me. And when I come back to my apartment, I close my eyes before the last bend of the stairs that lead to my door. I hold my breath and imagine a boy in a red Mickey Mouse T-shirt sitting on the topmost step. *If I can count to twenty, thirty, forty, without letting go*, I say to myself, *he'll be there. He'll hold out his arms, and in his high, clear voice he'll call to me.* I stand there halfway up the darkening staircase feeling the emptiness swirl around me, my lungs burning, my eyes shut tight as though in prayer.

THE MAID SERVANT'S STORY

THE AFTERNOON SUN LIGHTS UP THE SOFT FOLDS OF Deepa Mashi's red-and-white sari as she sits back with a satisfied after-lunch sigh in her cushioned easy chair. It shines on her hair, which is still as glossy and black as in my childhood, when I loved running my fingers through it. The *ghu-ghu* birds are cooing in the calm shadows under the eaves of her house, and in the distance I can hear the faint cry of the *kulfi* vendor calling out *fresh fresh ices, sweet sweet ices.* For a moment it is as though I had never left Calcutta.

Then Mashi says, "So, Manisha, I hear you might be getting married soon."

I am not surprised by the comment. I've been anticipating something of the sort ever since I mentioned to my mother, with careful casualness, that I'd met a Bengali professor at the university in California where I taught English. Still, disappointment rises raw and bitter in my throat. I'd hoped

that things would be different between my mother and myself this time.

I told her about Bijoy the very first night of my visit home. We were alone in her small flat overlooking a park filled with *kadam* trees that sent their too-sweet fragrance into the dark, moist air. We served ourselves from the dishes the day maid had cooked before she left. Rice, *dal,* a plain cauliflower curry. My mother lives simply. Strains of Rabindra Sangeet from a neighboring radio floated on the still evening —*Ami chini go chini tomare, I know you well, woman from a distant land beyond the ocean.* It was a good time, I felt, to talk—if not as mother and daughter, at least as two intelligent, adult women.

But when I'd spoken she just glanced up sharply with a look that could have been suspicion or disapproval, or even relief that a prospect had appeared, at last, on my barren marital horizon. I never have been able to read my mother's expressions. "That must be very nice, dear," she said. Then she went back to describing the naming ceremony for my cousin Sheela's oldest son in Burdwan last year.

Deepa Mashi is waiting. So I force a laugh and raise my hands in exaggerated protest, feeling myself slip back into the habits of my childhood, hiding pain with humor. "Mashi! I've just started seeing Bijoy! No one's said anything about a wedding yet."

Mashi opens her silver *paan* case, carefully chooses a rolled-up betel leaf, and places it in her mouth. "Two months since you met him, no?"

When, I wonder—as I used to throughout my growing-

up years—did the sisters manage to get together to discuss their errant daughter-niece? My resentment is all for my mother—it is she who should be asking these questions, not my aunt, much as I love her.

"You know for how long I met your uncle before we were married?" Deepa Mashi continues.

Of course I know. She's told me of it a hundred times. But I also know how much pleasure the retelling will give her. So I offer her a fond, expectant smile.

"Fifteen minutes during the bride-viewing, that's how long!" Mashi speaks with the plump and breathless exuberance she brings to all her stories. "And last year, grace of God, we celebrated our twentieth anniversary." She shuts her *paan* case with a victorious snap, as if she's won a major argument.

I take refuge in platitude. "Times have changed, Mashi."

Mashi waves away the intervening decades with a beringed, dimpled hand. "Oh, you Americanized girls! The really important things never change."

Perhaps she's right. I'd come back from my three years abroad feeling adult and sophisticated, determined to match my mother's distant courtesy. Over and over on the flight to Dum Dum airport, I'd promised myself that I wouldn't offer up my life for her inspection and approval, as I had so many times before. Yet I'd done it almost immediately. I guess transformations—the really important ones—require more than time and distance, and even desire.

That first night back, smarting at Mother's seeming indifference, I'd forced my way into her description of the

guests at the naming ceremony. "Bijoy teaches psychology—it's quite unusual to find Indians in that field, at least in California."

I was angry with myself as soon as I blurted it out, callow as any adolescent yearning for parental love—even before I heard her responding, in the perfectly modulated voice which I remembered so well, that he must be a most interesting man. I felt the familiar, furious urge to say something brutal enough to shatter her self-possession. *You're right, Mother, he's very interesting—especially in bed.* But I swallowed them both, the anger and the words. What good would it do? What good had *anything* done?

Throughout high school I'd pushed myself to stand first in exams, to win debates and drama competitions; but I never got the praise I craved, that squeezed-breathless, delirious-with-joy hug that other mothers gave their daughters for far lesser achievements. For a while in college I'd tried the opposite, cutting classes and running around with a wild crowd, smoking cigarettes (an absolute taboo for an Indian girl of good family) and even *ganja* a couple of times, letting boys hold my hand in broad daylight in the Maidan park, where it was certain someone would see us and report the facts back to my mother. But all she did was look at me with a distant sadness, as one might regard a character in a book or movie, and say that she didn't understand why I'd want to ruin my life this way. When, in my final attempt to shock some kind of feeling out of her, I'd told her that I was leaving for America, she'd merely said, "Be careful, and write if you need anything." At the airport she'd pressed a cool, dry cheek to mine (while all around us parents clung to departing children and

let fall torrents of tears) and said, "You know I want the best for you."

The worst part was, I knew she did. She watched over my life carefully, vigilantly, if from afar. All through my childhood, everything I wanted—everything material, that is—was provided for me, often before I needed to ask. But what *she* thought, what *she* longed for, what made her cry out in her dreams (for I'd heard her, once or twice), I never knew. It was as though she'd built a wall of ice around her, thin and invisible and unbreakable. No matter how often I flung myself against it, I was refused entry.

Maybe she no longer knew how to let me. Maybe people were right when they said that the death of her husband and baby in a cholera epidemic that had struck Calcutta overnight when I was about five had killed a part of her too. (Why had that explanation always seemed too facile for me?) At any rate, she'd relinquished me to Deepa Mashi who, herself childless, enthusiastically took on the role of second mother, commending and cajoling and consoling me all those years, asking embarrassing questions and, when I refused to answer, creating vociferous scenes dramatic enough to satisfy any teenager's need for attention. Other girls might have resented the interference, but I was grateful. When I felt myself dissolving before my mother's even, passionless gaze, Deepa Mashi's voice, laughing at my follies, scolding me for my misdeeds, gave me solidity and shape. Secretly, guiltily, I wished I could have been her real daughter.

"We should plan your wedding outfit," Mashi is saying now. "Who knows when you'll come visit us next. And weddings have a habit of happening suddenly."

I want to explain to her about Bijoy. He's not like other Indians—certainly not the ones Aunt would know, engineers and accountants with responsible gold-rimmed eyeglasses and Parker fountain pens in their breast pockets—upright, virtuous, and deadly boring. On our second date he'd told me that he found me attractive and was interested in getting together, but wasn't ready to be tied down by marriage. I'd felt angry, insulted—far more so than if an American man had said the same thing. I'd taken the bus home that night, after informing him in chilled tones that we'd better not see each other again.

And we hadn't for a month, during which I thought incessantly, obsessively, of him. His utter disregard for the rules of my youth—and surely his as well—fascinated me. At the end of the month I contrived to get myself invited to a party where I knew he'd be present. I accepted his offer to escort me home. I let him kiss me, and when his lips pressed down hard on mine, his tongue forcing its way into my mouth, his hands deftly insistent on my *kurta* buttons, I told myself it was what I wanted. A liberated relationship, no strings attached. A sailing into uncharted and amazing areas of experience that someone like my mother couldn't even imagine. I'd pushed back the feeling of shame, the old voices echoing in my head, *Men don't do these things to women they respect.*

But it will only distress Mashi if I tell her I'm living with a man I'm not—and might never be—married to. Her world is constructed of simpler lines, its shapes filled in with bright primary colors that do not bleed together, as in the calendars of gods that hang on the walls of her living room. So it is much easier, as I sit under the slow-revolving ceiling fan, lulled by

the sun-warm smell of jasmine and gardenia from the garden, by the *shhh shhh* sound of the *mali* watering the lawn, to let myself fall into her fantasy.

"I'll wear a Benarasi silk, I guess, except I don't want any of those traditional gaudy colors." A part of me is amused at my own emphatic tone, as though this might actually happen. "You know, orange and maroon, eggplant-purple, bloodred." I realize I am thinking of my mother's wedding sari. I came across it once, wrapped in a blanket and thrust into the bottom of a trunk, like a sordid secret. "You can't ever wear them later, especially in America." I am pleased at the cleverness with which I've let drop the fact—which will duly find its way to my mother—that I'm not intending to come back to India. Not to stay. "Maybe saffron would be nice—a pale saffron. Yes, that's it. I want a saffron Benarasi for the wedding."

Mashi is silent for a long moment. Then in a strangely quiet voice she says, "Oh, my dear, not saffron, not that."

"Why not?" I ask, surprised by her uncharacteristic seriousness.

"Saffron is such a sorrowful color."

"Funny you should say that. I always thought of it as rather festive—the color of beginnings."

"I guess you're right. It's just that it reminds me of . . ." Deepa Mashi's voice disappears into a sigh.

"Of what, Mashi?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, it's only a story," says Mashi, twisting her fingers together. "A sad story, a bad-luck tale, not meant for brides-to-be. Come, let me make you some cardamom tea—I remember how much you used to enjoy that."

But like most Indian women, Mashi is not good at saying no. So when, intrigued by the uneasiness in her voice, I insist, she tells me.

Once there was a young wife, the apple of her husband's eye. She was beautiful and charming and intelligent, and had been to college as well, a rare achievement for women in those days. Her husband was fond of bringing up this fact in the course of conversations with friends—especially as she didn't flaunt her education and deferred, in most instances, to his superior judgment.

The young wife, whom everyone considered a lucky woman, lived in an old and respected part of Calcutta in a marble mansion that had belonged to the family since the time of the grandfather. (The grandfather, whose portrait hung, majestically framed in antique brass, in the hall, had been famous for his charitable works—free medical clinics and slum schools—another fact that the husband liked to mention in conversations though he was not involved in any of them.) While the husband was away at work (he was an assistant manager at a very proper British bank that had stayed on in India after Independence), she occupied herself with household duties, as a wife should, telling the cook which of the master's favorite dishes to prepare for dinner, and supervising the maids as they dusted the tall armoires and wall clocks and polished the ivory and brass figurines that sat in various alcoves around the house. She took long walks in the garden and advised the *mali* on what to plant in the flower beds that edged the circular driveway. And when the *darwan*

(who doubled as chauffeur) stood up with a smart salute from his stool at the wrought-iron gates which were kept closed at all times, she wished him good day with a smile and asked after his wife and children, who lived in the servant's quarters above the garage and whose names she always remembered.

She was additionally lucky, people said, in that she didn't have a mother-in-law to contend with, but it is very probable that she would have got along well with one. Her mother had taught her to be respectful of elders, and she took good care of her husband's aunt, an ancient and somewhat deaf widow who lived with them, in spite of the biting remarks the old woman let drop from time to time. She also took good care of her daughter, bathing and feeding her with her own hands instead of turning her over to the *ayah* as so many of the women of her class did, and reading to her in the afternoons as they lay together in the cool white nursery bed until the little girl fell asleep.

In her spare time the wife read the books which the husband picked up from the library for her on his way back from the office, and practiced her singing. (She had a good voice and an interest in contemporary music, and the husband, who liked to boast of this talent of hers as well, had hired a lady teacher who came to the house every Thursday to teach her Rabindra Sangeet.*) She wrote many letters, mainly to her family, mentioning always how happy she was, how loved and protected, how blessed—especially now that she was expecting another baby. In one of them she asked her younger sister, who was still unmarried and thus without responsibilities of her own, if she could come and stay with her for a few months, just until her delivery. It was a little lonely

* Songs of R Tagore

at times in this great big house where voices echoed and footsteps rang hollow down the corridors. Maybe it would be a little boy this time, she ended, like her husband wanted, a charming fair-skinned boy with curly hair and bright eyes, to delight their hearts and carry on the family name.

The maid servant arrived soon after that.

The two sisters were walking under the fragrant *neem* trees in the early evening, taking advantage of the cool breeze before the sun disappeared behind the coconut palms and mosquitoes invaded the garden. For the younger sister had come right away, pleased and even a little gratified that the sister she had looked up to all her life, who everyone said was prettier and smarter and sweeter-natured and who had married so much better than she herself could hope to, actually needed her. Besides, her annual exams were over and the prospect of summer in provincial Burdwan stretched ahead of her, long and barren and parched like the fields she stared out at each morning from the windows of her father's house. In Calcutta there would be shops to visit and movies to see, the grounds of the Maidan and the Victoria Memorial to promenade in, and musical soirees to attend. And even the Kalighat temple, noisy with chanted prayers and the frantic bleating of sacrificial goats, where her sister took the aunt every Tuesday, was an exciting change from the small Shiva shrine back home. She liked her brother-in-law too, though she was a bit in awe of him—especially when, on workday mornings, he appeared at breakfast dressed in suit and tie, his shoes spit-shiny and the stiff collars of his shirts precisely ironed. He

made her uncomfortable (although she never would have said it to anyone) with his easy charm as he asked after her health, with his sophisticated jokes that she didn't understand. With the look that flickered briefly, hotly in his eyes when her sister wasn't around.

The woman was standing outside the wrought-iron gates, perfectly still, her head haloed by the setting sun, so that when the sister first caught sight of her she seemed dazzle-bright, a forest goddess materialized out of a children's fairy tale. But of course she wasn't. She was only a poor woman in a coarse, green-bordered sari, with high, hungry cheekbones and shadows in the hollow of her throat. She was good-looking enough in a primitive *adivasi* way, but no one would have mistaken her—at least on second look—for anything except a working-class girl who'd been out of work awhile.

"Mistress," she said in a broad rural accent when she saw the women staring at her, "do you need a maid?"

The sister expected the wife to say no. Things like this had happened before, in spite of this being a neighborhood that housed the cream of the Calcutta families. Sometimes tramps would wander up to the gates, ragged bearded men who wanted food in exchange for a day's work and turned sullen when told they weren't needed. Street urchins would try to climb over the wall to get at the mango tree, even when the fruit was green and hard and bitter. The beggar women were the worst. They would grip the wrought-iron spears of the gate with clawlike fingers and cry that they had hungry children at home, could the little mother let them have just one cup of rice. But of course you couldn't, as the husband

always reminded them, because news of it would travel along the beggar grapevine and the next day a hundred others would descend on them.

The sister paused for the wife to call the *darwan,* who was washing the black Studebaker at the other end of the driveway, and ask him—as she had done on those other occasions—to make the woman leave. So she was surprised when instead she heard her ask the woman what she could do.

"Anything," said the woman. "If you show me how to, I'll learn. I'm a good worker—I won't be any trouble to you." Her voice, though respectful, wasn't obsequious like that of most servants. Bell-clear, it resonated in the evening air in spite of the way her collarbones rose sharp and fragile from her flesh.

"Do you have family?" asked the older sister.

"Yes," said the woman after a slight pause, "the kind it's better not to have." She didn't offer explanations.

"Where will you go if I say no?"

The woman shrugged, her face calm with the look of a lake over which many storms have passed.

The young wife thought for a while. Then she lifted the gate latch and motioned the woman to follow her. The sister, concerned, tried to tell her that it wasn't a good idea, that her brother-in-law would surely be displeased. But the wife had begun a casual discussion about baby quilts—whether a lining of imported satin, which the husband favored, would be better than the traditional red *malmal* that was supposed to bring good luck to newborns—and she didn't get a chance.

The sister was right, of course. There was a scene at dinner when the husband found out that his wife had hired a woman to be her personal maid without consulting him.

"First of all you don't need another servant. As it is, Ayah doesn't have enough to do. And then, where will she stay? The servant's quarters are full already."

"She could stay in the house," the wife said in her soft voice. "We have so many empty rooms."

"In the house! You want to put her in the house! What d'you know of this woman? She could be a thief or, worse still, the spy for a gang of *dacoits*. Remember what happened at the Dasguptas last year, the whole family murdered in their beds, and later the police found out that the maid had let the killers in."

"That's right," said the old aunt (for she could hear well enough when she wanted to). "Asking for trouble, you are. Half those women are prostitutes anyway."

"I don't think this girl's like that," said the wife. She folded her hands over the swell of her belly, fixed her luminous eyes on her husband, and waited until he said, grudgingly, "Let me take a look at her."

So the woman was summoned. The husband's eyes slid over the dark glow of her new-washed face, the neatly pulled-back hair that brought out the arresting shape of her cheekbones. The slim, straight body, the taut belly, the sinuous curve of breast and hip that the old green sari didn't quite hide. (But perhaps the sister was only imagining this.) Then he said in a voice which still sounded annoyed that he was willing to try her out for a month or so, but only if his wife took full responsibility for anything that went wrong.

"I will," said the wife, giving him a smile of grateful brilliance and clasping his hand in hers, though she knew that the old aunt frowned on such forward behavior on the part of wives. But the sister, who sensed that the husband was not really annoyed at all, crossed her fingers under the table to avert bad luck and said a prayer for her sister.

That was how the maid—let us call her Sarala—came to the house.

The maid was as good as her word. Quick and alert, in a few weeks she learned all that the wife showed her, from embroidering baby diapers to mixing medicinal oils according to the special recipe passed down to the wife by her mother. And she was a hard worker. Up at dawn, she would be waiting on the balcony with a pot of the basil tea considered particularly beneficial for pregnant women by the time the wife emerged from the bedroom. Once the husband left for work, she dusted the wife's dressing table, lovingly lining up the combs and brushes, the little pots of *kumkum* and *sindur* and *kajal*, and arranging in their velvet cases the jewelry the wife was increasingly too tired to put away. She washed her fine cotton saris by hand and dried them in the shady part of the terrace so they would smell sun-fresh without the colors fading. She massaged the wife's swollen feet with the medicinal oil and never tired of running down to the kitchen to bring her up a glass of chilled *nimbu-pani* whenever she felt nauseous. Even in the hot afternoons when the rest of the servants disappeared for their siestas, she would sit in the passage outside her mistress's bedroom, hemming one of her petticoats or

letting out a blouse, and keeping the little girl, who often woke early from her nap, occupied with tales and rhymes so she wouldn't go in and disturb her mother's sleep.

Sometimes the wife would call out in her gentle voice, "Why don't you go and lie down for a bit, Sarala? I don't mind if Khuku comes and plays on my bed."

But the maid would always say, "Oh no, Didi (she had taken to calling her *elder sister*, just as her own sister did), I'm not tired. You please rest. Khukumoni is no trouble at all."

At first the sister regarded the maid's devotion to the wife with suspicion. (And yes, it must be admitted, even some jealousy. She didn't like the business of the maid calling her sister *didi*, a title that was rightfully hers to use. A hot resentment pricked at her when she heard the wife speaking to the maid in the same affectionate tone she used toward her own sister.) She had never come across a servant quite like her. Even the old ones who had been in her father's family for years were, though loyal, always taking advantage of their seniority to ask for favors—a new shawl at Durga Puja time, gifts of money for the marriage of their children, longer vacations to visit family. The sister watched the maid intently for a slip—a glint of the eye, a twist of the lip, a careless word dropped to a fellow servant that would reveal her real motives. But there was nothing. Though polite to the other household help, the maid didn't gossip with them. When the wife asked her if she needed anything—clothing, soap, another blanket—she said no. The sister noticed, too, how she took care to stay out of the husband's way without making it obvious. How she pulled her thick hair back in a style she must have known was unattractive (for she was smart, this maid—the sister had seen

that right away) and kept her sari modestly pulled around her shoulders at all times. How she chose, for her sleeping space, not the big alcove with the ceiling fan, as the wife had suggested, but a cramped and airless storeroom which could be locked from the inside.

After a month the sister was forced to admit to herself that she had been wrong. The maid loved the wife in the way intelligent animals love their keepers, with a ferocious and total loyalty, a forgetting of self. (The sister had heard tales of such beasts—cheetahs and house snakes and the great gray wolf-dogs that rajahs sometimes kept—killing for their masters, dying for them.) Perhaps it was because the wife was the first person to be truly kind to the maid, with a kindness that expects nothing in return.

One evening the sister watched the maid bring a footstool and a glass of honey-milk to the wife as she sat on the balcony. She saw the gracious smile with which the mistress took the drink from the maid, and the desperate bright joy that flashed across the maid's face in response, and she forced herself, finally, to wipe the last traces of jealousy from her heart. *When I am gone*, she told herself, *there will still be someone in this house to look after my sister.*

"We must teach Sarala to read and write," the wife told the sister one day. Turning to the maid, who was combing out her hair with long, sweeping strokes, she asked, "Would you like that?"

The maid's face was that of someone who, after being in a dark room all her life, sees a window opening and the bril-

liance she'd only heard about till then pouring in. "Oh yes, Didi." Then her voice faltered. "But do you think I can?"

"Of course," said the wife. "You're a clever girl."

"But Dadababu—he may not like it. I don't want him to be angry with you."

The wife did not deny what the maid said about the husband, and the sister, surprised, thought, *She knows more than I realized.*

"Dadababu need not know," said the wife after a moment, smiling again. "It can be our secret."

And so the lessons began.

The wife bought the maid a slate and chalk and a primary reader, and in the hot hushed afternoons when she couldn't sleep (for she was increasingly uncomfortable nowadays with the great growing swell of her belly pressing up into her chest, making it hard to breathe), she taught her the Bengali alphabet. The sister would sit in one of the cushioned chairs in the dim bedroom, smelling the damp grassy odor of *khush-khush* screens lowered against the heat, and watch as the wife helped the maid shape the letters. She would look at her sister's fingers—fragile, almost translucent—curving over the maid's sturdy dark ones, she would listen to her soft, clear voice enunciate the sounds—*cha, la, bha, sha*—and the maid's faltering echo, and love for her sister would sweep through her, ferocious as a fire or flood. But beneath the love would be a prick of apprehension, a voice in her heart saying, *Where will this lead?*

News traveled, of course, in spite of the closed bedroom doors, as it always does in a house full of servants. Down to the kitchen, in jealous whispers, then up again to the old aunt,

who had her informers. And the aunt, who had never really liked the wife in spite of her many kindnesses (or perhaps because of them, for that is how the human heart sometimes works), who had often complained to her friends—other old women living in bitterness on the charity of relatives—that she was too modern and uppity and not a fit daughter-in-law for the Bandopadhyay family, said casually one night at dinner, "So now you're teaching that woman to read and write."

"Yes," said the wife. Her voice was composed enough—experienced in the ways of large households, she must have expected this to happen sooner or later—but a slight flush tinged her cheeks.

"What's this now?" said the husband. When the wife explained, his lips pressed together in displeased thinness. "Don't you think you should have asked me before you started all this?"

"When," said the aunt, "did she ever ask anyone."

"I didn't think you'd be interested," said the wife. "It is a small thing, after all."

"Small things lead to big problems," said the aunt.

The sister felt the rage rise in her like a wild wind, but she bit down on her tongue to keep herself quiet. Anything she said, she knew, would only harm her sister's case.

"Aunt's right," said the husband. "Things like that give ideas to the lower classes, especially the women. Makes them want to rise above their station."

"Next she'll be asking for a higher salary," the aunt began. "Then more vacation time, then . . ."

For the first time the wife interrupted. Speaking only to her husband she said in a clear voice, "They're so exploited,

our people, because they're illiterate. The women most of all. And Sarala—she's such a smart girl. It would be a great pity to waste her intelligence. I know your grandfather would have felt the same way." Her eyes were like diamonds, with a chiseled spark to them.

Faced by that resolute shine, the husband seemed at a loss for words. Finally he said, "Oh, very well, go ahead. But you remember what we told you, Aunt and I. You watch out for that maid."

Later in private he told the aunt, "We don't want to upset her, not at this time. I'll take care of things later."

The maid was as good at the lessons as at everything else. Soon she learned her letters and was able to decipher simple words. After a while she could even read a few nursery rhymes aloud to the little girl, who was quite excited by this turn in events and annoyed the old *ayah* terribly by saying that she liked Sarala better and wanted to play only with her.

Writing came harder. Callused and unschooled, the maid's fingers found it difficult to form the twists and turns of the *sha,* the sharp angles of the *ra,* the tight curls of the *la.* But she wouldn't give up. Every night on her way to bed the sister would see her sitting under the corridor light outside the storeroom, head bent in concentration, wiping, with the edge of her sari, the erratic, disobedient lines that slashed the slate again and again.

Finally one day the maid presented to her mistress the slate across which was written, in crude and barbaric letters, yes, but clearly enough, her name. The wife stood up and

pulled her close for a hug, saying, "Sarala, that's beautiful, I'm so proud of you." The slatted sunlight from the window illumined the faces of both the women, the tears glistening on their lashes, and the sister, whose eyes had filled too, felt blessed, as though for a moment she had been allowed to look into the heart of grace.

The next morning, after the black Studebaker had disappeared with the husband down the newly washed driveway that smelled of lemon blossom, the wife called the maid into the bedroom and opened the mahogany *almirah* that held her clothes. She pulled out the bottom drawer, which was filled with colorful silks, and the scent of sandalwood from the sachets that nestled between the saris filled the room.

"I want you to choose a sari—any one," she said to the maid. "It's my gift to you for learning so well."

The maid shied away, a scandalized look on her face, for the saris were expensive and far above her station. The sister, who had been sitting on the bed, watching, drew in her breath in sharp dismay, for it seemed to her that the wife was making a serious error.

"Go ahead," said the wife encouragingly. Looking at the maid's expression she added, "Don't worry, these saris are quite old, and Dadababu thinks they're dreadfully out of style. I'll probably never wear any of them again. So no one should mind."

The sister stared at the wife's face, wondering if she really believed what she was saying. Plenty of people, she

knew, would mind. Her sister's enormous innocence made her feel at once sad and envious.

"Didi," she ventured, "I don't think it's such a good idea. Perhaps instead you can give her . . ."

The wife whirled to face her with unusual anger (though the sister could see, even then, that the anger wasn't directed at herself). "These saris are mine," she said. "From before marriage. No one else has the right to say what I should do with them."

The sister realized that she had made a mistake in judging the wife as too innocent.

After much persuasion, the maid timidly picked out one of the simpler pieces, a saffron silk with a thin gold border worked in the shape of *peepul* leaves.

"Good choice," said the wife approvingly. "Saffron is one of my favorite colors, too. Here, see, it has a matching blouse. Go wash up and put it on so I can see how it looks on you."

The sister's brief hope that the unfortunate sari would lie at the bottom of the maid's box until her sister forgot about it died. She tried again to stop her, to say that perhaps another day would be better, but the wife, her face like marble, turned from her and said, "Now."

So the maid went and put on the sari. Perhaps she had intended at first merely to show herself to her mistress and then, using the excuse of work, change back into her regular clothes. But when she felt the silk against her skin, softer even than the petals at the heart of a lotus, something seemed to come over her. She searched in her box till she found a bro-

ken piece of mirror and held it up for a long moment to see how the fabric glowed like dawn against her ebony skin. Then she combed out her hair and tied it into a braid that swung against her hips. And finally—can you blame her? she was not much older, after all, than the sister—she went into the little girl's room and took some of the homemade *kajal* that is believed to be good for children's eyes and applied a tiny bit of the lampblack to her lashes.

"You look very nice," said the wife when the maid knocked shyly on the door. "You should always wear your hair like that." She was lying on the bed, which was unusual for her this early in the day, with her swollen feet propped on a folded quilt. Against the pillowcase embroidered with turtle doves her smile flickered tiredly, as though she'd been pushing an enormous weight uphill. "I think I'll rest for a few hours now. Maybe you can bring me up a little sweet yogurt for lunch, Sarala. And if you"—turning to her sister a trifle apologetically—"could supervise Khuku's bath and make sure she takes her nap, you know how naughty she can be sometimes. . . ."

"Of course I will," said the sister with a reassuring smile as she drew the curtains. "You just rest and don't worry about any of it." But inside she was thinking how her sister didn't look well at all, how as soon as he came home she must ask her brother-in-law to send for old Dr. Hazra. She was also thinking of a tactful way of telling the maid to take off the saffron sari and tie her hair up the old way, but before she could find the right words the girl had run down to the kitchen to fetch her mistress a glass of cold pomegranate juice.

In the kitchen the cook's jaw dropped as the maid entered, and the bearer-boy who ran errands pursed his lips in a low whistle as he watched that braid swing against the slim waist. The *ayah,* who was squatting by the door chewing *paan*, drew in her breath so sharply that a sliver of betel nut caught in her throat and she coughed and coughed until the cook hurried over and thumped her on the back.

The maid hid a triumphant smile and went about her task in her usual reserved way, peeling pomegranates and crushing the pods in the juicer until a deep red liquid filled a glass.

The *ayah,* who had recovered by now, stated acidly that it was well known that when ants grew wings, the time of their doom had arrived.

The maid filled the glass calmly with ice chips, not letting a drop of juice spill to the silver tray on which it sat, but when she left her chin was up just a bit straighter, her braid swung a little more than before, and she continued to wear the saffron sari (which she had been intending to put away) for the rest of the day.

Later the sister would think back to this day as the highest point on a wheel—the wheel of luck, perhaps, or karma, the moment of balance when everything was as perfect as it can be in this flawed world. Perhaps, by its very nature, such a time cannot last but must topple into darkness as the wheel continues to turn. But the sister blamed the sari for what

happened next, that ill-fated sari around which wisps of disaster (which might otherwise have dissipated) coalesced and took shape. The sari that burned through the afternoon like a taunt to the gods with its thoughtlessly cheerful tint, its gay, gold *palloo* fluttering behind the maid as she played tag with the little girl around the tall oleander bushes.

Darkness was falling—suddenly, violently, as it always does in the twilightless tropical evenings of Calcutta. Smoke from the charcoal *chula* the cook had lit in the backyard hung in the air, heavy, acrid as a premonition. The wife slept on, stretched unmoving on the high white bed like someone drugged or dead. From her own bedroom window the sister crinkled her eyes through the purplish haze to see the two figures weaving among the bushes, a flicker of burnished gold, then her niece's child-voice rising querulously as her pursuer caught up with her, *No, no, I don't want to go inside yet.*

The sister was about to call down an admonition when she noticed the husband—the chauffeur must have just let him out at the front porch—walking toward the two of them. The maid and the girl, their backs toward him, were busy arguing. So the sister was the only one who noticed how his gait took on the predatory lope of a wolf—or was it a jackal? Before she was able to force a cry out of the dry tightness of her throat, his arm was around the maid's waist, pulling her hard against him. Shock stiffened the maid's body for a moment. Then she was struggling, pushing fiercely, mutely at the husband's chest, while the little girl tilted up her curious head —her large luminous eyes so like her mother's—to watch them.

He let her go at once, of course. From where she

gripped the edge of her window, the sister could hear the laugh low and deep in his throat, the smooth murmur of his words as he bent to pick up his daughter. She knew what he was telling her as he stared after the disappearing figure of the maid. *A mistake. I thought it was your mother.*

It was certainly not impossible. It was almost dark by now, and the maid *had* been wearing the wife's sari. But the sister stood at the window for a long time after, her head against the bars, her eyes squeezed shut, feeling the cold rust fleck off on her forehead, the thick, muddy fear clog her heart.

The next day the wife was worse. Her face was the color of *chapati* dough, and the flesh around her eyes was soft and puffy. She complained of a dull ache low in her abdomen, and when the aunt suggested a poultice of warm turmeric, she didn't say no. Watching her lie there submissive and motionless, eyes closed, while the aunt rubbed the yellow paste on her belly, the sister thought for a moment, *She's dead.* And though she tried to pluck the bad-luck words out from her mind, they wouldn't go.

"I want to call the doctor," she said.

"What for?" said the aunt. "This poultice is the best thing for pregnant women—didn't I tell you how my sister-in-law . . ."

"Where's the number?" the sister asked.

"You'd better wait till Babu comes home and ask him if he thinks it's really necessary," said the aunt.

"The number," said the sister, leaning over the wife, and

the wife lifted her hand to point at the bureau and let it fall heavily again.

When she finally got through to the doctor's office, the sister found out that he couldn't be reached—he was at the hospital performing an operation. She had to be satisfied with the assistant's assurance that he'd written down everything she'd said, and that the doctor would come over as soon as he could, probably sometime that night.

The sister stood outside the wife's room for a while, biting her lip, listening to her sister moan. It was a low, hopeless animal sound that distressed her more than the sharpest cry of pain would have. She finally decided to call the brother-in-law, although yesterday she had thought she would never be able to speak to him again. But the operator at his firm informed her that he wasn't back yet from lunch.

"Choto-didi." It was the hesitant voice of the maid. "Do you think I might have the afternoon off?"

The sister looked up at her distractedly. Even through her worry, a part of her mind was pleased to note that the maid had gone back to her usual mode of dress. Her hair was pulled back more tightly than before, making the edges of her eyes slant slightly upward, giving her face a quality of alienness. She was surprised, though, that the maid would choose *this* day to want to go somewhere. It wasn't like her. The other servants were always manufacturing elaborate excuses for why they *must* have a day off, but the maid had never asked for a vacation since she'd been hired, so that the sister had supposed that she didn't know anyone in the city.

"I guess it's all right," she said. It would have been more correct for the girl to ask the aunt for permission, but she

couldn't blame her. From the bedroom she could hear the old woman's nasal voice telling the wife that a glass of black tea with a sprig of *tulsi* seeped in it would be just the thing for her cramps.

"Be sure to come back fast," she said over her shoulder as she hurried to protect her sister from more of the aunt's home remedies.

"Oh yes, Choto-didi, I will."

Only later, when the wife, fretting, asked, "Where's Sarala? I want her to rub my legs," did the sister realize that she had forgotten to inquire where the maid was going.

The maid didn't return till the shadow of the *peepul* trees slanted shivering across the lawn to the veranda, where the family was having evening tea and biscuits. The wife, claiming she felt a little better—though her face still looked drawn, with dark half-moons under the eyes that gave them a bruised look—had joined them. ("Told you that turmeric poultice would take care of your cramps!" declared the aunt.)

The husband thanked the sister for having called the doctor. "You did the right thing. I don't want to take any chances with your sister's health." He wore, like always in the evening, an immaculate *kurta*, white as just-picked *shiuli* flowers and fastened with gold buttons that shone. When he leaned forward to touch her hand—but lightly, respectfully, with a brother's touch—his eyes, too, shone, and with such sincerity that for a moment the sister believed she had imagined yesterday's episode.

That was when the maid came hurrying down the drive,

holding a packet in her hands. She stopped when she noticed the husband sitting there. The sister thought she saw a brief tremor run through her body.

"Sarala," called the wife. "Where have you been?"

"I went to the Kalighat temple, Didi, to offer a prayer for you." The maid held out a crumpled banana leaf with some flowers and *kumkum* and a graying sweetmeat. "I brought you some *prasad.* Mother Kali, she's very powerful—she can cure anything."

"Thank you, my dear." The wife's eyes were warm as she took the package and touched it to her forehead.

"I've nothing against Kali," said the husband, not looking at the maid as he spoke, "and it was a nice thing for the girl to do. But I don't think you should eat any of that stuff."

"One little bit can't do any harm, especially when it's blessed by the goddess," said the wife calmly, and she broke off a piece of the sweet and put it in her mouth.

"Babu. . . ."

It was the *darwan,* looking uncomfortable.

"What is it?"

"There's a woman outside, demanding to be let in. I tried to turn her away, but she claims she's"—he pointed to the maid—"her mother. She's making a lot of noise. Shall I ask the bearer-boy to come help me get rid of her?"

The sister looked at the maid, who stood beside the wife's chair, stricken into stillness.

The husband, who had also been watching the maid, spoke slowly, consideringly. "No. Bring her in. I think we should hear what she has to say."

They could hear the woman's voice long before she appeared around the bend of the drive, its broad peasant accent the same as the maid's, but crude and grating in a way hers had never been. "So this is where she ended up, the little slut. Who would've thought it!"

And the *darwan*'s outraged, scolding whisper, "Watch your mouth, old woman. This is the house of *bhadralok,* decent people, not a *bustee* like you come from."

The woman's laugh was gravelly with contempt. The maid winced from it as though it were something solid, flung across the evening at her face. "Don't talk to me about *bhadralok!* I know more about them than you ever will. I've seen the inside of a lot of mansions in my time—palaces, even—and I'm not talking about drawing rooms and dining halls either."

At first when she saw her, the sister was surprised that this woman should be the mother of the maid. In her garish yellow sari and cheap silver jewelry, she seemed to belong to a lower order of humanity, her lips pulled back from her teeth in a predatory smirk. And yet, in the creases of that face which had long since given up all claim to innocence, the sister could see traces of a certain ruined beauty. It struck her that at one time men must have forgotten to breathe when they watched the mother walk down the street.

"So," said the mother, advancing on the maid. "You've been hiding out here, have you, you sly thing, while I'm going crazy looking everywhere for you. And so's Biru." Addressing

the husband with an obsequious bow, she explained, "They had a little tiff, husband and wife, and my silly daughter here, she ran away."

"He's not my husband," the maid said through stiff lips.

The mother ignored her. "It's lucky I was at Bappi's Tea Stall across from the temple bus stop today. The goddess's grace, what else can you call it. I'd just started on my *kima paratha* when Kamala lets out a yell that just about makes me choke. *Ai*, Lakkhi-Pishi, she says, isn't that your girl, the one that's missing. I didn't even finish my *paratha*, I tell you, I jumped right up—couldn't take a chance on losing my daughter again, could I—and ran out. She was already on the bus, but fortunately another one came right away. And here I am." Her grin brown and smug in her seamed face, she turned to the maid. "So if you'll just gather your things, we'll thank the *babu* and his good wife here, and be on our way."

"I'm not going," said the maid, her voice small but definite.

"What?"

"I'm not going."

"Oh yes you are, even if I have to drag you by your hair every step of the way."

The sister took a swift, shocked breath and turned to the wife, who sat as though in a dream, as though none of this were really happening. The maid, too, turned to her. "Please, Didi, don't make me go." She gripped the handle of the wife's chair with white fingernails.

"I'm your mother. I have the right."

Looking only at the wife, the maid said, "She sends men to my room at night, her and Biru, for the money."

There was a sudden hush in the air, as before the *baisakhi* storms that rip the sky open. The sister saw that the *darwan*'s mouth had fallen comically open, and that the aunt's eyes glittered with victory. But the look on her brother-in-law's face she couldn't read.

"That's a lie, a stinking, bare-faced lie, you bitch. You'd better stop babbling and come with me right this minute. . . ."

The wife's chair fell over with a crash as she stood up, and the packet of *prasad* dropped from her lap, the sweetmeat rolling on the ground until it came to rest next to the husband's *chappal*. She swayed a little, hand pressed to her belly. The sister noted with alarm that her lips were ash color, and she too rose.

"Get rid of this—creature," said the wife to the husband in a slurred, sleepwalker's voice. She waited until he nodded at the *darwan*, and then held out her hand for the maid. "Sarala," the words came out jerky, disjointed. "Help me to my room."

As the sister rushed to take her other arm, she heard the mother shout behind her, "Creature—who's she calling *creature*? And, *babu*, don't think you can get rid of me so easily. I know my rights. You might be rich, but I can get a hundred people from the *bustee* to come back here with me tomorrow. Make a stink like you won't believe." Her voice dipped knowingly. "Don't think I can't see the real reason you're keeping my girl on—that pregnant wife of yours isn't much good for anything else right now, is she?"

And the *darwan*, shoving her before him, "Get out, get out, you filthy-minded witch, before I bash your head in.

Threaten the *babu* in his own home, will you? Just you try coming back. . . ."

"Break a stick across her back when I do get hold of her . . ." screamed the mother.

"Out, out this minute. . . ."

And the husband leaning smoothly back in his chair, the dark pooling around his bone-white *kurta*, a curiously pleased expression on his face.

By the time Dr. Hazra arrived, the wife was delirious with fever, and the ache in her belly was worse. She tossed on the bed, throwing off the covers they tried to keep on her, hitting out when the aunt tried to put on another poultice, and when her husband leaned over to ask her how she felt, she didn't seem to know him. The doctor gave her a shot and called the hospital, for she would have to be moved right away.

"We'll probably keep her there for the next few weeks, until it's safe for the baby to be born. She needs supervision. But most of all"—he looked accusingly at the rest of the household—"she needs to be kept from getting agitated."

"I can't go," the wife spoke in a tired whisper. "Who'll take care of Khuku? Who'll . . . ?"

"My dear," said the husband, taking her hands solicitously between his, "if the doctor says you must go, then of course you must. None of us like the thought of you being away, but we have to think of whatever's best for you—and the baby. You need not worry—your sister is here after all. And the maid."

"Yes, please, don't worry," said the sister, pushing back a

damp strand of hair from the wife's forehead, though every muscle in her body tightened at the thought of remaining in this house without her sister.

The wife beckoned the sister closer, until her ear was close to her mouth. "Promise me you'll stay until I get back," she said in the faint tones of one who is already far away. "Promise me you'll take care of Khuku. And, Sarala—promise me you'll take care of her too."

"I promise," said the sister, trying to keep the doubt from her voice. She felt weak and incapable, weighed down with misgivings. But what else could she say?

In the week after the wife was hospitalized, the sister was amazed at how smoothly everything at home continued to run. The *mali* watered and fertilized and mowed as usual, and even trimmed, without having to be told, the mango branches that were blocking the light from the living-room window. The cook performed magnificently, fixing a Mughlai lamb dish that the husband claimed was better than anything he had done before; the bearer-boy came to work on time; and the *ayah* didn't get into a single fight with the other servants all week. Even the little girl didn't cry for her mother, as the sister had worried she might. She went for her bath unprotestingly and let the sister comb out the tangles in her hair without kicking or screaming. She ate a good lunch and took her nap, and in the evenings she played checkers with her father quite cheerfully until bedtime.

The sister was relieved, but her relief was tinged with dismay. At first she'd interpreted this sudden spate of good

behavior as a temporary, shocked reaction to the wife's absence, but as the weeks passed she saw that she had been wrong. The household had closed over the departure soundlessly, without sorrow, the way the fluted leaves of the water hyacinth close over the surface of a pond after the bathers have left. As though it were the most natural thing. Would it be the same if—she couldn't keep the thought from her mind though she tried hard to push it away—her sister were dead? Is this, finally, all a life amounts to, all the mark it makes on others, she asked herself as she turned restlessly—but carefully, so as to not wake the others—on the large pallet that had been put together by joining two mattresses on the nursery floor.

The pallet was in the nursery because there had been a problem with sleeping arrangements. The wife had asked that the aunt sleep in the nursery with the little girl, while the maid slept on the floor of the sister's bedroom (for what reason the sister thought better not to ask). But from the second night on, the little girl had refused, insisting that the sister sleep with her instead.

"She snores," she said, pointing to the old woman. "And she smells too."

The aunt, bristling, had said that the wife had asked her specifically to sleep in the nursery, and no one was going to stop her from carrying out the poor sick woman's wishes.

They'd reached a compromise by having the sister join the other two in the nursery, but when she'd asked if the maid could sleep there too, the aunt had put her foot down quite firmly. The room was too small, and besides, she wasn't going to sleep in the same space as a servant girl, especially one with

questionable morals. (After the mother had shown up, there had been lengthy and heated discussions about the maid's morals throughout the house, though not in the wife's hearing. In the dining room the aunt had held forth on how it was a scandal that a decent family should be asked to put up with a woman who was, by her own admission, no better than a call girl. And in the kitchen a vindicated *ayah* had told everyone how she knew, just *knew*, right from the first that the girl was *evil*.)

So the maid slept, as before, in the storeroom. And she was probably better off there, thought the sister, sighing, as for the tenth time she pushed the little girl's foot off her stomach and clamped a pillow over her ear to block out the aunt's vigorous snores.

The sister had never been a heavy sleeper. And now, what with the new sleeping arrangements and worry over the wife's health and that of her unborn child, she spent long stretches of the night lying awake. Staring at the walls streaked with moonlight, she thought of her last visit to the hospital. How the wife had lain in the narrow military-green cot she was confined to at all times by the doctor's orders, her face leached of animation, pale as old ivory. How in spite of the open windows her room had smelled faintly of urine (for she wasn't allowed to get up to go to the bathroom) and another odor the sister couldn't quite place but thought of as the smell of helplessness.

Lying awake, the sister grew familiar with the night noises of house and garden, the *jhi-jhi* insects chirping in the

honeysuckle, the owls hooting mournfully from the distant *ata* tree, the geckos calling *tik-tik-tik* as they slithered over the whitewashed corridor walls. The watchman's shoes clattered on the cobbles outside the gate as he patrolled the streets with his baton, raising his voice periodically in the cautionary *kaun hai.* The dripping faucet in the bathroom sounded as though someone were impatiently tapping his fingers along a table; the door frames creaked and settled with the noise of knuckles being cracked; and the halting *shhk-shhk* of the ceiling fan was disturbingly like a person shuffling along in bedroom slippers.

But on this night in the beginning of the second week the sister heard a different sound, one that made her sit up in bed with a hand pressed against her pounding chest. It was a very soft padding, as of naked feet on marbled mosaic, coming down the corridor. What frightened the sister was the fact that it was the sound of someone trying to be quiet.

She looked down at the sleeping child beside her, the old woman breathing loudly with her mouth open. She wanted to lie down again, to plunge, like them, into an uncomplicated rest. But she couldn't. She slipped off the mattress cautiously, in spite of the voice in her head that cried *no, no, no.* She pulled her sari tight across her chest, unlatched the bedroom door, and looked out through the crack.

A man was disappearing around the bend of the corridor. She didn't recognize him. Only a little moonlight seeped into the passage, and he was dressed in the sleeveless *genji* and white *dhoti* that most Bengali men wear on hot nights. Could it be one of the servants? Did the maid have a "friend"

after all? The sister followed, keeping to the shadows, though she knew that she shouldn't. *Unwise, dangerous,* screamed the voice in her head. *What does it matter who he is?* But something about the man drew her on. When she stopped at the corner to peer into the gloom, she saw that he was knocking on the door of the storeroom, muffled, urgent beats that the sister could barely hear above the thudding of her heart.

"Who is it?" she heard the maid call, her tone wary. "Who is it?"

The man—she couldn't see his face yet—whispered something the sister couldn't catch, but she heard the latch click open. The maid appeared in the doorway, face swollen with sleep, hair and clothes disarranged. "Khuku's ill? Where is she? What's wrong? I'd better go help Choto-didi right away. . . ." And then more loudly, as the man tried to push her back into the storeroom, "No, I beg you, no, stop it, let me go, please. How can you be like this with Didi sick in the hospital?"

"Don't act so virtuous," the man hissed. "Once a whore, always a whore."

The sister recognized the voice. Dizziness swept through her—or was it terror, mixed with rage on her sister's behalf—and she had to hold on to the edge of the wall.

The man tried to clamp a hand over the maid's mouth but she twisted away. "Don't worry, no one will know. I'll make it worth your while," he said with a laugh that struck the sister like a shard of ice. "And it'll be a lot more fun with me than it was with those stinking peasants at the *bustee.*"

"Let me go, Dadababu." The maid was kicking at the

man's shins now. When the man didn't release her, she clawed at his face, her voice rising threateningly. "Or else I'll scream loud enough to wake everyone in the house."

The man swore, low and vicious, clapping a hand to his cheek. He shoved the maid backward, and the sister heard her body thudding against the wall. "Bitch! You'll be sorry."

The sister caught a glimpse of her brother-in-law's rage-engorged face. And then she was running faster than she ever had in her life to get back to the bedroom before he saw her.

For years afterward, she would ask herself why she'd felt so ashamed, so guilty, as though *she* had been the clandestine one. She would wish that she'd stayed and confronted him, if only with a look. She would wonder if that might have made a difference to what happened later.

The next day the sister sat with a late-morning cup of tea on the balcony, thinking. The idea of facing her brother-in-law's polite inquiries at the breakfast table—*Is everything all right, Did you sleep well, Is there anything I can get you on my way back from the office*—had filled her with nausea, and she had stayed in bed, complaining of a headache, until he left home. Now as she listened to the maid reading aloud to the little girl, her voice rising and falling melodiously, with no trace of the night's turbulences in it, she wondered what she should do. Should she indicate to her that she knew what had happened and try, together, to figure out a plan so that it didn't occur again? Should she approach her brother-in-law with her dangerous knowledge and blackmail him into good behavior? Should she tell her sister? She remembered the wife's face,

white against the white hospital pillow, her eyes that passed without curiosity over people's faces, as though they were part of a distant past which no longer held meaning for her—and knew she couldn't. Nor could she undertake the other actions —she was not the type. Youngest in the household and a girl besides, she'd always had people making decisions for her, or at least telling her what to do, praising her for being tractable and obedient, which as everyone knew were the cardinal virtues of womanhood. The thought of acting on her own, of setting in motion some uncontrollable force that might eventually shatter her sister's marriage (for she wasn't tractable, her sister, not like her—who knew what she might take it in her head to do if she found out what had happened?) filled her with dread.

And besides, she told herself, staring down at the dappled sunlight playing over the red and gold dahlias that edged the driveway, perhaps she was overreacting. These things happened—even in her sheltered provincial existence she'd heard of them often enough. At least her brother-in-law didn't have a "keep," a mistress set up in a separate household, as affluent Bengali men often did. He didn't go off with his friends for "musical" weekends which featured, as everyone knew, singers and dancers who were happy to provide other services as well. In his way he loved his wife and was a good father to his little girl. Perhaps the best thing would be to forget what had happened, to forgive him his moment's lapse (he was a man, after all, with those uncontrollable male urges she'd been warned of time and again). To pray it wouldn't recur.

"Choto-didi! Choto-didi!"

Startled, the sister looked down to see the *darwan*'s

daughter, who lived in the servant's quarter by the gate, running toward the house, panting.

"Choto-didi, there's a crowd of people at the gate, along with that one's mother." (Here she jerked her chin at the maid, who had let the book fall to the floor.) "They're trying to get in. My father's still at the office with the car, and the bearer's gone to the market. What shall we do?"

Now the sister—she'd been too deep in thought earlier—could hear the rattling of the locked gate, the angry yells that grew louder even as she listened, and then a clanging, as of rocks being thrown. Soon they'd break the lock and be on them.

The sister stood up, her whole body trembling. She had to do something—and soon. But what? She tried to think of what her sister would have done—not the woman who now lay in the hospital as though at the bottom of a lake, with all that stagnant water pressing down on her, but her vibrant earlier self. She closed her eyes to remember the wife's strong, sweet voice, the confident grace of her gestures, and when she opened them she told the *darwan*'s daughter to fetch the *mali* and the cook.

"Take Khuku to her room," she said to the maid, "and stay there, no matter what."

The maid stared at her as though she hadn't understood.

"Go!" snapped the sister, suddenly furious with her, and the maid moved away, holding the little girl's hand. There was something odd about her walk, but the sister, rushing to call the police, couldn't tell what it was. Years later, as she watched a film about migrating birds, it would strike her that

the maid had moved with the stiff gait of lost seabirds that find themselves in a landlocked field far from home.

The sister felt a little better after she had reached the police.

"They'll be here right away," she told the anxiously waiting *mali* and cook. "Now you come with me to the gate."

The cook twisted the dishcloth hanging from his shoulder. "Don't you think we should just stay in the house, Choto-didi, with the doors and windows locked? Don't you think you should call Dadababu?" Oily drops of sweat beaded his upper lip and the sister realized that he too had never faced anything like this before. Curiously, it made some of her fear dissipate.

"No," she said, answering his first question. (She wasn't ready to deal with the second, which really meant *why haven't you called him.)* "We must show them we're not afraid. *Now*. Once they break in we won't be able to control them, but if we act right away we still can." She was surprised at how calm she sounded, how logical, as though she really believed in what she was saying.

The three of them made their way to the gate, and when they were there the sister saw that the massive iron sheets were dented by rocks and the wrought-iron carvings of spears hung bent in unnatural shapes, like broken arms and legs. She looked at the faces on the other side, seeing them piecemeal—the rotted, tobacco-stained teeth, the flared nostrils, the corners of mouths turned down in hate so strong that she could smell it as clearly as their sweat. The eyes glazed with the euphoria of destruction. They weren't people, *real* people. Try as she might, she couldn't put their fragmented features

together to form an entire human face. The cold, quicksilver terror flooded her veins again, making her voice shake as she asked what they wanted, and from their wolfish grins she could see that they too sensed its presence.

"We want the girl. Give us the girl."

"Her mother wants her back, and so does her man. You got no right to keep her."

"Up to no good we hear, you folks. Taking advantage of a young girl like that."

"All you rich people, all alike, think you own the earth."

Clumps of onlookers had gathered at the edges of the mob by now, street vendors and sweepers, passersby on their way to work, servants from some of the neighboring houses. The sister searched their faces for support but found only elation at the prospect of drama, the rich folks finally getting what they deserve. She bit down on the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood, salty, metallic. The throbbing pain took away some of her fear.

"No one's keeping Sarala against her wishes. She doesn't want to go back to her mother, or her"—with a mental apology to the maid, she forced herself to say the word—"husband."

"Sarala! Is that what she's calling herself nowadays!"

"What's this about her not wanting? Everyone knows a daughter belongs to her parents, a wife to her husband. *Sahibi* talk like this is what's making our families fall apart."

"Look, miss, you better not stick your finger in what isn't your business. We got no quarrel with you. Just call the girl to the gate. We'll take her and be off."

"Shall I go get her?" whispered the cook.

The wife's face floated into the sister's vision. It was the palest yellow, as though, having been underwater a long time, it had taken on the color of lake sand. Strands of uncombed hair tangled around it like water weeds. The eyes were closed, in death or resignation.

"No," she said. "No!"

An angry sound, half roar, half hiss, rose from the crowd, and they moved closer. Someone began to rattle the gates again.

"You'll be sorry." She recognized the mother's voice, strangely happy, though in the melee she couldn't find her face.

A clod hit her shoulder, and something else—hard, abrasive—struck her cheek. They were throwing whatever they could get their hands on—mud, clumps of grass, pebbles. She could hear the pounding of stone on metal as someone attacked the lock again. She put up an arm to shield her face and heard the sharp crack as the lock gave. Someone—the *mali* perhaps—pushed her out of the way against the *hasnahana* bushes as the gates opened and the crowd pressed forward with a cry of jubilation.

And then she heard the sirens.

"Imagine!" said the aunt at the dinner table that night. "The police and everything, in *our* compound. Vans, sirens, handcuffs. The whole neighborhood gathered around, gaping. What shame! In my seventy-two years I've never seen any-

thing like this. The *hasnahana* bushes by the gate all trampled —it'll take years to grow them back. We should have got rid of that bad-luck girl a long time back, like I said."

"We should have," said the husband, fingering the strip of sticking plaster that ran down the side of his face. "I should have been firmer about it." There were white lines around his mouth, thin, tight lines that the sister tried to decipher, but couldn't quite. All she knew was that it wasn't just anger, nothing simple like that.

"And have you seen the gate?" said the aunt. "Completely ruined. That ironwork was from your grandfather's time. We'll never be able to replace it."

"Mr. Chowdhury from next door phoned this evening," said the husband, "to ask me what was the reason for such disgraceful goings-on. Those were his words. I've never been so humiliated."

The aunt clucked sympathetically.

"And worst of all, you're hurt," he added to the sister, indicating the bandage on her cheek. "I feel responsible for that."

"Please," said the sister through dry lips, for she could see where this was leading. "Don't worry about me."

"But think what might have happened if the police hadn't arrived just then!" said the husband. He gave a shudder, as though even the imagining of such a possibility was too much for him. Then he turned to the cook, who had been listening avidly from the doorway, and asked him to summon the maid, and when she arrived he told her, in his kind, reasonable voice, that he appreciated her difficulties but had to think of the reputation and safety of his household. Surely she

could see why he couldn't keep her on. All of this was very bad for the little girl, who was already upset by her mother being in the hospital; the people next door had complained, and rightly, that events like this were intolerable in a neighborhood that had been written up in *The Statesman* as one of the best in Calcutta; and look what had happened to Chotodidi—attacked and maybe scarred for the rest of her life.

"I'm fine," insisted the sister. "It's only a scratch." But no one paid her any attention.

"I have no doubts about your moral character," continued the husband. "However, I have no choice but to let you go."

The maid did not weep or plead to be kept on. From her unsurprised face the sister could see that she had known—perhaps for a long time—that this was going to happen.

"I'm sure you understand," said the husband.

"I understand," said the maid. There was something in her tone—an irony, perhaps—that made the husband lose his composure for a moment. But he recovered almost immediately and told her, in his customary benevolent tones, that of course she would be paid for the full month. And since it was dark already—he wasn't an unreasonable man—she could stay the night, as long as she was gone first thing in the morning.

In the middle of his sentence, the maid left the room.

"What impertinence," said the aunt. "Really, the lower classes today, I don't know what they're coming to. In my father's day, a servant would have been whipped for acting like that. Why . . ."

"You can't just send her away!" the sister cried. "It's not her fault."

"No one said it was," said the husband. Beneath the softness in his voice lay a razor edge of warning.

But the sister continued, "Her life will be ruined if she leaves here—her mother's bound to get hold of her again. And she was doing so well, learning to read and . . ."

"My first responsibility is the welfare of my family. That woman has caused nothing but trouble since the day she came."

The sister tried to garner strength from her morning's victory over the mob, to say something devastating that would make him choke on his hypocritical words. *I know why you're really getting rid of her.* But she wasn't ready for what such a comment might unleash. Besides, it was one thing to face a ragged bunch of intruders from the *bustee* and another to stand up against the suave power of her brother-in-law. Hating the conciliatory words even as she spoke, she said, "At least wait until Didi gets home—she was so fond of Sarala. . . ." She noticed with dismay that she was speaking in the past tense, as though the maid were gone already.

The husband, who had also noticed the slip, gave a victorious smile. "All the more reason for her to go right now. We wouldn't want your sister to go through another trauma right after she comes back from the hospital, would we? And you know just as well as I that your sister, dear woman though she is, is prone to get overly emotional."

"Please," the sister tried once more, because she had promised her sister. But she knew it was no use.

The husband held up his hand.

"Credit me with a little intelligence. I know what's best

for my household. You *will* agree that I'm still the head of this household, no?"

The sister felt as though a fist were squeezing her chest, leaving no room for breath. As she pushed away her half-eaten dinner and rose to leave, she heard the husband's voice saying, from very far away, "If I were you, I wouldn't agitate your sister by telling her any of this. In her unstable condition, something fatal may well occur. . . ."

And so the wife knew nothing of what happened until she came home with her new baby, who was born full-term and healthy—which was more than people had hoped for—and was, besides, a boy. She was swept up into a flurry of congratulatory visits and general jubilation. (Even the aunt had only good things to say about her ability to mother such a charming, bright-eyed son, and with so much hair, too, just like his father when he'd been a baby.) But one afternoon she called the sister into her bedroom, where the new air conditioner which the husband had bought for the baby hummed comfortingly, and asked her what exactly had gone on while she'd been away.

The sister looked away from the wife's eyes, their dark, penetrating gaze, to where the baby slept. She stared at his dimpled knees, his little fisted hands that twitched from time to time, his impossibly tiny, perfect mouth that was puckered as though ready for a kiss. She loved him so much already that every time she looked at him she felt a tugging pain in her chest. He was so defenseless. Without a father, he would be

more so. And Khuku with her luminous, wondering eyes—she would lose all chances for a good marriage if the scandal of a broken home stained her life. And the wife herself, what future was there for women who, no matter how pressing the reason, left their husbands' homes?

The night the husband dismissed the maid, the sister ran from the dinner table all the way up to the storeroom, where the maid was gathering her things.

"You're not leaving tonight?" the sister asked, distressed, and then, "But where will you go?"

"I'm not sure," the maid said, and for the first time her voice trembled. In the passage light her face looked young and afraid.

"I'm sorry," the sister said, clasping the maid's hand in her own. "I'm really sorry. I wish I could do something."

"Nothing to be done now," the maid said, gently disengaging her fingers. And the sister realized that the maid knew that she knew, and that she forgave her for not accusing the husband, for not using his lapse to help the maid's case.

"Tell Didi . . ." the maid started, then broke off, so that for a long time after the sister would wonder what she had wanted the wife to know. About the husband's actions? About her own fidelity to the woman who had taken her in? About injustice and ill chance? Whatever it was, she knew she couldn't tell it to her sister. But she did tell her the last thing the maid said, with a sigh, before she disappeared around the corner of the passage. *I wish I could have seen her one last time.*

"I wish I could have too," the wife replied. She wiped her eyes with the edge of her sari and, leaving her sleeping

baby, went to the storeroom which no one had entered since the maid's departure. Following her, the sister saw something she hadn't noticed that night. The maid hadn't taken all her belongings with her. Piled neatly in the far corner of the tiny room lay the slate and chalk box and the readers the maid had studied with such passionate care. When the wife picked them up, the women noticed something else—at the bottom of the pile was the saffron sari.

"Poor Sarala," the wife said after a long silence, smoothing out the delicate, crushed fabric. "Poor, poor girl." She put the small pile back just as it had been and closed the door of the storeroom behind her. In the few remaining days of the sister's visit, she did not mention the maid again.

It was over a year later when the sister returned to Calcutta, this time to pick out her wedding trousseau, for her marriage had recently been arranged. It was a good match. Her husband-to-be was an engineer for Ralli's Fans and lived in a large company flat in Khiddirpore, a fairly decent Calcutta neighborhood, and owned his own scooter—all of which, everyone agreed, was a fine achievement for a young man not yet thirty. He wasn't bad-looking either.

Perhaps it was the excitement of the coming wedding and all the shopping to be done, or perhaps the pleasure of seeing the children who crowded around her, the little one tripping over his feet in his excitement, shouting *mashi, mashi.* Or maybe it was the glowing joy with which her sister embraced her saying, "My dear, I'm so glad. He seems like a really nice man. Besides, we'll practically be neighbors. We'll

be able to see each other all the time—I can send the car for you in the afternoons when the men are at work—and gossip to our hearts' content. And our children can grow up together." At any rate, the sister found herself enjoying hugely the visit she'd looked to with some dread. Even conversing with her brother-in-law, who was as debonairly charming as ever, was less difficult than she'd feared.

This night, for example, on their way to a housewarming ceremony at the new home of a business associate, he was jovially discussing her husband-to-be. The poor man had no chance, he said. She would control every waking moment of his life, and probably his dreams as well, just like her *didi* did with *her* husband. It was the fate of married men.

In the back of the car—it was a new one this time, a powder-blue Rolls Royce, because the husband had recently been made manager of his branch—the wife smiled and shook her head indulgently. She looked at her sister over the heads of the children, who were dressed, according to the husband's instructions, in elaborate party clothes befitting his new position. "He likes to joke, your brother-in-law," she said as she straightened the little boy's silk *kurta* and tucked a curl into the girl's filigreed gold headband.

"Dadababu." It was the driver, sounding anxious. "There's a *michil* up ahead. If we get caught in it, we'll be stuck for hours."

"Damn!" said the husband with a scowl. "These strikers and union-*wallahs*, always blocking the roads with their flags and their shouts, their unreasonable demands. Messing up the lives of decent folks. They should be thrown in jail, the lot of them, like when the British were here. Teach them a lesson."

To the driver he added, "Take another road, and make sure we get to the ceremony on time."

"The only other way is through the *mandi*," said the driver hesitantly.

"We'll have to take it then," the husband said, annoyed. He waved an impatient hand at the driver. "Go on, what are you waiting for?"

The sister leaned forward, staring, as the car turned sharply and entered an alleyway barely wide enough for a vehicle to pass. She'd never been in this part of the city. She noticed that the pavements were more crowded here, and with a different kind of people. There were, of course, the usual vendors who spilled onto the street with their wares of sweet-smelling jasmine garlands, colorful glass bangles, and hot onion *pakoras*. And the ubiquitous *chai*-boys hurried back and forth with racks of tea glasses from which steam rose and mingled with the vapor from the gas street lamps. But what about the men—large numbers of them, dressed in embroidered *kurtas* with glittering buttons, garlands wrapped about their hands—who sauntered up and down the street, seemingly going nowhere? And the women who crowded the balconies of the narrow buildings lining the road, their lips red with betel juice, thick lines of *surma* smearing their eyelids? They jangled their bracelets as they waved to the passing men and let the *palloos* of their gauzy nylex saris slide artfully from their bosoms. The sister's cheeks grew hot as she realized who they were.

"Can't you hurry?" the husband asked the driver in an irritated tone.

"Sorry, Dadababu—there's just too many people—and

you know how they are nowadays, ready to smash the car windows if you even touch them with a fender."

The wife had been trying to divert the children's attention from the street with a game of rhymes, but as the car lurched to a halt at a corner, she glanced up. Three women were standing on the pavement, and when the car stopped one called out something to the men in front and blew them a kiss, while the other two burst into raucous laughter.

"Disgusting," said the husband, turning away, but the wife, who'd been staring at the woman who had spoken, drew her breath in sharply.

"Isn't that Sarala?" she said, and started to roll down her window.

"What the hell are you doing!" exclaimed the husband. "Are you crazy? Don't you realize that these are . . . ?"

"It's Sarala, I'm sure it is," said the wife, and leaning out of her window she called breathlessly, "Sarala! Sarala!"

"Put up your window this minute," shouted the husband. And to the driver, furiously, "Get out of here. Right now. I don't care how you do it."

In the back seat, the children, scared by the shouting, had started to cry, but the wife didn't seem to hear them. Or the sister, who was tugging at the *palloo* of her *zari*-embroidered sari, pleading for her to sit back.

"Sarala," she called again. She was struggling with the lock now, trying to open the door as the car inched forward.

The woman creased her eyes and bent to peer into the car's dark plush interior. The sister stared, fascinated, at the gaping neck of her low-cut blouse, the white powder layering

the cleavage between the breasts. Fumes of cheap perfume and alcohol filled the car. The face—was it the maid's? How could the wife seem so certain? She herself couldn't see sufficiently past the plaster of makeup, past the jaded droop of eyelid and mouth, to be sure.

The husband reached across from the front seat and grabbed the wife's arm, his mouth taut with anger or fear.

But the wife reached out through the window with her other hand, its pale, cool fingers shining with her wedding rings, toward the woman. "Sarala," she said, "it's me, Didi."

The woman stared at her for a moment, then spat. A bloodred wad of betel leaf splattered against the wife's palm. She sat there looking at it, long after the woman had swung away, long after the husband had jerked her away from the window and ordered the sister to roll it up. After the driver, finding a fortunate gap in the crowd, had roared forward. After the sister, with shaking fingers, had scrubbed and scrubbed at her hand with a lace-edged handkerchief until no trace of the stain was left.

"That was stupid," the husband snapped as the car, having made it back to the main road, picked up speed. "Those women—they're no better than animals. She could have done worse—snatched your rings, your bangles, anything."

"It was Sarala, I know it," the wife said in a voice of toneless calm which frightened the sister more than any hysterical outburst.

The husband's mouth was an ugly gash in his face. "That was a whore, do you understand, a *whore*." But his voice, thought the sister, shook the tiniest bit.

Next morning the wife called the *ayah* to the storeroom and handed her the things the maid had left behind.

"Burn them," she said.

"Everything?" asked the *ayah,* her voice high with shocked disapproval. "Even *this?*" She ran a longing hand over the flawless, petal-soft surface of the saffron sari, finer than anything she ever hoped to own.

"Especially that," said the wife. Her face seemed composed entirely of planes and angles, as though it would never soften into a smile again.

"But it's so beautiful—it would be such a waste," said the *ayah.* A note at once accusing and cajoling crept into her voice. "You could maybe let me have it?"

"Burn it," shouted the wife. The *ayah,* who had never before heard her mistress raise her voice, backed away in fear. "Didn't you hear me? Burn it right now if you want to keep your job."

("Imagine!" the *ayah* would later say indignantly to the other servants, who had, of course, been given a full account of the evening by the driver. "She threatened to fire me. *Me,* who's been working for this household twenty years, long before she came into it. And all over a sari she'd given to that slut."

"Shows you what strong *jadu* that girl worked in the short time she was here," the cook responded, making a sign to ward off the evil eye.)

The wife shut herself in her room and did not open the

door all day and all night, not when the sister called her for lunch, not when the children, crying at naptime, came looking for her. Even when the husband, back from work, rattled the knob and said, *What nonsense is this now,* she remained inside, so silent that the sister wondered apprehensively if she had done something to harm herself.

But in the morning she rose and took her bath and combed her long wet hair neatly down her back. She put on a sunrise-red *bindi* and a freshly ironed *dhakai* sari and set out office clothes for the husband (who, forced to sleep for the first time in his life in the guest room, had submitted to this indignity with surprising meekness). She summoned the cook and told him what to make for lunch and dinner, reminding him to drain the fried *brinjal* on newspapers before serving it, warning him not to put any chili paste in the children's chicken curry, nor any *dhania* leaf either, because it always made the little boy throw up. She played Ludo with the children until they went for their nap, then called the sister to come and choose a suitable design, from the Sheffield catalogue that the husband ordered each year from Britain, for the silver dinner set that was to be their wedding gift to her. In the evening she sat on the veranda with the family and served tea in the fragile Wedgewood cups that had been part of her dowry and wiped the children's mouths and made conversation in a voice calm as the just-watered jasmine bushes that lined the steps.

And it was like this every day till the end of the sister's visit, as though that brief upheaval of household had never been. As though no one had seen that woman with her tawdry

clothes, her lewd, painted face. Her contempt-filled eyes that came back to haunt the sister—and surely the husband?—when they lay defenseless under the onslaught of sleep. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief that things were back to normal—it had been so discomfiting to have the wife behave in that crazed manner, even for a day.

But sometimes in the heat-encrusted afternoons when the wife looked up from a piece of embroidery to stare through the window bars at the blank yellow sky, the sister felt that something was gone, irrevocably, from her face. How much had she guessed of the maid's story? It was impossible to tell. A patina of hardness that kept the sister from looking in had descended on her. Over the years it would thicken (though no one except the sister seemed to notice) into a burnished mask that gave away nothing. Watching, the sister would shiver, as though she felt the cold hardening of her own arteries. She would grieve silently and, yes, guiltily (no matter how often she told herself that it wasn't her fault) for that eager embracive grace which had once made her sister a rare and magical being.

Night has taken over the lawn by the time Deepa Mashi finishes the story. We sit in the dark room, held by the echo of her words, until she reaches over to switch on the lamp. Her cheeks glimmer wetly in the sudden light.

"Mashi, you're crying."

Mashi laughs embarrassedly, dismissively. "Oh, you know me, I'm too emotional. No wonder Uncle is always

scolding me about it. Any sad story can make me cry. Remember the time we went to see that movie about the kidnapped girl, what was it, *Umrao Jaan,* at the Globe—I went through three handkerchiefs. . . ."

But there's something more. I feel it in the uneasy silence that has gathered in the corners of the room, among the houseplants and knick-knacks and wall hangings that look suddenly dusty and sad, as though they embodied some unendingly futile human endeavor—a search for beauty, a belief in luck. A hope that happiness will endure. My aunt's beleaguered world is not the simple one I have always taken it to be.

"Mashi," I ask, "why did you tell me this story?"

Mashi fidgets, uncomfortable with the bald, western habit I've acquired of going at things head on. It isn't proper, womanly, safe.

"I don't know," she finally says, not looking at me.

She's not telling me everything, I sense it. Is this a cautionary parable for brides-to-be? An ancestral tale taken from some outlying branch of our convoluted family tree? Then it strikes me—but without surprise, as though the realization had lain in my subconscious throughout the telling. The events could have happened to my own mother. The child that died of cholera, along with my father, was a boy. He could well have been the baby in the story, and I the little girl.

I try to push aside the cobwebbed years to get at those pre-epidemic days before my mother moved with me to the small flat (more suited to a widow's lifestyle and finances) where I grew up, the home where she still lives, the home

which appears in all my dreams of childhood—and my nightmares. And now it seems I remember an old house—long marble halls, bright magenta bougainvillea trailing the balcony, the cool whirr of fans in high-ceilinged bedrooms. Once unleashed, the images will not stop: afternoon games of Ludo and checkers, my father's cologne-scented kiss as I run down the graveled driveway, dodging the *mali*'s hose, to the black Studebaker that brought him home. Lullabies sung in a country accent haunting as the moonlight that glimmered in the palm trees.

I tell myself that it's only my aunt's storytelling taking root in my overfertile imagination. But I'm sure they happened to me, those sun-filled balcony mornings when I sat at the feet of a woman with a smile sweeter than palm-honey. Her hands were a gentle wind in my hair. When she lifted me onto her lap—*come, Khuku*—awkwardly, around the growing curve of her belly, I never wanted her to set me down. A woman so different from the mother I know that I want to hit out at someone, to shatter something, to scream until I have no breath left. For a moment I feel the burden of guilt my aunt must bear and wonder if her loving of me, all these years, has been in part an attempt at reparation.

The others, they existed too—the cranky *ayah* with her bark-wrinkled face, the deaf aunt whose snores cut through my sleep like a raspy saw, the sweaty cook who made the divinest rice pudding, thickly studded with sugared almonds and fat golden raisins. The slim girl with long hair who played catch with me in the gloom of evening under the *lichu* trees and read to me of jinns and water witches in a shivery, silvery voice.

And that last evening—I'm not just giving form to my aunt's words when I see it again. The forbidden street filled with the bitter scent of drying marigold and jasmine. A woman's lips twisted in a sneer that is perhaps her defense against heartbreak. A man's dark face where fear battles rage. My mother curling her fingers around the red stain in her palm as though around a wound that will never heal, while the brightness drains from her face.

"It's my mother's story, isn't it," I say to Mashi.

"Oh dear!" Mashi wrings her hands in agitation. "What an idea! It's just a story—I should never have brought it up."

I know she will not tell me any more. It's how we survive, we Indian women whose lives are half light and half darkness, stopping short of revelations that would otherwise crisp away our skins. I'm left alone to figure the truth of the story, to puzzle out why it was given to me.

And then, along the illogical byways of thought, Bijoy's face flashes against my raw, aching eyelids, handsome and charming and full of laughter, but also—I have never admitted this before—implacable. I wonder if the story (though not intended as such by my aunt) is a warning for me, a preview of my own life which I thought I had fashioned so cleverly, so differently from my mother's, but which is only a repetition, in a different *raga*, of her tragic song. Perhaps it is like this for all daughters, doomed to choose for ourselves, over and over, the men who have destroyed our mothers.

"It's late," says Deepa Mashi. "I'd better start dinner. Uncle will be *so* annoyed if he finds out how I've been wasting the afternoon away on silly stories." But she doesn't move, and

when I reach for her hand, she holds tightly to my fingers. We sit like this, two women caught in the repeating, circular world of shadow and memory, watching where the last light, silky and fragile, has spilled itself just above the horizon like the *palloo* of a saffron sari.

THE DISAPPEARANCE

AT FIRST WHEN THEY HEARD ABOUT THE DISAPPEARANCE, people didn't believe it.

Why, we saw her just yesterday at the Ram Ratan Indian Grocery, friends said, picking out radishes for pickling. And wasn't she at the Mountain View park with her little boy last week, remember, we waved from our car and she waved back, she was in that blue *salwaar-kameez*, yes, she never did wear American clothes. And the boy waved too, he must be, what, two and a half? Looks just like her with those big black eyes, that dimple. What a shame, they said, it's getting so that you aren't safe anywhere in this country nowadays.

Because that's what everyone suspected, including the husband. Crime. Otherwise, he said to the investigating policeman (he had called the police that very night), how could a young Indian woman wearing a yellow-flowered *kurta* and Nike walking shoes just *disappear*? She'd been out for her

evening walk, she took one every day after he got back from the office. Yes, yes, always alone, she said that was her time for herself. (He didn't quite understand that, but he was happy to watch his little boy, play ball with him, perhaps, until she returned to serve them dinner.)

Did you folks have a quarrel, asked the policeman, looking up from his notepad with a frown, and the husband looked directly back into his eyes and said, No, of course we didn't.

Later he would think about what the policeman had asked, while he sat in front of his computer in his office, or while he lay in the bed which still seemed to smell of her. (But surely that was his imagination—the linen had been washed already.) He *had* told the truth about them not having a quarrel, hadn't he? (He prided himself on being an honest man, he often told his son how important it was not to lie, see what happened to Pinocchio's nose. And even now when the boy asked him where Mama was, he didn't say she had gone on a trip, as some of his friends' wives had advised him. I don't know, he said. And when the boy's thin face would crumple, want Mama, when she coming back, he held him in his lap awkwardly and tried to stroke his hair, like he had seen his wife do, but he couldn't bring himself to say what the boy needed to hear, *soon-soon*. I don't know, he said over and over.)

They hadn't really had a fight. She wasn't, thank God, the quarrelsome type, like some of his friends' wives. Quiet. That's how she was, at least around him, although sometimes

when he came home unexpectedly he would hear her singing to her son, her voice slightly off-key but full and confident. Or laughing as she chased him around the family room, Mama's going to get you, get you, both of them shrieking with delight until they saw him. Hush now, she would tell the boy, settle down, and they would walk over sedately to give him his welcome-home kiss.

He couldn't complain, though. Wasn't that what he had specified when his mother started asking, When are you getting married, I'm getting old, I want to see a grandson before I die.

If you can find me a quiet, pretty girl, he wrote, not brash, like Calcutta girls are nowadays, not with too many western ideas. Someone who would be relieved to have her husband make the major decisions. But she had to be smart, at least a year of college, someone he could introduce to his friends with pride.

He'd flown to Calcutta to view several suitable girls that his mother had picked out. But now, thinking back, he can only remember her. She had sat, head bowed, jasmine plaited into her hair, silk sari draped modestly over her shoulders, just like all the other prospective brides he'd seen. Nervous, he'd thought, yearning to be chosen. But when she'd glanced up there had been a cool, considering look in her eyes. Almost disinterested, almost as though *she* were wondering if he would make a suitable spouse. He had wanted her then, had married her within the week in spite of his mother's protests (had she caught that same look?) that something about the girl just didn't feel *right*.

He was a good husband. No one could deny it. He let

her have her way, indulged her, even. When the kitchen was remodeled, for example, and she wanted pink and gray tiles even though he preferred white. Or when she wanted to go to Yosemite Park instead of Reno, although he knew he would be dreadfully bored among all those bearshit-filled trails and dried-up waterfalls. Once in a while, of course, he had to put his foot down, like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes. But he always softened his no's with a remark like, What for, I'm here to take care of you, or, You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more feminine. He would pull her onto his lap and give her a kiss and a cuddle which usually ended with him taking her to the bedroom.

That was another area where he'd had to be firm. Sex. She was always saying, Please, not tonight, I don't feel up to it. He didn't mind that. She was, after all, a well-bred Indian girl. He didn't expect her to behave like those American women he sometimes watched on X-rated videos, screaming and biting and doing other things he grew hot just thinking about. But her reluctance went beyond womanly modesty. After dinner for instance she would start on the most elaborate household projects, soaping down the floors, changing the liners in cabinets. The night before she disappeared she'd started cleaning windows, taken out the Windex and the rags as soon as she'd put the boy to bed, even though he said, Let's go. Surely he couldn't be blamed for raising his voice at those times (though never so much as to wake his son), or for grabbing her by the elbow and pulling her to the bed, like he did that last night. He was always careful not to hurt her, he prided himself on that. Not even a little slap, not like some of the men he'd

known growing up, or even some of his friends now. And he always told himself he'd stop if she really begged him, if she cried. After some time, though, she would quit struggling and let him do what he wanted. But that was nothing new. That could have nothing to do with the disappearance.

Two weeks passed and there was no news of the woman, even though the husband had put a notice in the *San Jose Mercury* as well as a half-page ad in *India West*, which he photocopied and taped to neighborhood lampposts. The ad had a photo of her, a close-up taken in too-bright sunlight where she gazed gravely at something beyond the camera. WOMAN MISSING, read the ad. REWARD $100,000. (How on earth would he come up with that kind of money, asked his friends. The husband confessed that it would be difficult, but he'd manage somehow. His wife was more important to him, after all, than all the money in the world. And to prove it he went to the bank the very same day and brought home a sheaf of forms to fill so that he could take out a second mortgage on the house.) He kept calling the police station, too, but the police weren't much help. They were working on it, they said. They'd checked the local hospitals and morgues, the shelters. They'd even sent her description to other states. But there were no leads. It didn't look very hopeful.

So finally he called India and over a faulty long-distance connection that made his voice echo eerily in his ear told his mother what had happened. My poor boy, she cried, left all alone (the word flickered unpleasantly across his brain, *left, left*), how can you possibly cope with the household and a

child as well. And when he admitted that yes, it was very difficult, could she perhaps come and help out for a while if it wasn't too much trouble, she had replied that of course she would come right away and stay as long as he needed her, and what was all this American nonsense about too much trouble, he was her only son, wasn't he. She would contact the wife's family too, she ended, so he wouldn't have to deal with that awkwardness.

Within a week she had closed up the little flat she had lived in since her husband's death, got hold of a special family emergency visa, and was on her way. Almost as though she'd been waiting for something like this to happen, said some of the women spitefully. (These were his wife's friends, though maybe acquaintances would be a more accurate word. His wife had liked to keep to herself, which had been just fine with him. He was glad, he'd told her several times, that she didn't spend hours chattering on the phone like the other Indian wives.)

He was angry when this gossip reached him (perhaps because he'd had the same insidious thought for a moment when, at the airport, he noticed how happy his mother looked, her flushed excited face appearing suddenly young). Really, he said to his friends, some people see only what they *want* to see. Didn't *they* think it was a good thing she'd come over? Oh yes, said his friends. Look how well the household was running now, the furniture dusted daily, laundry folded and put into drawers (his mother, a smart woman, had figured out the washing machine in no time at all). She cooked all his favorite dishes, which his wife had never managed to learn quite right, and she took *such* good care of the little boy,

walking him to the park each afternoon, bringing him into her bed when he woke up crying at night. (He'd told her once or twice that his wife had never done that, she had this idea about the boy needing to be independent. What nonsense, said his mother.) Lucky man, a couple of his friends added and he silently agreed, although later he thought it was ironic that they would say that about a man whose wife had disappeared.

As the year went on, the husband stopped thinking as much about the wife. It wasn't that he loved her any less, or that the shock of her disappearance was less acute. It was just that it wasn't on his mind all the time. There would be stretches of time—when he was on the phone with an important client, or when he was watching after-dinner TV or driving his son to kiddie gym class—when he would forget that his wife was gone, that he had had a wife at all. And even when he remembered that he had forgotten, he would experience only a slight twinge, similar to what he felt in his teeth when he drank something too cold too fast. The boy, too, didn't ask as often about his mother. He was sleeping through the nights again, he had put on a few pounds (because he was finally being fed right, said the grandmother), and he had started calling her "Ma," just like his father did.

So it seemed quite natural for the husband to, one day, remove the photographs of his wife from the frames that sat on the mantelpiece and replace them with pictures of himself and his little boy that friends had taken on a recent trip to Great America, and also one of the boy on his grandma's lap,

holding a red birthday balloon, smiling (she said) exactly like his father used to at that age. He put the old pictures into a manila envelope and slid them to the back of a drawer, intending to show them to his son when he grew up. The next time his mother asked (as she had been doing ever since she got there), shall I put away all those saris and *kameezes*, it'll give you more space in the closet, he said, if you like. When she said, it's now over a year since the tragedy, shouldn't we have a prayer service done at the temple, he said OK. And when she told him, you really should think about getting married again, you're still young, and besides, the boy needs a mother, shall I contact second aunt back home, he remained silent but didn't disagree.

Then one night while cooking cauliflower curry, her specialty, his mother ran out of *hing*, which was, she insisted, essential to the recipe. The Indian grocery was closed, but the husband remembered that sometimes his wife used to keep extra spices on the top shelf. So he climbed on a chair to look. There were no extra spices, but he did find something he had forgotten about, an old tea tin in which he'd asked her to hide her jewelry in case the house ever got burgled. Nothing major was ever kept there. The expensive wedding items were all stored in a vault. Still, the husband thought it would be a good idea to take them into the bank in the morning.

But when he picked up the tin it felt surprisingly light, and when he opened it, there were only empty pink nests of tissue inside.

He stood there holding the tin for a moment, not

breathing. Then he reminded himself that his wife had been a careless woman. He'd often had to speak to her about leaving things lying around. The pieces could be anywhere—pushed to the back of her makeup drawer or forgotten under a pile of books in the spare room where she used to spend inordinate amounts of time reading. Nevertheless he was not himself the rest of the evening, so much so that his mother said, What happened, you're awfully quiet, are you all right, your face looks funny. He told her he was fine, just a little pain in the chest area. Yes, he would make an appointment with the doctor tomorrow, no, he wouldn't forget, now could she please leave him alone for a while.

The next day he took the afternoon off from work, but he didn't go to the doctor. He went to the bank. In a small stuffy cubicle that smelled faintly of mold, he opened his safety deposit box to find that all her jewelry was gone. She hadn't taken any of the other valuables.

The edges of the cubicle seemed to fade and darken at the same time, as though the husband had stared at a lightbulb for too long. He ground his fists into his eyes and tried to imagine her on that last morning, putting the boy in his stroller and walking the twenty minutes to the bank (they only had one car, which he took to work; they could have afforded another, but why, he said to his friends, when she didn't even know how to drive). Maybe she had sat in this very cubicle and lifted out the emerald earrings, the pearl choker, the long gold chain. He imagined her wrapping the pieces carefully in plastic bags, the thin, clear kind one got at the grocery for vegetables, then slipping them into her purse. Or did she just throw them in anyhow, the strands of the necklace

tangling, the brilliant green stones clicking against each other in the darkness inside the handbag, the boy laughing and clapping his hands at this new game.

At home that night he couldn't eat any dinner, and before he went to bed he did thirty minutes on the dusty exercise bike that sat in the corner of the family room. Have you gone crazy, asked his mother. He didn't answer. When he finally lay down, the tiredness did not put him to sleep as he had hoped. His calves ached from the unaccustomed strain, his head throbbed from the images that would not stop coming, and the bedclothes, when he pulled them up to his neck, smelled again of his wife's hair.

Where was she now? And with whom? Because surely she couldn't manage on her own. He'd always thought her to be like the delicate purple passion-flower vines that they'd put up on trellises along their back fence, and once, early in the marriage, had presented her with a poem he'd written about this. He remembered how, when he held out the sheet to her, she'd stared at him for a long moment and a look he couldn't quite read had flickered in her eyes. Then she'd taken the poem with a small smile. He went over and over all the men she might have known, but they (mostly his Indian friends) were safely married and still at home, every one.

The bed felt hot and lumpy. He tossed his feverish body around like a caught animal, punched the pillow, threw the blanket to the floor. Even thought, for a wild moment, of shaking the boy awake and asking him, *Who did your mama see?* And as though he had an inbuilt antenna that picked up his father's agitation, in the next room the boy started crying

(which he hadn't done for months), shrill screams that left him breathless. And when his father and grandmother rushed to see what the problem was, he pushed them from him with all the strength in his small arms, saying, Go way, don't want you, want Mama, want Mama.

After the boy had been dosed with gripe water and settled in bed again, the husband sat alone in the family room with a glass of brandy. He wasn't a drinker. He believed that alcohol was for weak men. But somehow he couldn't face the rumpled bed just yet, the pillows wrested onto the floor. The unknown areas of his wife's existence yawning blackly around him like chasms. Should he tell the police, he wondered, would it do any good? What if somehow his friends came to know? *Didn't I tell you, right from the first*, his mother would say. And anyway it was possible she was already dead, killed by a stranger from whom she'd hitched a ride, or by a violent, jealous lover. He felt a small, bitter pleasure at the thought, and then a pang of shame.

Nevertheless he made his way to the dark bedroom (a trifle unsteadily; the drink had made him light-headed) and groped in the bottom drawer beneath his underwear until he felt the coarse manila envelope with her photos. He drew it out and, without looking at them, tore the pictures into tiny pieces. Then he took them over to the kitchen, where the trash compactor was.

The roar of the compactor seemed to shake the entire house. He stiffened, afraid his mother would wake and ask what was going on, but she didn't. When the machine ground to a halt, he took a long breath. Finished, he thought. Fin-

ished. Tomorrow he would contact a lawyer, find out the legal procedure for remarriage. Over dinner he would mention to his mother, casually, that it was OK with him if she wanted to contact second aunt. Only this time he didn't want a college-educated woman. Even good looks weren't that important. A simple girl, maybe from their ancestral village. Someone whose family wasn't well off, who would be suitably appreciative of the comforts he could provide. Someone who would be a real mother to his boy.

He didn't know then that it wasn't finished. That even as he made love to his new wife (a plump, cheerful girl, good-hearted, if slightly unimaginative), or helped his daughters with their homework, or disciplined his increasingly rebellious son, he would wonder about *her*. Was she alive? Was she happy? With a sudden anger that he knew to be irrational, he would try to imagine her body tangled in swaying kelp at the bottom of the ocean where it had been flung. Bloated. Eaten by fish. But all he could conjure up was the intent look on her face when she rocked her son back and forth, singing a children's rhyme in Bengali, *Khoka jabe biye korte, shonge chhasho dhol, my little boy is going to be married, six hundred drummers.* Years later, when he was an old man living in a home for seniors (his second wife dead, his daughters moved away to distant towns, his son not on speaking terms with him), he would continue to be dazzled by that brief unguarded joy in her face, would say to himself, again, how much she must have hated me to choose to give *that* up.

But he had no inkling of any of this yet. So he switched off the trash compactor with a satisfied click, the sense of a job

well done and, after taking a shower (long and very hot, the way he liked it, the hard jets of water turning the skin of his chest a dull red), went to bed and fell immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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DOORS

IT ALL STARTED WHEN RAJ CAME TO LIVE WITH THEM.

But no, not really. There had been signs of trouble even earlier. Maybe that was why Preeti's mother had kept warning her right up to the time of the marriage.

"It'll never work, I tell you," she had declared gloomily as she placed a neatly folded pile of shimmery *dupattas* in the suitcase Preeti would be taking back to Berkeley with her after the wedding. "Here you are, living in the U.S. since you were twelve. And Deepak—he's straight out of India. Just because you took a few classes together at the university, and you liked how he talks, doesn't mean that you can live with him."

"Please, Ma!" Preeti paused halfway through emptying out her makeup drawer. "We've been over this a hundred times. Don't you think it's time to stop, considering the fact the wedding's tomorrow?"

"It's never too late to stop yourself from ruining your life," her mother said. "What do you *really* know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?"

"Now don't start on that again. You and Dad have had a happy enough marriage the last twenty-four years, haven't you?"

"Your father's not like the others. . . ."

"Nor is Deepak."

"And besides, he's mellowed over the years. You should have seen him when we first got married."

"Well, I'm sure with all the training you've given me, I'll be able to mellow Deepak in no time!"

"*That's* your problem!" Preeti's mother flared. "Making a joke of everything, thinking the world will always let you have your own way. I wish I *had* trained you better, like my mother did me, to be obedient and adjusting and forgiving. You're going to need it."

"Is this the same mother who was always at me to marry a nice Indian boy! The one who introduced me to all her friends' sons whenever I came home from college!"

"They were all brought up here, like you." Her mother refused to be charmed. "Not with a set of prehistoric values."

"Mom! Deepak is the most enlightened man I know!" Preeti spoke lightly, trying to push down her rising anger because she knew her mother's concern came from love.

"I want you to know you always have a home with us." Preeti's mother lowered the lid of the suitcase with a sigh, as though she were closing up a coffin.

"Enough of all this doom and gloom!" Preeti had given her mother a determined hug, though deep down she felt a twinge of fear at her ominous tone. "Let's not argue anymore, OK? Deepak and I love each other. We'll manage just fine."

Deepak's Indian friends had also been concerned when he'd met them at the International House Cafe to share the good news.

"*Yaar*, are you sure you're doing the right thing?" one of them had asked, staring down at the wedding invitation Deepak had handed him. "She's been here so long it's almost like she was born in this country. And you know how these 'American' women are, always bossing you, always thinking about themselves. . . ."

"It's no wonder we call them ABCDs—American-Born-Confused-*Desis*," quipped another friend as he took a swallow of beer.

"Preeti's different!" Deepak said angrily. "You know that—you've all met her many times. She's smart and serious and considerate. . . ."

"Me," said a third young man, adjusting his spectacles, "I'd go for an arranged marriage from back home any day, a pretty young girl from my parents' village, not too educated, brought up to treat a man right and not talk back. . . ."

"I can't believe you said that!" Deepak stood up so abruptly that his chair fell over with a crash. "Women aren't dolls or slaves. I *want* Preeti to make her own decisions. I'm proud that she's able to."

"Calm down, Deepak-*bhai*, we're only trying to help!

We don't want you to end up with a broken marriage a few years down the road . . ." someone protested.

"Our marriage isn't going to break up. It's going to be stronger than any traditional marriage because it's based on mutual respect," Deepak had flung over his shoulder as he walked out of the cafe.

On the whole it seemed that Preeti and Deepak had been right. They had lived together amicably for the last three years, at first in a tiny student apartment in Berkeley and then, after Deepak got a job with a computer firm, in a condominium in Milpitas. Preeti, who was still working on her dissertation, hadn't been too enthusiastic about moving to the suburbs, but she'd given in when Deepak pointed out how difficult his commute had become. And it was true, like he said, that she only had to come to campus a couple times a week to teach. In return he left all the decorating to her, letting her fill the rooms with secondhand shelves crammed with books, comfortable old couches and cushions piled on the floor, a worn Persian rug and multicolored wall hangings woven by a women's art co-op to which her friend Cathy belonged. He himself would have preferred to buy, on the Sears Home Improvement Plan, a brand-new sofa set (complete with shiny oak-finish end tables) and curtains that matched the bedspreads, but he figured that the house was her domain.

When finally, having settled in, they gave a housewarming party, all their friends had to admit that Deepak and Preeti had a fine marriage.

"Did you try some of those delicious *gulabjamuns* she fixed?" said one young man to another as they left. "Deepak sure lucked out, didn't he?"

"Yes, and did you hear how she got the Student of the Year award in her department? Pretty soon she'll land a cushy teaching job and start bringing in a fat paycheck as well!" replied the other, sighing enviously.

Preeti's Indian girlfriends were amazed at Deepak's helpfulness. "I can't believe it!" one exclaimed. "He actually knows where the kitchen is. That's more than my brothers do."

"Did you see how he refilled her plate for her and brought her her drink?" said another. "And his talk—it's always, *Preeti-this* and *Preeti-that*. Maybe I *should* let my mother arrange my marriage with her sister-in-law's second cousin's son in Delhi, like she's been wanting to."

Even Cathy, who wasn't easily impressed, pulled Preeti aside just before she left. "I must admit I had my doubts in the beginning, though I didn't want to say anything—your mother was already being so negative. Just like her I thought he'd turn out to be terribly chauvinistic, like other men I've seen from the old countries. And of course I know how stubborn and closemouthed *you* are! But I think you've both adjusted wonderfully. At the risk of sounding clichéd, I'd say you're a perfectly matched couple!"

"What was Cathy saying?" Deepak asked later, after all the guests had left. They were at the sink, she washing, he drying.

"She thinks we're a perfectly matched couple!" Preeti's

face glowed with pleasure as she rinsed a set of mugs. Cathy's comments meant a lot to her.

"Funny, that's what my friend Suresh said, too."

"Maybe they're right!"

"I think we should check it out—right now." Deepak dropped the towel and reached for her with a grin. "The dishes can wait till tomorrow."

None of the guests had known, of course, about the matter of doors.

Deepak liked to leave them open, and Preeti liked them closed.

Deepak had laughed about it at first, early in the marriage.

"Are the pots and pans from the kitchen going to come and watch us making love?" he would joke when she meticulously shut the bedroom door at night although there were just the two of them in the house. Or, "Do you think I'm going to come in and attack you?" when she locked the bathroom door behind her with an audible click. He himself always bathed with the door open, song and steam pouring out of the bathroom with equal abandon.

But soon he realized that it was not a laughing matter with her. Preeti would shut the study door before settling down with her Ph.D. dissertation. When in the garden, she would make sure the gate was securely fastened as she weeded. If there had been a door to the kitchen, she would have closed it as she cooked.

Deepak was puzzled by all this door shutting. He had

grown up in a large family, and although they had been affluent enough to possess three bedrooms—one for Father, one for Mother and his two sisters, and the third for the three boys—they had never observed boundaries. They had constantly spilled into each other's rooms, doors always left open for chance remarks and jokes.

He asked Preeti about it one night just before bed, when she came out of the bathroom where she always went to change into her nightie. She wasn't able to give him an answer.

"I don't know," she said, her brow wrinkled, folding and refolding her jeans. "I guess I'm just a private person. It's not like I'm shutting you out. I've just always done it this way. Maybe it has something to do with being an only child." Her eyes searched his face unhappily. "I know it's not what you're used to. Does it bother you?"

She seemed so troubled that Deepak felt a pang of guilt.

"No, no, I don't care, not at all," he rushed to say, giving her shoulders a squeeze. And really, he didn't mind, even though he didn't quite understand. People were different. He knew that. And he was more than ready to accept the unique needs of this exotic creature—Indian and yet not Indian—who had by some mysterious fortune become his wife.

So things went on smoothly—until Raj descended on them.

"Tomorrow!" Preeti was distraught, although she tried to hide it in the face of Deepak's obvious delight. Her mind raced over the list of things to be done—the guest bedroom dusted,

the sheets washed, a special welcome dinner cooked (that would require a trip to the grocery and the Indian store), perhaps some flowers. . . . And her advisor was pressuring her to turn in the second chapter of her dissertation, which wasn't going well.

"Yes, tomorrow! His plane comes in at ten-thirty at night." Deepak waved the telegram excitedly. "Imagine, it's been five years since I've seen him! We used to be inseparable back home although he was so much younger. He was always in and out of our house, laughing and joking and playing pranks. You won't believe some of the escapades we got into! I know you'll just love him—everyone does. And see, he calls you *bhaviji*—sister-in-law—already."

At the airport Raj was a lanky whirlwind, rushing from the gate to throw his arms around Deepak, kissing him loudly on both cheeks, oblivious to American stares. Preeti found his strong Bombay accent hard to follow as he breathlessly regaled them with news of old acquaintances that had Deepak throwing back his head in loud laughter. She watched him, thinking that she'd never seen him laugh like that before.

But the trouble really started after dinner.

"What a marvelous meal, *bhaviji*! I can see why Deepak is getting a potbelly!" Raj belched in appreciation as he pushed back his chair. "I know I'll sleep soundly tonight—my eyes are closing already. If you tell me where the bedsheets are, I'll bring them over and start making my bed while you're clearing the table."

"Thanks, Raj, but I made the bed already, upstairs in the guest room."

"The guest room? I'm not a guest, *bhavi*! I'm going to be

with you for quite a while. You'd better save the guest bedroom for real guests. About six square feet of space—right here between the dining table and the sofa—is all I need. See, I'll just move the chairs a bit, like this."

Seeing the look on Preeti's face, Deepak tried to intervene.

"Come on, Raju—why not use the guest bed for tonight since it's made already? We can work out the long-term arrangements later."

"*Aare bhai,* you know how I hate all this formal-tormal business. I won't be able to sleep up there! Don't you remember what fun it was to spread a big sheet on the floor of the living room and spend the night, all us boys together, telling stories? Have you become an *amreekan* or what? Come along and help me carry the bedclothes down. . . ."

Preeti stood frozen as his singsong voice faded beyond the bend of the stairs; then she made her own way upstairs silently. When Deepak came to bed an hour later, she was waiting for him.

"What! Not asleep yet? Don't you have an early class to teach tomorrow?"

"You have to leave for work early, too."

"Well, as a matter of fact I was thinking of taking a couple days off. You know—take Raju to San Francisco, maybe down to Carmel."

Preeti was surprised by the sudden surge of jealousy she felt. She tried to shake it off, to speak reasonably.

"I really don't think you should be neglecting your work—but that's your own business." She controlled her voice with an effort, not letting her displeasure color it. "What I do need

to straighten out is this matter of sleeping downstairs. I need to use the dining area early in the morning, and I can't do it with him sleeping there." She shuddered silently as she pictured herself trying to enjoy her quiet morning tea and the newspaper with him sprawled on the floor nearby—snoring, in all probability. "By the way, just what did he mean by he's going to be here for a long time?"

"Well, he wants to stay here until he completes his Master's—maybe a year and a half—and I told him that was fine with us. . . ."

"You *what*? Isn't this my house, too? Don't I get a say in who lives in it?"

"Fine, then. Go ahead and tell him that you don't want him here. Go ahead, wake him up and tell him tonight."

There was an edge to Deepak's voice that Preeti hadn't heard before. Staring at the stony line of his lips, she suddenly realized, frightened, that they were having their first serious quarrel. Her mother's face, triumphant in its woefulness, rose in her mind.

"You know that's not what I'm saying." She made her tone conciliatory. "I realize how much it means to you to have your old friend here, and I'll do my best to make him welcome. I'm just not used to having a long-term houseguest around, and it makes things harder when he insists on sleeping on the living-room floor." She offered him her most charming smile, desperately willing the stranger in his eyes—cold, defensive—to disappear.

It worked. He smiled back and pulled her to him, her own dear Deepak again, promising to get Raj to use the guest

room, gently biting the nape of her neck in that delicious way that always sent shivers up her spine. And as she snuggled against him with a deep sigh of pleasure, curving her body to fit his, Preeti promised herself to do her very best to accept Raj.

It was harder than she had expected, though.

The concept of doors did not exist in Raj's universe, and he ignored their physical reality—so solid and reassuring to Preeti—whenever he could. He would burst into her closed study to tell her of the latest events in his computer lab, leaving the door ajar when he left. He would throw open the door to the garage where she did the laundry to offer help, usually just as she was folding her underwear. Even when she retreated to her little garden in search of privacy, there was no escape. From the porch, he gave solicitous advice on the drooping fuchsias.

"A little more fertilizer, don't you think, *bhavi*? Really, this bottled stuff is no good compared to the cow dung my family uses in their vegetable garden. I tell you, *phul gobis* THIS size." He would hold up his hands to indicate a largeness impossible for cauliflowers, while behind him the swinging screen door afforded free entry to hordes of insects. Perhaps to set her an example, he left his own bedroom door wide open so that the honest rumble of his snores assaulted Preeti on her way to the bathroom every morning.

"Cathy, Raj is driving me up the wall," she told her friend when they met for coffee after class.

"Tell him that!"

"I can't! Deepak would be terribly upset. It has to do with hospitality and losing face—I guess it's a cultural thing."

"Well, have you discussed it with Deepak?"

"I tried, once or twice. He doesn't listen. It's like he's a different person nowadays—he's even beginning to sound different."

"How?"

"His accent—it's a lot more Indian, like Raj's."

"Preeti, you've got to talk to him." Over the rim of her cup, Cathy's eyes were wide with concern. "I haven't ever seen you so depressed. There are craters, literally, under your eyes, and you look like you've lost weight. Surely if he knew how strongly Raj's habits bothered you, he'd do something about them."

Cathy was right, Preeti thought on the way back as the BART train's jogging rhythm soothed her into drowsiness. She needed to make more of an effort to communicate with Deepak. Maybe tonight. She was glad she had taken the time that morning, before she left for school, to fix a *bharta*, the grilled eggplant dish which was one of his favorites. When she got home, she'd make some *pulao* rice—the kind he liked, with lots of fried cashews—and after dinner when they went to bed she'd lay her head in the curve of his shoulder and hold him tight and tell him exactly how she felt. Maybe they'd even make love—it seemed like a terribly long time since they'd done that.

But when she opened the door to the house, she was assaulted by a loud burst of *filmi* music. Deepak and Raj sat side by side on the family-room couch, watching an Indian

movie where a plump man wearing a hat and a bemused expression was serenading a haughty young woman. Both men yelled with laughter as the woman swung around, snatched the hat off her admirer's head, and stomped on it.

"*Vah*, look at those flashing eyes!" Raj exclaimed. "I tell you, none of our modern girls can match Nutan for style!" Noticing Preeti, he waved a cheery hand. "Oh, *bhavi*, there you are! Come join us. Deepu-*bhaiya* and I rented a couple of our favorite movies from the Indian video store. . . ."

"Yes," Deepak added, "that was a great idea of Raj's. I never thought I'd have such a terrific time watching these old videos. They bring back some really fun memories."

"I bet they do! *Bhavi*, did you know your husband used to be a regular street-corner Romeo in his bachelor days? *Yaar*, remember that girl who used to live across from your house in Birla Mansions? How you used to sing *chand-ke-tukde*—that means piece of moon, *bhavi*—whenever she waited at the bus stop . . . ?"

"That's enough, Raju! You'll get me in trouble now," Deepak said, but he looked rather pleased. "Preeti, come sit with us and I'll explain the Hindi words to you." He moved closer to Raj to make space on the couch, and Preeti noted with a twist of the heart how he casually let an arm fall over Raj's shoulder.

"I have to warm up dinner," she said through stiff lips.

"Oh, don't bother!" Deepak said. "We stopped for *samosas* at that little restaurant next to the video store—what is it—"

"Nusrat Cuisine," Raj supplied helpfully. "We're stuffed."

"We brought you back a few," Deepak said. "They're on the counter."

Preeti walked to the kitchen. Her body seemed heavy and unwieldy, as though she were moving in deep water. Emotions she didn't want to examine churned through her, insidious currents waiting to pull her under. She picked up the brown bag printed with the restaurant's logo and, without opening it, threw it in the trash can. She wanted to throw out the *bharta*, too, but with an effort she put it in the refrigerator.

As she started up the steps, she heard Deepak call behind her, "Don't you want to watch the movie?"

"No. I have a lot of schoolwork to catch up on." She knew she sounded ungracious. A party pooper, in Raj's language.

"Well, if you're sure. . . ."

"Do you think you could come upstairs soon?" She tried to make her voice bright and pleasant. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Sure thing. I'll be up in a bit."

This can't be happening to me, Preeti told herself as she stared into the bedroom mirror. In the dim light her face looked sallow, unwell. She tried to remember her past successes—standing on a university stage in Ohio receiving her B.A. degree from the college president, knowing that she was one of a handful of students with solid A's; opening an embossed envelope with trembling fingers to find that she'd been accepted at Berkeley; standing at a podium and hearing the roar of applause when she finished presenting a paper at a national conference. None of it seemed real. None of it

seemed to have happened to the woman who looked back at her from the mirror, the skin of her face drawn tight over cheekbones that stuck out too sharply. All her life she had believed that she could do anything she set her mind to; it was what her mother had always said. Now as a sudden wave of giddiness struck her, she felt doubt for the first time. Then she drew her breath in fiercely. *I won't let him ruin my life*, she said. For a moment it wasn't clear to her if it was Raj she was referring to, or Deepak.

She changed into the lacy pink nightdress Deepak had bought her for their first anniversary. She sprayed perfume on her wrists and practiced, in the mirror, the words she would say. *Think positive,* she told herself. *Losing your temper will achieve nothing.*

It was a couple of hours before Deepak opened the door of the bedroom. He was humming a Hindi song under his breath.

"You still awake?" He sounded surprised.

"Remember, I wanted to talk to you about something." *Calmly, calmly.* But her voice trembled, thin and high. Accusing.

"Sorry," Deepak said, a little shamefaced. "The movie was so good—I forgot all about the time." Then he gave a great yawn. "Maybe we can talk tomorrow?"

"No! I have to tell you now." Preeti spoke quickly, before she lost her nerve. "I can't live with Raj in the house anymore. He's driving me crazy. He's . . ."

"What d'you mean, he's driving you crazy?" Deepak's voice was suddenly testy. "He's only trying to be friendly, poor chap. I should think you'd be able to open up a bit more to

him. After all, we're the closest thing he has to family in this strange country."

"Even family members sometimes need time and space away from each other. In my family no one ever intruded. . . ."

"Well, maybe they should have," Deepak interrupted in a hard tone that made Preeti stare at him. "Maybe then you'd be a little more flexible now."

After this, Preeti took to locking herself up in the bedroom with her work in the evenings while downstairs Deepak and Raj talked over the old days as the stereo blared out the Kishore Kumar songs they'd grown up on. Often she fell asleep over her books and woke to the sound of Deepak's irritated knocks on the door.

"I just don't understand you nowadays!" he would exclaim with annoyance. "Why must you lock the bedroom door when you're reading? Isn't that being a bit paranoid? Maybe you should see someone about it."

Preeti would turn away in silence, thinking, *It can't be forever, he can't stay with us forever, I can put up with it until he leaves, and then everything will be perfect again.*

And so things might have continued had it not been for one fateful afternoon.

It was the end of the semester, and Preeti was lying on her bed, eyes closed. That morning her advisor had called her into his office to tell her that her dissertation lacked originality and depth. He suggested that she restructure the entire argument.

His final comment kept resounding in her brain: "I don't know what's been wrong with you for the past few months—you've consistently produced second-rate work. And you used to be one of my sharpest students! I still remember that article on Marlowe, so innovative. . . . Maybe you need a break—a semester away from school?"

"Not from school—it's a semester away from home that I need," she whispered now as the door banged downstairs and Raj's eager voice floated up to her.

"*Bhavi, bhavi*, where *are* you? Have I got great news for you!"

Preeti put her pillow over her head, willing him away like she tried to do with the dull, throbbing headaches that came to her so often nowadays. But he was at the bedroom door, knocking.

"Open up, *bhavi!* I have something to show you—I aced the Math final—I was the only one in the entire class. . . ."

"Not now, Raj, please, I'm very tired. Dinner's in the kitchen—do you think you could help yourself?"

"What's wrong? You have a headache? Wait a minute, I'll bring you some of my tiger balm—excellent for headaches."

She heard his footsteps recede, then return.

"Thanks, Raj," she called out to forestall any more conversation. "Just leave it outside. I don't feel like getting up for it right now."

"Oh, you don't have to get up. I'll bring it in to you." And before she could refuse, Raj had opened the door—how could she have forgotten to lock it?—and walked in.

Shocked, speechless, Preeti watched Raj. Holding a squat green bottle in his extended hand, he seemed to advance in slow motion across the suddenly enormous expanse of the bedroom that had been her last sanctuary. His lips moved, but she couldn't hear him through the red haze that was spreading across her eyes.

A voice pierced the haze, screaming at him to *get out, get out right now.* A hand snatched the bottle and hurled it against the wall where it shattered and fell in emerald fragments. Dimly she recognized the voice, the hand. They were hers. And then she was alone in the sudden silence.

The bedroom was as neat and tranquil as ever when Deepak walked in. Only a very keen eye would have noted the pale stain against the far wall.

"Are you OK? Raju mentioned something about you not feeling well." And then, as his glance fell on the packed suitcase by which Preeti was standing, "What's this?"

"I'm leaving," she said, her voice very calm. "I'm going to move in for a while with Cathy. . . ."

She watched, eyes expressionless, as Deepak swore softly and violently.

"You can't leave. What would people say? Besides, you're my wife. You belong in my home."

She looked at him a long moment. Somewhere in the back of her mind was a thought. M*other, you were right.* Oddly, it caused her no sorrow.

"It's Raju, isn't it? You just can't stand him, can you,

although he's tried and tried, poor fellow." Deepak's voice was bitter. "Very well, I'll get him out of your way. For good."

She listened silently to his footsteps fading down the stairs. A long, low murmur of voices came from the living room. Then she heard sounds of packing from the guest room. She realized that she was still standing and moved to sit on the bed. Her limbs felt stiff and wooden, and she had trouble bending her knees. Sometime later—she couldn't tell how much—from outside her bedroom door, Raj thanked her and wished her luck in the hushed voice people reserve for the very ill. The front door banged behind the men.

She was still sitting on the bed when Deepak returned and told her that Raj would be staying at a motel till he found a room on campus.

"Hope you're happy, now that you have the house all to yourself," he ended acidly. And then, "I'm going to sleep in the guest room."

From the master bedroom, Preeti could hear his awkward bed-making efforts, the muffled sound of pillows thrown on the floor, the creaking bedsprings. A part of her cried out to go to him, to apologize and offer to have Raj back. To fashion her curves to his warm body and let his lips—so familiar, so reassuring—soothe her into sleep.

Instead, for the first time, she lay down alone in the big bed they'd bought together the week before their marriage. She closed her eyes and tried to recall the happiness of that day, but there was only a black square filled with snow and

static, as when, while watching a video, one comes across a portion of the tape that has been erased by accident. She lay there, feeling the night cover her slowly, layer by cold, clean layer. And when the door finally clicked shut, she did not know whether it was in the guest room or deep inside her own being.

THE ULTRASOUND

My cousin Arundhati and I are both pregnant with our first babies, a fact which gives me great pleasure. Although she's in India and I'm here in California, we've kept close track of each other's progress. Each week we compare notes on the nausea (I have it worse than Runu, not just in the morning but through the entire day), the crippling sleepiness of the early afternoon (particularly hard on Runu since that's when she has to fix tea snacks for her in-laws), the depressing weight gain (we have no waists at all); the exhilarating sense of unrealness which makes us write, at the end of each letter, "Is this truly happening?"

We keep in touch mostly through letters. International calls are too expensive for my slender budget, since I'm still in school and there isn't much left of Sunil's salary after he sends money home to his parents. Still, once in a while, for a special occasion, I'll phone. Runu and I plan these calls for months in

"Mom!" Dinesh's voice breaks through my thoughts. There's an anxious edge to his voice. I realize he's been asking me something for a while.

"Sorry," I say.

"I said, how did your evening go?"

I pause for a moment, tempted. Then I say, grimacing, "I made a mess of things." I'm surprised by the lightness the admission brings. In the rush of it, I daringly add, "I'll tell you about it if you want. I could make us some hot *pista* milk. . . ." I reach out to draw him to me, a little afraid that he will pull away, will say, *Nah, Mom, I got stuff to do.* But he lowers his head so that his bristly hair tickles my cheek and gives me a quick, awkward hug.

"Sounds OK to me." He is smiling now, just a little. "Hey, Mom, you haven't made *pista* milk in a long time."

Later I stand over the stove, stirring the blended pistachios into the simmering milk, watching with wonder as it thickens beautifully. I know there will be other fights, other hurtful words we'll fling at each other, perhaps even tonight. Other times when I sit in the car, listening to the engine's seductive purr. Still, I take from the living-room cabinet two of the Rosenthal crystal glasses Mahesh gave me for our tenth anniversary, and when the creamy milk cools, pour it into them.

Tomorrow I'll start a letter to Mrinal.

The glasses glitter like hope. We raise them to each other solemnly, my son and I, and drink to our precious, imperfect lives.

GLOSSARY

The words below are from different Indian languages (mostly Bengali and Hindi). Some words, such as "bearer-boy" are Indianized British expressions from colonial times.

adivasi	member of indigenous tribe (the word itself means original people)
almirah	large closet
alu	potato
amchur	powdery mix made from ground mangoes, black salt, and other spices
amreekan	American
apsara	celestial nymph (from Indian mythology)
arre bhai	hey brother, a customary expression among men
ata	custard apple
ayah	nanny
babu	master, gentleman; common appellation for Bengali men
baisakhi	violent April thunderstorm
banja	barren

bearer-boy	young servant employed for running errands
bhadralok	people of good family
bhai	brother, a term often used between male friends
bhaiya	brother, a more informal term
bharta	spicy dish made from roasted egg-plant
bhaviji	sister-in-law; *ji* at the end of a word indicates respect
bindi	dot worn on forehead by many Indian women; a red one usually signifies that the woman is married
biriyani	fried rice dish seasoned with onions, raisins, and spices; can be prepared with vegetables, meat, or chicken
boudi	older brother's wife
bride-viewing	the process, involving a meeting of the potential bride and groom in the bride's home, by which marriages are arranged
brinjal	eggplant
bustee	slums
chachaji	uncle (father's brother)
chai	tea
champa	sweet-smelling gold-colored flower
chand-ke-tukde	epithet of admiration, literally, piece of moon
chapatis	Indian wheat bread similar to tortillas
chappals	sandals
charak	a fair held at a particular time of year

choli	close-fitting blouse worn with sari
chula	wood- or coal-burning stove
churidar	narrow pants worn by women (and sometimes men) under a long tunic *(kurta)*
dacoit	bandit
dain	mythical witch who devours human flesh
dal	lentil soup
darwan	gatekeeper
desh	country, a term often used by expatriate Indians in referring to India
dhakai	fine handloomed sari made in Bangladesh
dhania	coriander
dhoti	piece of cloth tied around the waist and reaching to ground; worn by men
didi	older sister
dupatta	long scarf worn with tunic *(kameez* or *kurta)*
filmi	pertaining to films
firingi	foreigner, westerner
genji	man's undershirt
ghazal	poetic song (from the Muslim tradition)
ghu-ghu	brown bird, similar to dove
girgiti	lizard
gulabjamun	dessert of fried dough balls soaked in syrup

hasnahana	sweet-smelling flower
hing	asafetida
jadu	magic
jhi-jhi	cricket-like insect that makes a buzzing noise
kachuri	stuffed balls of dough, spicy, rolled out and deep-fried
kadam	tree with fragrant ball-like blossoms that flower during the monsoons
kajal	black paste used as eyeliner
kala admi	dark-skinned man
kalia	spicy curry dish (usually fish) particular to Bengal
kameez	close-fitting tunic worn over pants by women
karela	bitter melon
kaun hai	who's there
kheer	dessert made of thickened milk
khush-khush	fragrant grass out of which thick window-coverings are made. These are sprayed with water in summer to keep out the heat
kokil	black songbird
kul	sour fruit used for making pickles
kulfi	ice cream
kumkum	red paste or powder used for a dot on a woman's forehead
kurta	long loose tunic worn over pants by both men and women

lauki	large green squash
lichu	litchi
mali	gardener
maharajah	king
malmal	soft cotton fabric
mandi	bazaar
mashi	aunt (mother's sister)
memsaab	lady of the house, a respectful term used mostly by servants
michil	procession
momphali	peanuts
neem	tree with bitter medicinal leaves
nimbu-pani	lemonade
paan	betel leaf
pakora	spicy snack made of vegetables dipped in batter and deep-fried
palloo	the end of the sari that falls over the shoulder, sometimes spelled *pallav*
panipuri	popular roadside snack made of crisp deep-fried puffs filled with potatoes and a spicy sauce
papad	crisp lentil wafers
paratha	Indian wheat bread rolled out and panfried
patisapta	complicated dessert of stuffed lentil crepes in syrup
peepul	large tree with heart-shaped leaves
phul gobi	cauliflower
pista	pistachios

pista kulfi	pistachio ice cream
prasad	food offered as part of a prayer ceremony
puja	prayer ceremony
pulao	Indian fried rice, generally vegetarian
puri	Indian wheat bread, rolled out and deep-fried
qurma	highly spiced dish made with vegetables or meat
raga	Indian melody
rajah	king
rasogollah	dessert made of curdled milk balls cooked in sugar syrup
rogan josh	spicy lamb curry
sahibi	westernized
salwaar-kameez	set of long tunic and loose pants worn by Indian women
samosa	a snack made from wheat dough, rolled out, stuffed, and deep-fried
sandesh	dessert made from sugar and curdled milk
sari	long piece of fabric worn by Indian women
shapla	water plant
shiuli	small white flower that gows in Bengal in the winter
shona	term of endearment used for children, literally, gold
singara	same as *samosa*

sitar	Indian stringed musical instrument similar to guitar
surma	eyeliner
tabla	classical Indian drums
tulsi	basil plant, considered sacred in India
veranda	balcony
wallah	a suffix denoting possession or belonging; e.g., union-*wallahs:* men belonging to a union
yaksha	mythical demon, male, guardian of household or treasure
yakshini	female of *yaksha*
zamindar	landowner
zari	gold thread