section it was considerably big. There were three tables, few desks and around eight employees, both regular and temporary, were working. Some were busy in proof reading; some were preparing the lay out and some were occupied in writing exclusive features. Now a days the Nabaprabhat was printing the supplementary thrice a week. Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays. After so much of persistent requesting, Jayashree was shifted in the section regarding current issues and Shubhamoy from this department was shifted to the news section. There was no need of staying more than seven or seven thirty in the supplementary section.

Deya came to Anasua and not to Jayashree. The fifty-year-old Jayashree was the head of the journal of Tuesday. From the very beginning of Nababharat she has been there.

Seeing Deya, Anasua loudly called out, “Hey, come here. Up to now we were talking about you.”

Listening to the cheerful welcome Anasua felt embarrassed, “Why, Anasuadi?”

“Oh my God! But why?”

“Yes dear. I am focusing how you have shown noble gesture to that girl in the Prabhatdarpan. Jayashree is preparing the matter.”

Jayashree waved her hand from the corner table. With smiling face she said, “Come and see this.”

Deya was very surprised. Various types of casual and attractive news found place in the column of the Prabhatdarpan. Fine arts, literature, culture, science, small but special moments of the city life or any eminent personality- these were the basic items of the Prabhatdarpan. This section of the Nabaprabhat was very popular. What was being written there regarding Deya?
Jayashree was reading out. The heading was ‘The Generosity of a Reporter’. The young reporter Deya Sinharoy did not finish her duty only after reporting the news. She had set a great example by providing shelter to the helpless and exploited young girl in her own house…

With an emotional tone Jayashree read the whole matter. Finishing the thing she was simpering, “Hey, do you like it? How have I written?”

Deya flushed with shame. With a hesitating tone she said, “Oh my God! Why have you placed so many adjectives beside my name?”

“At least I can never do such type of thing. I don’t have that guts.” Jayashree’s smile looked sympathetic. “Take it as a felicitation to a bold lady like you from the weeks like us.”

“Forget it! That’s an exaggeration.”

“Even to go beyond the limit for a noble cause is good.” That was Anasua’s voice.

“Leave it. What’s the news of that side? Could you arrange something?”

Deya explicitly described the scene in each and every rehab centre.

Anasua was frequently nodding her head. Crease of tension appeared in Anasua’s dignified face. “The demand of all the social workers goes high at the time urgency. Okay, let me talk once.”

Right at the moment Anasua took out the thin diary from the drawer. While stooping on it she was pressing the buttons of the telephone. “Hallo. Natun Diganta? Is Ms. Nisha Maitra there? …Oh, not available? When will she be coming? …Oh, okay…when she returns inform her that Anasua Goswami had called. From the newspaper office. Nabprabharat. Tell her that it is urgent.”

With a sullen face Anasua put down the receiver. “Your luck is bad. I am sure that it would have worked out if I could talk to Nisha Maitra. Nishadi is the president of Natun Diganta. Once I prepared a page regarding Nishadi. But presently Nishadi is in Delhi. By next Wednesday she will be back. Have patience for a few more days.”

Listening this Deya smiled, “Anasua, I am already holding my patience.”

But she murmured within, “But how will I convince Soumya?”

It seemed as if Anasua could sense something seeing Deya’s expressions. She asked, “Is that girl staying comfortably with you?”
“Yes, she is. But she cries a lot.”
“Did you inform the police station as you have brought her home?”
“Yes, I have given them my address and other necessary information.”
“And what about your local police station?
“What is the need for that? The investigation is being carried out by the police station in Shewli’s locality!”
“How strange! How can you forget those ruffians? There is no guarantee as to how long their hands can be? In fact the whole day both of you don’t stay at home. If they attack your house!”
“How will they recognize my house?”
Suddenly Debnath from the supplementary section of Friday told, “It will not be that hard if the police double-crosses. They generally have a link with the police.”
And right at the moment spoke out, “The ruffians have their own sources too. Searching your address would be a trivial task for them.”
“In fact I think that you should inform Ranenda about this. And if possible go and inform Malaybabu in Lalbazar.”
Jayashree asked timidly, “Hey, are you sure that nobody has followed you when you brought her home.”
Deya remembered Laxmidî’s words. Somebody was wandering near the house. It seemed that Sabita had seen. Suddenly Deya felt her heart beating fast. Was it for herself? Or for that girl? Was everyone scaring her unnecessarily?
To get rid of her anxiety Deya laughed forcefully, “What are you saying? So many things are being written in papers. Do you think that anyone will dare to do something?”

Deya did not stand any more time in the current journals section. She returned to her office. She worked for sometime with restless mind. Special news was being written regarding her. A secret happiness was bubbling in her mind. On the other side there was an anxiety like continuous damp sweating. In the warp and woof of the two feelings Deya could not be stable. Before going out she sprinkled lot of water on her eyes and face thinking that the cold touch would make her inside also cool.
This time the monsoon set in time. Almost everyday the sky’s face looked heavy. Often there was monotonous and tiring heavy downpour. Though it did not rain today, the sky was red. The weather was sultry and the wind was not blowing. At any time it could shower. Deya was walking through the footpath. The workers from the telephone department were digging the footpath. She had to walk carefully. The condensed sky brought down the darkness quickly. Even the bright streetlights appeared to be pale. Smearred with anxiety.

No sooner Deya crossed the temporary tea stall a sudden call terrified Deya, “Are you running away?”

An icy cold flow coming down through her spine made Deya numb for few seconds. The next moment she moved in wonder, “You-u?”

_Ha..ha..ha_…Ritam laughed out loudly, “Hey, you are scared, I see.”

The palpitation did not stop yet. Deya took long breath. “How come you are here?”

“There is a newspaper office called _Nabaprabhat_. I came there.”

Deya’s eyes were wide open. “In our office? To whom? Why?”

“One of my friends works there. Deya Sinharoy. I had some work with her.”

Deya burst out into laughter. “How flippant you are! As you are a writer you can’t talk anything directly, I see. Why didn’t you come upstairs to call me?”

“It is not good to enter the newspaper office frequently. The weight of a writer comes down.”

“If I had come out after one hour?”

“I would have waited. If you had come after one month also I would have stood for one month. If you had come after one year….”

“Stop. Don’t cross the limit. While walking Deya pinched Ritam, “Without going to my house why did you come to bother me here!”

“There is a great news for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Slow, friend, slow. Today I had a very busy day and I am heavily tired. Call a taxi first.”

“How will I get a taxi here now? In this office hour?”

“If a beautiful girl wishes something in her mind the taxi will definitely stop. Closing your eyes meditate for a yellow and black taxi…the way Kunti called Surya…”
Deya was about to slap Ritam on his head. Before that really a taxi appeared. How strange. There was smile on the face of a taxi driver of Kolkata. Extending his head he asked, “Didi, are you going somewhere?”

Deya was quite embarrassed, “Yes, I will. Santoshpur.”

Miracles still happen. The driver did not run away. He said, “Come in, madam.”

Ritam relaxed his body in the back seat. He was lighting the cigarette taking it out from his embroidered kurta. Taking a long puff he said, “Could you arrange anything for Shewli?”

“I am trying my best. I hope to arrange something soon.”

“That means you haven’t managed to arrange anything so far. But I have arranged.”

“Really? Where?” Deya literally jumped, “You should have told this before.”

“There is a way of revealing good news. First take me home and give me something substantial to eat…”

“Hey Ritam, please tell it.”

“No, make a promise first.”

“Okay, I will feed you poison. Will it work?”

“If you give it with your own hand I will drink that too.”

“One should give you only poison.”

“Guru that’s what you did. You kicked me out and got married to a computer.”

“Hey, what are you saying?”

“I am not that worthless. I can even do something.”

“Hey! Are you in mood of delivering lecture? Be serious, please. Tell me something useful.”

“Okay, listen to this.” Ritam puffed the cigarette deeply. “Yesterday I placed the matter of Shewli in our parliament. There, poet Satyabrata, whose name has already been registered in the Guineas Book as a liar, gave me an address. And for the first time in his life he showed some respect for his name. According to his direction today morning I rushed to Diamond Harbour. It was not exactly proper Diamond Harbour. It is towards the South. Almost near Kulpi. There is an establishment for girls at that place. Golden Hope. An N.G.O. An Italian woman runs it. She is an Italian by name but now she has turned almost local who eats jingeposto. Perhaps she came here by kick of fate in her life.
Now she is busy with the destitute girls.” “I introduced myself and the memsahib showed special treatment in knowing that I am a writer. She let me know that it was her duty to give shelter to distressed and poor girls. Then…”

“Then what?”

“A sponsor is needed. The lady roams around to arrange some foreign advertisements. She runs the organization mainly depending on the funding from sponsors. We have to give her a lumpsum amount annually. But not much. Around five thousand.”

“That’s very good. I easily can sponsor Shewli. Paying five thousand yearly is not a big deal, isn’t it?”

“But the expense is recurring until Shewli becomes independent.”

“I told you. I can afford. But how is the place?”

“It seemed to be good. Most of the girls are orphans. And there are some whose parents can’t feed them…”

“Did you explicitly tell the lady about Shewli?”

“Why should I hide? Though the lady listened to it with interest but did not give importance to it. She told that her organization was meant for wiping out one’s past. If Shewli doesn’t open her story herself there will be no problem.” Ritam paused for a while and then told, “I knew that you would agree. I said yes to that lady.”

“You did a good job. When are you taking me there?”

“Whenever you say.”

It would be good to get rid of Shewli as soon as possible. Both for Deya and Shewli. Tomorrow is Saturday. So should she go tomorrow? Or the next Thursday? On her day off. Her two casual leaves are already over for Shewli. If she would take another leave now Asheshda would surely scold her. In fact the other day he was casually telling, ‘No sooner the responsibility increased you have started escaping.’ She must have to shop some things for Shewli. The girl would like to get new things before beginning a new life. She would need so many little thing. Other than the dresses she would need a bed sheet, towel etc. It would be good to buy a small suitcase.

Ritam threw away the small piece of cigarette through the window, “Why are you silent?”

“I am thinking.”
“Why are you thinking again? In fact the chapter is closed now.”
“Yes.”
“Then let me open another chapter. There is another good news.”
Deya turned towards him.
Ritam was dancing his eyebrows. “The Janapad has given me place.”
The matter did not strike Deya’s head. “What?”
“The Janapad. The leading Bangala literary magazine. They asked for my story in their special puja edition of the Janapad. Through post. What? Did you understand? I am not that insignificant compared to your computer.”
“Aha! Who says that you are insignificant? Deya ogled. “You are a genius.”
“All the legpulling will stop. There will be lot of fanfare all around me. Got it? The plot has already started pricking my brain. I have to bring it out properly. Everybody writes sad stories behind the screen of happiness. Mine will be smile coated with pain. Black irony. Would you like to listen? …Think that a guy gets married to a girl…”
“That usually happens. A girl doesn’t marry another girl. At least not now.”
“Don’t interrupt. Think that the guy is crazy. He is not an insane but crazy. Bohemian type. He is not able to adjust with anything…”
“I got it. It is your autobiography.”
“You shun even the shadow of literature. How will you know? The writer is always present by all means in all his works. Sometimes directly and sometimes crouched in the characters. Now listen…”
Ritam was telling the idea of his story with great enthusiasm. He could not progress much. They reached home. He was literally jumping the steps to reach the third floor. He was singing in his awkward harsh tone, going out of tune. Deya was very pleased to see the happy face of Ritam. He was so full of life! Though outwardly he said that he was tired there was no such trace in his actions.
Entering the flat Ritam extended his arms in front of Laxmi. “India, how many days would you depend only on tea and air!”
Laxmi looked blank. At one time she was looking at Deya and the next moment at Ritam. Ritam was singing the tune of *keertana*. “There is so much scarcity of food in this country, bring *puri parota* and chicken mutton.” Laxmi now could understand the inner significance of the *Rabindrasangeet*, which was an instant brainchild of Ritam. She smiled showing all her black teeth, “I understood. You are hungry, right? But there is no chicken or mutton today. Today I cooked *tangra* fish.”

“Oh! Does the computer eat *tangra* fish?”

“Of course not!” Deya smiled. “In fact he does not prefer fish at all except for certain types. You can count them in fingers. Prawn, *hilsa, rohu*, that’s it. Because of him I have almost forgotten the taste of fish fish. Today I was desperate. So I brought some local *tangra*…”

“You don’t have a sense of humor at all. Celebration of good news with *tangra* fish?”

*Dada, what’s the good news?*

“Your helping hand will leave soon. Deya has arranged something for Shewli.” And saying this Ritam called, “Hey Shewli, where are you hiding yourself? Come here.” Shewli was in the kitchen. She came out slowly.

“Go and pack your bags.” Ritam was hurrying in such a way as if Shewli was about to leave at the very moment. Dancing his finger he said, “The quota of your staying in *didi*’s house is over. Hey Deya, which date is she leaving?”

“Ah, Ritam. What are you doing? Why are you so restless?” Deya scolded him lightly. He called Laxmi. “First get us some hot coffee.”

“And along with that get some food also. *Roti, luchi, parota*, omelette toast, any damn thing. A hippopotamus is jumping in my stomach.” Throwing those words to her Ritam got busy with Shewli’s topic again. “Shewli, the place that your *didi* has arranged for is firstclass. Do you get me? It is on the banks of a river. You can enjoy the gentle breeze and there is much greenery around. You will get many friends. Twenty to twenty five. All are of your age. You can learn to dance, sing and you can play even outdoor games. The court is already drawn.”
Shewli was looking blank. Deya pulled Shewli close. “Listen; there will be no pain for you anymore. It is a permanent solution. And once you go there, study hard. Do you understand? And concentrate in learning handiwork as well. Knitting in machine, preparing *papad*, pickle. The *memsahib* out there actually sells these things. And that money will also be yours.”

Shewli’s eyes were filled with tears. The drops ran down on her cheeks.

Deya became worried. “Hey, you fool. Why are you crying? You will play, dance and sing…. You will be absolutely fine there. Sometimes we will also visit and see the things that you have learnt.”

Shewli lowered her head. She wiped her cheeks.

Deya patted Shewli’s back, “Go with Laxmi di. Help her.”

Shewli left silently.

Shewli’s tears had broken Deya’s tune of happiness. Both Ritam and Deya turned silent. Sitting on the sofa Ritam took out a cigarette from the packet and put it between his lips. But he did not light it. He was playing with the matchbox. Deya brought the ashtray and sat facing Ritam. Lowering the face she was running her fingers through her hair.

Deya’s mood was off. Within these few days she became quite fond to the girl. Shewli stayed by her side all the while she was at home. Like her shadow. Or perhaps in the shadow of Deya she felt secured and happy. If Deya asked for something it breathed life in Shewli. She wanted to please Deya by all means. Within these few days Shewli’s existence got established in this house in a strange way. Wouldn’t Deya miss her when she would leave?

Ritam asked her absentmindedly, “Why did the girl cry?”

A small sigh rolled out from Deya. She said, “Perhaps she is missing her mother.”

“Is it? But I think it’s something else.”

“What do you think?”

“Nothing. Leave it.” It seemed as if a breath also rolled out from Ritam. Giving a strange fade smile he said, “You are happy, right?”
Could Deya find real happiness deep inside her heart? What she had was a mere feeling of assurance. But would it be right to utter those things now? At least in front of Ritam? In fact, nobody better than Ritam knew that, Deya was responsible to a great extent, for the distress of the girl.

Deya would bask in praise and glory in the following Tuesday and that too because of that girl… No, Deya doesn’t have the face to let Ritam know about that. Ritam warned her again and again. And in spite of the rise of an adverse situation he did not blame Deya much. But like a real friend he willingly made Deya free from any accusation. Wasn’t she being mean in front of the Ritam’s noble gesture? Should Deya thank Ritam? Should she show gratitude to Ritam?

No, no such word came on Deya’s lips. In a low and indistinct tone she said, “Soumya will feel very relieved with this development.”

It started raining in midnight. It was raining in the same pace. In the same tune. Continuously. The fan was moving in the full speed in Deya’s bedroom. Smeared with the cool coziness the monsoon breeze was blowing in the whole room. The blue light is on. Like soothing happiness.

Suddenly Deya’s sleep got disturbed. Soumya was pulling her. Deya was lying turning her back to Soumya. Indistinctly she said, “What happened?” Soumya removed the thin bed sheet from Deya’s body. Lifting his head he was hiding his face in Deya’s bosom. Like a petted cat he was making a sound, ‘Ummm’.

At the end of the night such erotic call from Soumya was very familiar to Deya. He started snoring soon after going to sleep. At that time he wouldn’t even touch Deya. He would wake up exactly at three o’clock. And at that time he needed Deya the most. Everyday Supriya would wake her son up at this time for his studies. The habit of getting up at three had stuck steadfastly in the cells of Soumya’s brain. And if his sex appetite rose at this hour what Soumya could do!
After marriage in the beginning Deya enjoyed the matter very much. And sometimes it seemed very strange to her. At the start of the night even if Deya’s body desired something and even if she was restless with drive Soumya paid no attention to it. Deya needed to respond when he needed her the most. Soumya did not want to understand the fact that anything unusual would seem boring once it became routine. But today Deya did not mind. She was aroused with physical touch. She tightly hugged Soumya. Rubbing her face against his she said, “What happened, Somu dear? Are you going to study now?”

Soumya was madly kissing Deya. On the face, lips, neck, cheeks and all over her body. He was taking her sheer nightdress off. He was a man meant for business. He had no time to talk now.

Deya too felt heat between her legs. She felt dizzy with the smell of the man’s body. Every pore of her body opened up. She was overwhelmed with sensation. Routine lovemaking ended in habitual rhythm.

Most of the days Soumya fell asleep at this time, but on some days, he would talk voraciously. Today in a satiated mood he was half asleep. He was running his fingers through Deya’s hair. He said, “Do you know that Bugida has left today?”

“But your Bugida did not come here. He promised you…”

“It seems in the end he had to run around a lot. But Bugida’s proposal is good.”

“Hmm.”

“If it clicks, the life’s gear will really change. All the deadlines will rapidly come ahead.”

Deya kissed Soumya’s cheek. “Even starting the family?”

“No, that is fixed. The baby will not come in the higher purchase scheme.”

“But sir, I have to count an installment for nine months. Deya smiled lightly. She lightly hugged Soumya. In a serious tone she said, “Hey, let’s go for now.”

“Why?”

“I want to. Mahua was saying, ‘Why are you delaying it? In fact the increase in age means complication for women.’

“But sweetheart, there are doctors for that. I can’t change my plans suddenly.”

“Even if I want?”

“Why will you make unfair demands? Once you are a mother you will be busy. Will you
be exclusively mine then? Let’s enjoy life, sweety.”
Deya breathed out. Soumya is so immature.
Soumya lightly pressed Deya’s hand. “Hey, our anniversary is knocking the doors. Whom you are planning to call?”
“Those who usually come. You can call your Chotuda this time.”
“Why?”
“Why not? You are going to start something with Bugida…. Plus count your Lalidi too.”
“No, I will not invite anyone from our family.”
“But you are unfairly obstinate. Lalidi always remains in close touch with us. She visits us from time to time too. Whatever you say, I will definitely call Lalidi.”
“No, never. Who are you to invite the people from my family?”
“Strange! Am I not the daughter-in-law of your family? Don’t I have any wish?”
“Okay. Call her. But on the day of our anniversary I will not be present. In fact, that is a social gathering. It will not affect much even if someone is absent.”
Deya laughed out. Soumya was really so immature. Pulling Soumya’s nose she said, “Okay dear, as you wish. No Lalidi Bhulidi will come. Happy?”
Saying this Deya got up from the bed. Coming from the bathroom she drank some water from the glass kept on the dressing table. The rain was about to stop. The sound was very low now.
Though she was to go back to the bed she stopped. She was trying to listen to something. She said, “Hey can you hear something?”
“Where?”
“No, it’s there. Listen carefully. It is a sound of moaning. It’s coming from our flat.”
Opening the door Deya came to the drawing room. She went slowly to switch on the dim light. Removing the center table Laxmi was in deep sleep on the carpet. Where was Shewli? Was the girl there?
Yes, it was. What she had thought was correct. Deya could sense that the sound was coming from the kitchen. Hiding the face between her knees Shewli was crying because of her suppressed pain.
Going there Deya kept her hand on Shewli’s head, “What happened? Why are you crying sitting here?”
Shewli came to her senses suddenly with Deya’s touch. With her dumb eye she looked at Deya once. In a moment throwing herself down she clung to Deya’s feet. She cried out like a wounded animal, “Didi, I beg of you, didi…. Don’t drive me out, didi…. I will stay here like a good girl…. I swear on you…. I want to stay with you, didi…. Don’t send me anywhere, didi…. I will die didi…. I don’t have anyone except you, didi.” Shewli was shivering over all. Deya stood motionless like a pillar. Deya’s eyes overflowed with tears.

This time the monsoon has suddenly disappeared before the arrival of the month of Shravana. After a couple of months’ imprisonment, the Sun God has finally broken the shackles of clouds after his imprisonment of few months. Now he is all set to show his prowess. He doesn’t give a damn to a few fleeting clouds and is steaming the whole city with the humid heat. It seems as if the water laden clouds have lost their way and moved to the West chased by some pressure. Who knows when they would return!

Ritam does not like such sultry summer at all. Sitting in his den Ritam was chewing his pen and every now and then was casting cruel glances at the prehistoric pedestal stand. Empty vessels sound much. The noise only caused headache but didn’t give cool air. He was soaking with sweat since he returned from the market which didn’t dry in any way.

Ritam wanted to drive away the hotness from his mind. In fact heat or cold is related to one’s mind to a large extent. There is no harm in thinking that he is sitting in Siberia itself. There is a shower of snow from the sky. Trees and roads are covered with shredded cotton like snow. One can have the view of the houses; however they are
smeared with whiteness. Men, covered with fur from head to toe scurried along wanting to enter their homes quickly. Children threw snowballs at each other with their glove covered hands. An old man with his nose, frozen in cold, rubbed ice on it. Shivering terribly with cold, Ritam is walking beside the old man. How about bringing a polar bear in the scene?

Really, thoughts have their positive effects. The heat really seemed lessened. Ritam lowered his eyes on papers. Lighting a cigarette he was trying to concentrate on his writing. He had not been out of his house at a stretch for two days in order to get back to the story. But it’s not shaping up…not shaping up. The fire is missing. The sour and sweet shades of the girl’s pain are not taking a proper shape. It is drifting towards pathos. Hang it! Why doesn’t the pen ever remain in his control? Again he would have to break, start and tear it.

Outside there was cacophony of female voices. Though unwillingly, Ritam’s ears went there. Didi has come. Damn! Forget it now. It’s all shattered now. Gudum is also here. Both the mother and son competed in shouting. Does it make any sense? Of all days didi had to come on this Sunday? With the thought there was a bang on the door. Opening the door wide, Gudum jumped like a ping pong ball. “Mama is here! Here is he!” He had managed to create quite a cool atmosphere. But with a blink of an eyelid it was over. Ritam wiped the sweat on his forehead, “Hey, what’s up? What brings you people here?”

Immediately Runu appeared on the stage. Rolling her eyes in anger she said, “What do you mean by why? I have come to my father’s house. I have come to see ma.” “That means to meet ma you have come to your father’s house!”

Thirty-five year old Runu was taken back. Twisting her neck she said, “Yes, I have come and it seems that you are not happy!” “When did I say so? I just want to say that though baba died eight years ago it is still your father’s house, not your mother’s.” “What do you mean?”
“That means ma is a nonentity. Just think even ma’s own home is also not her own in our eyes but the house of our mama. The house where ma got married is also not hers but the house of our father. Now place yourself where ma stands.” Saying this with a grin, he asked Gudum, “Where have you come now?” The answer from the five and half year old Gudum came quickly, “To my mama’s home.”

“Did you hear? Here you are a nonentity. Go back to your Baagbazar house and that will be your father-in-law’s house or the house of Gudum’s father, which means, there too you would be a nonentity. Am I wrong?” Runu’s eyes were wide open. “Why are you weaving a cobweb in your mind?”

“I just want to make you to see the point that women still have no existence. However liberal you might be, you are like a cow tied to a post.” Ritam danced his eyebrows. “What did you understand? This is the main theme of my next story. Women themselves can’t understand how patriarchy has ingrained inside our bone marrows. I mean even women like you.” Runu sneered, “Stop it. No need of delivering lecture sitting in your den. Come out of it.” Ritam shrugged. Is there any other choice since her majesty has appeared? If he didn’t come out there would be another danger. In another minute Gudum would want to write. Ritam’s literature and Gudum’s knowledge literally would all be one then. During Gudum’s last visit he had drawn a big sun on Ritam’s faired copy of a story. In case Ritam can’t make sense of what it is, he scribbled in capital letters ‘SUN’.

Putting down the pen and the paper in the drawer Ritam latched the door. Whenever didi visited their house a lively atmosphere was created. Ma’s face glowed with happiness. Shrabani would talk her heart out with her sister-in-law. Didi would toss Tuski around her. With his continuous mischievous activities Gudum would make the house lively. The household which is generally melancholy with the gloom of an imagined misery is flooded with happiness like the picture of a perfect family. Ritam quite enjoyed it even though it meant putting his work on hold. Everyone now was in Atasi’s room. Tuski’s mealtime episode was on, spectators were surrounding her. Quite a tough task. Shrabani held her tight. Opening her jaw she was forcing Tuski to swallow
the Cerelac. Like a mighty emperor Tuski can spend her entire life with a spoonful of Cerelac in her mouth. If another spoon was forced in her mouth she would spit it out. These days her favorite diet comprises of slippers and shoes. She has started crawling with quite a speed. And because of her queer diet tendencies all the footwear of the house had to be hidden from her reach.

Tuski just spat again… *fuuurr*. Gudum clapped with joy. He was encouraging his sister. Shrabani’s face got smeared with Cerelac. Runu looked fascinated.

Insinuating Runu told her brother, “Your daughter is just like you. She doesn’t like any good food.”

Ritam said, “*Didi*, don’t talk rubbish. I never say ‘no’ food.”

“Really? Then who threw up all those good jobs?”

“I swear. I really could not digest them.”

“You did not even care about the business.”

“The business would have been risky. It must have upset the stomach of people. How much mixture and potato chips can one consume, tell me?”

Atasi stormed in. “Runu, why are you again asking him about earning a livelihood? For someone who doesn’t know what’s good for him, to pressure him is mere wastage of one’s own energies.”

“I will not tell him anything. Your son-in-law has strictly forbidden me. He said that if good sense dawns upon Babua and he feels the need of earning he will have to take an initiative and meet Ambarda. He has sworn that he will not come forward to do anything on his own for Babua.”

At last Ambarda himself has called it quits. Poor Ambarda! But he is a good man. In spite of hobnobbing with big-shot politicians his heart has not turned to stone. He still retains his virtues. In spite of being the secretary of a middle grade minister Ambarda is still quite honest. Till date he hasn’t acquired a flat or a car. Neither does he have the reputation of mishandling money. But he can’t be a saint either. Taking to someone or the other to procure jobs for the unemployed brother-in-law time and again is a form of favour. Brother-in-law’s would-be wife managed a posting in a college of Kolkata itself. It was all because Ambarda could pull some strings. Those days it was Ritam himself
who saw Amabarda with Shrabani to plead her case. But yes had there not been that little pinch of lime in pure milk then Ambar da would have been an angel falling out of heaven. Whatever Ambar da had done it was only because he loved Ritam.

Yet Ritam could not control himself from poking Runu. Having a laugh he said, “Are you sure that Ambar da won’t do anything for me anymore?”

“He cares a damn.”

“Keep watching. People in politics are usually unable to keep their promises for long. Perhaps he can again build an argument as to why he should try doing something for Babua….”

“Ma, can you see? See how he talks!”

Not Atasi, this time Shrabani flashed angry eyes on Ritam. She was teaching the guilty a lesson by railing at the innocent. She whacked Tuski’s cheeks with force. Tuski whimpered. Runu cried, “Ah, why are you beating the little child?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” The sensible Shrabani quickly controlled herself. “It is almost killing me to feed her a mouthful of Cerelac!”

Atasi quickly cooled the environment.

“Now-a-days Tuski prefers khichdi quite well. Mixing the rice with dal I add vegetables and put it in the pressure cooker. And once it’s cooked I just add a bit of ghee. She devours it with pleasure.”

Runu pulled Tuski on her lap. Free of being fed Tuski’s tears also vanished within a moment. She was gleefully smiling and playing with her aunt. Gudum really wanted to take his sister on his lap. With a lot of efforts Runu was trying to save Tuski from Gudum. Cuddling her niece Runu said, “Now she is developing her sense of taste. You can try animal protein for Tuski. Small fish, chicken…”

Shrabani said, “In fact she likes. But I don’t give her much.”

The topic of the conversation changed. The house became vibrant again. Tuski, Gudum’s school, Runu’s office, Shrabani’s college, discussion about the relatives…

In between Atasi got up and went to the inner verandah. She gestured and called Ritam. Once he was there she asked in a low voice, “Why are you sitting tight? Go and bring some meat.”
“What should I bring? Chicken?”
“No, get some mutton. Runu likes it.”
“Hasn’t she had enough of meat? So far wasn’t she chewing all our brains?”
Atasi glared at him with anger enough to reduce Ritam to ashes in no time.
Ritam simpered, “Ma, who scares you more? Shrabani or didi?”
“Will you shut up? Will you now leave?”
Runu’s eyes and ears both were sharp. She could see across the wall. Shouting from the inner room she said, “Babua, are you going to the market? Take some money from me. Bring a lot of sweet curd. It’s been a long time since I have eaten curd from Satyanarayana’s shop.”
Shrabani’s voice could be heard, “Didi, why will you pay? I will give money for the curd.”
“Ah, in fact I wanted to buy it on my way. But I forgot…”
“No, no, you keep the money. I will give you treat.”
Both the women were busy in arguing regarding rights and courtesy. Ritam came in front of the door, “Nobody has to give. I have my tuition money. Today I will treat everyone to sweet curd. With it there will be a Kamalabhog for each of you from Satyanarayana. But don’t ask more than one? Is it alright?”
Back from the market Ritam found that there was a strange silence prevailing in the house.
Along with Tuski and Gudum, Runu went upstairs to meet the jethus and kakus. The relationship of Ritam’s family members with their kakus and jethus was not bitter. Whether it was a necessary or unnecessary occasion both the family members used to visit each other’s home. Even on special occasions they used to forget that they had separate ovens. Still there was a distance.
Everyone was somehow detached. Of course, whenever the daughters of the Sengupta mansion visited their paternal house they made it a point to peep into all the rooms at least once. In fact, Runu was welcomed especially as she was the wife of the right hand of a minister.
Runu came back after few hours. Again after chatting for sometime, feeding Gudum and making Tuski sleep all of them sat at the dining table around one o’clock. It was a grand

While eating, Runu herself raised the topic. “By the way Babua, what happened to the girl?”

Being a food lover Ritam was engrossed in relishing the dishes. Mixing rice with the curry he asked, “Which girl?”

“The girl from *boropisi’s* the house, …whom you people rescued.”

“You mean, Shewli? But she is in Deya’s house now.”

“Why? Couldn’t you people manage a shelter home or something of that sort?”

“Actually the girl was not ready to go. She is not willing to leave Deya by any means.”

“Would Deya keep the girl with her for ever?”

“What else can she do? In fact Deya has become very fond of the girl.”

“Unnecessarily all the efforts of your brother went in vain.” Shrabani suddenly spoke out.

“In wee hours of morning he ran around to search a home for that girl. He found a place too for the girl to stay. But the girl did not budge an inch! Both that girl and your brother’s friend are glued to each other. And now your brother’s load has increased more with the mission of imparting education to that girl. Everyday, almost everyday he is going to that house!”

“Why are you talking rubbish?”

Shrabani’s cynicism pierced Ritam. In a hurt tone he said, “Do I go everyday? Did I go yesterday or day before yesterday? Wasn’t I at home for the entire day?”

“Oh, so you are repenting for having not gone there for the last two days? Go, go everyday, go twice a day. Who is forbidding you?”

What has Shrabani started? Ritam really felt very uncomfortable. There is no reason for Shrabani to nurse a grudge against the girl. So it isn’t difficult to guess that all her bitterness is targeted at Deya. But Ritam doesn’t go there for Deya. Whatever he is doing for Shewli, is his duty. Or else as a human being Ritam will not be able to respect himself! Doesn’t Shrabani have the sense to understand this? Or else is she blinded by baseless jealousy?

In a heavy tone Ritam said, “Shrabani, you don’t know what you are saying.”

In a heavier tone Shrabani said, “I know it very well. Too much of anything is not good.”
Runu looked at both Ritam and Shrabani. With a serious tone of an elder sister she said, “Babua, I think Shrabani is not wrong. A girl was in danger. You helped to rescue her. It’s fine. But now the girl has settled in some house. Now you don’t need to bother yourself so much about the girl. If they want to educate her it’s upto them. And even if they want to treat her like a maid it’s entirely their business. It’s unfair on your part to be anxious about her. One can not entirely ignore the girl’s past.”

“But it is our moral duty to help the girl to forget her past.”

“This is the responsibility of those who have housed her. Listen Babua, you haven’t seen much of this world. Forbidden life may be disliked but it has its allurement too. You would have to admit that the girl was in bad company. It is hard to give up bad company compared to a good one. Perhaps the girl is interested to lead a decent life but whether she can be good or not won’t be easy to tell. Her inner instincts will drive her towards evil. I mean this could be a possibility.”

“Even I am afraid of that.’ Atasi also could not sit as a mere spectator. “Any day the girl can trap Babua by doing something vile…!”

“Ma, please don’t tell these things to me. I feel very bad to listen to these things. Shewli is just a kid. She is the victim of an unfortunate situation.”

“Babua, that’s why I am telling you to be a bit alert about her. The environment that she belongs to…to change herself completely…”

Runu swayed her head on both sides, “Though you are calling her a kid it is not so. After the process, which she has gone through, she is not a kid any longer. She can’t be. I believe that you should keep a safe distance. You can go to see her once a while. That’s enough.”

What pointless arguments are these! Sitting in one’s own safe boundary, what a ridiculous effort it was to judge people from a distance! Meaningless middle class mentality!

Though Ritam was highly irritated he did not argue. There was no point in trying to convince them. It was enough that they could not understand the direction of Shrabani’s shaft.

Ritam concentrated on his food. He was taking out the marrow from the chicken bone by gentle strokes. The chicken was well cooked. He took a little more rice. Others were
eating silently too. Runu’s and Atasi’s faces bore the satisfaction obtained by suggesting Ritam to keep from falling into a pit. Shrabani too was eating with serious look on her. She added, “Didi, you know what bothers me all the more? Everybody uses him conveniently but never gives him the due credit. Did you see the newspaper article which was written about his friend?”

“Oh, really? Where did it appear?”

“In Nabaprabhat. Ten twelve lines of praise for Deya Singharoy.”

“Doesn’t Deya work in Nabaprabhat itself?”

“Where else? She got an article written in her own paper. But your brother was with Deya all through the matter. From supplying the news…even when the girl’s mother died. That day too she picked him up from home. Then he had to rush to the cremation ground, morgue, police station and where not. But it was Deya Singharoy who got publicity! There was not a single mention of Ritam Sengupta’s name! Hmm, that’s what you call a real friend!”

With a pale look Ritam said, “I don’t work for name.”

“Very crestfallen. You are born to give life unconditionally for others. Didi, do you see the way he speaks.”

Now Runu had a suppressed smile on her face. As if now she understood the actual secret of Shrabani’s anguish. Spreading her smile she said, “What can you do? That’s your husband’s nature. You don’t have the good fortune to be proud of your husband’s achievements.

Babua always does things for his friends selflessly. To him things like name and fame are meaningless.”

“Didi, I have a different sphere for name”, Ritam retorted instantly. “My name also comes in print. But it’s different that it does not draw attention of a few people. Tell Shrabani that the value of that name and fame is totally different. I don’t need to be famous as a social worker.”

“Didi, you can tell your brother that my eyes are very sharp. I notice everything.”

“Even my writing?”

Now Shrabani had nothing to say. Runu laughed out, “What have you both started? It’s enough. Stop now.” Saying that she turned to Atasi, “What do you say Atasidevi? Will
you go to Rajasthan during the *Pujas*?"

Atasi could not understand quickly. “Rajasthan? All on a sudden?”

“The reason for which people go to Rajasthan. For a tour. I have already chalked the plan and programme. From here we will go to Jaipur by train. At Jaipur we will halt for two days. Then we will hire a car and see Ajmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Mount Abu, Udaipur, Chittor, Ranathambor and we will be back to Jaipur again. It will be a tour of three weeks approximately. With her face filled with happiness, Atasi spoke “I have never been to Rajasthan. Once I planned it with your father but for some reason we could not make it.”

“*Ma*, I had my board examinations that year. Hadn’t I?”

“Yes, I remember. That was a sudden obstruction and after that year…”

“But a journey of so many days….Runu, will it not be tiring? Would I be able to endure it?”

“Tell me why you think that you are that aged? You are only sixty. At your age Liz Taylor married again. The more you think that you are old…”

“*Ma*, there will not be a problem. You must go.” Ritam said. “*Didi* will hire a car. It seems that the roads of Rajasthan are also very good.”

“We might go as well. I have already asked to book tickets for all.”

“It will be a nice trip. You are alluring me. The land of forts. Love, chivalry, desert, architecture…”

Ritam’s eyes were dreamy.

“One has to take a good camera.”

“We will take the one of your Ambar*da* has. It is a good SLR camera. It is not that old too.”

“How did you coax Ambar*da*? In fact Ambar*da* doesn’t want to go anywhere these days.”

“He is not going. He doesn’t have the time! There is party conference in the month of November. At Bolpur. Do you think that he will have time for anything in October?”

“Hmm. In fact that will be a Rajasuya Yajna.”

“Actually he is not coming. And that’s why I have selected you.”

“Why? How can I substitute Ambar*da*?”
“We are going to such a distant place. Don’t we need a male with us? Do you expect us all three women to go out just like that?”

“Oh. That means I am a bodyguard.” Ritam winked. “But you have a male next to your hand.”

“Who?”

“Gudum. He is enough to guard you all… Didi, I don’t understand what you people are. You are working, your health is also sound and you have good dominating power too. Yet you need a guard?”

“Don’t talk rubbish. God Knows what will happen if we unfortunately run into a dacoit…”

“Do you want me to save you from dacoits? No chance. I won’t utter a single sound even if they rob you of everything. I’ll simply run in a ragged. Instead if Shrabani smiles a little at them there is a fair chance that the dacoits’ hearts may melt.”

“I understood. You are good for nothing.” Runu licked the last drop of curd.

She asked Shrabani, “Your holiday starts from the day of Panchami. Isn’t it? Or is it starting from Mahalaya.”

Shrabani looked a bit pale. Feebly she said, “Didi, I can’t go.”

All the three heads turned towards Shrabani at a time. Words spattered from Runu’s throat, “What are you saying? Why?”

“It will not be possible for me this time. I have given my word to ma that I will spend the whole vacation there. After marriage I have not spent quality time there. Even baba was insisting on it.”

In a low voice Runu said, “You are not coming for this? Spend the whole December there. You can stay there even now. You can go to college from there.”

“Didi, it is not so easy to manage daily up and down from that distant Chandannagar. The pressure in college is also high during this time.”

“Then should I cancel the trip?”

“Oh, no. What are you saying? No way. You take ma. Even your brother will also be coming. Let me be pampered by my parents for a few days.”

“Will it work if I talk to mashi and meshomoshai?”
“Please don’t tell them anything. They can’t say no to you on your face. But they will be
hurt deep into their heart. They will think that I have asked you to tell them.”
Sharavani avoided eye contact with Ritam. “Didi, ma and baba is nourishing the hope for
long.”
Looking at Shrabani, Runu left the table. She washed hands in the basin. Without
speaking a single word she entered Atasi’s room. She fell flat on her mother’s bed next to
her son.

There was a dead silence prevailing in the house. With a glum face Atasi also
entered her room after cleaning the table. Ritam sat smoking. Why did suddenly Shrabani
behave like that? Ego? Irritation? Or the fear that the split in their relationship would
surface in front of others. No, in that case Shrabani would not have fought in that manner
in front of didi. Would she to spend her entire vacation in Chandannagar? The
relationship between Shrabani’s sisters-in-law and her parents was quite bitter. Because
of their tiffs Shrabani doesn’t prefer to spend a single night there. She used to say that she
felt suffocated. No, no, excuses, they were all excuses. There must be something more to
it, some other secret to it.
Ritam could hardly breathe throughout the whole afternoon. After Runu left in the
evening he caught hold of Shrabani. In an unanimated tone he asked, “Why did you hurt
didi like that?”
Sitting on the bed Shrabani was correcting papers. In a quiet tone she said, “Can’t I wish
to stay with my parents?”
“You are lying. It is just an excuse.”
“If you have understood why are you asking?”
“What was your point in hurting didi?”
“I have not hurt anyone. Where do I have that power? Yet if didi is hurt I will apologize
to her.”
“But why did you talk like that? Why won’t you go?”
Shrabani stilled her red pen. She turned towards him. Looking straight at Ritam’s eyes
she said, “If you apply a bit bit of common sense you can understand why I will not go. It
is a tour of three weeks. Have you calculated how much it would cost per head? Didi has
money. She works in a bank. She has LTC…Whenever didi goes for an outing she wants to stay in a good hotel with comfort…That means it will be blow of ten thousand rupees per head. I don’t have so much money.”
“Strange, only because of this petty reason you…!”
“For you it may be a petty reason but it matters a lot to me. At this moment it doesn’t suit me to blow up twenty to twenty five thousand rupees. Moreover, I don’t have that much money. Should I borrow for a tour?”
“But didi never raised the topic of money.”
“That’s what hurt me. Why didn’t she raise it?”
“Didi is taking us for a tour. Didi is aware of our condition. Will didi think about money?”
“Why should I tour with didi’s money?” Shrabani emphasized a lot on the word ‘I’. It seemed that she was trying to draw attention to something more than ‘I’. Her voice was slightly tearful, “Don’t I have any self-respect?”
“Oh.” Ritam raised his eyebrow, “You could have told this openly to didi.”
“It can’t be said. At least it was not possible on my part.”
“Why? Is it that dangerous?”
“You won’t understand.”
“Make me understand. I will surely understand if you try.”
Suddenly Shrabani’s continence changed. The bluish veins in her throat were throbbing. She bit her lips with her teeth. She was almost breathless.
Turning his hand Ritam said, “Tell me, what happened?”
Controlling the tears, which were about to burst out Shrabani told shaking her head, “You can’t understand at all where a woman gets hurt…!”
Ritam was stupefied. He murmured, “Hey Shrabani…We already had discussed this. Didn’t we?”
“That’s why I feel bad to force you.” Shrabani seemed to shake a little with the force of her suppressed tears. Wiping her tears with her fingers she said, “I can’t go and stay at Chandannagar…a question mark always hangs on the faces of baba and dadas. I have to lie in so many ways to my friends, relatives and at other places…!”
“Why do you lie? Shrabani, what is the problem in speaking the truth?”
It seemed as if there was spark of lightning in Shravan’s eyes along with the rain, “Ritam, what are you made of? Don’t you write stories? Can’t you read the mind of a woman?” Ritam looked at Shrabani without blinking an eyelid. How could he make such a big mistake in understanding her? Time and again Ritam has laughed away Shrabani’s anger about his frequent job quitting. He thought it was temporary. It’s not what she actually means. But Shrabani in the bosom of her heart….! One was still familiar with the envious Shrabani. Jealousy is another of love. But this cloudy Shrabani is completely unknown to him.

Deep, very deep inside Ritam’s heart an odd pain was in the process of solidifying. The pain was rotating. No, girls can’t take it! Girls still can’t take it!

Had Ritam been someone like Soumya Deya too would have suffered from such an inferiority complex? Perhaps she would.

Ritam came to his own room silently. He sat with his pen and paper. This time definitely his writing would get its flow.

Soumya was finishing his breakfast before going out. Deya has changed the routine a bit today. She has fried the bread slices dipping them in the egg batter. French toast. This is something Soumya more or less likes. One had to turn the bottle of ketchup and pour a lot of it on his plate. Soumya needed a lot of ketchup with French toast. Although he was not eating cornflakes today, some milk was kept nevertheless aside for him. In a big glass. Soumya never touched tea. Once in a while during an off-day he drank a little coffee if he felt like, with lots of milk. It was tough to make out from sipping that hot concoction whether it was coffee mixed in milk or milk mixed in coffee.

Taking out the frozen chicken from the freezer Laxmi was boiling it. Just a while ago Sabita has cleaned the utensils. Wiping them with a dry cloth Shewli was arranging them
on the rack. Taking her plate Deya sat on the table, “Do you want some more? I have distributed whatever was there.”

“I don’t need.”

“I have put chicken sandwich in your lunch box. Should I put a banana too?”

“Okay, put it.”

“Salad?”

“No. The other day the onion turned sour. If you want, put only cucumber.”

Deya raised her voice, “Laxmi, slice only cucumber today. No need of tomato and onion. And yes, spread mayonnaise on the bread slices. I will make the sandwiches. She bit a piece of the French toast as she said this. Pointing the finger towards it she said, “Please, pass the pickle.”

Deya didn’t like tomato sauce. She loved chilly pickle. Soumya passed the bottle of pickle towards her as he ate. He asked, “What’s your plan for the day?”

“I will be at home. Rest. I will eat, sleep and relax. I may even sit with the article in the afternoon for sometime.”

“That story of yours regarding the female feticide?”

“Yes. Anasua is asking me to speed it up. I am almost through collecting the state wise data. Even in the computer age you can’t imagine how horrible the picture is!”

“Just see to it that a feminist stamp doesn’t get attached to you.” There was narrow smile on Soumya’s lips.

Deya frowned, “Strange, half the human race is female. At least that’s what it should be to maintain nature’s balance. They are killing the girls even before they are born or throwing them in the dustbin after birth. Shouldn’t there be a protest in a civilized society? And if a woman happens to protest then it is fair to instantly label her a feminist.”

“Have you ever thought why they are killed? The parents are often reduced to beggars in order to get a girl married. Because of that fear…”

“Why should this go on? The system needs to change. I will write against dowry too.”

“Can you change the system only with your writing?” Soumya smiled derisively with a sense of neglect. “Forget it. Nothing will change by writing about these things.”

“What else then? A public opinion is created with incessant writing. The practice of Sati
could be banned because people like Rammohan and Vidyasagar wrote against it. The widow marriage started too…”

“It was not because of the public opinion. For that a law was required.”

“The pressure of the public opinion consequently brought about the law…”

“That law is still there. The dowry system is still illegal. Then why does one need to create fresh public opinion?”

“Because a particular section of the society is not obeying the laws.”

“Then why do you think that they will change on reading your articles?”

“But public opinion created in various forms will generate some kind of mental pressure.”

“Come on dear. Face the truth. This is not the age of Rammohan and Vidyasagar. Now life is fast. Nobody has time to create an uproar only by reading an article.” Soumya sipped his glass of milk, using his tongue to check the amount of sugar. Gulping the milk he said, “In today’s world people would see the article, read it, show some concern and the maximum they would do is to say that the girl has written quite well. This is not something that should go on. And after that they forget everything. So despite all your noble intention ultimately it ends in spreading gems in a jungle.”

Deya turned silent. Neither she could entirely deny what Soumya said nor could she accept them wholeheartedly. If nothing really worked then how could one prevent these gruesome incidents? Didn’t the pen create a small wave somewhere? It’s true that the blow of an axe is not enough to bring about the fall of a mountain but does the blow go in vain? The blow exists at least somewhere in nature.

Soumya finished his milk. He was wiping his lips. Spreading his smile he said, “Listen to me, journalist. To stop these dirty things is the duty of government. You want to write, go ahead. Write with all your heart. It will fill the pages of your supplement. The topic would be interesting too. But don’t expect any result. You have made me blabber a lot before going to the office. Now give me some water.”
The jug on the table was empty. Finishing the last bite of the French toast Deya went to the kitchen. Laxmi was cutting the bread in a triangular shape in a very slow pace. She took the knife from her hand. Casually she told Shewli, “Give a glass of water to dada. Don’t give him cold water but mix both the hot and cold water.” Saying this she asked Laxmi to work fast.

“Laxmidi, hurry. Make it fast. Shred the chicken pieces quickly. It is already eight fifteen. Your dada will start shouting now.”

Deya was working like a machine. She sliced cucumber into pieces. She prepared sandwich and made the lunch box ready. She kept the bananas in the box carefully so that they don’t get crushed.”

Covering the lunch box with a polythene packet Deya proceeded to the bedroom quickly. On the way she stopped. The glass full with water was still there on the table!

Taking the glass in hand Deya entered the room, “What happened? Why did you get up without drinking the water?”

Soumya was knotting his tie standing in front of the mirror. Pretending not having heard Deya, Soumya asked, “Where is my towel kerchief?”

“I’ll get it.” Deya kept the glass on the dressing table, “Drink the water.”

Soumya cast a side-glance at the glass.

Opening the wardrobe which was bought from an auction store Deya took out the handkerchief and put it in Soumya’s pocket. In a surprised tone she asked, “What happened? Why didn’t you drink?”

Combing his hair Soumya said, “Please bring my briefcase from that room.”

Deya stopped after taking a couple of steps ahead. Lines of surprise were visible on her forehead. She slowly retreated her steps. As soon as their eyes met Soumya moved his eyes to avoid eye contact. He was sniffing at the handkerchief taking it out from his pocket.

With a frown Deya asked, “Why are you not drinking the glass of water? Is it because Shewli gave it to you?”

“I asked you to give me a glass of water.” Soumya was serious, “If you had to order someone else, you should have told me in advance that you can’t do it.”

“You wouldn’t have any problem if Laxmidi had given the water, would you?”
Without replying Soumya proceeded to the next room. Deya quickly caught hold of his hand, “Wait. Answer my question. Why do you hate Shewli so much?”

“Deya, everyone has his own likes and dislikes.”

“But this is an insult to me. Just because I have forced Shewli’s stay on you.”

“You are free to interpret it as you like. My likes and dislikes are very clear. And you know it.”

Within a fraction of a second few pictures flashed in front of Deya’s eyes. Some fragmented pictures. Laxmi’s making *rotis* at night, placing them in a casserole. Shewli’s standing by the table, saying that his stomach was full. Soumya’s getting up and leaving…! Shewli was taking Soumya’s shirts and trousers to put them in the washing machine. Soumya scolding, “Leave them, I will wash my clothes…!” Soumya was working on his computer. Shewli devouring the pictures on the monitor from a distance. Soumya shouting with anger, “Why are you here?” Soumya watching cricket in television and sensing Shewli’s presence turning off the television…!

Does such childishness suit an adult like Soumya?

Deya did not pick up a quarrel. She tried to convince Soumya. In a soft tone she said, “Why are you behaving like that? In fact Ritam and I tried to send the girl to a destitute home. The girl is scared…doesn’t want to go. You have seen how she has been crying. Let a couple of months pass. Once she regains her mental strength we can think…”

“You will never send her anywhere. That I have very well understood.”

“You just wait and watch whether I send her or not.”

“I have nothing to see. If she doesn’t stay here how would at every moment you get to prove that you are noble in front of others? She is a living advertisement of your greatness.”

The words pierced her heart like a sharp arrow. Still Deya did not get agitated. In a cool manner she said, “Well, may be you are right. But you too would admit that the girl is in distress. I have not done anything wrong by letting her stay in our house. Have I?”

“The question doesn’t arise regarding good or bad. The whole thing is about likes and dislikes. Do I have to like everything done with noble cause? If today someone arranges
for a boxing match for the aid of thalassemia patients do I have to sit and watch the duel of punchers? When blood oozes out from boxers’ noses do I have to clap saying that oh, what a noble cause. What a noble cause it is!”

Deya was embarrassed. She said, “Is it the right comparison? Have I done something so gruesome?”

“You may not feel so. But for me it is like that. You may think that this act is noble. But why are you forcing me to like it? I am enduring it and isn’t that enough? Which other husbands would bear with it, eh?”

Soumya freed his hands from Deya’s clutches and left. Bringing his briefcase from the next room he was putting the lunch box in it with a lot of noise. He opened and closed the wardrobe without any reason. Thereafter he started wearing his socks and shoes sitting in the drawing room.

Deya came out quickly. Shewli and Laxmidi were in the kitchen. She looked at them once. No, neither of them had raised their voices. The others had not heard anything.

To overcome her uneasiness Deya talked to Soumya. In a normal tone she asked, “When would you be back?”

“Let’s see.”

“If possible come soon.”

“Why?”

“Just like that. We can go out somewhere.”

“I will try but I can’t promise.”

As soon as Soumya went out a fragment of a smile appeared on Deya’s face. Uff, what an anger. He would consider this act as noble but by any means would not like it.

No, Deya would have to take a lot of initiative. She must try to melt Soumya’s heart. Perhaps there was no need for that too. After few days Soumya would gradually accept Shewli. People get attached even to the cats and dogs at home and she after all was a human being.

Her head had started aching a little. Why hadn’t Laxmidi brought the tea till now? Deya was about to throw an order to Laxmi when the calling bell rang.

Was it Soumya? Had he forgotten to take something?

As Deya opened the door, there were two women standing. Strangers. One would be of
thirty-five or thirty-six and the other lady would be a little older than her. The relatively older woman folded her hands in greeting her. “You must be Deya Singharoy?”

“Yes I am. Hello. Tell me.”

“We are coming from the Women’s Welfare Society. We have a specific work with you.” With a delighted face Deya said, “Come, come. Please come inside.”

Sitting on the sofa the other woman said, “I am a cousin of Ashesh Dasgupta in your office. My name is Mallika Dasgupta. And she is our secretary. Basantidi. Basanti Pal.” What a surprise! Asheshda’s sister! Deya anxiously said, “Shall I ask for tea? What will you prefer? Tea or coffee?”

“Oh, why do you worry? Sit. Let us talk about business.”

“That’s not done. Just a second.”

Going into the kitchen Deya asked Laxmi to make some good coffee. She also asked to bring some cashew nuts, salted biscuits and mixture arranging them nicely. Coming back she asked, “Is it Asheshda who gave you the address?”

“No, dada could not give the exact address. I called him last night. He gave me a rough direction. He said that it is somewhere behind Santoshpur Lake.”

Deya was all the more surprised. The Glumtherium had so much information about her?

Basantidi said, “But we did not have to search a lot. A lot of people seem to know you, I found. When we mentioned the name of Nabaprabhat at the junction… Downstairs we met a tall and fair person. He was taking out his motorbike. It was he who directed us to the second floor…”

Deya laughed out, “He is my husband.”

“Oh, is it?” Mallika was smiling, “That’s why he was asking where we were coming from.”
Basanti said, “Ah, if we knew it before we could have talked to him for a couple of minutes.”

“But what it is about?”

“No I mean the gesture that both of you have shown. I mean the broadmindedness that both of you have shown….“

Deya’s acceptance of the praise offered to both of them got reflected on her merry face. Shyly she said, “No, no, have we done anything special? She did not have any place to stay and that’s why…”

“These days who else would do like that? How many people would have the guts to bring home a girl like that?”

Deya did not like the phrase ‘such a girl’. She does not like such thoughtless and sudden comments about Shewli at all? It’s been quite sometime since she had been seeing Shewli from close quarters. Has she ever found Shewli different? She might not be at par with them but she could be easily passed as Laxmid’s daughter.

The girl turned greedy due to poverty. And she was lured into a trap of love which brought about the dangerous turn of events. But that’s nothing unnatural.

Deya asked humbly, “But you haven’t yet told what you need from me.”

“Yes, let’s come to that.” Basanti settled herself on the seat. “We conduct two or three seminars every year on behalf of our society. This year too we are going to conduct one on the occasion of Independence Day. The topic this time is ‘the status of woman in our present society’. You have to be there as a speaker.”

“Me?” Deya was almost startled, “I can’t deliver speech or anything like that. Moreover on such a heavy topic…Oh my God, I can’t do it!”

“It’s you who can do it. The condition that girls from lower middle class families live, how they are exploited, what kind of dangers they have to face, the problem of rehabilitating such helpless girls… You have gone through such an experience. You’ll
narrate your experience in your own way. You tell about how the girl’s mother died.”

Mallika said, “Many famous women from other spheres will also come. Artists, writers, and social workers…we want you as a journalist and also as a person who provided shelter to that girl.”

Deya was in a dilemma. She had never been to such meetings and seminars in her life. At least as a speaker. Many women with great qualities and intellect will be present. What could an ordinary woman like Deya speak in front them? Her knees were shaking just to think about it.

On the other hand Deya felt enthusiastic inside. Was there any need to deliver a long speech? She would tell those things in a well-organized manner whatever she had seen, whatever she had understood. That much she could speak, couldn’t see? Ah, Soumya would definitely tease her when he would come to know about this. Was the tag of a feminist going to be attached to her?

Basanti said, “So we are going to print your name on the card?”

“But…”

“No ‘buts’. We want young women like you. We want your opinion, the reflection of your thought.”

Coffee had arrived. Shewli herself had brought it. She carefully placed the tray with cashew and snacks on the center table. She handed over the cups and plates to Basanti and Mallika.

Signalling through her eyes Basanti asked, “Is it the one?”

Deya nodded her head.

Basanti asked, “What is your name?”

Shewli isn’t diffident any longer. Sportingly she said, “Shewli. Shewli Chakraborty.”
“Oh. You are a Brahmin’s daughter? How far have you studied?”

“Class eight.”

Deya quickly said, “I have made her pursuit her studies again. Now a days she sits with books at home.”

“Wonderful. It’s great.”

Shewli smiled mildly, “May I go?”

“Yes, you can leave.” As soon as Shewli left Basanti, lowering her voice asked, “Can you get her admitted in a school?”

“Let me see. I will approach her. Otherwise she will study in private.”

Mallika said, “Really, you have guts. Naduda … I mean Asheshda also have praised you a lot. He said that she is a very active girl. She never cribs. Always full of enthusiasm …”

Deya was surprised. Not because of having known that Asheshda is called by another name but about Asheshda’s praises about her. That means there was another face of Ragudada?

After Mallika and Basanti left Deya moved around from room to room in a pleasant mood. With duster in her hand she was cleaning the furniture. Recently she bought three foliages of tropical plants from Gariahaat. She inspected the plants attentively. There were marks of water on the mirrors of both the bathrooms. Using wet newspaper she scrubbed them sparkling clean.

And like a tail Shewli was trailed behind Deya. She followed every step of hers. She showed great enthusiasm in whatever Deya was doing. She could not understand how to help her didi. Sometimes she was running to bring a duster of feather or a cloth. At times she shifted the tubs from here and there. They were busy in conversation while working.

“Didi, who were those people? Your friends?”

“Psh, how can they be my friends? Didn’t you notice that one of them was quite older
than me! They had come to invite me.”

“For a wedding…?”

“Don’t be stupid. This is an invitation of different kind. I have to go to a place to give a speech.”

“Why do you give a lecture? In fact, you are not a teacher.”

“Do you think no one other than teachers can deliver lecture? Okay, I will be going somewhere. Will you come with me?”

“Definitely. If you take me I will go.”

“Won’t you be scared?”

“I won’t have anything to fear if you are with me.”

“Throw any kind of fear from your mind. Haven’t I told you that I had been to Lalbazar? I have talked with all the highly placed police officers. They said, ‘Don’t worry. Nobody can touch even the tip of the girl’s hair’…will you remember that?”

“Yes…But if you don’t stay with me…”

“Hey idiot, from where did you get so much of trust upon me? Do you know if any day I become angry with you I can drive you out from my home?”

“Ah, you can’t do that at all.”

“If I put you in some shelter?”

“Why are you scaring me again?”

“Hey, again lemon water? Again lemon water? Wipe your tears.”

“I will not go to any home.”

“Why? Why are you so scared to go to any home?”

“Because you will not be there.”
“Will it do if you say like this? Your Babuada found such a nice place for you where you could have stayed far better than this place.”

“No, didi. I don’t know anyone there; don't know what is there in the mind of the people out there. If anyone forces me again…Didi, I feel very scared.”

“Idiot. I have already told you that so many girls like you stay there. Your Babuada is very angry with you.”

“Hi hi. Do you know Babuada is crazy? The other day I was unable to solve an arithmetic. A problem of interest. Babuada was tearing off his hair and said, ‘if you can’t solve the problem I will jump from the second floor.’”

“Do you like Babuada very much, eh?”

“Yes.”

“And dada?”

Shewli’s mouth was shut as soon as the topic about dada was raised.

Deya wanted to enjoy the fun. “You are very scared of dada. Aren’t you?”

Shewli nodded her head with fear.

Deya was laughing. “No dear. Dada is not at all bad tempered. He is a bit different. And he is always under a lot of work pressure. Go in front of him checking his mood and temperament. Do you get me?”

Shewli nodded her head quickly.

“Now I will go for a bath. You go and help Laxmi di.”

“Laxmi mashi doesn’t allow me to cook. She says, ‘dada will not eat if you cook.’”

Has Laxmi di too noticed Soumya’s different behavior? Laxmi di doesn’t behave badly with Shewli. Yet Laxmi di did not like her staying in this house. Deya could feel that. Now and then Laxmi di complains against her regarding little things. Did Laxmi di say
like that only to hurt Shewli? Could anyone say like that to a girl of her granddaughter’s age?

Deya changed the topic, “Can you cook?”

“Who else cooked at home? Did ma have time? I would go to school only after finishing all the cooking.”

“What all can you make?”

“Dal, laughanta, chachchari, …..While saying Shewli’s voice got choked with tears, “My mother used to cook very well.”

“Again you have started crying? I have already asked you not to think about the past any more!”

“Didi, my poor mother never had any peace. After my father’s death when ma started working as a domestic help in others’ houses she cried everyday on returning…”

“You were very young, I suppose. Do you remember?”

“In fact later too ma would tell many times, ‘Shewli, I had never imagined in my life that I would have to earn a living by working as a maid servant.’ You remove all my pains after being educated. And to that mother I have…”

A bond was being formed through the conversation. The bond of sympathy. Care. Deya was getting involved in Shewli oblivious of her knowledge.

Tugging at Shewli’s plait Deya said, “It’s enough. Stop. Go and get my hair oil. Let me have my haired oiled for sometime. Then I will shampoo my hair.”

Shewli wiped her eyes, “Should I apply to your hair?”

“Can you massage? By rubbing it?”

Again something new for Shewli to do. She was indeed delighted. She ran to the
bathroom and brought Deya’s coconut oil. Parting Deya’s hair she was massaging the oil.”

Deya’s eyes got closed as she relaxed, “Wow, you have a first class hand for massage! In fact you can join in a beauty parlor.”

“My mother used to massage oil in this way. She used to say that oil is the life for hair.”

Again past affairs. Deya changed the topic, “Just see if I have a gray hair.”

“Tut. How can you have any gray hair?”

“It’s quite possible. Due to all kinds of tension.”

“What kind of tension?”

“About you? Who else can it be?”

“Didi, I have put you in a lot of trouble. Haven’t I?”

“Again why are you crying? Hey, you conscious sinner, You’ll get a good spanking from me. Look for a gray hair.”

Shewli started comb searching with full concentration, looking for a gray hair on Deya’s scalp. Her thin fingers were searching around like an expert detective. The tingling sensation on her scalp was really making her sleepy.

During the initial days Deya was quite tensed. What status would she give Shewli in her house? That of a maidservant? Or else a helpless relative? She felt quite hesitant to make Shewli work. She felt as if exploiting her because of her condition. But Shewli herself found out the solution. She had herself chosen a middle path.

A sudden pulling of hair came between her thoughts. As if she had discovered hidden treasure of Tutenkhamen, the much-delighted Shewli said, “Didi I have found it. It’s here.”

Scratching her head, Deya looked at the hair. Not completely gray. A combination of black and white.
There was fake sadness on Deya’s face, “What will happen now? I am not even a mother yet and already I have aged. What if your dada drives me out!

Shewli’s face looked crestfallen. “Didi, you need not tell anyone. Even to Laxmi mashi. I will throw it without anyone’s notice.”

Shewli ran to the window to throw it. Deya was looking at Shewli.

Deya felt that the cruelest experience of life still had not yet robbed her of all her simplicity.

Laxmi came inside wiping her hand in her aanchal. Seeing the intimacy of Deya and Shewli she looked a bit grave. She said, “There is something that I have been waiting to tell you since morning.”

Deya turned her neck. “Yeah.”

“Subhash came yesterday.”

“Oh really? So what does he want to buy this time?” Smirking Deya said, “Taxi? Bus? Minibus?”

“He didn’t come for money. He wants to take me to Sonarpur one of these days.”

“Will he take you for a rickshaw ride? Okay go. Next Thursday I’ll be at home. Go on that day.”

“He asked me to go on Monday itself. That’s convenient for Subhash.”

Deya had a doubt now. Was Laxmi showing her anger?

Deya frowned, “How will it be possible on Monday? How can Shewli stay alone?”

“Is she a kid? She can do everything by herself. She’ll manage for a day.”

“That’s not what I mean. You know that I don’t want to keep her alone at home!

“Because of that shall I be in lifelong confinement?”
Quite often Laxmi used chaste vocabulary with correct grammar. At other times Deya would laugh it off. But now she didn’t find it funny. Anger, jealousy or ego whatever she had in her mind Laxmi was not wrong in what she said. Would Laxmi have to be confined for Shewli? For how many days can this go on? Shewli must slowly get used to stay alone.

With an expressionless face Deya said, “Okay. Go. But I have a three o’clock duty on Tuesday. So try to get back before that.”

Laxmi perhaps hadn’t imagined that she would get the permission so easily. She was standing still.

Deya asked, “Anything else?”

“Your mother was enquiring about you last evening. Call her sometime.”

To talk to the ma now meant to listening to he same old tune. ‘Listen, why have you kept the girl with you! Listen, why you are not driving her out! Today this girl may seem like a needle but tomorrow she will prove to be a knife. Be careful.’ These days she didn’t feel like calling her parents’ house. Even dada the other day curtly said, “Mimi, why are you inviting problems for yourself! Baba is much tensed about it!” How strange! Even her near and dear ones didn’t want to understand that Deya was mature enough to judge between good and bad. Terrible! Terrible!

Ma bares her soul to Laxmi. Regarding Shewli. Deya knew it. Did Laxmi intend to scold Deya through her mother, as she did not have the guts to do so.

With a serious face Deya said, “I’ll call her later.”

Deya got up and went to the bathroom. She massaged the shampoo on her scalp for sometime. Today she was not in a hurry to dry her hair. Today is the day of a luxurious bath for her. Standing under the downpour of the shower, Deya planned that she would ask Ritam to come on Monday without any fail and come early.
In the afternoon after finishing her lunch, Deya sat with her work. Sabita has left after cleaning the utensils.

Laxmi was lying in the drawing room. Shewli was sleeping on the floor of the smaller room. First Deya opened her e-mail for messages. There was something. It was from her friend of university days, Enakshi. Married and relocating herself in Canada, Enakshi was touring a lot with her NRI husband. She has listed a lengthy description of her tours. Having sent her a reply Deya started working on her own article. Organising it. She was deep into data and statistics. She collected quite a number of pieces from old newspaper cuttings archives. She read them attentively.

Sitting at a stretch always gave Deya a throbbing pain in her spine. She got up and drank water, opening the fridge. Then she stood on the balcony. Today the sky was deep blue. There was not a single trace of cloud. One couldn’t feel that Shravana had already arrived. But there was heaviness in the wind. The humidity in the air proclaimed that its there, the monsoon is still there.

From a distance the main road was full of traffic as usual. The road in front of the house was almost lonely. The absentminded eyes of Deya at times were at the distance and at times near. Were Sabita’s words true? Was someone really coming often? It couldn’t be so easy. Even the police told her the other day, ‘madam, the rowdies and hoodlums are also concerned about their lives. If they are caught red handed could they survive the beating!’

Suddenly she remembered the two ladies she met in the morning. Soumya would tease her a lot if he came to know.

As soon as Deya stepped into the smaller room she was very shocked. The sleeping Shewli looked restless on the floor. Curling her body she was trying to save herself from someone. An odd sound was coming from her mouth with inexpressible pain.

Perhaps the nightmare of those horrible days…

Deya trembled. Could those days be ever erased? Poor Shewli!
Soumya was unable to concentrate on his work since morning. His mind was disturbed. There was a group discussion with Amitabha, Deepanjan and Sutanuka about the new project. Soumya kept being distracted amidst the discussion. This rarely happens to him.

What has Deya stared? Deya didn’t even bother to inform him that Laxmidi would be leaving for Sonarpur the next day. It seems she forgot all about it. Even her argument seemed so absurd! “When I return from office either you dozing off for sleep or sitting in front of the computer like an addict, and morning means a rush for you. When can I discuss the domestic matters with you?” But the day before yesterday was Sunday and Deya spent the whole morning in a leisurely manner. Would it be fair if Soumya considers Deya’s mistake as something intentional? Did Deya not know what kind of uneasy situation Soumya would have to face in the absence of Laxmidi?

Soumya understands everything. Deya was making a futile attempt of creating pressure on Soumya. She thinks that in Laxmidi’s absence Soumya would be forced to seek help from that girl. Deya, you haven’t known Soumya as yet. It was not that easy to change Soumya’s decision. Strange! Deya forgot to tell Soumya but not Ritam. Ritam comes and sits in order to guard and Soumya has to see that! Was it not an insult to Soumya?

Last night Soumya heated the food himself. Deya was annoyed even with that! “Look you have caused stick to the pan. Shame on you. Don’t you know that one has to reduce the flame while heating food? The bowl of alur dam has turned lampblack. Can Sabita clean it tomorrow?” Her conversation was interspersed with needle like sarcasms. Once in his school life Soumya had asked one of his friends whether one should boil an egg just like that or one should peel it before boiling. In an unfortunate moment Soumya had told the story to Deya. Picking on that instance she was leaving no stone unturned to pinch and taunt him. Did Deya intend to see the limit of Soumya’s patience? Hmm, in his
life Soumya had fought not a few battles of obstinacy. Let this be another one!
With his mind full of tension Soumya continued his paperwork. In spite of sitting in an
air-conditioned room his head was hot. In front of him were workmanship of logic-gate,
signal and waveforms. Today he did not like it all. He had expected to make some
progress with the preliminary plan of preparing the microchips. Nothing was happening
at all. The day he had joined work Swarnakamalda said, “If you want to succeed in life
you will have to work with a few conditions. Never mix home and office. Always be
careful so that your family life doesn’t interfere in your job. Infocal will pay you heavily
for your efficiency. To satiate your material needs the company would do its best. But
you have to give hundred percent in lieu of that. Remember that you will never rise if you
can’t leave your family life behind the moment you step into the office.”

No, everything was going wrong with Soumya. Soumya got up. Going to the
washroom he splashed water on his face and neck. He was trying to concentrate on the
computer. He was preparing a program to simulate the design. He was modifying a
familiar computer language according to his need. The work had been designed by a
Japanese organization, regarding the personal security of the bank. The prevailing system
had to be more advanced and perfect. Perhaps Sutanuka had gone. She called for Soumya
standing at the door, “There is someone waiting for you.”
Soumya looked up. With a question in his eyes.
It was Sutanuka repeated, “He is standing outside. Little bit aged.”
Soumya who had stopped working got startled on hearing this. Baba!
With a surprised look he asked, “You? Here?”
There were scratches of wrinkles on the forehead of the tall and thin Debabrata.
Debabrata had retired only a couple of years back. But he already showed signs of aging.
He was wearing a gray bush shirt. He wore thick glasses and most of his hair turned grey.
With a hesitant tone Debabrata asked, “Are you busy?”
“A little… but suddenly why are you in the office?”
“Just like that. I had some work with you.”
“Why are you not coming to our place? Is your health fine?”
“Just going on. I was planning to go to your place for quite a few days. But I am not sure
when you people would be there at home. Today I was in my old office at Salt Lake. I thought that I must meet you today you.”

“I see. Soumya looked around. The hired guard of Infocal too stood indifferently! Their office did not have any tradition of bringing visitors inside How could he talk to his father standing in the passage? Soumya thought for few seconds. Then he said, “Let’s go downstairs.”

There was something like a small market on the first floor. There was even a reasonably decent restaurant. Soumya sat there with his father. He ordered coffee for his father and soft drinks for himself.

Sitting comfortably on his seat he asked, “So tell me what you were saying. You wanted to talk to me about something?”

“I’ll tell you.” Debabrata lit a cigarette, “Tell me about Deya? How is she?”

“She is alright. These days she has an evening shift.”

“I think that girl is still in your house.”

“Yes.”

“Were there any more problems? Deya had said that a man would be seen standing….”

“May be. But I don’t know.”

“Don’t tell me. You know anything about it?”

“Did you come to discuss all these?”

Debabrata turned silent for sometime. He was looking intensely at his son. Absentmindedly he nodded his head. It seemed as if he sighed. Then in a moist tone he said, “I am worried about your mother.”

Soumya had anticipated that his father was going to tell something like this. There was no change in his facial expression. In a casual manner he said, “Ma has always been a problem woman. What’s the latest did she do now? Has she started distributing bed and mattresses this time?”

“Son, actually your mother is not keeping well.”

“Take her to a doctor.”

“What would the doctor do? She has become very tired from within. She is not enthusiastic about anything. Just lies quietly. She doesn’t want to talk and gets very much irritated if I say anything…”
“What can I do for that?”
“The whole thing is crossing its limits. Suddenly she is taking voluntary retirement. She has already sent notice to the office…”
“In fact that’s good. She has been working for long. Now let her take rest at home.”
“Can you expect someone to get rid of mental problem only by taking rest?”
“Take her to a psychiatrist.”
“Why are you talking like that?” With a hurt face Debabrata said, “I am not discussing an outsider with you. She is your mother. Don’t you have any concern regarding her wellbeing?”
“Baba, I stay away as she doesn’t like my presence.”
“Do you have to repeat even what your mother says? Won’t any of you even think about me?” There was earnest request in Debabrata’s voice. He held Soumya’s hand, “Listen to my words, Somu. Come to your mother at least once. Supria will be alright if stand by her once.”
“If you feel so then it is necessary bring ma. The door of my house is open for all.”
“Please Somu, be reasonable. Listen to me at least for once. It’s okay. Even if you don’t want to go at least call her once. At least if she listens to your voice over phone…”
“Even ma can call me.”
“Uuff.” Debabrata shook his head. “I can’t take it anymore. I really can’t. Somu, I have become very lonely.”
Suddenly Soumya was reminded of a childhood dream. He would often dream of it. Like the villain of a Hindi film hanging from the cornice of a huge building baba was crying for help. Soumya and ma were clapping from upstairs and laughing. Suddenly baba’s hands lost his grip and he was falling down. Floating on air he was going down in slow motion.
Why would Soumya see that strange dream? Okay, let us suppose that seeing the helpless condition of Debabrata, Supria and Soumya were making fun. But why should Debabrata be the villain? Wasn’t he a tragic hero? Did Soumya’s subconscious mind tell him that whoever would stand between him and his mother was a bad man?
The coffee and the soft drink were served. Placing the straw between his lips Soumya took a sip from the bottle. By the manner of consoling his father he smiled gently, “Why
have you become so emotional today? This is something perennial. It’s between me and
ma.”
“Yes, you are right. It has always been the two of you who exist.” Debabrata’s voice
turned bitter. “Do you know about her latest whim? She doesn’t want to stay in Kolkata.
She is buying a house in Shantiniketan. She will spend the rest of her life there.”

It seemed as if Soumya felt a sudden blow. He looked blankly, “What will happen to the
Fern Road house?”
“I don’t know. It will be locked for the time being. She might eventually leave it.”
Soumya felt a crack in his heart. So many memories of his childhood are build up in that
house. How could ma wish to destroy everything by leaving that house which was
inseparable from Soumya’s blood? Whom did she intend to inflict pain? To Soumya? Or
to herself?
Or was she thinking that this was the best way to free herself from her pain?
In a dry tone Soumya said, “Why are you so worried? In fact Shantiniketan is a very nice
place.”
“Somu, how could you say this?”
“Why not? These days a lot of people are building their houses and staying there. In fact
you people are lucky. You can stay there and visit us in Kolkata from time to time.”
Debabrata was motionless. One could see a breakage going in his face. His veins were
throbbing. He pressed his temple with his fingers. The coffee was getting cold. He did not
even look at it, “I’ll be off now.”
“Are you leaving?”
“What’s the point in sitting here?” Saying this he left and after a few steps he returned
back. With a shaking voice pointing his index finger he said, “Listen to me Somu. It’s not
good on the part of a father to usher ill luck for his child. So I pray to God so that you
should never have kids. And if you do you should not go through my condition.”
Was it a prayer? Or a curse? Soumya could not finish the soft drink. He sat as if he had
lost his senses. Baba had never talked to him like that in the last three years. Baba never
raised the topic of ma willingly. Even if Deya raised the topic he gave short replies. Why
did baba come to the office in spite of going to the house? Didn’t he want to tell these
things in front of Deya? Why didn’t he want? Did baba not yet consider Deya as one of the family members? Or did he intend not to hurt Deya saying these things in front of her?

Soumya returned to the office with a bitter temper. He wanted to start working. He turned on the computer. He was blankly looking at it. Baba’s face appeared in front of his eyes amongst the words and data. Baba almost cried today! Was Soumya turning to a stone? No, today he wouldn’t be able to concentrate in his work. Soumya got up after arranging his things.

Though he was about to leave office he returned to his table. He dialed the Fern Road telephone number.

It was ringing! It was ringing!

After ringing for quite sometime Supria was on the other side, “Hello?”

Soumya suddenly pressed the mouth of the receiver. His stopped inhaling.

“Hello? Hello? Who is there?”

Soumya’s jaws were stiff. He pressed the mouth of the receiver more strongly so that the least sound of his breathing didn’t reach there. On the other side Supria was repeatedly making sounds. Those sounds appeared to be two to four times stronger and were hitting the membrane of Soumya’s ear.

Sudden the other side was silent. Soumya carefully put down the receiver. Was the sound of heavy breathing heard at the last moment? Could ma sense that Soumya had called? Defeat! …Defeat!

Soumya’s heart became heavier. Coming downstairs he was driving his motorcycle. After covering some distance he felt as if the bike was not running properly. He turned on the accelerator but the speed did not increase. What happened to the mischievous machine? Again it was not taking pick-up today?

Soumya loses his temper whenever the motorcycle slows down. Somehow he managed to reach Santoshpur and directly went to the garage directly.

Madan came running, “Dada, what happened?”

On listening to the problem Madan examined the vehicle. He was an experienced mechanic. He repaired it within few minutes. Cleaning his sticky and dirty hand with a
cloth he said, “Dada, the problem is in the sparkplug.”
Soumya was irritated, “What do you say? I have recently changed it.”
Widening his teeth Madan was smiling, “Dada, the sparkplug is unable to strike a cord with your bike.”
“Strange!” Soumya frowned with doubt, “But I fixed an original one. It wasn’t fake and it was you who gave it to me.”
“Actually your original place is weak. The engine has no energy. If the whole thing can be mended once….Madan kept the sliding wrench in the tool box, “It will take time. You have to keep it here.”
“How much will it cost?”
“I have to see. Without opening it I can’t say anything.”
“Hmm…:
“Dada, can I ask you something? For how many years is your vehicle running? Ten?”
“More than that.” Soumya calculated within. “I think, thirteen years.”
“Then it is giving you very good service. Now relieve it. Now a days who drives a 200cc model? Such a heavy model…! There are so many good 100cc models available in the market. Take one.”
Soumya did not pay attention to his words. Taking out the purse he said, “How much do I have to pay?”
“Give me fifty bucks.”
Madan is usually a little expensive. Soumya knew it. The work that he did was very little; he only cleaned the plug. At another place it would not have been more than thirty. Madan too would have charged that only, had Soumya taken him to task. But Soumya was not in a mood to bargain. Handing the money Soumya started the bike, “If I want to get the engine repaired I will let you know. You have to finish the work by the exact time you promise. Don’t trouble me.”
Madan Naskar used to keep his words. Touching the bike Madan said, “Dada, sell it. I will give you eight. Down payment.”
This time also Soumya didn’t pay attention to his words. Even if he bought a car he didn’t plan to sell his motorbike. There was a reason too. He had not bought it himself. It was a gift. To say the truth it was not even a gift. It was the price of fulfilling a condition. He had a deal with his mother at that time. If he would secure marks according to his mother’s expectations in the Higher Secondary he would get whatever he wanted. Soumya secured unexpected high marks in the higher secondary, almost nine hundred. In lieu of that he got this two-wheeler. Supria did not wish at all to buy this turbulent vehicle for her son. But at that time Soumya wanted only that thing. And he wanted it more as ma had strong objection against it. “I have pleased you. You also have to keep your promise!” In the very first year while driving the bike he met with an accident though not a big one. In a turning, while driving the bike in high speed the wheel skid. Though Soumya tried utmost he couldn’t control. It hit a buffalo. He had to give compensation to the owner of the buffalo. Soumya was also on bed with a fractured leg. Ma was desperate to sell the unlucky chariot. Soumya didn’t allow her at all. He told her directly if she would sell the motorcycle he would leave his course of computer engineering.

Yes, that was the relation between the son and the mother. At every step there were arguments, at every step arrogance, at every step fighting. “Soumya, today if you can mug up five rhymes you will get a cricket bat.”
“I will memorize but I will take a football and not a bat.”
“If you can complete thirty sums you will get two Cadbury Chocolates.”
“No, I want ice cream.”
“If you stand first I will take you to Kashmir this time.”
“No, you have to take me to Goa.”
At every step in spite of fulfilling a desire there was denial of another wish. In the game of give and take the son was as much strong as the mother.

How could Soumya leave that bike which he won after so much of confrontation? There were many sweet memories too regarding that bike. Soumya took Deya to so many places on this bike. Deya was very much attracted to rivers. *Kolaghat, Diamond Harbor, Basirhaat, Kanning* everywhere these three were all together. Soumya, Deya and Karl. Yes, Deya called the motorcycle with that name. In the name of the famous car of
Remark’s novel, *Three Comrades*. Sitting on the back of this Karl first time Deya hummed in his ears, ‘I love you’. Soumya pretended as if he did not listen to it. He said, “Speak louder.”

Spreading her arms Deya shouted, “I……loooovvvvveeee you…….”

That day they were on the way of *Ichaamoti*.

The endless embankments on both the sides never seemed to end. Water, and only water. The still water had gently swayed with Deya’s declaration, I love you… The leaves of the trees danced. The sky was deep blue. A nice fragrance spread all over the earth.

Was it possible to sell Karl? Never.

One’s gloominess is intensified by the past. Soumya’s mind became duller. There was so much of fight with ma, but what was the profit? *Ma* would perhaps never know but Soumya was defeated by himself today. The father whom he never had taken into consideration pierced his heart today. What could Soumya do but for sitting drooping his head? So much of love with Deya, so much mental compatibility and physical proximity. But what is left now? Deya does not care for Soumya anymore. Deya has changed. She has changed.

Soumya parked the motorbike in the garage in a dull mood. He was climbing the steps slowly. Tarit Paain stood on the first floor staircase landing. He was coming down. On seeing Soumya he stopped.

There was an elastic smile on the lips of the forty year old Tarit, “Are you coming back from office?”

Soumya stopped for the sake of courtesy, “Yes.”

“The sky is cloudy again. Isn’t it?”

“Perhaps I didn’t notice.”

“It is lightening. It will pour again. A change of rain will surely bring in floods.”

“Hmm.”

“Where is your Mrs.? On duty?”

“Yes.”

“But she made us very proud. I talk about her everywhere. To shelter to a prostitute in a gentleman’s house…”
“The girl is not a prostitute.” Soumya really hated the topic. Yet he was forced to say,
“The girl was forced…”
“But brother, that seems to be true for all prostitutes. Tell me please, how many girls
come into prostitution willingly? Many wish to escape but can’t. She could. She has
devil’s luck. And see how she got a place in such a nice family…”
Tarit was telling many more things. But nothing was getting in Soumya’s ears. He felt
some kind of nausea. He just felt like shutting his eyes and punching the man on his nose.
Ah! How many tests of tolerance Soumya would have to pass?
Soumya climbed the rest of the steps quickly. With all his anguish accumulated he lashed
at the calling bell violently.
Shewli opened the door and instantly stepped aside.
Soumya looked at her with anger, “Where is Laxmidi?”
“She hasn’t come”, Shewli replied softly.
Almost immediately there was Ritam’s voice from the sofa Ritam said, “Good evening
computer. Back so early today?”

Soumya’s head burnt with anger. Even today the crazy man is sitting today here.
Books and copies were scattered on the carpet. So here the farce of studies was going on
so long! What was happening to this house day by day? How come Ritam is so intimate
with a girl whose morality can be doubted? Soumya controlled his nerves with lot of
effort. Putting a forced smile on his lips he said, “When did you come?”
“Long back. Shewli prepared so many things for me. Parota, aluchachhari, pickle,
sandesh… Will you have tea? Then I will also have chance of
another cup.”
“No, you can take. I will take dinner after some time.”
“Brother, is there any harm in breaking the rule for a day? Hey Shewli, take all the books.
Let me chat with your Computerda today.”
Shewli buried herself in kitchen. She ran to the room and left quickly picking up her
books.
Taking out his shoes and socks Soumya was on the sofa.
Loosening his shirt buttons he said, “I think now a days your evenings are colorful.”
“Are you joking? I am almost dead!” Ritam lighted a *bidi*, “She is such scatterbrain when it comes to maths that the task of putting sums in her head has reduced my life to ashes. With the bitter smell of the *bidi* the nausea sensation returned again. With a sideways glance Soumya noticed that the expensive cut glass ashtray was overflowing with *bidi* stubs. Because of this friend of Deya Soumya would have to leave his own house. Keeping his smile intact Soumya said, “Yet I feel that you are enjoying a lot.”

“A challenging job, it is indeed. However, she is quite interested in History and Geography. I can be off once I have managed to create an interest. Then she can proceed on her own.

“That means your noble job will be fulfilled, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I mean…” Ritam was embarrassed a bit with the manner Soumya talked.

“Brother, can I say something if you don’t mind? You have lot of interest in noble jobs. Don’t you…?”

“I don’t understand good or bad.” Ritam sat straight. “If I can help a girl who has fallen into ditch …”

“Brother, in fact you could have helped the girl a lot more.”

“In what way?”

“By keeping the girl with you. You could have given her your valuable guidance twenty four hours.”

Ritam’s eyes shrank. It seemed that he could catch the underlying sarcasm of Soumya’s words at last. To Soumya’s utter surprise he laughed loudly, “Brother, do I have that strength? Or do I have any say at home? I am at my Majesty’s mercy? She’ll perhaps drive me out holding onto my neck if I add to the burden. Don’t you think so?”

“So you have cleverly shifted the entire burden on your friend’s head! I mean very cleverly!”

“But I …In fact I …” Ritam was hesitating, “But I haven’t forced Deya to take any burden”

“Did I ever say that you have forced? I said that you have done cleverly. What else are dear friends for! First you provoked Deya to do the story in the newspaper. Even Deya was eager to be famous overnight. So she swallowed the bait. Without raising his voice, keeping his smile intact, Soumya was pouring venom in a cool manner. “You are a
vagabond. You knew it very well that once the news was published that girl would land in trouble. And then started the second course of your action. Taking the opportunity of Deya’s weakness you started pricking her conscience. And without giving it a second thought out of sympathy Deya brought in the girl.

Is any of my statements wrong?”

Ritam’s face turned pale. Feebly he said, “I think what you said is correct. With your level of education and exposure there is hardly any scope for error.”

“Do you understand that? Do you get the difference?”

Shewli has brought Ritam’s coffee. Keeping the cup and saucer on the table she left the way she came in. She didn’t understand anything that was going on. She was used to listen to folk music. The subtlety of classical Dhrupad was beyond her comprehension.

Ritam gave a quick glance to see where Shewli was. Then he almost muttered, “Tell me what you want exactly. Do you want me to stop coming?”

“Who I am to say no to you!” There was smooth rudeness in Soumya’s voice, “You will come to your friend, both of you will enjoy together with utter satisfaction, compete in pretending nobleness…Of course not pricking thorn in your throat…Not making wet your own hair plate. Who can leave the opportunity to be great free of cost putting the gun on someone else’s shoulder?”

Ritam stood up with a dull face, “I am sorry, Soumya. I could not understand that I had disturbed you so much. I will also ask Deya to forgive me.”

“Please don’t destroy our peace by provoking Deya anymore. Whatever you do, with whatever intention you do, you surely are not our enemy! Am I right?”

Opening the door without uttering a single sound Ritam went out with his head down.

Soumya sat still like a stone. Did he do the right thing? Perhaps he needn’t have insulted him so much. But did he have any choice? He heard how the scandal spread everywhere. It is Ritam who is Deya’s chief adviser. If Ritam’s visits are stopped at least one of Deya’s wings would be chopped.

Shewli stood in front of him. Forgetting all about the place, time and person the girl asked with surprise, “What happened? Why did Babuada leave without drinking the coffee?”
The suppressed anger arose. Soumya shouted, “What’s your problem? Go and take the cup and dish.”

Like a chased dog Shewli ran away.

Soumya quickly went to the bedroom. Rudely he asked, “Hey, listen.”

Trembling Shewli came and stood near the door.

“Why are didi’s lipsticks and other stuffs scattered like that?”

“I don’t know.” Shewli mumbled.

“Don’t tell lie. Didn’t you touch the dressing table?”

“No dada. In fact didi…”

“Again you have started arguing on my face? You have become so arrogant, eh? Don’t I know how your didi handles things?”

Shewli’s eyes were filled with water because of the scolding.

Soumya looked at Shewli with much anger. That beggar like weak look was not there anymore. She became quite glazy within these few days. Was there a bit reddish glow on her lips? Was there any coating of cosmetics on her cheeks?

Soumya became angrier as he didn’t understand. The angry eyes were moving on Shewli’s dress. Didn’t he buy this pink salwar kameez for Deya in their honeymoon?

Soumya gnashed his teeth, “Leave. Leave from here. Don’t you dare to enter this room in our absence!” God knows why Deya does not lock the room!

Shewli escaped. Standing near the door of kitchen she was trembling in fear.

Soumya entered the bathroom taking trouser and punjabi on his shoulder. There was flame of fire in his head. There was no relaxation in spite of standing near the shower. He felt as if the water was not reaching his body. Deya was taking fun by sending Laxmidi to Sonarpur! Let her see. Soumya wouldn’t leave that girl. He would show her darkness by scolding her. He would see how long Deya could give her shelter under her anchal!

The shadow of Supria Singharoy was getting prolonged in Soumya. That Supria who never experienced defeat and never taught also…
Laxmi had gone home for one day but returned after having spent four days. It seems she fell very sick in Sonarpur. The son-in-law had brought a jackfruit for his mother-in-law to express his love and concern. A big and juicy one. Laxmi was knocked out on the bed because of her greed. For the two days she was down with upset stomach and vomiting. It seemed that her daughter had insisted her to take rest for two more days but she couldn’t stay back because of Shewli.

Whatever be the care, the return of Laxmi meant relief. Not Soumya but it was Deya who heaved a sigh of relief. No more worries about Shewli, no tension for Soumya either and she also got respite from hasty cooking sprees. The household started running smoothly again.

Even Soumya stopped grumbling about Shewli. Soumya’s Bugida had mailed him from Silicon Valley. Thus his temper was slightly happy. Bugida was supposed to visit before the Pujas and thus a new thought had entered Soumya’s mind. He had to find a good office space before Bugida arrived. Soumya was pretty occupied with all his future planning.

In between Deya too went to Chetla. Her grandmother was not keeping well. She was suffering from respiratory problems and so she paid her a visit. She paid least attention to her mother’s constant nagging on her father’s grumbling. There was an intense discussion with Mahua about her forthcoming wedding anniversary. Jokingly she also informed that Soumya might prepone his deadline of becoming a father. The usual rhythm had returned back in Soumya and Deya’s house. Not totally but almost. But a subtle unease still remained there. Soumya was trying his best to avoid Shewli. Even Laxmi seemed not so happy with Shewli. Let it be. Everything can’t change as per Deya’s wishes within a few days. One has to give it time. It takes time.
The coming Monday itself is Deya’s wedding anniversary. She hadn’t done any shopping. On Thursday after taking lunch Deya went out. Noontime Gariahaat was almost empty today. The clouds which lost their ways were back in the city again. They were taking control of the sky. It was drizzling from the morning. There was a strange sleep inducing light on the streets. It appeared very sweet. The marketing for puja did not start yet. The shopkeepers were sitting drowsily and at times getting up from the nap, were driving away the flies at their counters. And it was a run of luck for the customers. They could bargain as they wished. Deya was roaming around to complete her purchasing. She bought a nicely embroidered bed sheet which was off light shade of champak flower. Along with that she bought matching frilled pillow covers. She will spread it on the day of the wedding anniversary. The fragrance of newness will spread around. She wanted to change all the curtains that day and, therefore, bought fabric according to the required size. The shop had its own tailor. They will deliver the stitched curtains to her house within Sunday. They were charging a bit high but there would be no haste of carrying them home all by herself. She also bought four coffee mugs of deep red color at which her eyes got fixed. The coffee was always served in the cup saucers and it looked odd. Laxmi di was whining to bring small containers to keep various spices. After a lot of searching she got some plastic containers. She bought a leaf of bindis for herself and matching its shade got lipstick, compact and nail polish. Shewli had once touched Deya’s dressing table and Soumya was very angry with that. And he also scolded Shewli one day. There was no wonder that she could touch. Now a days the girl is little inclined to make-up. Whenever Deya sits for her make-up Shewli stands with a gaping mouth. Poor girl! At this stage of life such kind of desires spring up. This is the age for such kind of inclinations! She bought little bright lipstick for Shewli. She also got a cheap nail polish and few gaudy clips. She will dress herself nicely on the day of their wedding anniversary. Let Shewli too dress. Some salwar-kameezes were kept in the hangers of the footpath. The price range was within two hundred. She searched and selected a salwar of sandalwood color for Shewli. She thought for a while and did not take it. The girl prefers bright colors a lot. She roamed around and bought a set of false silk with the combination of red and yellow. The kameez was very glazy and there was no dupatta with it. Let it be like that. But it is enough to take only for Shewli. Laxmidì is there. She will be offended.
Laxmidi was not fussy about colors. She bought a striped *saree* of green color for Laxmidi. Now it is turn for Soumya. Deya felt tired after roaming so much. While sipping on a bottle of cold drink she was thinking what to take for Soumya. Trouser and shirt? But he had many. The wardrobe was falling short of space to hold them. Should she go for perfume? Colon? *Psh!* She gave him perfume on last March on the occasion of his birthday. Won’t it be a repetition? How will it be if she opts for faded jeans? Leave it. If Soumya doesn’t like the shade of Deya’s choice! A good tie? Yes, tie. An expensive pair of ties can easily be given. How will it look if along with that she presents a set of handkerchiefs? She smiled within. Just after giving the gift she will take one rupee from him. Handkerchiefs should not be given free of cost!

Just finishing the cool drink Deya entered the shop again. It was a huge showroom of a reputed company. While selecting ties her eyes got suddenly fixed on the cash counter. A young man was paying his bills. His face was very familiar! Where did she see him? Jadavpur? Wasn’t he Soumya’s friend? The guy too looked at Deya with a smiling face. Deya went forward, “Are you Soumya’s…?”

“Yes. I am Soumya’s batch mate. I am Deep….You were his fiancé, I presume?”

“We have been married for three years.”

“Is it? Congrats…Soumya has not moved an inch leaving Kolkata. Isn’t it?”

“No. He does not have plans too.”

Deya noticed that Deep had put on lot of weight. Earlier he used to be very slim. Sitting on his Karlo, when Deya flew with Soumya, Deep used to look at them with restless eyes. The old memory brought little smile on her lips. Holding the smile on her face Deya asked, “Where are you now?”

“New Jersey.” Deep picked up the packet from the counter.

“Tell Soumya that we chanced to meet. Bye.”

Deya felt little bad as Deep went away. The guy used to roam around a lot with Soumya. But didn’t he have inquisitiveness about Soumya? Why didn’t he want to know where Soumya was and how he was? Why didn’t he have anything to know about him? He did not even feel any necessity to tell anything about him! After studying four years together, was Soumya only Deep’s batch mate? Not a friend? There were eighty students
in Deya’s class in the university. They were forty five students in total in the honors class of the college. Even there was not much closeness with many. Yet they used to chat for few minutes if they had chanced to meet sometime. But Ritam’s case was different. She always had contact with Ritam. Even she used to chat with Debashish, Sanghamitra, Piali and others over phone. On special occasions they used to invite Deya. Deya also invited them on Monday. But how couldn’t she find such a single friend of Soumya in these three years!

Did Solumya have no friend because of his obstinacy and arrogance? Or did his state of friendlessness make him like that? Didn’t life appear to be a desert without enjoying with friends? Did Soumya have any pain as he did not have any friend? But it did not seem so. Deya came back at around 5p.m. after finishing all her shopping. Shewli, like a shalik bird rushed towards her as soon as she entered home.

“Didi, what did you buy? Let me see.”
Sitting under the fan Deya wiped her neck and throat, “First get me a glass of water.”
Shewli brought water with the speed of an airplane, “Show me. Show me.”
Deya simpered, “Now get a cup of hot tea.”
Laxmi turned her eyes, ‘. As soon as you go out she becomes restless. ‘When didi will be back? When will she return?’”
Deya pouted, “But Laxmididi the comparison you have made is not appropriate. You can say that in my presence she finds the heaven at her hand’s reach.”
“Actually I meant to say that.”
“Didi, now show me what you have brought.”
“Hey girl, why are you standing like that? Put the tea on the stove.”
Deya was revealing all the pearls and gems one by one while sipping tea. Shewli rushed to see them. As soon as Deya took out the salwar kameez she jumped with joy. She ran to the bathroom and wore it. Stretching her body she was seeing whether it fitted perfectly or not.
Deya gave a side glance. She was looking like a dazzling beauty. It enhanced her beauty!
Shewli was twisting her body with shyness.
Making face Laxmi said, “What a nuisance! I just can’t bear such a show! Go and put off
the dress now.”
Deya said, “Yes she is right. Fold it properly. You have to wear it on Monday.”
But Shewli did not take it out then itself. Like a fop she sat at the feet of Deya. “Didi, many people will come on Monday, isn’t it?”
“No, not many. Only around twenty.”
“Can Laxmi mashi cook for so many people? Can she?”
Carrying the saree under her armpit Laxmi was trotting. Turning back she said, “Why should I do? In fact you are there.”
“Oh my God! Can I do?”
“Even if you cook do you think people will eat your dishes?”
“Ah, Laxmidî!” Deya scolded her lightly. Slapping on the back side of Shewli’s head she said, “Listen stupid, nobody needs to cook on that day.”
Shewli was not at all bothered by Laxmi’s words. Perhaps she became used to listen to such comments. Showing her teeth she said, “Then what will happen? Will you serve mixture and sweet to all?”
“No dear, not at all. The food will be ordered from outside. Mutton biryani, chicken chop, fish butter fry, cake, ice cream and cold drinks.”
“Biryani is something Babuada is very fond of. That day too he was telling that he would make you treat him with biryani one of these days.”
“Yes, it is indeed your Babuada’s taste that has to be kept in mind.”

Saying this Deya became little absent minded. Ritam was not coming for the last few days. Deya called him up day before yesterday or the day before that. Shrabani had taken the call. Ritam was not at home at that time. Deya had repeatedly asked Shrabani to convey the message of ringing her back as soon as Ritam returns…Shrabani must have told. This guy is really crazy. He must have forgotten. Only God can say at what time and for what purpose this eccentric guy wanders about! Shrabani and Ritam haven’t been invited as yet. As soon as the thought hit her Deya sat with the handset, “Masima, is Ritam at home?”
“No, who is speaking?”
“I am Deya, mashima.”
“Oh, I see. But Babua went out early morning. Today he has job interview.”

“Is it? When will he return?”

“That I can’t say.”

“Is Shrabani around?”

“It’s time for her to return.. But she was telling that there was some meeting. Should I tell her something?”

Will it be proper to invite Ritam and Shrabani for the wedding anniversary through Ritam’s mother? Shrabani is a sensitive girl. She has a strong sense of pride. She may take it to heart.

But Ritam will definitely run to her as soon as he will get the news. Does Ritam remember the date of Deya’s marriage?

With lot of hesitation Deya said, “No mashima, nothing serious, I’ll call again later.”

Putting down the receiver Deya sat still for two minutes. Then she pulled the thin diary from the side table. She got Piali at home and Sanghamitra at her father’s home. Debashish was not at home. She informed his wife. She asked her cousin, Chindi to come along with the brother-in-law without fail. That too with Gaja and Nimki .One and half hours easily slipped away in making about six phone calls. She was tired from the incessant chatting. Exhausted Deya entered the room and kept Soumya’s packet inside. She will not show it to Soumya before Monday. Shewli came inside to give her a bunch of letters, “Sabita mashi brought them from downstairs. I forgot to give you.”

Deya’s eyes ran through the envelopes. But these were all Soumya’s. He had got a credit card last year before pujas. The bank sends lots of letters. All types of odd allurements such as, just with a phone call we will get you: “one lakh at your doorstep. Renovate your house, buy gadgets, stay in this hotel on your trip, and travel in so and so airlines…!” But Soumya did not even look at his credit card except for paying a hotel bill while they were eating out. Is Soumya miser? Or a spendthrift? No just calculative discreet when it comes to money. While checking the envelopes she found the telephone bill. Two thousand four hundred eighty eight rupees. Most of it was due to internet’s courtesy. It would increase some more. The way Buida had possessed Soumya. There
was an envelope from the post office beneath the stack. It was on Deya’s name. As soon as she opened the letter Deya’s face glowed with a pleasant smile. Her cousin Hiya wrote from Simla. She got married in the last Agrahayan. Her husband is a central government officer. Hiya’s unending honeymoon is at her husband’s place of work. Hiya has persistently invited Soumya and Deya to visit Simla at least once. Next year Hiya’s husband may get transferred. Before that itself….

It would be really nice. Since a long time Deya hasn’t been out. She went to Kodaikanal for her honeymoon and after that to Lava Lolegaon for seven days. That is all about her outing. Day and night work, work and only work. Soumya is busy with his job and Deya too. Should she pester Soumya once to go to Simla? It will certainly take one year Bugida to set up the company…If both of them can take leave before that….They can plan for the winter. Deya has never been to Himachal Pradesh. The Bipasha river flows there from the heart of the mountain. How does the river look in the chilling cold? Alas, how can Deya go out? What will happen to Shewli? If they go to Simla Laxmidi will surely not stay at all in the house! This time when she went to her younger son-in-law’s house her stomach was upset after eating jackfruit. Will she not compensate that in capital and interest together by visiting her elder son-in-law’s house?

Shewli is really a headache! No more sympathy from now! Now she must get rid of her feelings. She became quite stable. The girl should not cry at the proposal of going to home. If necessary she has to be forced. In fact Deya is her well wisher. For Shewli’s benefit she should go away. Deya came and lay on the bed. She closed her eyes to overcome the tiredness. She was terribly hungry yet she didn’t want to tell about it. She felt pleasure relaxing and lying down like a dead body. Will Soumya return early today? Last two Thursdays were wasted. How will it be if they plan for Chinese in Tangra?
A sound was coming from distance. The phone was ringing in the drawing room. Shewli rushed to give her the handset. Lying on the bed Deya presented the button, “Hallo?”
“Is Deya Singharoy there?”
“Speaking.”
“Oh. You saved me. My fingers are literally aching from calling Nabaprabhat many times. Though I got the line at last they said that you were on leave.”

A male voice. A professional tone.

Deya turned, “Who is speaking?”

“Beleghata P.S. I am the second officer. Madam we need to see you urgently.”

Deya was tensed, “Why? What happened?”

“The girl called Shewli Chakroborty is with you, right?”

“Yes.”

“You have to bring her once to the police station.”

“Why?”

“We have arrested two men. We believe that one of them is the fellow behind Shewli’s case.”

Deya sat up in hurry-scurry, “Really? From where did you nab them?”

“From a gambling den. Our source informed us about his earlier den. All of you consider us good for nothing but we kept a constant eye on him. The rascal had thought that the atmosphere became cool. So he was trying to set up a shelter.

“Are you sure that he is the same person?”

“It is only to confirm that we are calling you. Come with the girl. Let the identification be done.”

“Now? At night?”

“Madam, you people think about proper time and improper time. But we don’t. We are twenty four hours on duty. Come without fail tomorrow morning by nine. O.C. will also be present. In fact tomorrow we have other procedures to produce him before the court.”

“Yes, you are right.”

“Then are you coming tomorrow in the morning? …Today let’s give him a dressing down to see if we can extract some information. We believe that this time the whole gang…”

“I will come certainly. In fact it is my duty.”

“If every citizen were aware of their duties one wouldn’t need a department like this. Ha…ha…ha. Okay. I am putting down the phone.”
Lines of tension appeared on Deya’s forehead. Was the riddle getting solved or getting more complicated? Will there be any negative reaction if she takes Shewli to the police station? Now Shewli has forgotten many things. Will the fear in her return? She needs to talk to Shewli. Shewli really needs counseling. If the man really happens to be Shyamchand will there be no possibility of anything else? Although false it was a marriage. It might be for few days but Shewli loved Shyamchand. How will Shewli behave seeing that man? Will she burst into anger? Or will she break down? Or will she crouch in fear like a snail in its shell? How will be her mental state after coming back from the police station? Can Deya handle the situation? No. She must call Ritam. Right now. Deya pressed the buttons of the handset quickly, “Mashima? Is Ritam back?” “No. Not yet…Shall I give the phone to Shrabani?” “No, I will call later.”

Deya disconnected the phone absentmindedly.
Ritam managed to get a job. In sales. In a small company dealing with Ayurvedic medicine. In the beginning there will be training for fifteen days. He has to identify the medicines, and thereafter has to understand their medicinal values and then has to roam around to convince the doctors. He will also have to rush to the medical stores and market regularly. Taking orders is also a part of his job. Actually the medicines of that company are sold primarily in the villages. In the town there is less demand of their products.

Ritam managed to find the job on his own. Ambarda did not give. The fact that Ambarda didn’t have to do anything brought a lot of satisfaction to Ritam. But did it mean Ritam was happy on getting the job? Or sad? No, not like that. For engaging himself again to work was he accusing Shrabani deep inside his heart? It is difficult to tell. Ritam was trying his best to be neutral. Every moment he was trying to convince his inner self that he really needed the job. Financially? No. Was it possible to measure every need of life by the parameter of money? That Ritam would move everywhere, and get to meet a lot of people also has some value. Did his earlier jobs give him nothing? He got gradually confined to a small boundary. He became involved in the craft of using words. Now he can realize that those things also have become tasteless. To draw the picture of life man has to see it on a bigger canvas. Where is the sense of life in his writing? Where is the philosophy? Even any base of firm belief was not built in him. Not of distrust too. Who can nourish the store of life experience of a parasite like person who is averse to labor and how? Is pen for him a mere hobby and luxury? Nothing more than that?
Though Ritam was brooding over this inside but at times all the logics appeared to him absurd. Like a bell it rings continuously near his ears ‘Ritam, you are a defeated person. Ritam, you have not understood even the people close to you. Writing is not your cup of tea. Throw your pen in the drain. Gird up your loins and engage yourself in work. Take care of your wife and child properly. Nothing more than that suits you. What kind of childish whim is this to go for writing with a blind eye to everything?’

Thus Ritam was combating with himself sitting at the tea shop in the morning. He was building arguments and the next moment went on breaking them. The moment Shrabani came to know that he was sitting for the interview to get a job she became confused in a strange way. Every time she put on a face of guilty. Perhaps she was sure that it was the reaction of her anger. Could Shrabani understand where she had hit the blow in Ritam?

“Hey Babua, what you are meditating for?”
Ritam landed in the real world from the world imaginations. It was Bishuda. Bishwanath Haldar. His age could be forty five and might be sixty five. From when Ritam became grown up he did not notice in the face of Bishuda. Only few wrinkles appeared on his skinny face.
Ritam opened his jaw, “I was thinking a tough thing whether the earth rotates from right to left or left to right!”
“What?”
“Even I can’t understand. I was trying to achieve bodhi.”
“What incredible things you are talking about!” Bishwanath sat on the bench, “Order a cup of tea, dear.”
Ritam did not need to order. The glass came. Gopalda is an expert shopkeeper. He was running this tea stall for almost last twenty years.
He knew every person of the locality like his own palm. A glass of tea will always be ready for Bishwanath whomever he sits with.
It was nine thirty. It was the Saturday morning. There was not so much crowd at the tea stall. Someone was reading the newspaper attentively. In between he was commenting inside. Four boys comparatively young sitting on the front table were chatting. Standing
outside a rickshaw puller was drinking tea. There is hide and seek game between the sun and the cloud in the sky today. There was an odd heat; one could feel burning sensation on the body.

Sipping on the cup of tea Bishwanath told in a suppressed voice, “Babua, why did you hide the news from me?”

“Which news?”

“I heard that you people are selling your house.”

“No way. Who told you?”

“Dear, why are you concealing? It seems that your aunts have already talked with the elder brother of your father. And all of you decided to give the house to the promoter…?”

“Who is telling you these fibs, eh? The house is situated in a narrow lane. Will the promoter have anything remaining after giving shares to five people?”

“Then did I get wrong information!” With a little tensed face Bishwanath said, “Paltu was spreading the news that a flat will come up there.”

Paltu is the son of Ritam’s uncle. He is a very clever and mischievous boy. He must have been cracking jokes with Bishuda. Bishuda is a broker who deals with land and houses. He is a needy person. Naturally such a person skips with joy hearing such news.

Smiling Ritam said, “Forget Paltu’s words. We don’t have such plan at all.”

Bishwanath did not listen to it. He asked, “How much cottah is your land?”

“Around five cottahs?”

“Forget about the promoters. I have a party in my hand. They will pay twenty lacs. Outright purchase. You talk to your kaku and jethu, I will bring them one day to show the house.”

“Oh my God, Paltu has tickled him a lot. Ritam told him quickly, “Believe me. No one of us is thinking to sell it. I must have known then.”

“Perhaps they have talked to your mother.”

“Won’t she have told in such case? You listen to me, there will be no selling.”

Yet there was enough doubt in Bishwanath’s eyes. With a glum face he said, “I am a poor man and you have even objection if I earn some money?”

“No, Bishuda, you will not understand.” With a soft tone Ritam asked, “How much will
be your percent?”
“Two percent of the fixed rate.”
“How much of it will you give to me?”
Bishwanath got interested. His eyes became bright. “Will you take? Tell me how much you want? Eighty twenty?”
The depression which clouded Ritam some time before passed away. Making fun he said,
“Then a lion’s portion will out of your reach.”
“In fact such cheatings are common to me.” Bishwanath lowered his unusual tone, “I helped in selling the Madhuri Cinema hall. A person from Ghusuri bought it. I was supposed to get eighty thousand. But I did not a single penny. They showed so many excuses- you did not arrange sitting with the party, Ratan has taken the money! In fact rattan got the information through me.”
“You hold Ratan tight for the money.”
“That rascal has deceived. He said that the party asked to see for interested people. An out and out lie. What can I do? There is no victory of the truth.” Saying this he picked up a cigarette from Ritam’s packet kept on the table. Puffing he made his eyes small, “So you mean to say that you people have not talked to the promoter so far? Is the promoter is not talking it?”
“No. No such question arises.”
“Then should I bring the party once? If you ask I can start bargaining from a high amount. Twenty five…”
“How annoying! You are inconvincible. Okay I promise that even after one hundred years if we sell I will inform you first. Is it okay?”
Bishwanath had a mouthful smile. “You are like my brother. Please don’t make me fool. I know you will not do like that. I am seeing you from when you were a child. You have a good heart….Can you give me five rupees? The ration shop will not give me change for hundred rupees. I have to get sugar.”
What a strange life! All his hair turned grey with the hope of making a fat bargain in a fluke and thus spent the whole life by gleaning. He used to dream of eighty thousand but got hardly eight hundred. Dream or zeal to reach the unattainable? khuror kal? Or food for life?
The moment Bishwanath got the money he disappeared.
Right at the next moment another person was standing nearby. He had moustache and
beard on his face unshaved for a long time, matted hair on his head, thick layers of dirt on
his body and totally torn pant and punjabi. He was Bholapagla of the locality.
Ritam raised his voice, “Gopalda, give the mad his due.”
“Today there is no plain. Shall I give me slice?”
“Okay, give him. My pocket is empty today. Write this on my copy.”

Taking the loaf in his hand Bholapagla was going trudging his leg. He was a boy
from an educated family. Once he used to study in school with Ritam’s cousin. Because
of the failure in love he turned mad. Now he has no feeling except hunger. He roams
around the road. Whenever Ritam steps in the tea stall he surely turns up there. God
knows from where. He does not utter a single word but a silent prayer can be seen in his
eyes. A request for a quarter pound loaf. As soon as he gets it the mad gets immersed in
his own world.

Ritam was looking at Bholapagla as he was leaving. The girl whose love turned
Bhola mad must be leading a happy life after marriage. At the end of the day does she
remember Bhola at least for once? Or she has also lost memory being confined in the
family sphere? Like Bhola?

Suddenly Ritam’s eyes were unmoved. A taxi was entering their lane. It stopped in front
of the house of Ritam. Wasn’t she Deya getting down?
Deya was calling repeatedly. Ritam was apprehending that at any moment Deya could
come. Yet Ritam’s body all on a sudden became stiff. The insult of that day was still
sticking on his body like faeces. Ritam was digesting the foul odor all alone. He could not
share with anybody. Even not to Shrabani. He felt that it would demean Deya and not
Soumya.
Ritam did not feel like standing face to face of Deya right at that moment. What should
he do? Should he move aside?
Ritam could not move. The temporary maid servant was shouting, “Dada, somebody has
come for you. *Boudi* asked you to come home.”
Sighing Ritam left for home very slowly. As soon as he came in front of Deya he changed his facial expressions entirely. In a jocular manner he said, “Is it forgetting the way that the princess has stepped in the hut?”
“Shrabani, are you listening? Are you listening to his dialogues?” Deya shouted, “No one can get this gentleman even after repeated phone calls.”
Shrabani said, “But I informed him that you had called up.”
Atasi said, “I also have told. Ask him.”
“What happened to you? What royal work are you busy with that you don’t get time even to make a phone call?”
“*Devi*, control your anger. Don’t burn this devotee to ashes.” Ritam was giggling.
“Madam, there is work for me. It may not be a royal work but I also have some work.”
“Understood…Did you see today’s newspaper? That culprit of Shewli is caught.”
Ritam thought of staying away from the topic related to Shewli. But he could not hide his surprise. Tensed he asked, “Is it? When?”
“Day before yesterday. Yesterday I took Shewli to the police station. She identified the man.”
How didn’t such big news draw Ritam’s attention? But he did not read the paper thoroughly.
Ritam asked with excitement, “What happened then? What was Shewli’s reaction?”
“She was very puzzled. She became utter dumb after going to the police station. I was worried if she had collapsed. That’s why I was looking for you more.”
“I see…How is Shewli now?”
“Now she has become much cool. I could not go to office yesterday. The whole day I was making her comfortable….The police said that the gang was old. Shyamchand’s name was registered in the police record though in another name. In fact they change names as one changes dress. Such woman related cases were against him. Like woman trafficking. It seems that last time the police could not catch them. This time the whole gang…The Mumbai police is also informed. The other accomplishers will also not be saved.”
Ritam became very happy. He said, “Grand news. Let’s have coffee in the honor of this news.”
Atasi and Shrabani were listening to attentively. Atasi suddenly spoke out, “Everything is right. But poor Kanan died unnecessarily.”

“Mashima, there is no point in remembering that. Past is past. But I had already told Kanan that I would be beside them. If she informed at least once…In fact I was arranging home for her daughter at that time. If she could bear with a bit more….”

“No. You have done a lot. If you were not there the girl….But dear, don’t keep that girl any more with you…. Now arrange something for that girl.”

Deya did not reply. She was thinking something.

Knitting her brows Atasi looked at Deya. While going inside she said, “Babua, call your barapisi once. That day also Indira was asking about the girl.”

The atmosphere was heavy with the news of Shewli. Even Shrabani was not talking.

Ritam scolded himself inside. Does it suit him to think about Shewli any more? Soumya reminded him of the harsh reality. When he does not have power to take full fledged responsibility it does not suit him to show sympathy obtrusively.

The cloud left Deya’s face. With a smiling face she said, “Leave it. Listen to the important thing. Day after tomorrow come to my place in the evening.”

Both Ritam and Shrabani were looking at each other. Ritam asked indistinctly, “Why? Are you celebrating the arrest of Shyamchand?”

Deya simpered, “No. The arrest of Soumya Singharoy.”

“Yes. I remember. That’s your marriage day!”

“Yes. You should have remembered. You presented a bouquet of magnum size…! Listen. Shrabani and you have to come a bit early. You have to help me in work.”

Deya had an authoritarian voice. For a while Ritam thought that did Deya ever remember the marriage day of Ritam and Shrabani. But it is unjust to expect so. What is the relation between him and Soumya’s wife?

Before Ritam could open his mouth, Shrabani started giving excuse. “I feel like going but problem is with Tuski. In a crowded place the baby starts crying.”

“Hey, hey, no excuse. Last year you did not come as you were expecting Tuski. This time I will listen to no excuse.”

“Really. The girl will create lot of problem.”

“Keep her with mashima. When you go to college who handles her, eh?”
Ritam became very excited. “Yes, yes, why will she not go? She will go certainly. Tell me which saree are you going to wear on that day? Navy blue South Indian?”

Shrabani was little embarrassed. “Okay. I will see then.”

“No. Take the decision before. Otherwise just before going out you will say, ‘I don’t like that or this one is not ironed or I am not getting matching blouse…You should not prattle then. We will start at sharp six. Hey Deya, is it fine if we start at six?”

“Excellent. We will chat to the full. Even Debashish and Piali said that they would come early.”

“Have you ordered biryani for the menu this time also? While saying all these Ritam noticed that Shrabani was looking at him in a strange way. Ritam lighted a cigarette quickly. It seemed as if the tobacco stick between the fingers could make artificial happiness natural. Making gestures he said, ‘Keep arrangement of those things. I want Shrabani to taste a bit on that happy occasion.”

Atasi brought coffee. With that home made alur chop.

While sipping on the cup Deya was reminded of something. Looking around she said, “I am here for long but could not see the little baby.”

Opening the big bag Deya took out a doll and with that chocolate. The doll was quite expensive. Ritam noticed that Shrabani looked gloomy for a while. But it was only for while.

She said, “Why did you bring that?”

“My wish. Where is Puchki?”

“She is sleeping.”

“Now? Ten o’clock in the morning?”

“Oh, didn’t you understand that my daughter was a burglar in her earlier birth?” Ritam laughed loud unnecessarily. “My daughter wakes at night and sleeps in the day time. All her playing and shouting are at night.”

“Did I say in vain that she creates lot of problem?”

The act of praising high for Tuski continued. Deya was listening to them with a pleasant mood. Finishing the coffee and chop she got up. “Let me go today. Evening shift. Going home I have to rush to the office again….Then we are meeting day after tomorrow. Right?”
“Oh sure. Both of us will go.”

Though Deya was about to leave she stopped, “Ritam, come with me up to junction. Help me to get a taxi.”

Ritam felt helpless with the thought of going with Deya alone. But he could not say no to her directly.

As soon as they came out on the lane Deya asked him forcefully, “Hey, tell me clearly why you are not coming?”

Ritam tried to guess whether Soumya had told her something or not. But he could not understand. In the manner of avoiding he said, “I have already told that I was busy with work.”

“Don’t tell a fib. In these ten days I did not have even a glimpse of you…! Certainly something has happened.”

“What will happen?”

“You know that. Somebody perhaps forbade you.”

“Can someone forbid me? Who? Why?” Ritam tried so that the voice remains unshaken.

“That very reason, for which, everyone is forbidding me. Even no less I am listening to- Throw Shewli out…!” With little hesitation Deya said, “I thought perhaps Shrabani or mashina...!”

“Ma comments sometimes but casually but never pokes her nose. And Shrabani? She is not that mean.” Ritam felt little satisfied inside as he said that about Shrabani. He felt as if by that comment he had hit Soumya. Nodding his head said, “believe me I was very busy regarding a job. To make contacts, interview…For the last few days I had to run a lot.”

“Did you get the job?”

“Yes. I could hit it.”

“Great. Good. Then come in the evening today. Look after Shewli.”

“Why are you now worried about Shewli? The problem is almost solved. Now convince her to go to a home. If necessary force her. This will not be nice if she stays in your house for ever. Let her now stand in her own feet.”

“It would have been nice if it were possible.” Deya sighed. “As Shyamchand is arrested the problem has increased more. Now the case will run. She is the main witness. I have to
rush to the court regularly with her….Will the private homes take these responsibilities?”

“Hmm. That’s true.”

“Ritam, now I don’t have anyone except you whom I can depend on. You have to stand by me.”

Ritam’s breathing stopped for while. Then nodding his head said, “I can understand. But I don’t have time. I have to rush a lot in the new job. They will drive me from pillar to post. Half of the day I can’t stay in Kolkata.”

“The rest of the day you will stay, right? You can come then.”

“Dear, I don’t think I can come.”

Deya turned at him quickly, “That means you don’t want to be by my side. Am I wrong?”

“See Deya, don’t be angry. Sometimes one has to walk alone. You have to think that nobody was ever with you and will never be with you. Can you do great deeds depending on others? If somebody comes forward to help that is optional.”

Deya suddenly flared up. “Don’t try to preach. Please don’t. I considered you a bit different from others but by the end found that you are an ordinary man!”

“Have I ever claimed that I am a person of higher quality?”

“Shut up. Aren’t you a writer? Aren’t you? Aren’t you supposed to be sensitive? Aren’t you supposed to shed empathy from the tip of your pen?”

“Listen to me Deya….Try to understand my situation.”

“Leave it. I have understood. Except me all of you have work! Alright. It’s fine. Nobody has to be by my side. I am responsible for this condition of Shewli. I have to do everything for Shewli.”

Deya was going way in a hurry. Ritam’s feet were stuck to the ground. He wanted to shout and say, “Stop Deya, don’t go. Then listen to the truth….”

But he could not utter a single word. Could he ever say the words from his heart to Deya? Lowering his head he stood there for sometime and then came back with numb feet. He came straight and lay down on the bed. He closed his eyes with his palm.

It was sudden touch of Shrabani. “What happened? Are you feeling low?”

Ritam removed his hands from his eyes. “No. Why should I feel low?”

“I can understand everything.”

Ritam had a faded smile. “Shrabani, you can not understand anything.”
“I can. For example I can understand that you will not go to Deya’s home day after
tomorrow.”
Ritam was shaken. His eyes automatically shifted from Shrabani’s.
Shrabani whispered, “I also know that you will never go to Deya’s place. Why are you
feeling hurt? Why will you go there to be insulted?”
Is Shrabani God? Ritam looked at her blankly. Not jealousy but it was another tone
playing in Shrabani’s voice! How could Shrabani sense Ritam’s insult? How could she
put two and two together so easily?
Ritam was looking at Shrabani with deep eyes. She turned wife from lover just within
two and a half years. She was an idol in blood and flesh who had her black traits. Ritam’s
shelter. His sorrow. His happiness.
Is this what marital life is all about?

People started pouring in from evening but Sanghamitra who had the bad
reputation of a late comer since the university days was first to arrive. Without her
husband. He was on an official trip. Trailing behind Sanghamitra, came Chinidi in and
Bachhuda. After a long discussion, spending the whole of Sunday, Chinidi and company
concluded that Gaja-Nimki wouldn’t fit in a wedding anniversary party. So both the kids
were left behind. Tathagata, Kanad and Sukanya emerged together. Three of them had
been to Gariaahaat to buy a gift. If Deya had invited Anasuadi she would have to call
many seniors of the office. Inviting Anasuadi would mean inviting a lot of other seniors
in the office; therefore, Deya had invited only Jayashree from the supplementary section.
She too arrived early with her husband, Pratim from Switzerland.
Others followed quickly. Debashish and Susmita were last to come. Debashish teaches in a college in Nadia. He travels daily taking the Sealdaha main route. It seems the train was obstructed today at Kakinada because of the conflict between a husband and a wife. As a result Debashish got late in returning home. It seems that now a days the trains are being obstructed because of such silly reasons. Last week a train was obstructed at Barakpur because the daily passengers did not get seat to play cards. There was a roar of laughter regarding this. The guests cleared their throats shouting at their hearts’ content. The party was in full swing in Deya’s apartment by eight o’clock.

The sofas and the tables were removed from the drawing hall. They were pushed towards the wall to make it spacious. Mahua came at noon. Deya, Shewli and Mahua had decorated the room very nicely. There were new curtains on the windows, bunches of tuberose in the big vases kept in the corner of the room, flowers on the fridge top and on the crockery case…. There was prattling amongst the guests sitting on the sofa, carpet, divan and stool made of cane in that flower decorated room. Tathagata is a bit restless. Today is his night duty. He has to rush to the office from here. He was frequently looking at his watch. Seeing Deya in front of him he caught her hand quickly, “Deya… dear… I have to leave now.”

“Why will you go now? Eat and then start. I will serve dinner as soon as the cake is cut.”

“You know Asheshda. He will be pretty angry.”

“Nothing will happen. Please sit…. Let the ice cream be delivered. God knows why it is late!”

“Give me whatever is there.” Tathagata ran his fingers through his hair. “No need of ice cream. Later I will make a voucher. Pay that.”

“Okay. Wait.”

Deya rushed to the kitchen. Today she is flying like a bird around the flat. She is wearing a blue Baluchari saree. The battle of Kurukshetra was embroidered finely on the border and the anchal of the saree. Other than the ornaments her uncle also presented this saree. This is Deya’s very favorite saree. Today morning she had gone for a facial to the beauty parlor. There is a different glow on her candle smooth face today. She has
arranged her hair in a decorative bun and wrapped a garland of jasmine around it. There is a bindi on her forehead, her eyes are finely outlined, reddish blush on her cheeks and she had colored lips. This year Soumya has gifted her a pearl set. Sea water sprinkled pearls adorned her ears, neck and fingers. Today Deya looks like a beautiful swan.

Mahua was not in the kitchen. Today Mahua has wilfully taken all the responsibility of serving food. As the dinner did not start yet she was having a gay time. Now Laxmi and Shewli are the guards of the kitchen. Taking care of her saree Deya arranged plate for Tathagata. She told Shewli, “Bring water and come with me.” In the presence of so many people Shewli was little hesitant. Keeping the water filled glass on the table she went to her own place. Giving a side look Tathagata said, “That girl?” Deya nodded her head. “She has a worn a very bright dress, I see!”

It is true that today Shewli has embellished herself with a lot of enthusiasm. She wore a bright salwar kameez in the combination of red and yellow. She had silver colored bindi on her forehead, sparkling clips on hair, hanging earrings on her ears, glass bangles in her hands and a necklace of pearl-shaped beads. She put the lipstick on her lips which Deya bought for her and also the pink nail polish on her nails. Overall it was perhaps a little gaudy.

There is a glass of wine in Santu’s hand. Soumya has arranged for some wine for today’s function. Whisky and vodka. One has to do it. None of the guests are addicted to drinking but all of them drink casually. In fact Santu loves it. And one has to be colorful on the occasion of his sister’s wedding anniversary. Santu was taking the third peg. By waving his hand he called Deya, “Mimi, what are you doing? Cut the cake now.”
The cake was arranged on the table quickly. A heart of chocolate. Two arrows of cream have pierced it. Santu specially ordered that for his sister and brother-in-law.

Soumya was talking to Bachhuda. Mahua and Piali literally dragged him rapidly. They made him stand beside Deya. In spite of her fine decking up Deya appeared to be lusterless beside exquisitely handsome Soumya. But Soumya did not do much. Only an ordinary *Aligadi payjama* and long stripped *Pathan punjabi*. Even the color of the Punjabi was dull. It was of mud color. It seemed as it the color became bright as Soumya had worn it.

Even Debashish had glass in his hand. He spoke up suddenly, “Shouldn’t we wait for some time more for Ritam. You could have cut the cake once they turn up.”

Sanghamitra said, “Forget that crazy. He must be busy in attending literary association.”

Deya’s mind became overcast with cloud of gloominess. Will Ritam not come at all because of his anger? No, he will come definitely. Ritam can never be angry with Deya.

Mahua handed a long knife to Soumya. Sukanya placed Deya’s hand over Soumya’s. “Now, both of you together cut the heart into pieces.”

As soon as the cake was cut everybody was beaming with mirth. Soumya fed Deya a piece of the cake. Deya also fed Soumya with a piece of the broken heart. The jingling sound came from the glasses, “Cheers.”

There was shower of laughter and fun. There was no end of merry making and humor.

Piali was teasing Soumya, “Hey, tell me what was the secret of your cross connection?”

Soumya simpered, “What would you do on knowing that?”

“I am the one who need it most. I am getting old yet could not arrange a husband. If you tell me the technique I will sit with the phone on my lap.”

Pratim cracked a joke. “Madam it is the Almighty who sets the entire cross connections. When it is destined it hits.”

Sukanya turned her eyes, “Not at all. Ours is entirely direct. We saw each other at *Chhadnata* as the barber went on calling names.”

“Then don’t say that it is direct. Say, cross connection through *baba* and *ma*.”

Kanad became inquisitive. In a tone of investigating he said, “Deya, open up the story how your cross connection was done and when?”

Deya laughed, “Then I was in B.A second year…”
“From where did you call and to whom?”
“I called from home itself. To Chinidi.”
Chini had vodka in her hand. She spoke out, “Yes. She is right. I was saying something useful. In between there was a harsh tone who was constantly saying hallo hallo!”
Did you know that it was Soumya?
“Oh, how will I know then? As I got angry I put down the phone.”
“But Deya did not put down the phone. Did she?”
Soumya interrupted, “If she had put down could you people come to this place today?”
Bacchu gulped wine with much sound, “Right. Right. Intelligent reply.”
Kanad is a man from newspaper house. He is not the person to be repressed so easily. With small eyes he asked, “What did you converse actually on the first day?”
Tathagata was leaving. His face showed that he did not wish at all to leave such an interesting get-together. Waving his hand to all from the door he said, “Deya, be careful. Don’t tell anything to Kanad. Whatever he comes to know tells that man with the face of tobacco pipe.”
After seeing off Tathagata, Deya came back. “That day we did not talk much. We talked just like that. That day he only took my number.”
Debashish and Susmita got married just in this Falguna. Susmita got very interested, “Oh my God! I did not know that. Cross connection love? When did you meet?”
“After a long time. Then I had already completed my part one. I was already tired of phone friendship. One day I asked straightforwardly to meet me.”
Sukanya danced her eye balls, “Why? Did you feel that Soumya could be blind or lame?”
“It could be. Doubt may arise. He calls up over phone and does not want to meet…”
“So once you saw him you melted seeing his glamorous look, didn’t you?”
“Not only beauty. I saw his quality too….Soumya, should I tell? Should I?”
“Tell.”
“Do you know that on the first meeting he ordered two fish fries for both? And while paying he took out money from his pocket only for one.”
“Wouldn’t it have become a bad investment if the relationship had not materialized?”
There was a roar of laughter in the room. Hah hah...hih hih...huh huh.
Taking the cake Mahua went to the kitchen. She shouted from there, “Mimi, shall I serve the dinner now? Ice cream is also ready.”

Santu shouted, “Why now? Let the glass be finished.”

“Then you will say that let the bottle be finished!” Chini raised her voice, “No Mahua. Serve it. Your Bhachhu da can not drive after that.”

Mahua became busy. Arranging the food on the plates she was making them hot in the microwave. And she was sending them one by one through Shewli. Those who did not have glasses in their hands started eating.

Shewli was repeatedly coming and going. Till now she was almost behind the eyes of the people. In the midst of wit and laughter nobody noticed her much. But now seeing her many of them became restless.

In fact Chini spoke out, “The girl has settled herself here quite tightly, I see.”

Deya was drinking cold drinks. Making a sad face she said, “Tell me what I can do. I can’t leave the girl in such a helpless situation.”

Santu was looking unhappy. He said suddenly, “What an ugly outfit she is wearing, eh! I have not seen the girl before. This is the first time. Just seeing her one can understand that she is from that class.”

Deya was going to protest but before that Sukanya commented, “She can’t be blamed. For a quite some time she was with the sex workers. The influence of that is very obvious.”

“I have heard that she was there not more than ten to twelve days? And only with that….?”

“Dada, ten to twelve days is a long time. The desire of exposing oneself is an inner disease. Naturally the sex workers have it highly in them. It is obvious that the girl will bring something from them. At least she has not brought any disease from the sex workers. Isn’t it enough?”

Jayashree objected, “For quite some time what kind of odd and indecent terms you have been using! What workers are they? Is that a work?”

“It is definitely a work. Earning money in lieu of labour. In fact it is a profession.”

“Sorry dear. I don’t agree.” Sanghamitra poked her nose, “The Bengali equivalent word for profession is britti. If prostitution is called a profession stealing should also be
considered a profession. A very old profession. May be older than prostitution. Then can we call the thieves lift workers? Or theft workers?"

Jayashree said, “Where is the labor? Which labor you are talking about? Some pervert men are using a class of girls…against their wish, against their conscience… Where does the word labor come here?”

“But it is not always against wish.” Bachhu put down the glass on the table with much sound, “I know many stories of such girls who have willfully come to this profession. Do you know how many girls choose this profession as a fancy?”

“No Bachhu da, you are wrong.” Now Deya also became vocal. “No sane and normal girl comes to this profession willfully. Either they are forced or they come to earn their livelihood since they do not have any other choice left.”

“Do you want to say that no girl comes willfully? So many girls are taking advantage using their bodies! What will you call them?”

“Bachhuda, do they come in the normal category? It is irrelevant to discuss whether they can be categorized as worker or not. Suppose people from different classes are stealing using different means. Somebody defalcates money from bank, somebody is stealing the savings of workers, somebody is fattening themselves by taking bribe, and somebody is getting hands on the money of the common people….But do we put them in that class which is termed as thieves in the conventional use of Bengali? Though we call them thieves outwardly we don’t include them in that class. Why don’t we include? Because other than stealing, they have other options of earning their livelihood. In the same way those girls who have other means of surviving and yet have opted for prostitution to meet their own interests can’t be called prostitutes in the true sense. And in most of the cases we don’t call them so. People from both the classes can boldly roam around in the society, can’t they?”

“You will agree at least with this point that those who are forced to enter in this profession can be called sex workers?”

“Hey don’t talk too much.” Kanad became little tipsy only with two pegs. He literally scolded Sukanya, “Why are you talking rubbish? Sex is never a work. It’s an act. An act to perform. Eating can’t be called labor, to shit is not a labor, of course I am not talking about the piles patients….Similarly the act of sex also can’t be called labor.”
“Bilkul sahi baat. Debasheesh was nodding his head. Keeping the plate on his lap, in a manner of delivering lecture in a class he said, “Sex is nothing but an inevitable process of making creation alive. Personal happiness is something extra. If that is not there how will men and women be attracted to each other? ....Try to understand it better. If all the workers of this world sit idle stopping their work, the process of creation will not be disturbed. Provided food, sleep and sex continue smoothly. Just like the animal kingdom. In the case of insects. If they could arrange food sitting enjoying indolence they would not have worked. But the reverse of it is not true. A person may work endlessly but without food and sex creation will be lost. This is the difference between work and act. One is for the need; the other is ruled by nature. So prostitution can never be considered labor.”

“But they are earning their livelihood through it! Getting money!” Sukanya was not a person to relent easily, “And they are also not doing it for enjoyment and satisfaction. Then why will you not call it labor?”

“The answer of your question is hidden in itself. Just now you said that they are not doing it for procreation. Even not for enjoyment or satisfaction. And not for love too. If suddenly they give birth to babies it is against their professional ethics. That means these girls are resisting the law of nature. Or you can say that they are forced to walk against the law of nature. This is an imposed situation. And artificial. The patriarchal society has created it. For their enjoyment. This is an arrangement so that men can go out to seek pleasure crossing the boundary of sexual dictum controlled by the rules of the society. Here women have no role to play. Why will they be considered laborer? They are just used as women and not as laborers.”

Kanad said, “Consider the animal at the zoo. We pay to enter the zoo, getting some kind of pleasure seeing the tiger, lion and so on and so forth and the hunger of those animals is quenched by the money that we pay. Does it mean that to provide pleasure to our eyes is the profession of a tiger? Rather we can say that by keeping that tiger in a cage we are exploiting it for a bigger reason. Why are you people trying to give it a face of social right instead of touching the main point? Why to use bookish term? Sex worker! Younakarmi! If the girl, whom Deya has brought home, could not escape she would have to do sex slavery. Am I not right?”
The light atmosphere of the room was gradually getting tensed. Everyone was eating, picking mutton from biryani, biting fish fry. Only the earlier happy atmosphere was somehow missing. Suddenly Santu became very serious. Lines of irritation appear on Soumy’s face. Till now Soumya did not touch liquor. Suddenly he got up and poured whisky in a glass. Without mixing water he sipped on. The expressions of his face changed. Deya could read Soumya’s face. She could feel that he did not like the discussion at all. Even her brother could not digest them. Perhaps he was not ready to listen to such words from his sister’s friends.

Deya tried to lighten the atmosphere. She told Debashish, “Hey, only would teaching be enough? Eat to your heart’s content. Should I serve you a batter fry? Susmita, please take some more biryani.”

Susmita got frightened, “Oh my God! No way. I am unable to finish what you gave.”

Mahua sat down with her plate. She shouted, “Shewli, get me a glass of water.”

In such a moment again Shewli?

Deya was not at all happy. She was thinking whether she should go herself to bring water. Before that Shewli entered the stage. Since afternoon she has been following Mahua at every step. She is not at all hesitant before Mahua. She asked comfortably, “Boudi, Laxmi mashi is asking whether to serve ice cream now?”

“Give it after some time. I will ask later.”

Deya noticed that Soumya was looking at Shewli with anger.

Piali finished eating. She was licking her fingers. Deya quickly said, “Hey, take the plate of that didi. Throw the left over bones in the bucket.”

Now not only Soumya’s but all the eyes present in the room followed Shewli.

A suffocating silence came down in the dinner party.

Deya was searching words to open her mouth. Suddenly she spoke out, “Can you expect it from Ritam. He did not turn up!”

Why did Deya remember Ritam now? Did her subconscious mind tell her that if Ritam were there the atmosphere would have been much normal?

Sanghamitra was finely separating chicken from bone. She said lightly, “The crazy guy has missed it by mistake.”
Debashish said, “No, he is not the person to forget invitation. If he smells any invitation…Something else must have happened.”

“He might have suddenly flown away from Kolkata with a friend. Do you remember last time how he went to Kokrajhod?”

“Really he acted stupid!” Piali’s eyes were wide open, “he did not even inform mashima. Somebody pricked him about it at the Coffee House and he vanished. Poor mashima was calling every other person over phone…”

“He is no more a Bohemian now. He is married, got a baby….Check whether his baby is ill or not!”

“Deya, why don’t you call him?”

With a glum face Deya said, “Why should I call? If something was wrong he could have informed.”

Soumya got up suddenly and went to bathroom. Coming back he sat at a distance. He poured whisky in the glass again.

Mahua said, “What’s up Soumya? Why are you taking drinks again? Now have food.”

In a rough tone Soumya said, “I will eat. But after some time.”

Deya gulped, “Can’t you understand he is the host today! If he eats first, you people talk at the back of him?”

Debashish said, “Don’t be shy. You have attended us for quite some time…”

Bachhu said, “In fact Soumya is trying to overcome that tiredness. He is killing the body pain.” Saying this he made hint by ogling, “Doesn’t he need to be fit at night?”

Chini’s tongue was out of control just with the impact of little vodka. “If you drink so much everything will be in vain. You have to lie down like a bolster then.”

The wave of laugher was back again in the room. The suffocating atmosphere became vibrant again. Many had finished their eating. They were coming back from the bathroom washing their hands.

Mahua did not have any appetite left after cooking and stirring the food items throughout the day. After finishing only half she rushed to the kitchen. She came back giving the tray of ice cream on Shewli’s hand.”

Bachhu shrunk his nose, “I don’t understand the fashion of ice cream now a days! Don’t you know that rasagolla should be arranged in a feast?”
Chini frowned, “How dare you name *rasagolla*? Have you forgotten that your sugar level is two fifty?”

“Strange, as if ice cream is not sweet.”

“You will not touch even that ice cream. Chini passed her orders, “Mahua give me the ice cream of your Bachhuda’s share. I will eat two”

“This is not fair! Have I suddenly caught blood sugar today? Right after my marriage I caught the *chini rog*.”

Everyone in the room started clapping at Bachhu’s humorous comment. Santu was also laughing loudly. The stiffness of Soumya’s face became loose. Deya was feeling relieved.

That unpleasant topic came back again. But in a different tune.

On not being able to handle the argument properly Sukanya was feeling uneasy for quite some time. Taking the ice cream from the tray she was measuring Shewli minutely.

She said to Kanad, “Have you thought of one thing?”

Kanad came back finishing his day shift. He had monstrous hunger in his stomach. Before finishing his plate he brought two more batter fries. He was chewing them with much sound. With a gaping mouth he said, “What?”

“That the girl has got shelter at Deya’s place is well and good. For this Deya’s boldness and broad mind must be praised. But….” Sukanya paused for a moment. Thinking for a while she said, “If this profession had social acceptance we would not have sneered at this profession. And Deya also did not need to show sympathy to her. And that girl also could earn some money through this work. Of course I agree that the girl was deceived and taken away and she was brutally tortured in Mumbai….In fact the brothels are nothing but hell. The girls become shallow because of the torture of hooligans, rogues, police, pimp and the aunties. If the profession were legalized such torture would have been stopped. The girls would not have lived in a frightened state. Then with open mind they would have determined which customers they would entertain and whom they would not allow at all to enter room.

Kanad winked, “Hey…what are you saying? Are you mad or I am crazy? Am I listening to the right thing? Do you understand the meaning of what you are saying?”

“Certainly I can understand. In fact if today this profession had egal protection Shewli
would not have landed in such a disastrous situation.”
“So you are asking for a legal protection of an evil social practice. He stopped taking ice
cream and was again ready to argue.
Sukanya said, “Evil practice or whatever you say, this profession will remain unchanged
till the patriarchy is there. This is what you said before. To lessen the distress of women
that recognition is necessary.”
“I couldn’t get you.”
“What is there not to understand? Radical demolition of patriarchy is not possible. And if
patriarchy is there this profession will also be there. And if it is true why you people have
problem in giving protection to those girls? They will have some basic rights; their
children will grow up with dignity…."
Sanghamitra liked these words. She said, “It is in fact should be thought about. Perhaps
this will help the girls to overcome their hellish experience to some extent….”
“Don’t be confused with the logic trickled by sentiment. Listening to your words it seems
as if it was a mistake of Ramohan to protest against burning of Sati. Ah, the poor wives
are giving their lives in fire; no one can see their problems…so Your Honor, try to
eradicate their pain to some extent; and please provide them the facility of dying by
consuming poison!”
Kanad supported it. “Very true. Instead of abolishing the system you people are trying to
make it permanent.”

Sukanya became angry. “Who will abolish? You? Is it so easy? And if you shout
will patriarchy be over? Didn’t this Jayashree, who is chattering so much, bend her head
in front of male domination? In fact she has the power to stand on her own feet! Could
she show the minimum courage to protest? Rather, she is like a cat that loves fish but is
loath to wet its feet. In fact we are talking about this much arrangement.”
Pratim’s face became red. Enraged he said, “You are wrong. Jayashree has chosen that
path only not to disturb peace. If she had behaved arrogantly who would stop her? My
parents? Never. For some days they might have become furious but after that they would
have calmed down. Otherwise I would have to stay separately with my wife. What could
it be more than that? It is only because Jayashree basically has a compromising nature…”
Being hurt Jayashree said, “Sukanya, don’t show bad example. There is heaven and hell difference between lessening one’s ego for the sake of family and to choose the dirtiest path for a handful of rice. Have you ever felt the pain of those women?”

“Don’t prattle.” Still Sukanya was growling, “Don’t try to judge their pain with your middle class mentality. Before joining Nabaprabhat I was with an N.G.O. I did a statistical survey of some brothels. I have seen with my own eyes. They not at all consider themselves unhappy in the way we think about them. Don’t they have laughter, crying, happiness, and sorrow in them like a normal family! They are running their families, they have children, they have husbands and have lovers as well…to them it is a mere work. Like ten to five office.”

“Again you are wrong. The very thing which a girl of a brothel has to perform is not a work but an act. A woman whether she has hunger or not has to eat continuously from ten to five with a bitter mouth. Is it a job? And you are also blind who saw them happy. You could not understand the basic nature of human being. A person, in however abominable state he or she is in, tries to find the taste of freedom in that. Do you want to put the level of happiness on that? Shame on you! Have you not seen a plant? A plant kept in a room? Have you ever noticed how they try to expand their branches towards the window? This is not happiness but abhijojan. Adaptation. They try to stock food through adaptation. Those, who can’t, die, they are ruined. Probably that Shewli also had to face the same thing.”

“Yes, dear. Very true.” Though Deya did not intent but opened her mouth, “Till now the girl is in panic! She groans in pain even in sleep!”

Sukanya did not even listen to it. With a serious tone Debashish said, “That means you don’t want any specific solution. Am I right? You want no improvement of condition for those girls. You want them to be oppressed in the same way.”

Debashish laughed out, “In fact you told that it is not possible for one to change. That means collective voice is required. Unfortunately you can’t get Rammohan or Vidyasagar. So women should demand it for themselves. Let them uproot this system. The custom should force the nation to demolish it. Mind it, I am calling it custom but not profession.”

“Strange, you yourself told that it can’t be demolished. It is a primitive profession?”
“Yes, old. But it is not older than the history of men. There were many evil practices in the society. But should they be continued just because they are continuing? Thousands of years ago there was the custom of slavery. Is it still there? Even the custom of devdasi is also stopped.”

“Dear, there is no use of tall talk. When the stomach burns girls are forced to plunge to this line. Your nation can’t arrange food for them.”

“People also steal because of hunger. They do it because the nation can’t provide. Then let stealing also be legally sanctioned.”

“Imagine what a terrible matter it will be! Stealing legally sanctioned! Prostitution legally sanctioned! In fact totally a Raam Raajya! No, Kaam Raajya.” Kanad was giggling.

“Then eighty percent duty of the police department will be lessened! Nameplate will hang from the door of any house, Mr. so and so Robber like the way the name of a doctor or engineer is written. Boasting any proud father will say, ‘my daughter has joined the career of prostitution’. New subjects also have to be introduced in the school and colleges. Like a home science. For girls. Really Sukanya your idea is very revolutionary.”

Sukanya became very angry. She could not utter any more logic. After sitting silent for quite some time suddenly Baccu opened his mouth supporting Sukanya, “Why are you teasing her? She is not asking for that kind legalization. She wants some rights to live peacefully for those girls who are in this business or are forced to join it.”

“That means make this matter alive in a comparatively acceptable way so that like other poor countries the flesh trade also runs well for the sex traffickers in this country too, of course with no hazards…”

“Ah, why are you interrupting so much? Let me tell. A solution is very much necessary as the pimps of these girls are beaten black and blue by the police and their children don’t get normal life. Let the nation give them at least some facilities till it can do something big.”

“Dada, what is this nation? Nation is not a solid matter. Nation means I, you, Sukanya, Sanghamitra, Deya, Soumya….Let us do one thing. If we are really well wishers of those girls why will we leave them in the hell? In fact we can take responsibility of their children. If every one of us sponsors one child the children can live with dignity. And if
each affluent family keeps a prostitute in his or her house….Those who have real feelings they can keep them in their houses by getting them married. If you let your son marry one, Kanad marries one, Sukanya arranges one with her brother the present problem will be solved to a great extent. For time being let us start it in this way. You who think about the condition of those girls will also be interested in giving them a place of dignity. Am I wrong? Of course if you people are not hypocrites. In fact Deya has shown such a gesture. You people also do something. What madam Sukanya, how will it be to think along these lines?

Sukanya got up quickly. She was going towards the door quickly, “My opinion will not match with yours. I am going.”

Deya ran following her, “Hey Sukanya, stop. Chini and others are trying to pull you down.”

Sukanya did not look back. She was quickly getting down the staircase.

Coming back Deya said, “Psh, is there any point? Why all of you were pulling her leg?”

Kanad shrugged, “She herself raised the topic. She is a very headstrong lady. It was right to give her a shake.”

Debashish told Deya, “Do you know what the problem was? One section of women is dancing as puppets in the hands of men like fools. They think that it is progressiveness! They just can’t shout saying that the men who go to the brothels should be shot dead.”

“It’s enough. Stop” Deya gave a side look at Soumya. Soumya’s eyes were at the ceiling fan. It seemed as if so much of arguments did not touch him at all. Very doubtful! To get rid of the nervousness Deya said to Mahua, “Hey, did you ask Laxmidi to take her food?”

“Long back.” Mahua was looking at the watch. She pushed Santu, “It’s already ten. We should get up now.”

Santu was sitting resting his back on the sofa. Closing his eyes he said, “Hmm.”

Though he said like that he did not get up. He was sitting unmoved. All were leaving one by one. Bachhu was tired of sitting. Standing he stretched his body with ease. With a contented face he said, “Mimi, today’s evening was very nice. Drink, food, chatting, everything was first-class. Your professor friend is outstanding. He talks about interesting things.”

With a smiling face Chini said, “Mimi, when do you have that lecture, I forgot?”
“On 15th August. Next Friday.”
“So you must have got all the points for your lecture.”
“But mine is different topic. The position of women in the society.”
“Whatever. From this discussion you can say something in an organized way.”

Chinidi is very simple as a human being. Deya smiled at her simple advice. She went up to the door to see her brother-in-law off. From upstairs she heard Chinidi scolding Bachhuda on the steps, “Get down carefully. Why are you staggering?”

Mahua was arranging her bag. She said, “Mimi, there is so much of excess food.”
“Have you taken much for ma and baba?”
“Still so much is left. It will be tough for you and Soumya to finish.”
“I can’t eat any more. The appetite is ruined by the food smell of food. Hey dada, have you eaten properly? Was the food fine?”

Closing his eyes Santu said, “Hmm.”
“Are you drunk? Why are you not opening your eyes?”
“I am thinking. How impudent your friends are!”
Soumya suddenly commented, “See how you have added to your knowledge. You came to know about the pros and cons of prostitution!”
“Really, what a vulgar topic! It’s shameful.”
Mahua said, “Ah, there is no harm when this vulgar thing continues…! Get up please. God knows what Futku has been doing so long!”

It seemed that Santu had something more to tell Deya. He did not say, perhaps looking at the serious face of Soumya.

After the departure of Santu and Mahua, Deya came and sat by Soumya. She put her hand on Soumya’s back. Softly she asked, “You never drink so much? Today suddenly…?”

With lack-luster eyes Soumya looked at her once. But he did not reply. He removed Deya’s hand from his back gently.
“Come. Have something.”
Soumya was silent. He was not moving.
“What happened? Get up.”
“Don’t irritate me. I am not feeling well.”
“You felt very bored. Didn’t you?”
“But you wanted that.”
“They started talking about such a topic…”
“You have kept a prostitute in your house. Do you expect talks about religion and divinity in stead of those discussions?”
“Shame on you Soumya! Mind your language.”
“Are you teaching me language? In which language people were talking so far?” Soumya suddenly burst out. He stood up quickly, “Hey Shewli, come hear. Come quickly.”
Not only Shewli but Laxmi was also standing near.
Soumya roared, “What do you think? Is it a brothel? How dare you to hang around my house being dressed up like that?”
Deya also raised her voice, “Soumya, behave yourself. I have asked her to dress up like that. I have bought her that dress.”
“Great! Perfect match. What else? Now make sure about the entry of the customers.”
“You are behaving like a drunkard so late at night, I see?”
“I am not drunk. It’s you and you. With the obsession of showing greatness you have lost all your senses. How can your flag of nobleness fly until you dress her up like a prostitute in front of all?”
“Shame on you! You are so mean?”
“What have you seen of meanness? I am telling you clearly that I will not tolerate a prostitute in my house. Enough is enough.”
“Soumya, you are being too much!”
“Too much? What do you mean by too much? Without my permission you brought a whore to my house. Isn’t it too much? Coming to my flat your dear friends have rejoiced discussing her topic the whole day. Isn’t this too much?” Soumya was gnashing.
“Coward! Just ran away tucking the tail between his legs with little scolding. Hah!”
Deya was shocked, “You…! To Ritam…! What did you say to Ritam?”
“That what one gentle man can say in a civilized language to a brute. I will not tolerate anyone behaving scandalously with that dirty girl in my flat. Understand?”
“Why are you again and again uttering bad girl, dirty girl? You know that Shewli is not a bad girl!”
“Isn’t she? Go and ask your parents. Ask the neighbors. Everyone is saying the same
thing. I just can’t listen to them. Listen Deya, I am giving you last warning. You have to drive that girl out of this house.”

Deya flared up in anger. Hitting the ground with her feet she said, “If I don’t throw her out? What will you do? What?”

Laxmi rushed. She pressed Deya’s lips, “Mimi, please be quiet. It is not good to talk to the husband in this way.”

“Why should I be silent? Does he feed me or provide me clothes?”

“Have you become arrogant as you earn, eh? If you obey my words you can stay here or I will turn you out by the neck. Soumya Singharoy has not bothered for any one in his life. And he will never do that. Understood?”

Soumya entered the room kicking a glass lying on the carpet forcibly. Immediately it broke into pieces. Shewli was standing there like a stone. A piece hit the ground in front of her feet but she didn’t even notice.

Sitting on her heels Laxmi was cleaning the pieces and crying loudly. “God, why did it happen? What a fire caught this home! Oh God…you wretched girl…What disaster you have brought down…!”

Entering the small room Deya closed the door with big bang. She was fuming with anger. With a sudden pull she took out the garland from her bun and tore it into pieces. She threw the pearl ornaments. What an intense insult! Her bosom was burning. Was it due for her from that person whom she thought dearest in this world? Why should she obey Soumya’s words? Why will she drive Shewli out? She did nothing wrong. And by bringing Shewli Deya also did nothing wrong. How did Soumya dare? How could he say that he would drive her out holding her neck? Ah, why Ritam is like that! If he had told Deya once she would not have arranged this party to show people!

The insult was sucking all the energy from her body quickly. Deya was getting tired. She felt like crying but no tears in her eyes.

There are torn clouds in the sky of Shravana. Day after tomorrow is the full moon day. The moon looked like a broken brim. The moon was getting lost again and again behind the clouds. At the late there raised a breeze but disorderly. It stopped also beyond
anyone’s notice. The moon traveled alone in the whole sky crossing the obstacle of the clouds. In vain.
At dawn she was feeling drowsy. In a half asleep and half awakened state Deya heard an indistinct call, “Mimi…? Mimi…?”
Deya got up in hurry. It was morning. The room was flooded with light. Rubbing her eyes Deya opened the door.
Laxmi had a mouthful smile, “The nuisance has left.”
Nothing entered in the numb brain of Deya. Indistinctly she said, “Who?”
“Shewli. Shewli. Getting from sleep I could not find her. She ran away.”

Deya was climbing the steps with tired feet. Beleghata police station, Jadavpur police station, Lalbazar, hospital….She even went to the slum area of Beleghata thinking that in case Shewli had gone there. Like a possessed person she visited the Shialdaha station too.
Who can say whether Shewli thought of going to her mashis house or not?
But her mind was said that Shewli would not go to these places.
Where will Deya find Shewli?
If girls like Shewli wish to be missing can they be ever traced?
Standing at the doorstep of the flat Deya caught her breath. Her tired hands were at the calling bell.
Not Laxmi but Soumya opened the door.
How come Soumya was at home in the evening?
No, this question did not arise in Deya’s mind at all. Her sense of wonder was lost.
Soumya looked at Deya for some time with his mouth wide open.
He screamed with agony and anxiety, “What happened to you? Where were you the
whole day? I could not go to office. I was worried for you every moment. I stood still at the junction of the road for long….I called at Gopalanagar but you were not there. You did not even go to office…?

Was Soumya asking questions or reciting a list? Without uttering a single word Deya walked past Soumya. Sitting on the sofa she wiped her neck and throat. In a low tone she called, “Laxmidi, please give me some water.”

Opening the fridge Laxmi quickly took out the bottle of cold water. Filling the glass she came in a hurry, “Ah, you look so pale. Where were you roaming around? Did you eat something? Or have you taken only air?”

Deya finished the glass as if she would not listen to anything. Was the heat inside extinguished? Deya could not understand. It seemed as if her physical senses also became blunt.

Soumya was restless. Extending his arm he took the handset, “One second. Let me inform your home first.”

Lifting her hand Deya forbade. In a cool tone she said, “Call later.”

“Why? Why later?” Soumya was still worried. “Your parents must be tensed. They may come running any moment.”

“First come with me to that room.” Deya’s tone was cooler. “I have something to discuss with you.”

As if under the cast of a spell Soumya followed Deya to the bed room.

Deya closed the door. Facing Soumya in a heavy tone she said, “Don’t you know where I was wandering?”

Soumya removed his glance from her. With hesitation he said, “Yes, I mean…no, I mean….Did you get any news of Shewli?”

Deya did not reply. She sighed, “Soumya, I am not going to stay with you any more.”

The sudden blow of the words made Soumya speechless for a while. Then he murmured, “Deya, what are you saying?”

“Did I say anything cryptic?”

Soumya shrugged, “Deya, I am sorry. Extremely sorry. I was not in my senses. Whatever I said it was in a moment of anger….! Deya, why did you have to be so serious about whatever I blurted out in anger?”
“Soumya, what exactly should be considered not serious?” It seemed as if Deya had undergone a transformation within a single day. In a soft tone she said, “Your wish of not keeping Shewli here?”

“Deya, please try to understand. Nobody will like such a girl to stay in one’s house. It’s just not possible.”

“Still that blind mentality! Still that obstinacy!”
In a rough tone Deya said, “Leave others. Talk about yourself. Did I do anything wrong?”
Soumya was silent.

“If I bring Shewli back you will not have any objection, will you?”
Soumya looked with surprise, “Have you…?”

“Suppose I have found her. Suppose I bring her back!”
Soumya felt helpless. He passed around restlessly. Suddenly turning around he clutched Deya’s shoulder, “Why are you behaving arrogantly? For some girl…third party…a nonentity…for her will you strain our relation?”

“Strange. Don’t I have to see on which ground the relationship is standing?” Deya removed Soumya’s hand from her shoulder, “You are right. Shewli is no one. Shewli does not really matter. My question is whether whatever I think to be right will be accepted in the household or not. What is the point in saving the relationship when you don’t have respect for my opinion?”

“Deya, remember that you are going too far for a trivial matter.”

“To you the matter is trivial but not for me.”

With a glum face Soumya said, “Don’t my likes and dislikes have any importance?”

“What that you dislike happens in the household? It runs depending on every little like, dislike and preference of yours…. I have adjusted myself with your past, future and everything. But Soumya the place of one’s values has to be kept aside. Our values do not match, if our sense of just and unjust is different….For example, my friend came to my house with my invitation. But you insulted him and drove him out in my absence and you did not even feel the need to inform me about that….Can you imagine what kind of insult this is?”

Keeping quiet for a while he said, “Okay. Okay. Sorry. I will ask for apologize to Ritam.”

“Do you think that can belie the insult? Or wipe out the cause of it? In fact Ritam is just a
dummy. You couldn’t respect my values which is why you have done this thing. Asking for forgiveness is meaningless here.

“Deya…Come on.”

“No, no, I won’t stay with you.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Soumya became restless, “What is more important to you? The issue of Shewli? Or our love?”

“See, you still placed our love and Shewli’s issue in two different weighing scales! You want love to be unconditional. Or to be according to your conditions. Listen Soumya, love is not unconquerable, imperishable or eternal. Love also decays; silt also gets accumulated on it. And what is left at that time is adjustment. Compromise. To learn to depend on each other. And that adjustment again gives birth to a different type of love gradually.”

Deya spoke with pauses in between. It seemed as if she wasn’t trying to convince Soumya but herself. It was as if at that moment she did not have any anger, hatred or sense of insult in her but was trying to dig herself. And Soumya was nothing but a mirror. Soumya was feeling uneasy seeing Deya at that moment. And the uneasiness was increasing to a great extent as he could not burst into anger.

With a pale face he said, “I can understand that you have been very offended. Go and stay at Gopalnagar for some time.”

“Will you decide where I will go or not?” Deya’s face suddenly changed with sarcasm, “Why are you so sure that I will go?”

“What do you mean?”

“The meaning is very easy. You can go away. It shouldn’t always be the girls who have to leave their houses. You have not built up this household alone. This house is as much mine as yours. Here I can again bring another Shewli. If you can’t adjust you…..”

“Enough. Stop. Shut up.” Soumya moved away from her quickly. His fair complexioned face turned blood-red. His nostrils flared. There was fire in his voice. “What do you think of yourself, eh? You are crossing your limits! I want to see how bold you are! I have to leave the house? Me? How dare you?”

Deya was not scared at all. With calm footsteps she came to the balcony. Behind her a man was roaring. He was tearing himself in shreds by his nails and teeth. There was a
shadowy lake nearby, the crowded road was smeared with halogen light, a noisy world. It seemed as if the false vaunting of an egoist man overflowed all the shadow, light and sounds.
Deya felt like crying. She also felt like laughing.
Agrahayan - The eighth month of the Bengali calendar

Anchal - It refers to the flapping free end of the saree which is usually draped over the shoulder. Anchal is usually more densely ornamented than the field in matching or contrasting color.

Asanas –Aasana is a Sanskrit word which means a body position, typically associated with the practice of Yoga, intended primarily to restore and maintain a practitioner's well-being, improve the body's flexibility and vitality, and promote the ability to remain in seated meditation for extended periods.

Alur dam - This is a very delicious spicy main dish of Bengalis. It is popular throughout North India. It is usually cooked under pressure so the potatoes get soaked in the gravy.

Alur chop - Boiled potatoes cooked with ginger and onions, made into roundels, dipped in gram flour batter and deep fried.

Baba – One’s father.

Baluchari saree -. These traditional sarees are the creation of the East Indian artisans who give much effort to create this. The name, Baluchari is the derivative of the name of a small village called Baluchara, located in Murshidabad. Baluchari sarees possess a silk base with silk brocaded designs. These sarees are defined by the pictorial details that are created with great artistry in the sarees.

Baromashi - Elder sister of one’s mother.
Baropisi - Elder sister of one’s father.

Beguni - Beguni is a Bengal snack made of eggplant or brinjal slices deep fried in batter.

Bidi - an inexpensive cigarette locally produced usually from cut tobacco rolled in leaf.

Bindi- A bindi (from Sanskrit bindu, meaning "a drop, small particle, dot") is a forehead decoration worn in South Asia.

Biryani – This is a delicious dish made with scented rice, spices, meat, fish, eggs or vegetables. The name is derived from the Persian word beryā(n) which means "fried" or "roasted". Biryani was brought to the Indian subcontinent by Muslim travelers and merchants

Bodhi - Bodhi is a Sanskrit word which is traditionally translated into English as enlightenment, but frequently (and more accurately) translated as "awakening" or "to know". The word "buddha" means "one who has awakened.

boudi - the wife of one’s elder brother

Bhringi – a great devotee of Lord Shiva and one of the two chief attendants of lord Shiva while the other one is called Nandi.

Champak - a kind of flower and its tree belongs to the magnolia family

Chhadnatala: a canopied is a place bounded by banana plants and is decorated with alpana or designs under where Bengali marriage rituals are performed.

Chutney- Chutney is a loan word incorporated into English from Hindi. This is a term for a class of spicy preparations used as an accompaniment for a main dish. Chutneys usually
contain an idiosyncratic but complementary spice and vegetable mix. Bengali chutneys are usually sweet.

*Cottah – Cottah* (also spells *katha*) is an unit of area which is approximately 720 sq. ft

*Daal –* This is a preparation of pulses (dried beans, lentils etc.) which have been stripped of their outer hulls and split. It can be taken both with rice and *roti*.

*Dada –* One’s elder brother.

*Devdasi -* *Devadasi* was originally described a Hindu religious practice in which girls were "married" and dedicated to a deity (*deva* or *devi*). In addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, they learned and practiced dance and other classical Indian arts traditions and allegedly enjoyed a high social status. As the time passed, system changed and they were used for sex obligation for high caste and class people.

*Dupatta -* This is a multi-purpose scarf that is essential to many South Asian women's suits. The alternative names of *dupatta* include *orni, chunri, chunni* and *orna.* *Dupatta* has long been a symbol of modesty in South Asian outfits. It is used a chest covering cloth which can be included in *salwar kameez, kurta* or *ghaagra choli.*

*Falguna -* The eleventh month of the Bengali calendar.

*Fish-chop -* a popular Bengali snack where fish along with potato and other spices made into balls and deep fried in oil.

*Gharana -* Hindustani music, a *gharana* refers to a system of social organization linking musicians or dancers by lineage and/or apprenticeship, and by adherence to a particular musical style. A *gharana* also indicates a comprehensive musicological ideology.
*Hilsa* - *Ilish* or hilsa is the national fish of Bangladesh, and is very popular in Bengali and Oriya speaking communities. It lives in the sea for most of its life, but migrates up to 1,200 km inland through rivers in the Indian sub-continent for spawning. It is said that people can cook *hilsa* in more than 50 ways.

*Jaistha* - the second month of Bengali calendar.

*Jamaibabu* - husband of one’s elder sister.

*Jethu* – Father’s elder brother.

*Jhingeposto* - a special Bengali food prepared with the fruit of cucurbitaceous plant and poppy seed.

*Kachagolla* – It is a popular Bengali sweet made from milk.

*Kaku* - Father’s younger brother

*Kalbaishakhi* - storm clouds prevailing in the afternoon of May and June.

*Kam Raajya* - world of sensuality.

*Kamalabhog* – a popular sweet of Bengalis prepared from Indian cottage cheese and few drops of orange food color is added to it.

*Keertana* - To sing songs and about Radha and Lord Krishna It is a major practice of the Vaishnavites.

*Khichdi* – hotchpotch.

*Kurta* - It is a loose shirt falling either just above or somewhere below the knees of the wearer, and is worn by both men and women. This is popular in many parts of South Asia.
**Laddu** - It is made out of flour and with variety of other ingredients formed into balls. The laddu can be made from gram flour, semolina, wheat flakes, and many other flours.

**Langda aam** – A very sweet variety of mango.

**Luchi** - Thin cake of flour fried in boiling ghee

**Lungi** - The lungi, is a garment worn around the waist which is very popular in India and many parts of South Asia. Lungis are sewn into a tube shape like a skirt. It is particularly popular in regions where the heat and humidity create an unpleasant climate for trousers

**Maa**- One’s mother.

**Machher kaaliaa** – This is a favorite Bengali fish preparation with grated onion and ginger and other spices.

**Mahalaya** - Mahalaya is an auspicious occasion observed seven days before the Durga Puja, and heralds the advent of Durga, the goddess of supreme power. It's a kind of invocation or invitation to the mother goddess to descend on earth.

**Mama** – Maternal uncle.

**Memsahib** - Used formerly in colonial India as a form of respectful address for a European woman.

**Meshomoshai** – Husband of the sister of one’s mother.

**Naradmuni** - The name of a divine devotee of Lord Vishnu who instigated the gods to raise pretty disputes against each other
**Pakoda** - A type of fritter dipped in a spicy chickpea batter; can be made with vegetables, cheese, chicken or seafood.

**Papad** - *Papad* is thin, spicy, crisp wafer discs, about 4 to 8 inches in diameter, made from *daal*, flour lentils, vegetables, potatoes, shrimp, and rice. The discs are deep-fried or dry roasted on an open flame and served as a crispy savory appetizer.

**Parota** - A kind of thin bread fried in oil or clarified butter

**Payesh** - a kind of sweet dish prepared by boiling rice in milk with sugar and other ingredients.

**Payjama** - The word which originally comes from the word pāē jāmah, literally meaning ‘leg garment’. These are loose-fitting trousers worn in the Far East by men and women. This is worn in many cuts and shapes, much variation being seen in respect of girth, length, tightness, material, etc.

**Pisemoshai** – Husband of the sister of one’s father.

**Puishak** - An Indian spinach.

**Puja** – It indicates Durga Puja, an important festival of Bengalees celebrated in the month of *Ashwin*, the sixth month of the Bengali calendar that is in the month of September or October.

**Punjabi**- long white tunic-like shirts with loose sleeves worn over close-fitting or baggy white pants, which are usually called *payjama*.

**Raam Raajya** - welfare state.

Rabindrasangeet – it refers to music written and composed by Rabindranath Tagore.
Ramgarur - A sour-faced person.

Rasagolla- This popular Bengali sweet is made from balls of chhana (an Indian cottage cheese) and semolina dough, cooked in sugar syrup.

Rathyatra - a sacred Hindu festival when Lord Jagannath travels by chariot.

Rohu – It is a fish of the carp family Cyprinidae, found commonly in rivers and freshwater lakes in and around South Asia and South-East Asia. It is treated as a delicacy in many Indian states like Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Roti - Wheat-based flat bread. Integral part of Indian cuisine.

Sahib - Used formerly as a form of respectful address for a European man in colonial India.

Salwar kameez – This is the traditional dress worn by both women and men in South and Central part of Asia. Salwar or shalwar are loose pajama-like trousers. The legs are wide at the top, and narrow at the ankle. The kameez is a long shirt or tunic.

Sandesh – It is a very popular sweet in Bengal which is prepared with milk and sugar. Some recipes of Sandesh call for the use of chhana (curdled milk) or paneer instead of milk.

Saree – This is a female garment in the Indian Subcontinent. A saree is a strip of unstitched cloth, ranging from four to nine meters in length that is draped over the body in various styles. The most common style is for the sari to be wrapped around the waist, with one end then draped over the shoulder baring the midriff.

Sarod - The sarod is a stringed musical instrument, used mainly in Indian classical music.
Sati - A Hindu custom prevalent in the nineteenth century where the sati, the wife of the expired husband was forced to sit on the pyre of death along with her husband.

Sejomashi - the third sister of one’s mother.

Shalik – A kind of small yellow-beaked singing black bird of Bengal.

Shravana - The fourth month in the Bengali calendar.

Tangra - a species of small scale less river fish.

Thakuma – The mother of one’s father.

Yama - The god of death.

Yudhishtira - The eldest of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic.