







# THE NAKED TRIANGLE

An Autobiographical Novel

BALWANT GARG



TARANG PAPERBACKS

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## OPINIONS

Full of raw passion and a sense of loneliness ... critical, honest, brutal, interlaced with Indian compassion. I enjoyed reading it.

*Elia Kazan*

Balwant Gargi has had the courage to submit himself to self-examination. He goes into forbidden areas and has literally taken the lid of ... the most daring book ....

*Mulk Raj Anand*

Gargi spares neither himself nor the women he loved. He exposes himself with the same ruthless candour as he denudes them of their pretensions and pettiness. His character portrayal is very much like that of an artist of the impressionist school. What at first sight appear as artless dabs of the paint-brush reveal themselves in perspective as a carefully worked out combination of colours to illustrate the theme of love and lust gone sour by familiarity and misuse.

*Khushwant Singh*

**M**Y narrative does not follow a strict chronological order. Flashbacks and flash-forwards intermingle. Events and images are telescoped. My eyes looking at a horse do not register it from its head downwards, but from its flying mane or kicking hooves.

The theme? Betrayal. How men and women deceive each other when they make love; how they lie in their search for truth; how being disloyal to one makes them madly loyal to the other. . . the power and torture of sex, its ecstasy, its destructive nature. . . how geniuses are blinded by it and how they lust to be destroyed by their women.

My characters are naked, stripped to be worthy of the altar. There is no comfort other than the warmth of one's own skin.

I have used some real names, characters and situations and mixed them with some imaginary ones. . . to share with you the magic of sex, the truth of desire, of creation, of my nightmares and their dark taste.

BALWANT GARGI



*"Listen. . . . Oh I was forgetting. Thieves that we are, we have tried to filch your fine language. Liars that we are, the names I have mentioned to you are false. Listen. . ."*

*Archibald in Jean Genet's "The Blacks"*

**J**EANNIE and I met when I was already dating three girls in Seattle. Each of them was passionate and sincere. Their sincerity drove me crazy. Whom to marry? Whom to promise? Whom to betray?

I had started a special six-week course on Indian culture, which met on alternate days at the University of Washington. I had been persuaded to start this class by Marcea, a 19-year old sophomore who hated her home life, especially the domination of her father, and wanted to be with me in the evening. Jeannie, who edited a bulletin of the Fisheries Department, had joined this class too.

One day, when Marcea did not come, I gave Jeannie a ride back home. She thanked me and asked me to wait a minute, ran up the steps to her apartment which was located in a neglected garden, and soon returned with a little parcel, something wrapped in paper, and said, "It's home-made cake. You should not eat those horrible bakery doughnuts."

One afternoon she came to my apartment, took away

my laundry, and brought it back hand-washed and neatly ironed. I asked her if she wanted me to drop her but she said she would walk back. She loved walking. She had long slim legs and her walk was springy and graceful. She had wanted to become a dog walker in New York. The agency provided a leather jacket, beautiful black stockings, high kid-leather boots and paid three dollars an hour. She would feel safe walking with those impatient leash-tugging watch dogs — collies, alsatians, doberman pinschers — on New York streets, even in Central Park. Also, it would fulfil her passion for walking.

She lived alone. Her parents were in Seattle and her father was senior vice-president of a national bank. She never talked about him. Sometimes we would go to a wayside cafe and sit for hours correcting the proofs of my book. She would order a double-decker chocolate icecream with nuts, and I coffee. She fussed about my diet and would suggest seafood, sirloin steak, milk, and citrus fruit, but I had no taste for these.

My apartment was on the first floor of an old-fashioned two-storey house on Broadway overlooking the foliaged slopes, the freeway, and Lake Union. I could hear the constant swishing sound of cars racing by, a soothing, rocking sound like the opiate murmur of sea waves. Sitting alone, I would watch the lake, the Space Needle, the low mountain slopes and the countless lights glimmering around me in an oval of twenty miles. I did not feel lonely. The telephone was my extension. Through its coils — my antennas — I could feel, touch, hear and reach anybody.

I had told Jeannie never to phone me or drop in unannounced because I might be with some campus

professors. I did not want them to know of my relationship with her. She respected my wish. She would wait for me in her apartment — a one-room set-up with a folding spring bed, shelves, a wall-to-wall carpet and a kitchenette furnished with gadgets. She gave me the duplicate key to the hallway door and her room. Sometimes I would go to see her late at night and she would be there, knitting, correcting proofs, reading.

One day I told her I would be coming for an early dinner. Suddenly Marcea dropped in, and stayed on till midnight. She resembled a lush animal, lying on the floor, smoking in the soft glow of my small lamp, an odd nineteenth-century table-lamp with a glass chimney which I had painted red.

The phone rang many times but I did not pick it up. By its very ring, I could sense it was Jeannie. I had developed a hyper-sensitive receptor in me, a faculty to decode the varying subtle microtones of the apparatus. The little black instrument, sitting like a pet dog, would yelp, and I would immediately know who was calling by the emotional quality of the ring — commanding, beseeching, snarling, loving, angry. There was Judy who used to call me long distance from Minneapolis and I would immediately sense the special creamy tone of the ring. This ring was certainly Jeannie's — repeating the same emotion, the same consistency, the same wavelength. It was certainly she. But I was absent. I was not in the room.

After midnight I suddenly got worried and felt guilty.

I dropped Marcea fourteen miles across the bridge near the wharf, raced back over the winding undulating slopes and reached Jeannie's apartment

It was drizzling and cold. I opened the hallway door and then her room and found her knitting socks for me.

She ran to me, flung her arms around my neck and sobbed, "Darling, I was worried ...some accident ... where were you? You didn't even telephone. I was waiting and frightened..." And she sobbed hysterically.

I calmed her, kissing her, holding her beautiful body in my arms. Then she started laughing with joy. She had prepared soup for me. I sat down to eat... the third meal of the evening. I was overwhelmed by her devotion. That night I decided to marry her.

I can't describe Jeannie clearly. She was not a fleshy, passionate beauty, but was like the evening sunlight filtering through a lace curtain. Tall, noble-featured, she had luminous blue eyes with brown silk lashes, and a cascade of auburn hair. She brushed it regularly with a hundred strokes before bed-time so that it looked like burnished gold. Her face was gentle with nervous innocence, a patch of cloud flecked with light; her smile, sunny and milky. She neither smoked nor drank. She had never heard of marijuana, pot or grass. Her family had the puritanical streak of the early English settlers.

I confided in her about my girl friends and asked her to wait three months as I wanted to settle my affairs. It was like winding up a business house, cancelling old deals and squaring up debts. Slowly I disengaged myself. Marcea had a shock. She attempted suicide. Her parents took her to the Ocean Islands for a weekend. At night she sneaked out of the cabin, and walked towards the dark roaring waves lapping the ocean shore. I had

received a frantic long-distance call from her, but refused to give her any hope. She had begged and cried. I do not know how I became so hard. Half an hour later, I received another call—this from her mother who cursed me and threatened me with dire consequences. Marcea had gone out and not returned. Her father went in search of her with the coastguards and flashlights, and found her walking in kneedeep water.

Three months later. I married Jeannie in a magistrate's house on the banks of Green Lake. She wore a gold-edged silk sari, collyrium in her eyes and a red moon-mark on her forehead, sandal-paste dots arching across her brows. I met her father and mother for the first time. There were nine of my students as wedding guests.

The magistrate read out the marriage oath and we repeated the solemn words "till death do us part." I took out the ring and slipped it on the second finger of her left hand. She offered her lips for the wedding kiss, which I knew nothing about. Her friends whispered "kiss...ss." I stamped a kiss on her lips, the wedding seal.

Jeannie was organized and frugal. She was hesitant to buy expensive clothes or eat at high-priced restaurants. She noted down recipes of dishes I liked and learnt to cook sweet-and-sour prawns, my favourite. I had saved only three hundred dollars out of my earnings over the last two years. Jeannie worked overtime as a typist in a mortuary typing lists of the dead and was paid handsomely. In six months we had saved eight thousand dollars.

Jeannie left larger issues and decisions to me, but differed in her taste and approach to small matters. While buying a wedding ring, I wanted her to wear a

large sapphire or an emerald but she was keen on a tiny topaz. She liked filigreed ear-rings, lace curtains, crochet work, and delicate embroidery. She did not approve of theatrical flamboyance.

I had the same experience when we bought a pullover from Bon Marche on Third Avenue. There was a grand clearance sale. Tables stacked with woollen knitwear, pullovers, sweaters and cardigans. Women were clawing through this garbage—picking, trying, rejecting, pulling and tossing. Jeannie was selecting smooth knits in pastel shades—beige, mauve, lavender. I saw an interesting sleeve and pulled it out. It was a high-neck double weave hand-knitted Swedish pullover with fluffy sleeves. On its whitish woollen body inky black stripes flowed down from neck to mid-waist, cutting parallel black bars. At my insistence she tried it on.

The pullover gave her a luxurious look, mod and rich. She saw herself in the mirror, modelled by the loose flowing vertical lines and said, "I don't like this zebra!"

I went to the counter and asked the saleswoman its price because the tag was missing. She said, "Original thirty-two dollars; slash price nine dollars." I said, "O.K. I'll buy it." The saleswoman said, "You have a fantastic eye. This fits perfect on that beautiful blonde!"

Maybe she said it as a sales gimmick, but I took it as an objective fact. I bought the zebra pullover along with the lavender and mauve V-necked sweaters. When I returned to Jeannie, two women were hovering around her, greedy to buy the pullover on her body. By this time Jeannie had started liking it. On knowing its price, she shrieked, "A real bargain!"

Jeannie was always dreaming of India. Due to some early childhood experience she had a dislike for white skin—sickly pale, like a corpse. She liked baked earth and sunburnt faces, and her ideal was the dark brown Indians she had seen in magazines. In her own apartment she had photographs of Ajanta frescos, voluptuous women with large breasts and black-rimmed eyes, the Taj Mahal, the Qutab. Her scrapbook was full of clippings of dancers and artists.

I told her that she should not judge me by my glamorous position of a visiting Professor of Indian Drama at the university, because at home I was just a language writer. Financially not well off. She would have to cook and work and it would be a hard life. She said she hated the rat race in America. Violence. Insecurity. Selfishness. An utterly commercial, inhuman society. She could go with me even to a desert because life would be beautiful with me.

Hers was an idealistic approach. I tried to disillusion her by painting myself in thick black colours, and described the terrible heat and corruption and laziness of India. But this only made her more determined. She said, "I have married you. I am a traditionalist. I don't want my American citizenship. I'll surrender it and take up Indian citizenship. In my past life I must have been a Hindu. I believe in non-violence and Gandhi and Buddha and am filled with a deep sense of belonging to your country."

I was touched by her devotion. I hugged her. "Dear, you are leaving everything for me — your physical and emotional worlds. But I don't want you to surrender your soul. Right now you may say on an impulse that



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I was touched by her devotion. I hugged her. "Dear, you are leaving everything for me — your physical and emotional worlds. But I don't want you to surrender your soul. Right now you may say on an impulse that

you want to renounce your American citizenship, but I know that you will suddenly feel a great vacuum and may repent. When you see the Stars and Stripes fluttering you will miss a heart-beat and may cry. You should retain your citizenship. I want you to feel free. You are noble and innocent. You need someone to look after you."

She clutched my hand to her breast. "You are wise. You understand things more than I do. I am grateful."

We flew to New York, shipping all our household effects, including a giant ox-coloured Westinghouse refrigerator. Its packing, crating, shifting, storing, insurance, freight, import duty, agent's commission and dock charges drained me mentally and financially. The customs officials broke open the packaging and examined the freezer and shelves. The monster was repacked. Again the cycle of cartage, booking, freight and its uncertain arrival in Delhi.

We stayed in Bombay for a month with my college-day friend Sakhish Pandit, a high executive in Philips, at his flat on Malabar Hill. Jeannie was charmed by Bombay — its teeming millions, cool feathery trees, Marine Drive dotted with glittering lights in a crescent popularly known as the Queen's Necklace, the sea lying like a wrinkled circus tent, the salty tang in the air, tall chimneys, orange eyes staring out of swarthy faces, fisherwomen with their tightly draped saris and pronounced hips. A landscape of thatched huts, palms and waterways and skyscrapers under a shimmering blue sky.

fingers, swallowing curry-soaked *biryani* and fish. As they ate, the food fell on their spotless jackets and silk ties.

Prithvi Raj invited us to his Juhu shack for lunch. Knowing Jeannie's weakness for seafood, he had ordered pomfret.

We sat under the palms. The lunch went on till four o'clock as he narrated stories of his early struggle, his films, his three sons who had become stars, Raj Kapoor being the movie mogul. How he had trained Raj on the stage, boxed his ears, and still treated him like a kid.

Prithvi had left the film world in 1944 at the peak of his stardom and had ploughed his earnings into the setting up a professional Hindi theatre. In sixteen years he did eight plays—massive sagas with rituals and realistic details. He toured the length and breadth of the country with his ninety players and truckloads of sets and costumes, performing in distant towns. This ruined his health. Heavily in debt, he closed his theatre and had returned to films to play type roles of fat kings and patriarchs.

Prithvi Raj ran through six chickens, tearing them with his teeth and crunching their bones. Jeannie ate baked pomfret with white sauce, sliced lemon and coconut milk. I enjoyed both.

After the heavy lunch he took us for a house tour slowing us his theatre wardrobe: period costumes, crowns, wigs, swords, jugs, turbans and half-demolished pieces of painted sets. Everything was musty, smelling of old paint.

v you ..pimp!...*Chhod do!*"

Prithvi Raj left his food, got up and went straight to fighting guests. Jeannie and I followed him.

Two burly actors in cream-coloured suits were grappling with each other, ramming and cursing. They were full of demonic energy, their faces flushed and mouths foaming. They pulled, pushed and punched each other, sliding and sliding on the polished rosewood floor. Some guests were trying to disengage the interlocked bulls but were being dragged along in concentric circles, their movements like crazy skating. The waiters carrying trays loaded with food were pushed and bumped. By now, a crowd was milling around. Suddenly the floor felt slippery. It was the spilled meat curry and fish, which the crowd was trampling upon.

Prithvi Raj thundered, "Stop this nonsense!" He crashed through the crowd and put a large paw on one of the actors and plucked him aside. Suddenly there was silence. The two fighters stood panting and drooling, their eyes out of focus.

Jeannie was horrified by the barbaric fight. The food was crushed under so many feet and reduced to a gooey pulp, a dirty yellowish spatter, made her feel sick. I took her to the other room.

She sobbed. "I won't eat...I can't. They have crushed the food under their feet, like mud ...a huge vomit splashing the floor...I can't eat. The whole thing is a vomit!"

Bedi was running about requesting the guests to eat. Some of them were heavily drunk, waddling on their rubbery legs. They stood licking their yellowed limp

fingers, swallowing curry-soaked *biryani* and fish. As they ate, the food fell on their spotless jackets and silk ties.

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I looked at the props and costumes with nostalgia because I had seen all his plays many times. Also I had watched Prithvi grow from a slim muscular hero into a hefty ponderous lord.

“Could I have a memento?” I asked him.

“What do you want?”

“Anything...perhaps this turban.”

It was maroon silk twined around a silver skull-cap, the turban of the elemental character he portrayed. It was like Moliere’s chair.

“I’ll give it to you.”

“Thank you,” I said and picked up the turban, a massive head-gear, beautiful even in its faded glory. It was precious and antique, a symbol of Prithvi Raj himself.

The evening shadows lengthened. We went for a stroll on the beach. The waves were flushed with bluish orange light. We watched the refulgent orb. Stray, thin clouds masked it, constantly changing its shape. It appeared like a puffed golden chappati, a water melon chomped by a monster, a cracked bowl, Buddha’s shaved head, as it slowly sank into the sea.

The waves turned velvety blue and then dark grey. They rose in big sweeps, kissing the sands with their foamy lips. A bright moon appeared in the sky. Prithvi Raj walked on the wet sand hugging us. He was wheezing.

“I’ll set up a small theatre in Juhu. I’ll again act and direct. Some roles have haunted me. Great characters... like Chanakya, Akbar, Lokmanya Tilak, Ranjit Singh...”

Jeannie said, “You walk very slowly. May I run on the sands?”

The fridge arrived on a bullock cart. It was so huge that it would not enter the courtyard. Should I break the door? Even then the opening would be too narrow.

The ox-coloured monster stood in the street as if in protest. Stubborn. Sullen. In a strange way it assumed human form and symbolised a proud American unwilling to be integrated into the life of the house. How to wheedle it in? There were no cranes to lift it.

I went in search of some help and found six labourers sitting on the corner of the service lane, smoking bidis. I asked them to help. They jumped up and followed me for a wage of one rupee per head. Four of them lifted the refrigerator and hoisted it up the wall onto the parapet where the other two balanced it skilfully, while the others ran around to the other side to lower it. Their dark muscular bodies twitched, restless and springy. Like basketball players, they received it in their strong hands, gently carried it and placed it in the verandah.

We started our life, attending parties, functions and hosting friends.

I was soaking up Delhi life, spending almost every alternate evening out. It exhausted Jeannie, who preferred a quiet little meal in the house.

Of my friends, three were frequently in touch with me: Tara Singh, the carpenter poet; Uma Vasudev, the journalist-critic-writer; Satish Gujral, the fabulous painter.

Tara Singh and Uma met me in the Coffee House almost daily, sitting in two different sections. Tara Singh sat with the jobless bohemians, Punjabi businessmen and writers for hours over cups of coffee.



ON arrival in New Delhi, we settled in our small one-story rented house on Curzon Road. It had one long slim room, with low furniture, straw mats and cotton cushions, divided into fluid areas—a studio with a worktable, an electric typewriter, a telephone and a low divan; a bookshelf whose back served as a dressing table and a bedroom. The verandah had Arab arches. Vines and red bougainvillaea clambered up the courtyard wall onto the roof. A sixteenth-century granite Ganesha sat in a niche at the entrance.

Jeannie said, "I know this god...the god of plenty, fertility and benevolence. You begin everything with his name. His mount is a rat. His elephant head, fat belly and sunken navel make him a most lovable deity."

I carried her across the threshold.

In a few days, our household articles arrived. We opened the crates and unwrapped things one by one like Christmas gifts. Jeannie's blue Wedgwood, waffle iron, mixers, toaster, Gibson guitar, books and other paraphernalia, including her 300-dollar silver flute.

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Uma sat with her admirers in the exclusive family section. Both made the Coffee House their office. Here they met people, wrote letters, edited their papers and dictated errands.

Tara Singh was unlettered in English. His hands were strong and massive like hammers. He exuded an odour of sweaty strength, an odour which comes from the bodies of woodcutters. His bluish oily face had a grey straggling beard and his small eyes would blink from behind thick glasses as he told stories of abductions, call girls, Punjabi writers and corrupt businessmen.

One day it was raining heavily. Tara Singh sat alone at a table over his cup, scribbling something in his notebook. As I approached, he looked up, put away the notebook and ordered a cup for me.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

“Lies. You know...poetry is a craft to tell lies...I want to show people what doesn't exist in reality, what they don't see or can't see with their normal vision. For example, my sky is green velvet with a spray of rice grains... my village mud wall wears a red lipstick...my tree sits like a humped camel...That's poetry.”

I asked him how he made money. His paper did not have a circulation of more than five hundred.

He replied, “My magazine does not reach Indira Gandhi. Let *The Times of India* and foreign magazines criticise her. She is a jet plane. If I hurl a stone it won't hit her; instead it will fall on my head. My range is only the local industrialist. And the corrupt politician. I expose and black-mail them. And they shell out money. That's how I live. Then I write pbetry.”

Uma Vasudev's *Surge* was published fitfully, depending on her mood.

She was one of those women who hypnotised people without involvement. Her eyes held a strange fascination. She was called .303—the long-range deadly rifle. She held her salon in the Coffee House discussing politics, music, and scandals. She would go hunting for Muslim musicians in the curving lanes of old Delhi, rush to dance recitals, drink overboiled tea at wayside stalls, and drive to the Icon coffee bar late at night before returning to her bachelor apartment. She had a lust for seeing people and showing herself to them. She was a multiple personality, and could be present at four different places at the same time.

I said to her, "You are wasting your life in this Coffee House."

"I don't think I have wasted a single moment. I am not a hoarder. What's life? You can't store it; can't put it in a bank and live on its interest..."

She often talked about the possessiveness of men and their insensitivity. She believed in the power of one's mother tongue and moaned over why she had not learnt Punjabi.

I said, "I have been writing in Punjabi for over thirty years. I bet you haven't read any of my works. None of my friends have. They praise me without reading me. I feel I am a fake!"

"Don't be funny! I wish I knew Punjabi as you do...this language...juicy, flaming, rugged...the language of farmers, cobblers, weavers, bandits. It's the language of blood...your name will live...whereas I and many like me writing in English, well, we hardly matter."

Her lecture galled me. I wanted to reach a wider world. I felt like a woman whom everybody was pushing into a cave while they played and laughed and drank outside. I resented sermons, however well meaning. I wanted to reject myself, see my image upside down, reverse my thinking, do something wild...something which would blow up my brains.

Uma often took the opposite view of what I said. This made me argue and say things which surprised me. She acted like a distorted mirror in which I saw my perpendicular face and elongated teeth. I searched for the right reflection.

Life rolled on like this for six months.

Jeannie said, "I never see you writing. Nor reading. I also should take up some work, but they pay very little. A typist gets...how much?...sixty dollars a month. Even less. Your friends think we are well to do. When we tell them we are not, they don't believe it. It's this fridge which makes them think we are rich."

I wrote a few articles in Punjabi, but that meant that I had to spend money even for the postage because Punjabi magazines did not pay. A stray radio or television programme meant only a measly sum. I met many people for a job. Finally the Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University, a corpulent, puritanical educationist, asked me if I would like to come to his university in Chandigarh initially for a year. They might then ask me to set up a department of Indian theatre. They would give me the full salary of a professor, a bungalow, a stenotypist, a production budget and a...

I didn't want to leave Delhi though I needed the job desperately. I wrote to him that I would accept the post at half the salary if I was not required to stay on the campus all year round. This he could not agree to.

I accepted the job.

I felt a wrench on leaving my little house, New Delhi life and friends and the creative compulsions and tensions of the Capital to which I was an addict.

There was a farewell party for me and Jeannie at Satish Gujral's house.

Satish, an affluent painter, had burning eyes and a black beard fringing his face. He was stone deaf. His bald head was fitted with a specially manufactured toupee from a New York milliner. At nine, he had lost his hearing. He learnt to lipread his friends. He joined government service as a designer but was fired after two years because his designs were considered the "ugly squiggles of a rat." Jobless, he came to Delhi, and painted the horrors of Partition: tortured faces, spitfire nostrils, massive breasts, large ape-like hands, sweeps of muscular colours portraying the brutality and anguish of his characters. His work was liked by the Mexican Cultural Attache who offered him a scholarship. After two years with Sequiros and Rivera in Mexico, he returned to Delhi.

Soon Indira Gandhi gave him a sitting. He painted her as a light-pale Madonna with large sad eyes, clutching her draped sari with her long fingers. Pandit Nehru too commissioned him for a portrait. His fame spread and he married a nineteen-year bosomy beauty, the daughter of a leading dental surgeon who refused to talk to her if

she married a deaf monster. But Kiran, a sensitive artist in her own right, ignored her father's threats. In a few years, Satish switched to murals and gave New Delhi three or four shockingly controversial art treasures.

There were ten of us at his party: two lanky painters, a young architect and his French wife, Uma Vasudev, film critic Bindu Batra, the plump art teacher Bishamber, myself and Jeannie, and the stage actress Jayshree. Everyone was smoking and drinking except Satish and Jeannie.

We enjoyed Satish's spellbinding stories of sex, art and politics, and his bawdy jokes. He spoke with violent gestures, his mouth a fiery cavern.

"There is an intrigue in the art world. A sinister set-up. The artist has to be a cunning weasel," he said.

Jayshree was sipping a martini and smoking a cigarillo. She frequented embassy parties, drank and laughed loudly. Her Dravidian lips and bosom jutted out. In her plushy voice she condemned bourgeois art and championed the cause of the left-wing Naxalites.

Blowing out a cloud of smoke she held Satish's hand. "Why don't you give me that painting?"

The painting on the wall was in tantric symbols: sawdust mixed with jute fibre, mud, and gum, applied on the canvas for a three dimensional effect. Here and there vermilion was used, but so sparingly as to become an event.

He snapped, "Why should I? What have you given me? I have never gifted a painting. It's worse than whoring! Why shouldn't my friends buy my paintings? Many of them own big bungalows. They spend lakhs to decorate their drawing rooms with ugly sofas, marble

chip flooring, teakwood panels and fat rugs. But they won't spend a few thousand for a painting. We artists are not living on Indian money. When a few foreigners visit our galleries and houses and buy our works, some crazy M.P. howls: 'Why is our art being sent abroad.' Some shit about brain-drain. Our politicians make only speeches..."

The architect was leaning over Jayshree's shoulder and whispering sweet nothings.

"He is calling you beautiful," said Satish. "Aren't you pleased? Have you read Waris Shah? He says, 'When a woman is pleased she offer her pissing bowl to the man'?" She did not understand Waris Shah. The "bowl" was lost in screams of laughter.

Satish said, "You have beautiful thighs. Do you use them too much?"

"Don't talk rot!" Jayshree retorted. "You have become a bourgeois painter. What is the purpose of your paintings? They don't touch the masses... just decorative designs. No ideas."

Satish laughed bitterly. "What's an idea? If ideas made art Plato would make a greater poet than Shakespeare. Van Gogh painted a pair of old shoes and made it look holier than the face of a Madonna. But I know of painters who paint Madonnas and succeed in making her look worse than old shoes. Don't try to pump your newly learnt Marxism-Leninism into me. I have had enough of it in my time. It has taken me years to learn that greatness does not lie in painting beautiful things but painting things beautifully. I chose the Partition as my theme not because of any particular interest in the event, but because it provided me with a



theme *par excellence* to express my own inner sensibility. If there had been no Partition I might have invented one! It's the power behind the brush which gives it the form of art. Not ideas, not feelings, not inspiration. Just power..a magical creative power .A lady asked Picasso 'You have great power in your line. How do you paint?' Picasso replied 'Madam, I don't paint with my brush; I paint with my penis'."

Satish's face became intense, his nostrils flaring "Picasso was not joking. He meant it. One paints from the pit of one's navel..Painting is a mindless act. It is a ritual in which an artist's own participation is no different from the audience's...the same tantric principle of creative energy. Look at Shakespeare and Iqbal. It was not thoughts or ideas which these giants gave you, but something greater—an electric shock. By an uncanny power they arranged the words in a manner that the lines burnt, sang, hissed and stung. By their very touch ordinary thoughts and cliches are turned into revelations. Magical incantations. Moving, original, pregnant with beauty."

Bindu sat listening intently. She knitted her brows and spoke with dramatic intensity, each gesture vivid and heightened, "But why have you stopped painting? Now you do only murals—which is not the same thing. I think you have gone commercial."

Satish's mouth opened wide and his beard quivered "Do you understand what a mural is? The only art which combines sculpture, painting and architecture. It's a trinity. A painting is like writing music in private a mural is like conducting it on the stage. It is a mass address system. You may paint a flower or a revolution

but you always end up on a drawing room wall where your only function is to contribute to the furniture around. I consider it rather whoring for the rich...My paintings led me to murals. A mural is a French word for wall—a live wall, a wall which breathes, speaks, communicates. Most buildings have dead walls. Some artists enlarge one of their paintings into a wall-size horror and call it a mural. Foolish. Just lengthening a short story doesn't make it a novel. It's the character, the scope and the technique. Of quite another genre. Who understands the term? Very few. The whole of Delhi is littered with murals. Curzon Road buildings crusted with yellow circles and green blobs...ugly designs. Tfoo! And this goes in the name of murals!"

Jayshree held Satish's hand and pouted, "You are mean. Why don't you give me that painting, louse!"

Satish looked at her and something flashed in his head. He said, "All right. On one condition. You stand on that stool, strip and walk to the painting."

Amidst cigarette fumes and cackles, Jayshree got up, walked defiantly to the stool and stood hipshot on it. She cast a theatrical look at the audience, her lips half-opened. She paused for a minute gauging our reaction, a suspense for all of us.

Most women in the party talked of revolutionary action and off-beat life styles. But beneath their provocative manners, they were essentially Indian females, sexually aloof, with centuries of reserve. They looked at Jayshree as if she was threatening to jump from a high tower into a turbulent ocean.

Jayshree looked at us with impish glee and gave a throaty laugh. She jerked her head and started peeling

off her clothes one by one—sari, petticoat, blouse—and stood in her bra and pink panties. The party enjoyed the game of striptease, cheering and giggling with excitement. Jayshree swung her head, undid her bra and flung it away, releasing her enormous silky breasts topped by dark aureoles and nipples. A sensation ran through us, of wonder, admiration, a charged joy. Women shouted, "That's all!"

Satish thundered, "No!"

Jayshree laughed, jiggled, kicked off her panties and rotated like a model. What we saw was a glimpse of the inky plumage of her crotch.

She walked with a swagger, making her breasts bobble, and stood on her toes to reach the painting. In the crazy light of the room we saw her long ivory arm with polished black nails and her golden-olive buttocks, like the two halves of a musk-melon.

She removed the painting, picked up her clothes and disappeared into the other room.

A few minutes later she walked in beaming, wrapping her sari.

Satish had not bargained for this. He was perspiring with shame as if it was he who had been stripped.

WE shifted to Chandigarh and started living on the Panjab University campus in a bungalow behind the stone-walled open air theatre, a tiny fortress. I converted the backstage into a studio theatre with teakwood flooring and sound-proof walls. The floor-level stage shone like a polished diamond encircled by tiers of cushioned seats. Here I taught and directed plays.

The campus had a breezy look, spruced lawns, expansive playgrounds, and an intelligent distribution of buildings. The most formidable was the huge administrative block—a cement hippo sitting in the middle. The most lyrical was Gandhi Bhavan, a cozy hexagonal architecture beside an L-shaped water tank, topped by a silver wing symbolising a bird in flight. During the last war with Pakistan, the silver wing was blackened so that the enemy bombers would not strike the university. The silver wing continued to be tarred, a rusty black hatchet cutting the sky.

Jèannie collected all the photographs of my former girl friends, their letters marked by lipstick, perfumed

and pinned with butterfly wings. I told her who they were: Hilda who had flown from Warsaw in 1956 and stayed with me for a month, going to parties, kissing me publicly; Judi with her lustful bosom and intelligent eyes; an Indian actress who betrayed me in my early youth and joined films; Marcea, who threatened me with suicide if I did not marry her, and others. .

All these women were properly indexed, marked and safely put in magnum-size manila envelopes in a small green suitcase. "They are all buried there," Jeannie said, "Your women. I love you darling because you chose me as your bride, your final woman."

She spent long hours reading novels, magazines and the latest books on motherhood. She had preserved cuttings of colour pictures from *Life*, of the stages of the growing embryo, and showed me these foamy bladders with veins, blurred blues, crimson membranes like seaweeds—the webby moss of the unformed baby. She was concerned with the life growing in her. She felt out of breath in the cruel heat of Chandigarh, in the fanless room which was like a furnace.

As I returned from the theatre I found Jeannie lying on the bed, breathing with difficulty. She started weeping like a little girl and said, "Darling, I can't stand this heat. I want cool air. Ice-creams. Milk-shakes. I am perspiring. I am not meant for this heat. I can't breathe..."

I went out in search of an airconditioner to buy or rent and ultimately found a second-hand Westinghouse in a foreign concern which had closed down because of Indira

Gandhi's new policy. I paid half in cash and half by a post-dated cheque and had the airconditioner installed.

There was cheer in the house. Jeannie smiled. Then she started laughing out of sheer happiness as the airconditioner threw cold gusts of air into the room.

Jeannie's labour pains started at midnight. Young Professor Vishwa Tiwari, a literary Don Quixote, came in his car to help. Jeannie had kept everything ready in a suitcase. Two dozen fresh linen napkins she had sewn, tiny frocks, pillows, a hot-water bottle, a flask, some medicines, and her maternity wardrobe. My widowed sister Shanti accompanied us in the car.

The doctors asked me to check up in the morning. I went away with the pride of a would-be father. Jeannie had drawn up a list of names for our child—fifty for a son and fifty for a daughter. She chanted these Indian names. She revised the list everyday, adding a few more and striking off some which she disapproved of. She put down the corresponding names of her Scottish McLaren clan. One she had shown me her family tree—up to her great-great-grand mother. This comprehensively worked out family tree was Xeroxed and she had one copy. The original was with her great aunt who lived in Essex by the seashore.

She was keen to add the name of our forthcoming child to her family table. A tiny shoot which would take roots and grow into a powerful branch.

The following morning I got up early. The house felt empty. Jeannie had taken all life with her, her little domestic activities of knitting and sewing. She found these restful and auspicious. Shanti had told Jeannie not to stitch during pregnancy. When Jeannie asked

ly, Shanti replied, "The child's mouth will be stitched. He may be born dumb."

Jeannie laughed, "I wish my child not to chatter all the time. He will be a silent yogi."

As I sipped tea, I thought about her birth pangs and the surprise awaiting me. If it were a daughter, she would have Jeannie's long hair and beautiful face. The same complexion and tapering fingers. If a son...What would be the colour of his eyes? His hair? Maybe pink cheeks...or olive skin with blue eyes.

I plucked roses from our little garden, arranged them into a bouquet and went to the hospital. The nurse at the counter noted my name, asked me to wear hospital slippers and led me to the labour room. Jeannie lay in bed writhing with pain. She held out her hand. "De...aar, it comes and goes...maybe...it'll take time. Thank you for coming. Thank you for the flowers."

She kissed the roses and put them aside.

I asked if she needed anything.

"I would like to have ice-cream after the baby is born."

I visited the hospital again in the afternoon. The doctor said, "It's a first delivery. It'll take time. Maybe...by ten. You should relax. Everything will be fine."

I went back to the theatre to rehearse *The Little Clay Cart*, my forthcoming production. From the rehearsal I went to a wedding party. While I was eating ice-cream, I remembered Jeannie.

A journalist friend walked up to me. "Congratulations!"

"A lovely wedding party," I said.

He pulled at his pipe and puffed out pungent fumes.

“My boy, you are a father now. What about a champagne party?”

“What?”

He had been to the hospital to inquire about a relative admitted there and learnt that Jeannie had given birth to a son.

I asked the chief waiter to fill a large bowl with fruit ice-cream and raced to the hospital. The nurse greeted me and gave me the news.

I put on the slippers and shuffled into the ward. Jeannie lay under a white sheet. Her face had thinned. She needed something hot on a raw stomach. Halwa or steaming broth. But Jeannie's body reflexes were different. As she gulped the icecream, she shrieked, “You must see your son.”

The nurse brought the baby, wrapped in flannel. I held the fluffy bundle. His face was brown and he had smoke-coloured filmy eyes, soft flesh. The tiny fingers were clenched. I was a bit put off by his complexion: it was like mine. I had wished it to be white. I felt a twinge at nature's caprice. But years later I was grateful for this complexion; he resembled me and belonged to me physically and psychologically. Children of mixed blood with blue eyes and brown skin and red hair may look cute as babies, but they grow into non-belonging individuals.

Life went on smoothly. Teaching, directing, going to parties, having endless cups of tea.

The household routine was smoothened by a wiry old woman, Surti, who came to serve as a live-in ayah and



took charge of our little son, Manu. She had worked with European families for nine years, had been a nanny in an American home for twelve years, and had gone back to her village in the Himalayas. At her nephew's request she came to work for us. The first day she appeared in the hallway, Manu howled at the sight of her dark wizened face and hooked nose. But she tamed Manu in three days with her affection and experience and became his darling.

A daughter was born to us after two years. We named her Jannat, after the beautiful Muslim gram-roaster of my village. Surti brought up both children with care and devotion, and freed us from all worry.

She bathed the children, played with them in the garden, took them for walks, fed them tiny morsels, laughed with them at their little secret jokes, and made them sleep by her side. This gave Jeannie time to read a lot, cook, and practise on the flute.

I would come home from the theatre and find her sitting on her bed playing the flute. Negro spirituals, Xmas carols and the folk tunes of her Scottish ancestors.

One day she cried, "You know I am not an intellectual. I am not like your friends. I feel uncomfortable in their company. They yap all the time about politics, scandals and leaders with jawbreaking names. I am here only because of you... You don't care about your health. You have grown plump in three years. Look at your paunch. You are slowly balding. You don't eat delicately flavoured food. Steamed vegetables. You are ruining your health by eating stuffed *parathas* swimming in ghee and drinking sugared tea all day. My love, you must live long for me and the children. What shall I do without you ? I am

twenty years younger. If you die who is there for me in India?"

Tears welled up in her eyes and trembled on her golden lashes. I held her hand.

Sometimes as I lay in bed she would peel off my clothes and rub my back, running her fingers on my body as if I were a piano. In mock anger she would whip me with her long silken hair. I enjoyed these lashes and thought of Marat in a Peter Brook production I had seen with Jeannie in New York, where Corday kills Marat in the bath-tub with a dagger as she whips him with her long hair. In the silence of the night, I felt magical shivers in my flesh.

The house had mice, lizards, honey-bees and ants. The children learnt to live with them. They ran in the yard chasing crows, squirrels and multi-coloured sparrows. They knew every nook and hole of the garden. The gnarled mango tree was their favourite haunt to climb, swing and scamper.

At night mice came in search of food and made snipping noises. One morning we found they had bitten through the wooden meatsafe and made a big hole. Surti set a trap. One fat mouse was caught. We gathered to see the bandit. It ran up and down the cage like a motorcyclist in a circus death-well. Suddenly it stopped, its pink nozzle quivering, its timid eyes beseeching. I did not feel like killing the little creature. I picked up the cage and went out to the yard, Manu and Jannat running along with their eyes glued on the doomed prisoner. I walked across to the shrubbery and set the rodent free.

Surti walked into the room and cawed, "Mouse eating Mem Saheb cake and books. Not good. I not liking many mouse in the house running. "Jeannie went to the store and let out a shriek. I ran to her. "Look, the mice have nibbled my music lessons!"

I opened the cardboard boxes in which I had kept my books and documents. There were tiny black droppings in them. I started dusting the books. To my horror the rats had nibbled my passport, our marriage certificate and about a dozen valuable books. But they hadn't touched junk literature. I was amused. Even rats had literary taste!

I talked about this mysterious coincidence to a municipal doctor. He laughed, "The rats are attracted to books which have been opened and read and might have greasy finger marks."

Jeannie played music, copied Indian recipes in her note-book, spent hours baking cakes and crustpies, and read a lot. All her clothes, jewellery, letters and childhood mementos were neatly kept. One day she opened a little cardboard box which contained shells, beads, heirlooms, childhood photographs. She opened an album and said, "Look at these butterflies I used to collect. Nature's batik work."

I saw her precious treasure: silky petals with yellow concentric circles, shimmering emeralds, feathery black veins, slender and abstract compositions brazenly arranged by nature in a gross violation of rules.

She had collected these over the years in her own yard, on the beach, and on Bambridge Island. I looked at the collection, wondering at how hard-working and

patient she was. How she carried her childhood encased in these boxes.

Suddenly she looked at me. "You seem to have no interest in flowers?"

"I do."

She pointed to a chrysanthemum. "Tell me its name."

I didn't know it. I had grown up in a desert and had no feeling for flowers. Very little knowledge of trees or plants or birds. My entire interest centered on human beings.

I had attained fame very early. My first play *Loha Kut* about the double elopement of a daughter and mother in a blacksmith's family was a shocker. It highlighted filial hate, sex, violence and betrayal. I had written the play ignorant of the standards of Punjabi literature, as I had not read a single novel or a play in my own language. My dream was to go to London, roam its streets, Chelsea, Soho, Piccadilly, Half-Moon Street, and perfect my English to write in that language. Before I could decide my career, Punjabi critics and papers acclaimed me as a top writer. I was sucked in by the vortex of praise. In a few years, money flowed through my Punjabi plays and stories.

Professors and students would point at me wherever I went. In a few months I became a part of the campus like one of its trees. They taught my plays in M.A., discussed me in their Ph.D. theses. But it was not I—the short, husky, unkempt-haired person in corduroys. They were discussing the mythical Gargi who roamed in

Bombay, New York, New Delhi, and whose pictures flashed in papers. I appeared to them unreal.

I watched myself, divorced from my name, and looked at myself as if at another being. This magnified my estrangement from my physical reality. I started feeling a loss of identity. Eating at a wayside stall, walking in the sun, buying onions at a vegetable shop, standing in a queue at a post office window and waiting on the Vice-Chancellor like a petitioner stripped me of my glamour.

The new Vice-Chancellor, a strong ex-wrestler, had a short clipped moustache on his well barbered face. He looked like an officer of the Baluch Regiment but was a gentle person. He had graduated from being a chemistry-lab demonstrator to the exalted position of Vice-Chancellor. As a child he had been brought up by his mother on milk, fruit and prayers. She used to handroll pills of dough and throw these in the village pond to feed the fish, every time chanting the name of Krishna. One hundred thousand pills so that her son should do no wrong. As Vice-Chancellor, he was keen to please everybody. He often burst into a bland smile, rubbing his hands, and readily agreed to any suggestions you took to him, but then changed his mind so that no one knew what his final order would be. Once I invited him to see *Antigone*. He beamed. "I have seen this play in Europe. Very good drama...about a Greek king who picks out his own eyes and marries his mother. I'll come and see your production."

He had mistaken *Antigone* for *Oedipus*.

—The members of the Syndicate, the governing body of the university, were mostly courtiers who advised their educational monarch—the Vice-Chancellor. Everyone curried favour and thought, “Why should I annoy him? What personal stake do I have?” Everyone hoped for an extension, assignment, nomination or membership on some committee, even if he was 93.

A meeting of a committee of four professors and the Dean of University Instruction was held to select a top personality for ten lectures on Tagore. For this, ten thousand rupees was to be paid to the distinguished speaker. Three names were suggested. One was Satyajit Ray's. The Dean, a pompous professor of Business Administration, asked about Ray's qualifications. Dr B. N. Goswami, the brilliant professor of Fine Arts, remarked. “His qualifications are that his name is Satyajit Ray!” But the Dean insisted on Ray's bio-data and a specimen of his writing to evaluate his capabilities. If I were not on the committee, I would not have believed that the university had such dull-witted, mulish and arrogant buffoons. He took the names to the Vice-Chancellor. Finally their choice fell on a pale, bearded lobster — the scholar-poet Mohan Singh Diwana — who lived in Sector 15 next to the University. Ray's name was turned down!

I met Raji in the Himalayan Theatre, a local amateur group which had invited me to direct a play.

While trying out candidates for the role of a courtesan I asked the girls to walk across the stage. To express the character of the courtesan. Is she greedy? Generous? Vulgar? Mean? Seductive? Her age, emotions, temperament. Everything in a few expressive steps.

I sat watching them. It was like a geometrical check-up. But when Raji walked across, my thoughts wandered. She had an animality which fascinated me. For a while I saw her almost without clothes...her curving back, broad hips, legs. As she turned around and walked towards me I saw her nipples protruding from her breasts.

One afternoon when I came home I was surprised to find Raji waiting for me in my study.

I asked her if she would like to have tea. I went to the kitchen and put the electric kettle on. Jeannie had gone out with the children to practice Christmas carols. Surti was in her room down with a pain in her chest. Raji followed me to the kitchen. "I'll fix the tea for you."

She brought the tea to the study.

"I have been thinking of you..." she said, "but you are always busy. Always surrounded by people."

Her eyes brimmed with sensuality. "I...have come to seek your friendship. I need it. I had read about you in papers: your travels, your stories, your marriage, and I wondered how to meet you. When I was studying in school I hadn't the courage to write to you."

She told me she had met me two years ago at a dinner at a deputy director's house. She had worn a deep-green silk sari with a gold border, a matching blouse and gold ear-rings. I had come late for dinner and left early. I faintly recalled having met her.

One day she brought gifts for Jeannie and the children. Soon Jeannie and she became friends. Both liked music and cooking. I often heard their laughter in the kitchen. I was happy with their friendship, a classic cover for my growing fondness for Raji. I always met her amidst players or with Jeannie in the house and felt strangely elated.

It was late in the evening. I returned home from the university and found Raji and Jeannie busy writing something in their notebooks. When they saw me they laughed and said that I had timed my return. They had finished exchanging notes on cooking. Raji got up and said that she had to leave as it was late. She bade us good-bye and went out through the hallway.

I went to the kitchen and sipped a spoonful of soup. I was hungry. From the back door I wandered out, past the old mango tree to the main iron gate. She was



standing there. I realised that my coming out was due to the vague lust I had seen in her eyes as she left the house. She asked me if I could drop her in my car.

We walked back to the garage. I saw through the window that Jeannie was lying in her bed reading to the children. My feet became rubber-soled.

Raji walked ahead of me and stood at the door. I followed her. Scattered moonlight came through the branches of an overhanging tree and fell on her. Her bosom heaved and her eyes were aflame. I could feel the heat of her body. A current ran through me. I tried to open the garage door but it was stuck — it was swollen due to the rains. I put my shoulder to it and pushed. It opened with a halting squeak. We went inside, trembling and hypnotised with fear as if we were in a trench in sight of enemy guns.

We felt each other in the dark. She grabbed me and started kissing me in one long, unending cycle of passion. I pressed her against the wall. I was maddened with desire. Our teeth clashed and I felt sparks explode in my mouth. Our tongues met as if in combat: rolling, twisting, stabbing and mauling each other. They assumed a personality of their own, an independent will, and wrestled in our charged mouths. Hot and cold waves ran alternately through my body. My tongue became another organ — potent and wild — sending shivers of delight down to my groins.

A faint light filtered through the cracks of the iron shutter. Now our eyes had become familiar to the milky darkness. Our movements were like those of underwater swimmers — in slow motion, cautious and groping. Silently she peeled off her clothes; her white bra fluttered

down like a deformed pigeon. I felt her moist breasts, the texture of her warm skin, my hands gliding down her back to her naked buttocks, muscular and fleshy. Both of us rolled on the floor, her thick hair snakily tangling my mouth and fingers. Our bodies assumed a supersensory perception; our toes scrawled on our legs a mysterious alphabet..a dark language on wet sand. The coarse hemp needles amidst her thighs bristled and I felt I was sinking into her... the wet fuzz of hemp, prickly and delicious, a slippery boiling paste of rice and sensation of flesh... throbbing. A flash of white lights, an explosion in my brain, the breaking of the sound barrier, and the smell of semen filled the air with a strange odour mixed with the smell of rotting leaves...

When we tiptoed out, moonlight was filtering through the trees, dappling the lawn.

Jeannie was fast asleep. I went to the kitchen, heated my food and ate it slowly, standing. I returned to the bedroom and lay by Jeannie's side quietly, full of strange sensations and tastes. For long I stared in the dark listening to her heavy breathing. Then I dozed off.

Raji often stayed behind after rehearsals and we would go to a wayside inn to have dinner.

She told me that her father was a retired Brigadier. She had two brothers and a very strong-willed, possessive mother. She had been married to a rich contractor's son. He drank too much, gambled, and screwed any woman he could lay his hands on. A daughter was born to her after one year. She said, "He was a beast. One day he brought his typist home. I yelled at that whore. He hit me. He was drunk; he abused me in filthy language...I

was pregnant. He had lost interest in me. Later I caught him in his office with another woman. I kicked the door open. The hinges came off and as I stomped in I saw him without trousers with a fat woman sitting on his lap. I caught him by his hair and yanked his head so hard that it struck against the wall and he fell. I came back to my parents and never went back. After a few months my son was born. He is now four. He has the same eyes and the same fat nose of my husband. I love him. In a strange way I love and hate him at the same time. When he cries and grinds his teeth, he looks like my husband. What can a woman do? Once she gives birth to a son she has to live with him for the rest of her life."

She paused for a little while and continued, "If I had met you seven years ago, I would have run away with you somewhere...to America or Bombay...any place...away from Chandigarh. I have wasted the last seven years. I can't believe that I am with you now."

Jeannie had gone to practise music with her friends. Feeling empty, I wandered about the house, and went to the study. Raji was there.

She ran up and embraced me, breathing heavily. I could hear the pounding of her heart. She said, "I thought of you all night...waiting for the morning so that I could be with you. I am here...at your feet. I have brought a gift."

She opened a tiny box of red powder, took a pinch and put it in my palm. "Put this red dust in the parting of my hair and call me 'wife'. Say this magical word 'wife'...your bride...I belong to you. I'll give you my body. Everything

to make you happy. No woman will ever love you like this. No woman can. Only I, because so far no man has ever made my body tingle the way you have. I surrender everything to you. You are the master of my body. I love you."

Her words had a warm fleshy quality. Even her poetic utterances felt real. Despite all my cynicism her words had a *mesmeric effect on me*. The simple words "I love you" uttered billions of times had not lost their freshness.

Months went by. I was living a double life. One day Raji asked me, "Tell me about your life...How many women have you loved? People say you have been with many."

"I don't know...sleeping with a woman did not matter to me. I lived alone. Women came and stayed in my house — friends, chance acquaintances, painters, writers. It may not sound true but the fact is I never approached them. Never made a pass at them, not out of any moral consideration but because of the way I am. Many of them slept with me. I was like a stray woman whom any person could make love to and have hot-blooded moments of sex, gossip and intimacy with, and then disappear. But you are different. I love you. I belong to you."

While making love to Raji I always came out with the wildest truths — the sins I had committed. How I had slept with a seventeen-year girl when I was 23. Once her mother caught us and lost her temper. When I broke down, she soothed me, "Son, you must know my daughter is to marry soon. She is innocent. I cannot allow it...it's a sin." She caressed me and held my head in her lap with a purity and affection I had not known. At night, she seduced me, kissing me like a mother and then suddenly

changing her passion into naked lust, whispering "my son, my son!" all the time. After that she would allow me to take her daughter. I began to sleep with both of them.

Raji laughed, "If I were your mother, I also would have seduced you!"

A group of American women led by Dr. Millard Rogers, who was a professor of art history at Seattle, visited Chandigarh. They could not stand the hot climate. Two women fell sick. We invited them for a cool meal: cold salad, cold chicken, cold coffee and chilled milk.

After the routine talk about Corbousier architecture, the weather, folkcraft, Kangra miniatures, the caves and the Taj, the conversation turned to the double standards of morality of the Indians. They said that the dual nature of Indian philosophy was embedded in the nation's way of thinking. American women were straightforward and honest as were the men. They would never accept a man having a mistress or extra-marital relations. It was feudal, barbaric.

I replied, "Men are different. A man can sleep with another woman and yet be loyal to his wife...It's not a question of being Indian, but of being truthful. A man can, while sexually involved with another, be spiritually loyal to his wife, but a woman cannot. Biologically she is different. Her emotions are different."

Mrs. Rogers, a sixty-year old platinum-haired female, raised her eyebrows and asked if I was really serious. Was I the same damn Asian who while abroad believed in Western democracy and equality but on his return home became a diehard Hindu. She said, "Balwant, how

can you talk like that? What do you know about women..Your ideas about them are typical of all males. A thinking person, an honest person, will never think like that. It's horrible. It's sick.

Other women joined her in condemning me.

I said, "Man is different...again I say, biologically. In many ways on an emotional level as well. The fact is...well, it's not lust or sex or love. It's nature. Suppose I were married to Marilyn Monroe. On the wedding night, I am with her in bed. It is past midnight. Our cottage is in a large garden and there is a half moon in the clouds. She loves jasmine and wants to rub its buds on her nipples to pour out her love to me. I go out to the garden and wander in the dark in search of jasmine buds. I stumble and the noise wakes up the gardener's daughter. She is a silly woman, smelling of manure. She helps me in plucking flowers. We collide in the dark. I grab her in the bushes and have her. Then I pick up the buds and walk back to my bedroom and find Marilyn waiting for me. It is only Marilyn, my beloved wife. It is possible for a man to do that and yet be innocent. This sexual act in the bushes is impersonal — an overflow of semen without diminishing the psychic fury, the passion, the love...because I am emotionally loyal to Marilyn."

The fought against my views and wondered how Jeannie could take that kind of thing from me.

After the Americans left, Jeannie said, "I have been reading Pearl Buck. She has great sensitivity towards Asian life. I am reading about China, and seem to understand India — the same peasant mind, full of philosophy, wisdom, patience. Your women understand life. They accept it instead of fighting it. They receive it

and do not grab it. Does it matter if a husband sleeps with another woman? Maybe it is the excess fluid which needs spurting. Men are like that. Let them wander in the jungle and pluck different fruits, munch them and come home. The Asian woman understands this. She would not lose her man. I am reading the story of an American who marries a Japanese woman. He visits a geisha. She scrubs him, bathes him, caresses him and sleeps with him. She rationalises it. Man has compartmentalized sex. The story is written with such perception that I wonder if the fighting American female is not foolish. Also I am thinking of myself...I have given you two children, a handsome boy and a beautiful daughter. I feel my function is over. My mind has changed. My body is changing. I am content. I don't think I would mind if you slept with another woman.

I was surprised. Did she suspect me? Did she want a confession? Did she know that I had fallen for this young actress and she for me?

Jeannie would leave in the morning to practise her music lessons, her flute, and return in the evening leaving me completely free all day. I would wait for Raji wild with passion. The main entrance gate was always closed by Jeannie when she left on her bicycle so that stray dogs and wandering beggars could not enter. The gate always closed with a metallic groan. My ears were trained for this sound.

One day I was with Raji in bed when I heard this peculiar groan. I dressed quickly and came out. It was Jeannie. She had come to pick up her flute. She saw Raji and greeted her with great warmth. She left after hugging me in the foyer and with a shine in her eyes. "I

be back at four. Meanwhile you finish your work. There is bread, jam and olives.” She cycled out and I heard the clang of the gate.

Jeannie had no suspicion. At first I thought of her as a simple woman with total trust. But even a simple woman could be jealous. Jeannie was not jealous. Was it a conscious arrangement... promoting my relation with Raji? Leaving me completely with her for those glorious moments of passion? Was it a design to keep me in this sexual ecstasy and herself free for her own explorations? Where did she go? I never questioned her.

We were rehearsing *A Doll's House* in the little studio. The players sat on the teakwood floor discussing the theme. Was it relevant to our times? Why did Nora leave her husband and two children? Where did she go? We were exploring her motives and destination. As we nibbled the text to shreds, I found the theme contemporary. Today's woman does not leave the husband for a lover, but out of sheer boredom, futility, non-communicability — almost a Beckettian isolation. It is a search for identity and a thirst to communicate.

I returned from the rehearsal early one day and found Jeannie in the bedroom singing carols; the high fluting lilt echoed as if in a vaulted church. A spiritual echo... mystical, soul-stirring. A beseeching voice to the unknown.

As usual, my *dal and chapattis* were in the kitchen. I heated the food and brought it to the bedroom, put the tray on the floor and started eating.

She said, “It was wonderful to sing in the streets. Do you understand this? But you have no taste for Western music.”



I asked her, "Could you sing carols in my play?"  
"Why?"

"It will be a beautiful beginning. You could come with your group and walk through the aisle of the theatre, singing. Then play the flute in the dark. Let the echoes, haunting...the play is about a home doomed to split."

On the opening day of *A Doll's House*, Jeannie and her choir sang carols, she playing the flute and a boy playing the accordion. The echoes merged with the happy entrance of Nora bearing gifts.

Jeannie and her group left after their song was over. As I watched the play, Nora appeared like Jeannie: I like the bank manager. She had lived like a doll in her house, a beautiful window show piece... a silly, sentimental girl, a squirrel, a singing lark, as she whizzed through the kitchen cooking and baking Christmas goodies.

That night I lay awake in bed, and saw her lying on my side, fast asleep. I asked myself: What was the meaning of my existence? Did she understand me? I was living a routine existence, everyday the same restlessness, the same senseless, useless activity. Lying there, I had a new insight into the play and reversed the roles...I was Nora. What was my destination? It was not the problem of a domesticated woman which Ibsen had posed. But that of a human being. Of a person. A revolt against a deadened existence, a consciousness of one's destiny. I found myself in Nora's situation, in her dilemma... seven years of married life in a blank tunnel leading nowhere. No purpose, no direction, no future...caught in the web of a life which was meaningless.

**M**Y theatre was sandwiched between the boys Hostels. When girls walked by, they would let out animal screams and shout, "Oh swinging hips! Oh, lovely breasts! Come to my bed! Oh, you fucking beauty! Come here!"

This was reported to me. "Don't mind their language." I told the girls, "Talk to them gently and they will become your protectors. They are not different from the boys you are working with on the stage, embracing in love scenes, and having coffee with under the tree. They are only envious."

I sent for the boys and told them that they could sit on the theatre steps and watch rehearsals. They would come in groups, watch a few scenes, and leave quietly.

I had sympathy for them. Tall, robust, full of passion. At their age men break walls to taste sex. In their dreams they must be sleeping with these girls, but in reality dare not approach them. Shut in their cubicles, stone-sties with iron grills, these students were like the inmates of an asylum. They lived a repressed life, their hissing in their veins and passion hammering their

heads as they pored over their microbiology lessons and Malthusian theory.

The girls hostels were sixteenth century nunneries, guarded by matrons, the sex-meat — the food of love and youth— safely preserved. Every night the boys would retire to their cubicles and let out howls to exhaust their sexual energy. These were the over-boiling fumes of their suppressed desires. There was always the danger that if repressed further, they would attack the girls hostels and loot the objects preserved there in the name of chastity. There could be a storming of the sexual Bastille. Perhaps it was better that they rent the air with their yells, sparred with phantom windmills, and fell unconscious on their lonely beds.

Things were changing fast in the country. Riots. Strikes. Gheraos. Prices were rising. Who could stop these? People were struggling, earning, weeping, fighting, dying and being reborn. Whilst the war against poverty was being waged, five-star hotels and luxury houses flourished, and the fat politicians grew fatter.

There were angry protests and marches in big towns demanding Indira Gandhi's resignation. Puzzled and aggrieved, she announced over and over again that as scheduled there would be parliamentary elections in eight months, and at that time the people could give their verdict. The instigating slogans of the Opposition and the growing lawlessness infuriated her. She declared a state of Emergency. Leaders were arrested, press censorship imposed and strict security measures were put into operation. Within a week, she had crushed the incipient rebellion. The entire police, military and civil services were behind her. Intellectuals, artists, painters

and industrialists supported her. A new era began: an era of censorship, of suppression of views. The right to strike was cut down and all freedoms were withdrawn.

Jayshree too was put in jail. She was working in a school, taking acting classes, when the police swooped in and arrested her as a Naxalite. She had been active in the underground movement and had gone to the South to work with rebel students. To help them she sold Satish's painting to a Gujarati millionaire for four thousand rupees. I knew she was no revolutionary and could not stick to anything for long. She had a weakness for bourgeois parties and drinks. But this act of hers touched me. She would do anything to raise funds for her party. She wanted to be Judith!

There were hushed discussions on the campus about Indira Gandhi. Professors argued about the muzzling of the freedom of thought and action. But they soon realised that Indira meant business. Some teachers were arrested and a few officials dismissed. The news was blacked out. Soon professors and intellectuals started saying that emergency was a necessity, a social miracle.

Various forums were set up: Artists forum, doctors forum, writers forum, lawyers forum, teachers forum. Campus teachers vied with one another to champion Indira's 20-point programme and fought for the secretaryship of the forum. Intrigues and counter-intrigues. Finally M.M. Puri, an ultra leftist-cum-rightist-cum-infra-factionist, grabbed the position. He sported a Lenin beard and a flaming tie, had a command over historical facts and was an excellent orator. He planned a massive get-together of teachers in the university auditorium. But how to attract them? He arranged with

a government-sponsored organisation to provide a chicken lunch for five hundred delegates. That was enough. Tell a Punjabi that there is a tiger, a dense forest, a swollen river, and a cobra on a sandy bed. And beyond all these a chicken lunch. He will brave all hazards and reach there. More than a thousand teachers flocked the hall!

Chief Minister Zail Singh's photographs appeared daily in the press. Every billboard, magazine and calendar carried his grinning portrait. One of the universities conferred on him a doctorate to wipe out his well-known illiteracy. He ordered his press chief to drop the word Giani from his name and prefix it with Doctor. Though Giani means a learned person, he wanted to be known as Doctor. He had reduced the entire Public Relations Department with its budget of millions to a department of self-publicity. He suffered from two diseases: diabetes and public speaking. Generally his throat was hoarse from spouting speeches morning till late evening, so he would keep sucking lozenges. He presided over every minor and major function. The university felt grateful for his august presence. Professors ran like rats to capture his attention.

In one such scramble he was requested to address the International Anthropological Conference in campus. He came with a speech printed in English, to be distributed to the participants and the press, but spoke in Punjabi with vehemence and brilliance. He questioned the scientists, "You say man is the son of a monkey. You may be, I am not! (Laughter). It's a lie cooked up by you people. If you say that man has evolved from the monkey, then tell me whose son is the parrot? How did the parrot come into existence? Why are its beak and

green feathers still intact? Why hasn't it dissolved into a monkey or evolved into a man? And if monkeys change and their tails disappear and they assume the human form, then tell me why are monkeys still alive? Why have they stopped growing into your form? Look at Ajanta and Ellora. Our ancient caves... the statues of Gautam Buddha. His face is more beautiful than ours. Was he the son of a monkey? Utter nonsense." His challenge left the anthropologists stunned.

I stopped going to these conferences. Canned phrases and jargon were repeated there. I preferred to sip coffee, visit a friend, sleep, or play with my children. Or be busy with the students in the theatre.

I attended a convocation, compulsory for every professor. I put on the black gown, walked with the rest of the "penguins," and sat on the dais watching the lifeless ceremony. President Giri was reading his address, a 24-page printed message to the students. He spoke very slowly, his breath wheezing, and I was sick by the time he reached the 14th page. I thought of every conceivable event to divert my mind but time stood still. I wanted to run away. But behind me were rows of chairs occupied by professors and deans. Why had I come here? How could I ever pardon myself? After that horror I never went to any convocation.

I received a letter from the Left-Wing Writers Union, of which I was a founder-member, to explain why I was corrupting Punjabi language by writing obscene stories and plays. In the pen-sketch of a contemporary woman

writer, Ajit Cour, I had used the word "breasts." This evoked angry protests from these writers and they sent a circular to all Punjabi papers and journals "advising" them not to publish me. They saw a foreign hand in it; some even ascribed it to my marrying an American woman and being corrupted by the shameless Western literature. They demanded that I appear at their next executive body meeting to explain my conduct. I tore their letter into four pieces and threw it into the wastepaper basket. On second thought, I retrieved the pieces and kept them safely in my file. The letter hurt me greatly. This was when the union had no power. It had only a moral force, which had been eroded by the arrogant political manoeverers. They had elbowed out creative writers from the central body and reduced it to a non-creative organisation.

In what language did I think? My mother cursed me in home-spun Punjabi; the games I played and the folk songs and stories of ghosts I heard were in Punjabi; the detective novels and poetry I read were in Urdu; and the modern thoughts and knowledge came from English. What was the colour and shape of an emotion in terms of words? How to describe an unformed thought, a quarter feeling or a half-bloomed image? Sensations came to me in clashing languages. I was all the time changing tracks, translating my thoughts from one language to another. How I could survive the fragmentation of my mind? Perhaps it was my Hindu background which allowed multiple gods and shrines.

Once at a get-together at my house, a heated discussion

took place. The Lenin-bearded M.M. Puri said, "We are gutless bastards!.. the so-called intellectuals. After teaching for twenty years in a university, we lose not only our hair but also our potency... Now look at me! Do you think I believe in these new forums? But I am the first to be there. We are with Indira Gandhi. I tell you that if the Chinese come, we will be with the Chinese. Or the Americans."

Puri had had three drinks. His eyes were blurred, and he was speaking with strong gestures, fighting his past, the idealism of his school days, crusading against the smug bourgeoisie. In the process he had himself become a smug bourgeois, for which he hated himself. This surfaced only after drinks.

He said, "We are all cowards. Can we fight? Can we stand up for any cause? For anything? We only talk. I challenge anyone here to speak out the truth in public! Let's not fool ourselves. We are with nobody. The truth is that we are a gutless race..like dogs we yelp for crumbs. Can we stand up for any idea? Not at all! We are with the chair. All our jugglery of words, ideals, of taking a stand is pure shit! We don't believe in it. The political bosses also know we don't believe in it. It is a facade.. We are the worst criminals!"

The luxuriously fat Ravneet Kaur sat sipping whisky, smoking and pouting. She kept a small loaded pistol in her cleavage. None dared molest her when she drove about alone at night on the Chandigarh roads, drinking tea at wayside stalls or eating hot *parathas* stuffed with spiced potatoes. She had sensitive lips, large almond eyes and a finely drawn face, but enormous breasts and buttocks. She dressed in fantastic costumes, mostly



designed by herself — a multicolour blouse, a billowing skirt with mirror work — and painted her nails and lips black and sometimes green, with matching mascara. An IAS hippie, she was the spoilt daughter of the bureaucracy. Honest, temperamental, culturally knowledgeable. Her offbeat manners shocked people.

Ravneet said, "Who cares for art? I produced three plays for the state repertory, known works of master dramatists. Worked day and night. I sat with the poor actors, ate with them, supervised costumes and worked backstage. What happened? Complaints against me. Enquiries. I felt disgusted. I had a dream to build a repertory in Punjab and elevate theatre to the national level. But I was transferred. Now...I don't care."

The sculptor Shiv Singh, who wore a black turban, a black velvet jacket and a black beard, had returned from Germany and settled in Chandigarh. He said, "Punjab is a huge salt mine. Anybody who goes into it turns into salt. The leaders are busy all the time with *jathedars*, hangers-on, personal secretaries and relatives. Even the most upright and talented secretary becomes gutless. He dare not risk the displeasure of the minister. These officials. They wear neckties and smart jackets, discuss Western democracy and freedom of thought, but are feudal beneath their underwear."

Gurcharan, a rebel theatre director, remarked, "Our leaders cannot distinguish a bad book from a good one. They have no idea who Bade Ghulam Ali Khan was. Or Amrita Sher-Gil. If you invite them to a play, however brilliant, they ask, 'Have I to inaugurate it?' And if you tell them to just come and see the play, they feel insulted. Inaugurations, opening ceremonies, closing

ceremonies, weddings, *bhogs*, laying foundation stones or making public speeches. It's disgusting."

A golden-bearded critic said, "Why should we need government patronage? Did our folk artists and poets compose for the government? An artist is out to break fossilised values. Why should the government patronise him? Why shouldn't they put him in jail? Here everyone runs after the government. It has corrupted us."

I said, "I wonder if the small town Punjabi has any taste for art and theatre. He has a taste for roast chicken and liquor. He can immediately tell if the chicken is tender, well-baked or overdone. The quality of its juices, crust, gizzards. But he cannot appreciate the arts. Who are our Punjabi writers? A deputy commissioner, a high court judge, a magistrate, a managing director, a general manager of railways, and professors galore! They have poached over the area. They attend conferences to preside or to read papers. Who listens to their muck? These bloody seminars! What's a seminar? If ten intelligent people get together, exchange views and speak out their souls, it's a seminar. By enlarging the crowd you diffuse thinking. Rather, thinking disappears!"

A revolutionary poet hissed, "What you are writing these days is mere shit! Just vulgar sex. Not our culture. It's the Western influence, the corrupt capitalist system based on violence and sex. Why have you to write on sexual themes? Is there no other subject? When there is so much hunger and poverty and exploitation in the country, so much corruption and hypocrisy, why do you harp on sex and use vulgar words like 'breasts'?"

Anger ran through my body and I said, "Who are you to judge me with your stupid morals? For me the hand is as sacred as the head or the penis. How can you call the word 'breasts' vulgar? It's beautiful. Every child is suckled by its mother on her breasts...a life-giving force...You accuse me of vulgarity. It's people like you who have distorted literary values. Vulgarity is in a context and depends upon the person. Some people write sweet nothings with mawkish servility. They are vulgar. Others use foul curses and look noble. Some people's anger is noble, while some people's laughter is vulgar. For me the human body is beautiful...glorious! Painters and sculptors have been wise to stick to their tradition of the nude. They worship it. But the writers are a mismash lot...Sadat Hassan Manto was dragged to the court for using word 'breasts' in one of his stories. The judge was a bearded religious Muslim. Manto asked the judge, "Tell me what shall I call a woman's breasts? Should I call it a razor, table, or cashewnut?" Today after thirty-five years I ask you the same question!"

The revolutionary poet said with disdain, "You don't paint life as it is!"

I asked, "Do you know life? Have you watched farmers, politicians and truck drivers? How they talk and eat and slurp, larding their speech with foul curses. They backslap and hug each other with choicest abuses. When my granduncle entered the courtyard he would knock on the door, shouting, "Open the door, mother fuckers!" The women would hear his flowery invectives as they cooked and washed clothes. When he went out the old women told obscene jokes as they sat spinning in the courtyard. Their lewd vocabulary was a way of speech.

It did not sound vulgar. What is vulgar for a petty bourgeois may not be considered so by the rural folk. You cannot judge a piece of art in terms of morality. It's the wrong yardstick. Literature is not vulgar or noble. It is either good or bad!"

The discussion moved on to poverty and crime. Puri said, "It's the exploitation of the poor, hunger and the miserable conditions of living which force the people to rebel against the system. The case histories of murderers and thieves reveal that the basis of crime is man's exploitation of man."

A lean sociologist sucked at his pipe. "It's not poverty that breeds crime. Look at New York. The lights failed one evening and the customers in shops started pillaging. A chain reaction set in through the whole city. Blacks, whites, young, old, mothers, children — all indulged in a looting spree. A department store was stripped of everything; only a pair of socks was left. The people who looted were well-to-do. The moment the fear of the law was removed, they became savages. It is the gun which keeps people in check. It's human nature to violate the law. To steal. I don't think it's poverty. It's the *samaskars*. Something one inherits in one's psyche, and environment. One cannot predict the result. Who can control the millions and billions of impressions which impinge upon the growing consciousness of a child. Everyone reacts differently to a situation. The son of a prostitute may become a saint; an illiterate mother may give birth to a brilliant writer; a bastard may be a great prime minister. And vice-versa. I have come to believe in the power of heredity. Environment is only to pamper, nourish, help and nurture the already-

formed characteristics. I mean the mind...the essence, the inner core of one's being."

What was it that determined people's behaviour? Why did they change when they occupied the throne of power? Why did they become suddenly ignorant of social realities? Most of our leaders come from poor families, have suffered in jails, travelled in buses, have seen hunger and privation. But when they are voted to power, they suddenly became monsters.

The conversation leapfrogged from topic to topic amid cigarette fumes and whisky. Heated arguments on one subject suddenly dissolved into others, depending upon the mood of the speaker. Everyone was inspired by personal ambitions and guilts. There was no direction. No purpose. Nothing to prove. In the noisy and fuddled atmosphere, the conversation had a startling frankness: people fighting their ghosts, speaking out their hidden desires, acting out their guilts.

The following morning they were back to their jobs. They repeated the same lessons year after year and grew old teaching the same formulae, the same equations, the same reasons for the fall of the Mughal Empire. This repetitive activity had dulled their minds. I felt I was dying slowly.

The life around me was of perverse relations, of petty existences. I knew of women professors and wardens who camouflaged their relationship with young girls under the garb of maternal care. The girl suspected nothing. Slowly she was initiated into a sexual relationship with her motherly teacher. It would begin

with affection, protective concern, hugs, burning kisses and finally end in bed.

This relationship was pure, beautiful and without any danger. The more strict and fearsome the teacher, the more hypnotic she became in her lesbian conquests. Some young girls sharing the same cubicle exchanged scarves and saris as tokens of affection, ate together and slept together in the same bed, fondling each other's breasts, kissing each other and slowly became sexual partners. In the absence of free mingling between men and women, these monosexual relationships were accepted by society as harmless. The perversions had a social and moral sanction and appeared natural. . .

While choosing the cast for Genet's *The Maids*, I put up posters on the campus and sent circulars to various departments. Thirty girls came for the try-outs. They were mod, liberated, and belonged to the upper class. I explained to them the theme of the play, the glorification of crime and the lesbian relationship of the two maids. The girls were horrified. None of them was ready to act. Finally, I went to the hostels in search of my cast and was able to persuade three girls to work in the play. I did not tell them the theme. I started straight with the lines and movement. The girls were hesitant to hug each other. I told them that they must behave like two loving sisters, pure and good, living together in a cubicle, eating, playing, working and sleeping together. Suddenly they became free. While playing the maids, they passionately hugged each other, quarreled, hated and made love in ecstasy and gave a superb portrayal of two lesbians without being conscious of it.

My production of *Gagon Mein Thal*, a play on the life of Guru Nanak to celebrate his 500th birth anniversary was to open at Tagore Theatre. I had involved the students of local colleges so that this song-and-dance packed colourful production could be real community work.

As I went backstage to greet the players who were putting on their make-up, I found to my horror that the leading girl, Mala Jaggi, was missing. I had asked the players to be in the theatre by three o'clock sharp. Now it was past five. I asked everybody if they had seen Mala. Why hadn't she come? Suddenly it occurred to me that she might have been stopped by her principal, Mr. Kaushalya Ram, who had asked me for two complimentary seats in the front row. I could not do that because of the university hierarchy. Ministers in the front row, judges in the second row, deans and syndics in the third and fourth, professors and principals in the fifth row. Mrs. Ram sent a message that she would not come to the play if she was not given a front seat along with judges and ministers. I thought she was joking.

Kaushalya Ram, the hirsute principal of the local Government College for Women, was a popular social and cultural figure. By her sheer physical weight, she dominated Chandigarh art circles and pronounced judgements on theatre and literature with great arrogance. This cultural ogress with her squeaky voice had the power and charm to melt down the hardest bureaucrat. She was the custodian of the choicest beauties and smartest girls of the province

studying in her college. They were her property. She guarded them fiercely, as she did her college furniture and files.

Dizzy and perspiring I ran out, jumped into my car and raced to Mala's hostel. The warden told me that Mala could not leave without the prior sanction of the principal. It sounded incredible. Ten years ago I had come to this very college as a VIP "to grace the occasion," at Mrs. Ram's behest.

Suddenly I saw Mala running across the lawn towards me, her hair flying and a hockey stick in her hand. She told me in tears that Mrs. Ram had ordered her not to go to the theatre.

I walked briskly to Mrs. Ram's bungalow in the college compound. The servant told me that his mistress had gone to a tea party. As I stood harassed, calculating a possible replacement, I heard a car roaring in. Mrs. Ram stepped out. She was in a hurry. She had come to change her outfit as she had to go to another party. I told her that she should not have stopped Mala from performing on the opening night. How could she do it?

She said, "It's not my concern. She will not go to act in your play. I don't care if the play flops. You had not the courtesy even to send me two tickets! I am not used to sitting in the fifth row. My husband is a known lawyer. We must sit with the judges."

She had assumed the posture of an arrogant judge; I was the petitioner. I begged but she would not melt. I promised to put two extra chairs in the front row. Finally, she relented. I came out hurriedly, took Mala in



my car and raced to the theatre. Only ten minutes were left for the play to start.

Myths and legends helped me understand my ego. Lord Krishna was cursed by his cousin 99 times, but he kept smiling. Giraudoux's Hector was insulted by a messenger who spat on his face in his court. Hector simply wiped the spit with the back of his hand and refused to be insulted. Mrs. Ram could not insult me

A travelling fashion show was passing through Chandigarh. Its woman director saw Raji at a party and asked her to join them. She found her ideally suited to be a model. Raji inquired about the emoluments and other benefits and wanted to go to Bombay to train for three months under the direction of this woman who assured her of an entry into the films.

I told Raji that this fashion madam was the mistress of a millionaire — an ugly crow — and also acted as his pimp. She would land in his bedroom before she ever got to the floor. This frightened her and she gave up the whole idea.

Still, she was very keen on films. She wrote long letters to some directors she had met. They sent her formal replies which she treasured. She was sure that if she moved to Bombay she would be able to make a breakthrough.

With her fantastic memory she remembered the songs and dialogues of almost every film and could narrate sequences of hit films shot by shot — scenes of

misunderstanding, separation, reconciliation, sacrifice and anguish. She devoured *Filmfare*, *Star and Style* and *Screen* for details of the private lives of actresses and actors. She would stand before the mirror and find herself more attractive than many actresses. Only she did not get a chance. If she had gone to the film world when she was eighteen, nobody could have stopped her from becoming a star. She had the correct height and waist, and her breasts were large and firm. Most significant were her eyes — well-shaped, hypnotic. Watching films from the age of nine, she had imbibed the mannerisms of heroines, their shy and loving movements, their graces and gestures.

Rajinder Singh Bedi had written me that he was searching for a new heroine for his film and could I

"You are obsessed with the thought that your photographs should appear in film magazines and journals and that you should be famous."

She looked at me with cold hate. "You are jealous. If some one praises me, you say he will exploit me. The fact is that *you* are exploiting me. You have kept me under your thumb. You don't want me to shine. You just want me to be your mistress!"

"Don't talk rot!"

"I'll show you that some day I will be a great actress. A star! In spite of you!"

I grabbed her hand, "You will show me? Ungrateful wretch! What were you before you met me? A domestic drudge in a middle-class house. I gave you knowledge. Consciousness. A new mind. Without me you will be a cultural widow."

"Yes, I am a widow!" she shrieked, "You are dead for me!"

I shook her violently. "Go! Wherever you want. Act with anyone you want!"

I pushed her to the wall forcefully as she kicked and cursed. I twisted her arm and hit her on the back. The next moment she was crouching on the floor, her eyes wild.

"Beast! How could you hit me? I'll never act in your plays! I have worked for you, followed you everywhere like a slave, ruined myself. How could you ever treat me like this. Cast me off like a rag. I'll see how you ever direct a play in this town! I'll have you thrown out! I'll cry from housetops that you are a monster! Let the whole world hear me! I'll go to your Vice-Chancellor and tell him all about you!"

I shouted, "To hell with you! Go to the Vice-Chancellor! Go to Indira Gandhi. Go to anyone you want! But get out from here!"

She beat the earth with her fists and broke into a flood of tears. Her hair fell loose. Lying on the floor, crushed and beaten, she wept loudly. Her pride was gone. Seeing her thus I was overcome with remorse.

I kneeled, "Don't cry, my dear...I am sorry. I get mad when you doubt me. Believe me I am writing these plays for you... thinking of a future with you. We'll create together."

She sobbed, "I cannot wait any longer. I am getting old ...I'm twenty nine. Already rings around my eyes...when will I act in a film? I am getting old."

"As long as you have these hands and these eyes and this passion, you will never grow old."

"And if I become old, you won't leave me? Swear, that you will never leave me, swear that you will love me till your last breath."

"I swear on my life."

"If I become a cripple, if my face is disfigured by pox-marks...even then will you love me?"

"Yes. Even then."

Tears had washed away her anger and her features had mellowed. She wiped her eyes, opened her purse and brought out a tiny red book with gold letters. "I always keep the Gita with me. Put your hand on it and say that you will always belong to me."

"Always."

"Say that if you ever sleep with another woman, may God destroy your male power!"



because I have a short black beard and gave them two hundred rupees. You can buy them cheap. They are all a herd of opportunists. Many attractive girls with cars and dogs have joined this movement. They are trying to make it glamorous and flashy on the Delhi pattern. Sanjay is young, aristocratic, temperamental, attractive and surrounded by females. The same is being copied here, a miserable miniature of the set-up. If I had not joined them, they would have pulled down the nudes in my studio."

He pointed out, "Look at that Italian girl with naked thighs and hair down her shoulders...her tits peeping through her wet shirt...the curves and the tingling flesh visible through the creases of her garment. Two youth leaders came and gaped at her. Do you think they would have spared this life-size sexy photo? And you know, young girls are my customers. Jazz players, rock'n roll types, mod women who drink and smoke frequent my studio. Their husbands and fathers consider me harmless because I am a cripple. But the idiots don't know that sex is not in your body; it's not in your penis...it's here!" And he tapped his head with his curved fat index finger.

Adarsh was a cripple, hardly four and a half feet tall, plump, with a massive head. The most distracting part of his face were his eyes, the pupils looking out at odd angles. One eye was in focus, the other tilted. I felt put off by these deceptive eyes. But when he talked, these very eyes became intense, meaningful. They had an unusual intelligence. His head housed a multiple brain, attending to four or five different unrelated subjects at the same time.

His stereophonic speech would be like this: "Yes, we have an analyser, Agfa colour printing filter and Varioscope auto enlarger...Damn it, two coffees with cream and six chicken sandwiches. Fuck that beast...I don't want him in my shop... Only multi-colour filters, and six 300 mm lenses... Get me one seat for Delhi, afternoon flight...No, I like small tits so that I can enlarge them, but what do I do with large breasts, I can't diminish them."

He continued, "I believe in good equipment. Excellent results. One can do better business. One can create. But since morning I have been feeling hellish. I want to scratch out my customers' eyes...day and night talking to idiots. I haven't talked to an intelligent man for months. I am wasting my life in Chandigarh — this Shitty Beautiful! But what can one do? ...you look worried. Don't bother about these youthwallahs... What about dinner tonight? I have to discuss something concerning you."

"Well...certainly."

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

"Let us have a quiet meal at Mount View. Seventy-thirty?"

"I'll be there."

I reached Mount View at the appointed time. Half an hour later, Adarsh hobbled into the dining room. As he dug his rubber-tipped aluminium crutches into the wooden floor, two waiters ran to pull out a chair for him



to sit. Adarsh rested his crutches on one side and asked  
"What will you have?"

"Anything."

"Beer, gin, whisky, vodka...?"

I preferred whisky. He ordered two pegs. Resting his  
elbow on the table and cupping his chin in his hand he  
smiled, "I'm sorry to be late. Just as I was leaving five  
people asked me to come with them for a drink. I told  
them I was tired and wanted to go home. I don't want  
to be with a person just for drinks or food. I enjoy very few  
people's company. Very few people have ideas. There are  
professors I wouldn't like to spit at. They have  
nothing to give to students. They only know how to draw  
their salary. They are absolutely bogus. Our society is  
such. Men talk about morality all the time. But their  
eyes pop out when they see a woman's hips. People go to  
the *Darbar Sahib* to listen to the *kirtan*. But their eyes  
search for women. What lovely bosoms. What lush  
thighs! Why don't they go to a brothel? All of them are  
lustering for women. But then I think why not. Tell me,  
if a woman comes to my bed will I leave her? If politicians  
can sleep with women where's the harm. If a politician  
can seduce a woman, I admire him because it is an art.

I said, "But if he is a chief minister and doles out  
favours and lures women to bed, I think it is  
immoral...criminal."

He grinned, "It's business. You shouldn't condemn  
me. Don't be a moralist. Someone sells his talent, his art, his  
ideas, his body...it's the same thing. Women have used  
their bodies throughout the ages and exploited men, but  
they have been clever enough to declare that they have been  
robbed. The male bastard says he was robbed of his money

by the woman he went to bed with. Both are liars. It's just business."

The bearer brought the drinks. Adarsh clutched his glass with his stubby fingers, clanked it against mine and sipped it. I was not in a mood to talk. In fact, I felt completely empty in my head. He had occupied all my thoughts.

He leaned over the table, "Balwantji, people talk a lot about you. This bloody city has nothing else to do but gossip. It's none of their business with whom you go, whom you fuck. If I have anything to say I'll say it to your face. I respect you a lot...but I want to say one thing...about Raji...."

Mention of her name made me sit up.

He continued, "She will destroy you. When you fall in love with a woman who has ambition she is bound to destroy you."

I said, "I know what people say. But you have no idea of this woman. I love her as I have never loved any woman... When I was twenty three I fell in love with a young actress. For four years I was in the grip of this master passion. She left me and married a friend of mine. Then betrayed him also. Now after twenty five years, Raji has come into my life. A perfect form of my vision. How can my friends judge me? How can they know my inner self? How can they ever realise the taste of this unique physical bliss, the complete joy of being. Five years with her, even five months...they are like fifty years with another woman. I love her that way. Love is a miracle. It has no parallel... What's greater than this? Nothing. One cannot count gains ...What's the gain of life? The ultimate gain: death. That's what

we are struggling for, fighting for, planning for...storing and building and saving...finally to die.”

Adarsh became quiet for a while, then said, “I am touched by your sincerity. You have the capacity to destroy yourself for this taste which is of the other world. I can understand you.”

My friends were discussing me and Raji at parties. Mocking me. Their contemptuous laughter. Even people up whom I didn't know enjoyed the gossip and spiced it up. Some were genuinely concerned. Why was I wrecking my life? Couldn't I see that Raji was using me? How could I be so blind? She wanted to reach the top...become a film star. She would betray me any day. Walk away with anyone who gave her a role...promised to make her a star...Some thought I was exploiting Raji. I had ruined her. She had given up her home, her children, her friends. What for? She was beautiful. Any handsome rich man would marry her. But she was mad...following me everywhere...coffee houses, theatres, wayside inns...

I could almost hear this conversation while I sat alone in my room. The charged waves of their disapproval, jealousy, contempt. I didn't care what they thought of me. In fact, the more vicious their remarks, the more free I felt. More independent. More self-willed and honest. I started to explore my existence and went deep into the inner shell of my being...I was tasting the joy of being myself. Life was fleeting, fast running out into the sands...

I would sit on the lawn and watch the tall poplars, their light-green slim trunks...flakes of brown bark peeling off, revealing the tender fresh skin. I would pass

my hand over my skin and feel my arm as if it were someone else's. I watched its texture, pores, its sun-tanned colour, the thin growth of black hair, muscles, lines on my palm, crisscross streaks, mango pollen floating in the air. I never thought about life as I did during these days...conscious of its futility, its essence, a narcotic one can drink...everything else was meaningless. Only moment which were lasting...the hysterical beauty of the rolling ocean, the wind, leaves, the bright laughter of a lunatic, the feeling of spiritual ecstasy, akin to sexual discharge...the supreme bliss. Only this mattered. All other things looked fake.

ON Jannat's third birthday we lit candles and the children hovered around the cake. Jannat puffed up her cheeks, shut her eyes and blew out the candles. We clapped and sang Happy Birthday. Jannat wore a cream coloured embroidered blouse. Jeannie said, "It's mine...thirty three years ago I wore it when I was three and have preserved it. Look. It fits her perfectly."

Jeannie preserved things. She wore shoes bought twelve years ago in Seattle and they looked new. Mine became deformed after one season. My clothes ripped at the seams and the pockets developed holes. My body seemed to wear out things. Clothes, shoes, combs, pillows, car. Everything I touched turned into a used object. Jeannie's touch was like a nurse's; mine like a blacksmith's. She would laugh, "How do you manage to write? It needs precision, focus and a great sense of coordination. Perhaps your entire sensitivity comes in writing. In life you are rough."

"I don't know," I said. "I am clumsy with my hands. Can't thread a needle. Can't fix a button, or type a letter."

I can't change even the wheel of my car though I have been driving for the last twenty five years. I am afraid of machines."

She reflected a little and said, "Our children would study in America. Too much violence and drugs. LS draft, guns. Free sex. It's a jungle. A TV program shows a head blown up by a bullet...blood spatters on the screen while people are eating their dinner. Violence has reached every home...My children will study in India. At least it's safe here." She had been reading stories of assassination and crime in *Time*.

I said, "*Time* dramatizes everything. It's salesmanship. If they wrote about a do-gooder or that the Mississippi flows nurturing the Midwest, it would be no news. But if it devastates 500 towns, it's news. *Time* catches the unusual, the odd...You can't judge America by what it says."

"But I still wouldn't like my children to study in America."

The children ran through clumps of mango trees chasing butterflies and catching the gossamer-winged pollen on the *ukk* plant. If a dog howled or a bird fluttered they were scared and ran back to me. "Papa, there's a wolf!" Manu would put his hand on Jannat's mouth, "Silly, it's a dog!" She would brush his hand aside and dilate his eyes, "No! it was a wolf. I saw its tail."

While walking through bushes and trees they imagined it to be the forest where Red Riding Hood met the Wolf and where Hansel and Gretel were lost. In this eerie wooded extension, fading off to the farthest end of the low boundary wall of the campus, the witch, the cast

the fairy godmother and the demon spitting fire were realities for them.

Manu and Jannat played with me. Manu had the same dimpled chin, the same quirky smile on the corners of his lips, the same ears. He walked like me...a miniature Balwant. He had something of my temperament and my father's. Nothing of Jeannie or of my mother. His mental make-up was mine. How mysteriously nature carries the message and thoughts of the grandfather through the son to the grandson...

At night Jannat would run to my bed in the main room where the cooler was on. She felt hot in the bedroom, oppressed by the fumes of incense and humidity. The fan swept the room and she would lie by my side enjoying the cool breeze. Manu would join her and both would fight to sleep on my right. This fight was to establish their superior right over me, and was a kind of game. Then Jannat would ask me the story of the crow and the fox and would help me with lines I forgot because I had to rebuild the story everytime afresh. She would add the sounds of "cawing," "slurping," "howling," and "hooting." Manu would ask for stories of Alladin's Lamp and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. They knew these stories by heart, but would ask me to retell them at night. Then Jannat would say "Papa, make the animals walk on my back!"

As she lay on her belly, I would feel her strong husky back, the soft tight flesh, and run my hand over it. She would close her eyes in ecstasy and say, "Start the game!"

This was the game I used to play fifty years ago with

my younger brother when we were children. A game which cost nothing except imagination.

I would slither my finger down Jannat's spine and she would shriek "Snake!" I would shape four fingers like a paw and move them step by step with the gait of an animal and she would howl "Cat!" I would dot her back with cute pinches and she would exclaim "Ant!" I would plant my fists and move them with heavy pauses up her back and she would titter "Elephant!"

Suddenly her eyes would start drooping and she would go to sleep.

One day a parrot-seller came across the mango grove balancing two baskets of parrots on a pole on his shoulders cawking. "Parrots for sale!"

Manu and Jannat came running "Papa, buy us a parrot!"

"Where?"

"There's a parrot-seller at the gate."

They led me by the arm to the gate where a man stood wearing a ragged dhoti, a red turban and small goldrings in his ears.

"How much?" I asked.

"Ten rupees for two."

"We want one."

"No, sir. We sell them as a couple. A lonely parrot dies soon. He must have a female companion."

Manu and Jannat tugged at my shirt, beseeching me, "Buy the parrot, Papa!"

Manu shrieked, "Look! there's a red circle around his neck."

"It's his necklace," said the parrot-seller.



I wondered how he could sell these beautiful creatures for just five rupees apiece when a stuffed parrot fetched twenty rupees in the market.

He put two parrots — male and female — in a cage and handed it to Manu. I paid the money.

The children ran with the cage to Surti who was thrilled with their new prize. The parrot man had given us instructions about their food, sleep, and other precautions. At night there was the danger of their attacking them. Therefore, they should be kept high in their cage in the children's sleeping room.

Manu told me that the sweeper Kaushalaya's parrots talked, and that they too would teach their parrots to talk and whistle. All evening they sat around the cage trying to talk to the parrots, bribing them with unripe mangoes. The two birds spun their round little eyes and screeched, nibbling at the straw bars of the cage. Jannat brought some pudding and offered it to the parrots through the bars. The parrot bit her and she howled. I soothed her and told the cook to buy a large iron cage to keep the pets comfortable, and advised Jannat not to put her finger in the cage.

The following day we learnt that the parrots had fought. The male had attacked the female and she had died. The children were sad. They removed the dead parrot and I told them to bury it under the poplar tree. Jannat carried the parrot, pressing her fingers against its fluffy body. They knelt and dug the earth with their hands.

It was raining heavily. The lightning cracked its whip and the clouds howled. I watched the poplars swaying their tall umbrellas. The gargoyles croaked. The road turned into a river gushing past the main gate. The green mango trees, flowering plants, and vast shrubbery were bathing in Nature's deluge. A car splashed and halted at the door. Husain emerged and strode into the house, dripping.

Husain had done a painting of Jeannie in half an hour in New Delhi during the first year of our marriage. We had gone to see him in his studio. Jeannie sat in a chair, wearing a black shawl, her hands clasped on her knees. Husain kneeled down, spread a canvas on the floor and started painting. There was savage concentration on his earth-brown face. I stood with bated breath. Husain was in his prayer pose when a thin young woman walked in. She glanced around and asked him to drive her to Connaught Place. Husain fumbled in his pocket for money and said, "Take a taxi." Seeing him absorbed, she turned angrily and went down, clattering her heels. Husain put down, his loaded brush. "It's complete."

He painted wherever he went, spawning sketches and portraits, leaving them in strangers' homes as one may leave one's umbrella.

Husain stayed with us three days.

He slept on a wooden divan in the main room. He had a small shoulder bag. I brought some drawing paper, colours, brushes, and kept these by his bedside. Twice I hinted if he would like to sketch something for me, but he would not nibble.

Jannat and Manu ran into the room and stopped,

awed by the presence of a stranger. Husain talked to them and picked up the reluctant Jannat. She wriggled to get down. Suddenly she became interested in his beard. She tugged at it, testing if it was real. Why had he such a long beard. Was he Santa Claus? She mewed like a cat, her familiar miming.

Husain put her down, went into the kitchen and brought a glass of water. He uncapped the little bottles of poster colours, took out a brush and dipped it in paint. He drew a cat in a thick black outline with one stroke. Jannat shouted, "Put red!" Husain obeyed. "Yellow!" "Blue!" Husain followed her directions, adding colours on command. "Tail!" He drew a long curly black tail. The result was a lively furry cat with red paws and a yellow belly.

Manu asked for an elephant. Husain loaded his brush in vermilion and painted a large elephant head, but there was no space for legs and a tail. Jannat shouted, "Why this elephant for Manu? I don't want your cat!" She rubbed her hand on the wet cat, messed up the picture and threw it at Husain's beard. Manu was angry that Husain had not given legs and a tail to his animal. He kicked the elephant. The red blob of its eyes splattered. Both children attacked the sketches and tore them to pieces.

Husain said, "I'll make another for you." Jannat pouted, "I don't like your painting!" and walked away. Manu followed her.

Jeannie was fond of long walks and felt restless in the

evenings. Sometimes I went with her to the lake or to the Botanical gardens. But I was lazy. I loved sitting with my friends or students, talking and drinking tea. For Jeannie her daily walk was like food. People saw a slim blonde walking cheerfully alone on the grassy pavements of the wide roads of Chandigarh, her long hair in a bandana. She would return around sunset. Always back to the house for an early dinner.

She said, "Why do you always go about in your car? Let's buy two bicycles and go riding in the evening. It's good for one's health. It will keep you fit."

I did not like cycling and could not shape my routine to fit in this compulsory health-oriented exercise.

Jeannie did not drink beer or whisky. Only wine on special occasions like a wedding anniversary or X'mas eve. She loved champagne, not so much for its taste as for its legendary association. At our weddings she had got high on it and remembered it for years.

I finished my new production and procured a large bottle of champagne from a foreign friend. I chilled it to give Jeannie a surprise. She had gone to meet a friend and had asked me to pick her up from their house in Sector 10 in the evening.

As I was about to leave, a pupil of mine came rushing up and told me that Jeannie had met with an accident. She had been knocked down by a speeding scooterist on Madhya Marg and was in the emergency ward of the PGI hospital.

I rushed to the hospital and found Jeannie lying in bed surrounded by nurses and a young doctor.

She opened her eyes, held my hands and said, "I

waited for you in that house till it got late. You didn't come. I have broken my collarbone. It hurts. But...I hope it's all right."

She looked touchingly beautiful. I pressed her hand, "How can I seek your pardon? Our roads are criminal...I am responsible for it, my love."

Little tears rolled down her cheeks, and her lips trembled. She kissed my hand and said, "It's all right."

It became a routine. Going to the theatre, working with amateurs, explaining movement, gesture, rhythm. While they rehearsed, I became so involved in their emotional and physical activity that I felt exhausted. Back home at nine. Jeannie and the children always ate at seven and nestled in the airconditioned bedroom. I ate alone because the smell of spiced curry offended her. I would finish my food hurriedly, brush my teeth and join the family. Jeannie would be reading a book. I would lie listening to the snatches she read out to me. She would caress my head, my shoulders and rub my back with her long sensitive fingers. I would pass out.

It was Christmas Eve. We had ordered a small turkey. She tenderised it and spent a full day grinding various ingredients, browning onions, mushrooms, mixing them with fried rice and almonds, and stuffing the turkey. Then she carefully stitched it and put it in the oven to roast. All the grinders and mixers whirred and shuddered on different tables in perfect co-ordination as Jeannie sang in the kitchen. She laid a ceremonial table in t

main room with her wedding silver, Japanese silk napkins and Wedgwood china. She lit two large red candles embossed with the figures of Mary and Jesus.

She was carving the turkey when the doorbell rang.

She said, "Please... don't bring in anybody. No friends. It's for the family. Just excuse yourself. Tell them you are busy."

I went out and found my old writer-friend Sant Singh Sekhon who had come from Ludhiana to stay with me. He had a little bag in his hand. I hugged him.

It was cold outside, a bit drizzly. He appeared like a testing angel on Christmas Eve, a beggarly Lazarus. After a conflict in my mind for a fraction of a minute, I told him, "I've some serious family matter. My brother has come from the village. Something very private. We'll meet tomorrow."

He smiled, "All right. I just dropped in. I'll come tomorrow."

I returned to the room fragrant with turkey steam and hot chocolate. Jeannie heaved a sigh of relief. We sat down to dinner: first a glass of wine, then soup followed by crisp turkey with a delicious stuffing. Manu and Jannat sat like little cubs to receive the slices of turkey which the mother doled out.

One morning a friend dropped in while I was having tea. The servant brought me toast and a fried egg, which I offered to the visitor, and asked the servant to bring more egg and toast. As we talked about a symposium in honour of a recently cremated young poet, Manu ran in. "Papa, there are no eggs. Mummy says, is it a hotel?"

I had brought a basket of twelve dozen eggs from the farm of a friend who raised American chicks. He had given me this fabulous variety of eggs as a gift. I went to the kitchen and asked Jeannie why she had sent this message when the fridge was well stocked. She replied, "They're special. For the family. Not for your Punjabi wolves who gobble anything."

I was stunned. I did not want a scene. That evening while I drove around with the children and Jeannie to buy vegetables from the Sector 15 market I said to her, "Should I go and buy a dozen eggs for myself?" "Better," she said. I got down from the car and bought the eggs. The small paper bag of twelve eggs was kept separate in the fridge for me. I had purchased the eggs only to shame her, to demonstrate how selfish and food-minded she was. And hoped that she would be sorry for her pettiness and realize that Manu should not have run to me with that foolish message. But she seemed pleased.

At night I lay in my bed thinking of the eggs. Was she so insensitive? So protein conscious? Or was it a demonstration of hate for me? Total non-sharing of things. An element which appeared earlier like an imperceptible seam in her personality slowly became a gap. An ugly large gap, revealing her self-centered meanness. She had often mocked the Indians who rushed to well-laden tables at wedding receptions to grab chicken breasts and drumsticks. She had laughed at her mother's letters which were always sprinkled with food news: where she ate, how she ate, descriptions of sirloin steak, kingsize Alaska lobsters, mushroom gravy, bamboo shoots. Now her own personality was taking the form of a food-hungry woman.

She was changing. Her features had started assuming a dim resemblance to her mother's. I looked at her as she sat eating her food on her bed, and thought of her mother who had visited us last year and who would sometimes sit on the bed and eat her breakfast, picking at her toast and ham gingerly, as if polishing her nails. Jeannie's jerky manners, startled looks and nervous actions were like her mother's. Her golden skin and springy walk had become subdued. The juices in her body were evaporating. She was ashamed to change in the room if I was around.

There was general neglect in the house. Crumpled sheets, soiled napkins, naked cold cement. The pillows were greasy and lumpy, buttons missing on my shirts. The bright yellow and turquoise curtains on the windows showed dirty blurs.

I entered the kitchen and saw her baking a chicken pie. On one stove simmered her special soup in which meat, bones, chopped spring onions and green celery bubbled. Noticing me, she put the lid on the soup and turned towards the pie. On her plate lay a club-sandwich stuffed with sliced ham, cheese, lettuce, half-braised tomatoes and fried sausages. I touched her shoulder and said, "Very appetising!"

I picked up one sausage and tasted it, "Delicious."

She looked at me and her features changed. She snapped, "Don't touch my sandwich! Why do you take my food? Eat your *chapattis* and *dal*."

I said, "I was only tasting the sausage. There are plenty of them...It's good to share things."



Her eyes flashed, "What sharing? Don't interfere in my food. Don't you start tasting the soup now!"

She turned and bent over the stove, as if to shield her preparations. There was a "touch-me-not" quality in her behaviour.

I walked out to the children in the garden.

In her bedroom she had started yoga and puja. A picture of Christ appeared above the long black cupboard in place of the Husain painting. One day I saw a gold cross around her neck. I asked her where it came from. She replied coldly, "I had my gold bangles melted and fashioned into this cross." These were the bangles my mother had left on her death for my bride.

She was slowly converting the household things into Christian objects. She regularly went to Church, took part in the choir, practised on her flute in her room for hours. Sometimes she would lock the door and remain inside all afternoon and I would feel like an intruder. It had never been locked in the past years. She had liked open windows, sunlight, the fragrance of poplars and glimpses of bougainvillaea. But now it was the room.

Her attitude was hardening, like wet clay left in the sun. The process was slow. On reflection I realised that it had begun that evening when she came in late from a choir practice session. I saw her crooning in the kitchen as she tossed salad in a large wooden bowl, beaming with happiness. This happiness was exactly of the same colour as when she had first met me in Seattle and brought a piece of home-made chocolate cake for me. Now when I entered the kitchen and she looked at me,

the same joy was on her face and the same shine in her eyes. She said in a singsong fashion, "You're O.K. I'm O.K. Have you read this book? Read it. It's wonderful. You're O.K. I'm O.K."

I noticed a blur in her smile. It was directed at me but not intended. Her thoughts were somewhere else.

IT was about midnight. I was in my study correcting the proofs of my play when I heard screams from across the mango yard. Sometimes the students would get drunk and quarrel or yell after the late night film show.

I came out to see what was happening.

Savage, almost non-human screams were coming from boys' hostel No. 1. Cries of "*pakro, pakro*" resounded. A clatter of running footsteps on the thoroughfare. After that it became quiet. Perhaps the students had settled their brawl. I returned to my room.

The following morning I learnt that a young boy, Jaspal, had been murdered in the hostel. The son of a high police official of Jullundur, Jaspal was a slim, lazy bum, a drug addict. He had a short beard, drowsy eyes and wore a pugree and a large steel bracelet studded with beads on his left wrist. Two unknown men had knocked at his cubicle and the half-asleep Jaspal had opened the door. One of the assassins whipped out a knife and plunged it in his chest. Jaspal let out a shattering scream. The assailant delivered two more vicious stabs on the same spot and Jaspal dropped dead.

Before the students could come out of their rooms to help, the assassins ran through the corridor brandishing their knives, down the steps, over the lawn and escaped through an opening in the hedge which the students had secretly made for their late-night returns.

The entire hostel was awake, shouting "*pakro pakro!* Murder!" A police patrol which had been drinking tea outside the main gate of the campus rushed in. They saw two men running in the dark and chased them. One escaped; the other fell as a policeman hurled his iron-tipped baton at him. It struck him between his legs and he stumbled. He was taken into custody.

When the warden, the dean and other officials came they found Jaspal lying flat on his back, his arms out stretched, the knot of his thick hair loosened in a ropy curl, his mouth half-opened with teeth gleaming. Blood had spurted from his chest, made a thick dark crimson puddle on his concave belly and flowed down the left side, making a pool on the floor. His left hand seemed to have clutched at his chest in a struggle for life, but it now lay limp, the fingers covered with caked blood.

It was all over campus that two Naxalites had killed young Jaspal to avenge their murdered comrades.

That morning classes were cancelled. The coffee shop was buzzing with students, teachers and journalists discussing the gruesome tragedy. Was this revenge justified? Wasn't it a mad criminal act?

A golden-bearded Jat student in a blue vest showing his hairy chest said, "I believe in revenge. An eye for an eye. There was no point in killing the old father who has shot many Naxalites. Now he will live a tortured life. Men in power will shudder. After all, the police are

killing teachers, students, workers, revolutionaries. There is a prize on the head of every Naxalite. They have been pushed outside society and declared criminals. The Naxalites hit back by living up to the image. For this I blame the system."

A bespectacled, sallow-faced researcher said, "They are misled. We cannot bring about a revolution by terrorism."

A student of microbiology puffed at his cigarette, "Can you frighten the government? Is the government an ant? Can you crush it? Fools. Their actions are mad."

"But how can you change the system? Only one way. A bomb. A dagger. A murder. Look, we are discussing Naxalites. Why? Because they kill."

"How do you know he was a Naxalite. I hear it was a family feud. Some personal grudge. And the police are blaming the Naxalites."

"I'll write a poem. They are torturing the man they arrested last night. I feel sympathy for him. They are giving him hell in the lock-up."

"Should they serve him chocolate pudding?"

"They have devised the most brutal methods of torture. I was reading about them. The parrot perch. The horse ride. The aeroplane zoom. The nectar feeding. The worst is the Hyderabad *goli*."

"What is it?"

"A steel rod is smeared with chilly powder and pushed up your ass!"

"They don't torture the leaders. Only the masses. But if you have an M.A. degree they won't torture you."

"They will if they consider you dangerous."

“Enemies of the youth. Of new light. Of new ideas, of revolution.”

“What are you babbling about revolution! A bloody downward earthing *dosas*, pissing in your pants. Don’t talk about revolution!”

“Revolutionary ideas are born in cafes. Paris, Warsaw, Budapest, Zurich...if Guru Nanak were alive he would be sitting in a cafe discussing, arguing, converting people to his views. Cafes are the centres of ideas.”

“Not like our coffee house. It’s a madhouse. Curses, rickshackles, burps. Foul breath of crumb seekers. You call it conversation? Bullshit!”

“You have to be really brave to commit murder. Look at the army. It commits wholesale manslaughter: The hero is given the Vir Chakra. Medals, decorations. Yesterday’s murderers are today’s saints.”

“A police officer in Bengal employs novel methods to torture females. He strips a woman naked, lights his cigar, and after a few puffs puts it out on her breast. The woman’s hands and legs are tied and her hair pulled back by an assistant to keep her in position. The inspector puts her shoulders, back and breasts with a garland of flowers and calls it the ‘marriage garland.’ And this officer is a great lover of music and fine arts.”

“Why be a Naxalite. I can understand murdering a rich man for money. Loot. Clothes. Watches. Women. But to murder for an idea? A foolish political thought. I can’t understand it.”

“A revolutionary is drugged with idea. The most potent, dangerous drug is an idea. You march to death, scale the highest mountain, walk through burning valleys, your eyes shining. You smile. Why? An idea has fired

your blood, lighted your veins. You don't feel the torture. Christ was a Naxalite..."

"Every revolutionary appears mad. Every idea is a crime. A plague. The first rat dies and the Establishment declares it a plague area which must be burnt down, cleared, bulldozed. But the idea escapes. You cannot bulldoze it. You trample it under your feet but it slips and floats in the air. It marches in streets. In hovels. In nightmares. In bedrooms. It moves and keeps the human race alive."

"You don't understand Marxism."

"I do."

"What is it."

"A hat worn by everybody. Russians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cubans, Algerians, Naxalites. The hat has lost its shape."

"I admire Zeenat Aman's tits."

"Liz Taylor looks a hag. She turns on my dad. Not me."

"Komila Virk's boobs are bigger."

"Fucking bastards!"

Amidst thick fumes, the clatter of cups, knives, grunts and slurps, the discussion moved to sex scandals and the hockey test match.

I left the coffee shop and walked past the library, Gandhi Bhavan and the water tank. I passed hostel No. 1 and saw the row of little cubicles with their jutting-out balconies where students hung their washing. A tall Sikh student, bare chested, was combing his long hair, swishing it around so that the mass of hair flew. A clean-shaven Hindu boy was doing the sit-stand exercise, and

in a balcony a student lay in an armchair singing a love song in his hoarse voice.

I returned home and walked into the bedroom. A stranger was sitting on Jeannie's bed with a pile of music records and books. She said, "Meet Mr. X, my teacher. He is a wonderful composer...a musician..."

The man gave me a leathery smile and shook my hand with overflowing zeal. "I'll be very happy to be your friend."

I didn't like the clammy touch of his friendship.

There was something in the eyes of this man, like bright marbles. While his facial muscles moved, these bright marbles stared with a fixed glow...a mesmerising stare...more like a mask...yet his actions were agile and clean.

I did not have the desire to meet him again.

I saw her carrying bundles of books and records with the help of this man. I was suddenly back in Seattle. I had carried her volumes of *National Geographic* and music records in exactly the same way from her Seattle apartment. The same look was in her eyes, a look of fear, anxiety, and distant hope.

As she was leaving, she said, "Come over to meet the members of our choir. It's wonderful. We go in groups, play the guitar and sing from door to door asking for donations...very thrilling. I love to sing with them. I'll return late."

And she left.

Where did she go? Who was this man? People had not talked to me about him because they respected my



feeling. Anyhow, one does not talk to the husband about his wife's activities.

One day Tara Chand Gupta, an old friend of mine, came to see me. He was a journalist with a fantastic eye for stories, hidden facts, about the underworld, educational crime, the twisted relationships in girl colleges, and politics.

We had a quiet lunch under the bouganvillea and talked about the political trouble in the country. Suddenly he said, "Do you know your wife spends all her time with a fellow who has opened a small music studio. She goes there.....to that den...it's scandalous. Everyone in town is talking about it."

His words hit me in the stomach. But I controlled myself and showed no emotion. I kept quiet for a little while. In this short pause, I realised the truth of Jeannie's relationship with this man. Also many half-statements, awkward conversations, and her cheerful absence from the house made the outline clear. I felt as if I had known about this already in my sub-conscious but had had no desire to face it. I was so overwhelmed by Raji's relationship that I had put aside Jeannie's emotional file and had not even tried to thumb it. Now it lay open like a wound.

I asked Tara Chand, "What should I do?"

He said, "You tell her to stop this nonsense. Tell her not to go to these music sessions."

"If she says no?"

"Then give her a slap and set her right. That's the only way to deal with women. Otherwise they blackmail you. Be firm. Strong. If she wants to break away at this point

let her do so. You can't stop it. But then at least you'll have some peace of mind."

After he had gone I roamed the house looking at the picture of Christ on the shelf, the bed where we slept, the airconditioner which had not been used by her during the day for months — at night she preferred the fan because she was afraid of the power fluctuations which could burn the compressor; the wardrobe where, among other things, hung the two dresses of Iranian fabric I had bought her in New York.

I saw a crumpled paper bag amidst her clothes and artificial jewellery on the lowest shelf. I picked up the bag, thinking that perhaps by mistake she had left orange peel in it because she was in the habit of carefully storing rubbish in order to throw it into a dustbin. I felt the bag, a cheap brown envelope. I put my hand into it and brought out a handful of the rubbish. There were torn letters and bits of a photograph. I recognised these bits — her smiling teeth and the texture of my tweed jacket. I emptied the bag on the bed, strewing the crazy snippets of the photograph: a fragment of my cheek, her half-eye, a coat collar, her partial nose, a slice of my chin, and her hair...a curious fragmentary dislocation of her being. I tried to piece it together. With great effort, I could assemble her eyes and partial nose together. I saw her looking at me with intense eyes, beautifully pencilled, while her smile lay separate.

I had never read a letter of hers even if it lay open. Never touched her diary which was in her cupboard, always unlocked. Now I felt I was poaching on her privacy, her inner world. A shudder went down my body.

I put the bits back into the bag and placed it in exactly the same place.

Some friends told me that she was seen cycling with a man who had sons and daughters and even grandchildren. Another friend had seen her leaning against him in his car. Adarsh told me that when he had invited me to Mount View Hotel, he had wanted to talk to me about Jeannie and this fellow. How Jeannie was being lured by him and what a shameful situation it was. I was the talk of the town. I must stop Jeannie from her foolish adventure. Instead, he had talked to me about Raji, and in an oblique way referred to the destruction of my home.

Surti had been ill for sometime. She had chest pains and sat up in her bed at night, coughing. Her face became drawn and her hooked nose appeared longer, like one of the hags in the children's books. We had her admitted in hospital and paid daily visits to her. Her nephew in town was informed. On the third day she returned to the house in a rickshaw with her little bundle of clothes. She said, "I not go hospital, Saheb. I not there die...I go my house." She was aching to return to her village and see her grand-daughters. She packed her things. Her nephew and his wife came. Surti carried all her belongings with her in three bundles, her suitcase, and an old rug we had given her. She put on new clothes, a white shawl, hugged the children and kissed them many times. We saw her off at the bus stand.

The children felt sad and lost. The rhythm of the house was dislocated. A week later her nephew came

with the news that Surti had died. He told us that she sat with all her possessions around her, staring at her daughter and grand-daughter and breathed her last. I knew she had gone simply to die in her native place.

The children would come to the theatre, watch the players, listen to drums and music, and when bored wander back quietly to the house. I told them not to disturb me, but they were hungry for my company. The rehearsals fascinated them. There was nobody in the house. The children missed the grand old Surti.

One day as I walked from the theatre to the house I saw Jannat walking alone in the hot sun. I picked her up and asked why she was alone. "A gypsy will put you in her bag and take you away" I said. She clung to me. "Papa, there is a beehive. There! I am afraid."

I saw an enormous honeycomb clinging to a thick branch overhead, a shiny mound of tar crusted with slaty chips. The bees were guarding the honey, a battalion of vicious stings. I carried Jannat to the house. Nobody was in. Manu had left her sleeping and gone to the theatre. All the doors were open — a devouring vacancy as the raggy curtain fluttered, a foreboding of loneliness, of emptiness.

I kissed her, "Will you come with me to the theatre?"

She nodded. We both walked back, she looking at her tiny shadow and sometimes jumping ahead trying to crush the head of my shadow, laughing and dancing when she missed it.

When I went to Delhi for the Film Festival. I asked Jeannie to accompany me and spend the New Year with

ends. She declined, saying that she would like to end it with some local American women, and she would be with the children for Christmas celebrations. I paused and said, "I don't like that man coming to your house."

"He seldom comes. Moreover, I don't stop your girlfriends from coming. Actresses and men friends. Why do you object if some of my friends come here?"

"Not he! If we were living apart, you could have your say. If you must meet him, then not here."

She reflected for a moment, "He will not come here." On my return from Delhi ten days later, I was keen to know if he had come in my absence. The servant said, "Yes, sir. He was here. On Christmas Eve Mem Saheb had baked a cake. They lit candles and had dinner in the bedroom. Exactly the same ritual...the silver, the Wedgwood, the ritualistic candles, the sponge cake, and the lace tablecloth."

I did not double-check with her because I did not want to appear a spy. Strangely, with all these mutual betrayals there was a strong note of self-justification in her attitude - a blind stubbornness which did not appear retaliatory but a slowly-worked out action, a calculated design.

She avoided conversations. If I asked her a routine question, she would look startled. She took her breakfast in her bedroom or sat outside under a tree reading a book as she slowly nibbled her toast, deeply absorbed. There was always a forbidding line of non-contact, almost ritualistic in its power. I started living this existence because I had no way left to fight. ...What was happening was happening. Nobody could stop it...I had vague thoughts that this was the end of our marriage.

No fuss. No legal fights. A polite, gentle understanding. But I did not know what she was thinking. What would be her next move? Her next step?

She spent her time with Mr. X in his studio-cum-meditation den. She was always shadowed mentally by this man and remote-controlled. Once, I was returning late at night and saw a car ahead of me. I stopped at the university gate. Jeannie stepped out and walked towards the house briskly, happily, her hair flying. She did not see me. I peered at the car. The man inside was the same. In the semi-darkness I could see his marble eyes.

I tried to figure out what could attracted her to this man. Money, future, position or any such...nothing. He had mesmerised her.

She was preparing to leave for her music. It was rather early.

“I want to talk to you,” I said.

“What’s there to talk?” she replied.

“Do you have five minutes?”

“Yes.”

“This is no life. You go in the morning and return in the evening. We are living like two separate individuals camping at a hotel.”

“You also go in the morning and return in the evening. I have my music to do...I cannot sit at home. I want to live my life.”

“What’s your life?” I demanded. “It’s no life...you are living with that rascal.”

She flared up. ‘Nonsense! He is my teacher. My guru...He is helping me. Teaching me...’

“Someone told me you intend to marry him,” I snapped.

She laughed. "Foolish!" And she picked up her flu and bag and was about to leave when I barred her way.

"It's no life. If you have to live like this, we had better part."

I said these words as a threat.

She turned, "If you so desire, we can part."

This left me speechless. She had already made up her mind.

"Do you want to leave for America?" I snapped.

"Yes, but not just now. The children are young...Jannat is only four. I would like to leave after two years. Meanwhile, I hope you will allow me to stay in this house and not throw me out. Otherwise I will move out with the children."

"Children...?"

"Yes," she said, raising her voice. "I cannot live with them. They belong to me. A mother always has a right to the children. That's the law...You wouldn't be so cruel as to snatch them away from me."

This little conversation took place in my study. Words came from our mouths like bullets. That was the end of our marriage. Now we were to worry about the carcass, the decomposing and rotting body of this relationship and how to bury it ceremoniously.

She left with her usual cheer and buoyancy. I sat in the room alone, like one who had committed a murder.

I had started the conversation politely and wanted understanding. But her mind was clear. Sitting there I remembered her face and the beseeching look when she had come to see me in Seattle with her luggage bag saying that she had left her house to marry me.

That I was her destiny. Once she had gone to see her uncle in San Francisco with a promise to return on New Year Eve to be with me. She sat in a bus...twenty hours' journey... through winding hills and snow...The bus had some engine trouble. She got out and waited in the snow. Another bus came and stopped for a little while. She ran to it and begged the conductor to let her in as she had to reach in time. She arrived at midnight and surprised me. There had always been a kind of determination in her planning... her gentle waxen will would become steel hard. Now there was the same kind of determination and clarity.

I picked up the script of the play and went to rehearsal. The players were waiting for me. The studio was warm and hushed and protective.



**R**AJI came early in the morning. Her eyes were swollen. She said, "My mother hit me last night. She asked me why I was so late. Called me a whore and started abusing me. She grabbed me by the hair, threw me on the ground and kicked me. I was so enraged that I slapped her. My brothers came running. My mother became hysterical and asked me to get out. I can't live in that hell. I want to shift...but don't know where to...Tell me, if I had come with my suitcase last night would you have given me shelter?"

Seeing me quiet, she said, "You don't belong to me, as I do to you. I want your complete love. Total. Just as you find in the stories of gypsies and in our legends. I want you to love me that way. Forgetting everybody. To lose yourself completely in me. I burn for such passion. I cannot share you...How can you be with me during the day and then go back to her at night?"

I told her that I was not sleeping with Jeannie any more.

Once we performed an experimental play in a village

square, based on a Punjabi love-legend. The headman's wife cooked a large pot of *saag* and maize loaves for us. I chatted with the young girl playing the heroine. Raji looked at me fiercely and said, "Have food with your starlet! I'm going away." I didn't want to run after her but I was worried. I tore myself away from the crowd of actors and people and overtook her on a dark curve of the village path. She shouted at me, saying that my eyes were lusting for that girl. We exchanged hot words. She pounced on me. I grabbed her. Slowly her fierceness melted into passion. She said, "I don't care if people see me here. Your friends and your actors. Strip me here in these reeds... I don't care for anyone. I want you." And we lay down in the reeds, unmindful of the scandal.

Love-making to Raji drowned all my worries. Everything appeared insignificant, meaningless before this blinding passion. My future, my relationships, my writing, my career. Everytime it was a new experience. An unending cycle of fresh discoveries, blood echoes receding to Eternity. There was danger all around, and this heightened the passion. A strange thrill, in a war-charged atmosphere. Raji was the kind of woman who could make love on a desolate mount under the flashes of exploding bombs.

I knew she was the woman for me. It was not due to any moral sense that I did not look at any other woman. It was the peculiar grip of her hands, the lusty temperature of her breasts, the smell of her body that enslaved me. Her special aroma. SHE. That was important.

I loved her not because she was a great actress or very intelligent. I loved her because she was a great female. She had opium in her breasts and I was addicted to her.

She had entered my bodily system, from my forehead down to my toes, her special flavour coursing in my blood. I lusted for her earthiness, beauty, ugliness. Everything thrilled me. My sex became blind, muddy, beautiful, complete...a ritual throbbing, a sacrifice...fierce, naked, pure. I thought of the Kuprin story where a Mongol spy, acting as a most trusted Russian officer, groans with joy in his native language during the sexual act and thus reveals his true identity...Back to the womb...to his babyhood...the mad urge to speak the truth.

I wondered if there was any man who did not feel dark impulses raging in his soul. Evil thoughts, passions, illogical dreams. I felt Raji's breath in my body, the taste of her nipples. Were these thoughts evil? Was I mad? Liberated? Foolish? Honest? An unending chain of bliss before which every other joy paled. Sex with her was everything...body, soul, hope, insults, lullabies, music, storms...the focus of the concentric circles of my existence...How could I describe its grandeur? How could people around me understand it?

Should I be writing all this? What is there to hide? To carry my dreams and ideas into my grave? The truth is now. Here. Just now. SPEAK!

I don't judge people by moral standards. But from their ethics. What is ethics? It's personal. I don't believe in God or the hereafter. Life is here. This moment. It is passing, slipping away, slowly going to the dustbin. After death who would care for me. Even if they did what would it matter. I would just be ashes, grains of dust...may be fertilise a tree, like the parrot. There was

nothing greater than life...cars, houses, books, memorials...everything was useless. If some magical herb could change me either into the seventy-year-old President of India or a youthful beggar, I would prefer to be the beggar.

Dulo Ram, the peon who guarded the theatre and lived in a hovel, came in and folded his hands.

"How are you?" I asked.

He replied, "Sir, I don't have a fan. It's very hot...Also I need a pair of shoes."

I said, "Well...suppose you were made the Vice-Chancellor of this university how would you like it?"

He gasped. Was I joking? He was a poor slave. If he become even a minor clerk through slow promotion, he would be grateful. He said, "Sir, I don't understand."

"I mean if by some magic you were transformed into the Vice-Chancellor, how would you like it?"

He looked aghast, "No, sir, I am young. Just twenty. I'll never wish to be an old man...It's terrible. I don't want to be older than I am."

It was true. Dulo Ram was rejecting the vice-chancellorship. I myself had become conscious of this at an early age. At every step, with each additional year, I became more conscious.

Raji discussed with me the possibility of her going to Delhi, joining the National Repertory and playing before large audiences. This would fulfil her passion for the stage. Her face glowed with future plans as she relaxed on the divan, reclining against the bright turquoise raw silk rectangle on the wall. Suddenly she asked, "Where

I replied, "You could stay in my apartment at Cur Road. It is fully furnished. But you should put your children in a hostel."

I said this almost as a reflex. She had many a time expressed her strong desire to live in that house. Once she had begged me, "You should renovate the house and carry me across the threshold. I'll cook for you. We will both create. You will write plays and I'll act and see you. My children, I'll put in a hostel. Then I could really be independent. Look at dancers and singers and painters. They sacrifice a lot for their art. My children are a problem. If I can put them in a hostel it will make them human beings. Now they are just beasts. Monsters. I am the one to look after them."

She had been corresponding with many public schools for their admission and had gone to Simla and Dalhousie to explore them. But now suddenly at my mention of a hostel, her face changed. I saw a flash of anger. Her lips slowly curled, as if they had tasted a bitter liquid.

"How can you think of that? You know I can't live without my children. They are mine. My responsibility. Just now they are living like orphans. Castaways. Victims of the constant rebukes of my mother and sister-in-law in that joint family hell. They are distorted by this environment. This poisonous atmosphere. And you tell me to put them in a hostel! Do you know it costs one thousand rupees a month! All impractical suggestions! You always think of yourself. Never of me...I won't tell you what our relation is. It's bogus. I feel hollow in the company of other people. I know nothing about theatre and the arts and have not read much...I am

Praising me to the sky. I know I am a pompous ham. I shout on the stage without understanding the role, without knowing the inner layers of the character, its psychological tensions and contradictions. Without understanding the elements which build the character. I am just a sham. I go about with you everywhere. What am I to you? A decoration? Your mistress? A prostitute? That's what people think! I wouldn't mind being called one if my personality was real. But it's fake. And you don't care. If you were even a bit serious you wouldn't ask me to dump my children in a hostel. My son needs great care. I must spend two hours daily tutoring him. He has become fat. I must cut down his weight. But all this needs money...And not mere talk! You are not interested in what I speak...interested in nothing except my body. Just that fucking bed! I am wasting my life. I've wasted four years. At my age, people conquer the world. Third-rate girls have become film actresses. A middle class idiot from Dhuri has become a dancer. She models! Tfoo! And here I am hanging around you. That's why no one respects me. I go to my house full of dreams and build up a beautiful little world, and there is my mother, a sixteenth century monster. She hits my little glass house of art with a stone and everything crashes. Each word of hers is a stone and vulgar. Every beautiful sentiment becomes ugly as soon as it comes out of her mouth. The noblest food becomes a vomit! And then my sister-in-law...Why should they care for me? On top of everything I come here and find you talking about your work without caring a damn for me. Have you ever told me: 'Read this book! Finish this chapter! Go through these paintings! Learn your lines! Play your role brilliantly

and I'll correct it.' Have you ever ordered me to be serious in my work? You waste your time drinking tea. We argue and argue, blaming each other. Mean, petty squabbles. The truth is that due to these unending unfruitful, quarrels we have become decadent. You have no discipline. No inner guts. No care for your time. But I have to build my life and must think. I am just where I was four years ago. If I had done some business I would've been earning three thousand rupees a month...or if I were in Horlicks or Philips as a personal secretary to some executive, I would be drawing a good pay with all perks. I would have respect. Money. Some satisfaction. But with you there's nothing. You don't care what is happening to my soul. How depressed and hollow I feel. I have ruined myself. And you are responsible for it. You!"

I listened to all this, sitting immobile. But an inner change was going on in my head. I went through many stages of thinking: concern, worry, sympathy, anger, disgust, indifference, and reflective quiet. I watched the burning words coming out of her mouth and wondered how she could reverse everything. Distort every event. I watched the blood racing beneath her skin, flushing her face with subtle nervous crinkles. She was charged with a blood-emotion. What was her mind like? A magnifying glass or a diminishing lens? No, she did not have normal vision. She was reversing things, reversing roles, reversing situations, reversing events and motivations. Through a strange female alchemy, she had transmuted things.

Her outburst had released her pent-up anger. The sudden spurt of blood slowly started receding. The

was a silence, in which the whirring of the fan and the distant clipping of the giant scissors pruning the hedges could be heard. I wanted to retaliate. Instead I just smiled. Her features relaxed and her eyes became mellow and she said, "I say whatever comes to my head. I am irrational, I know. I shouldn't have said all this. But where to speak? To whom? Who will receive my anger? My burning tortures. My turmoils. My nightmares. My foolish ravings. Who else but you? You alone in this world. You are not an ordinary human being. You are a saint..!"

Suddenly tears welled up in her eyes. She bent forward and held my hand and started sobbing. I sat unmoved. Her tears fell on the back of my hand. Warm drops. A hot wave passed through my body.

Slowly her heaving became normal and she regained control over herself. She wiped her tears with the end of her sari and said, "You know how I am. I was seized with a desire to complain, to express my inner torment...a strong desire to tear everything into pieces. It was just a physical urge. Don't mind my temper. It is periodical. A necessity. We women are made of such stuff. Periodically an excess of blood and tears must flow out of us. It means we are fertile...healthy...again ready to receive the daggers of men."

She got up, and tucking in the end of her sari said, "I am going to make tea for you. Then we shall work, if you feel like it. In the evening there is a film by Yash Chopra. It has Amitabh, Rakhi and Shashi Kapoor. Will you come with me to the film? I have two tickets."

I did not reply. She went to the kitchen to prepare tea



I was constantly in need of money. When I received Films Division assignment to do a colour documentary on the Ramlila, I was happy. During that summer vacation I left for Bombay to make arrangements for the film and to meet old friends. Bombay has always fascinated me. Its ocean, its curves, its speed and its strength as a city.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's multistarrer *Phagun* had flopped and he was cursing the star system. He had earned the goodwill of the people with his low-budgeted *Dastak* which had some half-nude scenes and a strong social comment. After its success, Bedi left his artistic nest and flew high, signing up stars, dreaming of millions. In the process he became a wreck. As a person and writer he had an indestructible reputation. His charm lay in his wit, humanity, and his jokes about film personalities and himself. Above all, his writing had sensitivity and brilliance.

After *Phagun*, nobody would give him the money to make a film. His eldest son, who had suddenly shot up as a successful director of quickies spiced with sex and

fist-fights and had made a pile, would not come forward to help his father.

Bedi asked me to dinner at his Juhu shack. He wore a fresh white muslin shirt and pyjamas and smoked. We talked till late night. He was very sentimental about his family.

"This son of mine who till yesterday ran my errands is rolling in money," he said, "he is illiterate. The mother." and son have joined hands. They denounce me as a fool with no talent for film making. Why? I've made a flop. These very people used to call me a genius, a super director. I can't believe my son is treating me like this. It's money. It has turned their brains upside down corrupted them. My wife abuses me...calls me a bastard. A sex maniac. The other day the whole family gathered. My sons and daughters. My wife shouted, 'If you meet that whore I'll throw acid on her face. I'll pick her eyes out. I'll strip you in public. You are not a man. You are a monster!' And I shouted back 'Yes. I am a monster!' My daughters started weeping. It was most humiliating. Bedi's voice was choked. He wiped his tears with the back of his hairy hand and said, "I'm sorry. A foolish sentiment. My daughters love me. They understand and respect me...I am touched by their affection."

I didn't feel sorry for him; rather, I admired him for his honesty. To face the challenge of a whole world — friends, family, sons — and stand firm and noble.

He said, "I am going to make a film with new faces. On a shoe-string budget. Just three lakhs. That's not much. My film will be on the theme of untouchability, on the rejected, despised, low-born scavengers. I want to re-examine what Gandhi taught us...project his image...his

I was constantly in need of money. When I received a Films Division assignment to do a colour documentary on the Ramlila, I was happy. During that summer vacation I left for Bombay to make arrangements for the film and to meet old friends. Bombay has always fascinated me. Its ocean, its curves, its speed and its strength as a city.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's multistarrer *Phagun* had flopped and he was cursing the star system. He had earned the goodwill of the people with his low-budgeted *Dastak* which had some half-nude scenes and a strong social comment. After its success, Bedi left his artistic nest and flew high, signing up stars, dreaming of millions. In the process he became a wreck. As a person and writer he had an indestructible reputation. His charm lay in his wit, humanity, and his jokes about film personalities and himself. Above all, his writing had sensitivity and brilliance.

After *Phagun*, nobody would give him the money to make a film. His eldest son, who had suddenly shot up as a successful director of quickies spiced with sex and

fist-fights and had made a pile, would not come forward to help his father.

Bedi asked me to dinner at his Juhu shack. He wore a fresh white muslin shirt and pyjamas and smoked. We talked till late night. He was very sentimental about his family.

"This son of mine who till yesterday ran my errand is rolling in money," he said, "he is illiterate. The mother." and son have joined hands. They denounce me as a fool with no talent for film making. Why? I've made a flop. These very people used to call me a genius, a super director. I can't believe my son is treating me like this. It's money. It has turned their brains upside down corrupted them. My wife abuses me...calls me a bastard. A sex maniac. The other day the whole family gathered. My sons and daughters. My wife shouted, 'If you meet that whore I'll throw acid on her face. I'll pick her eye out. I'll strip you in public. You are not a man. You are a monster!' And I shouted back 'Yes. I am a monster!' My daughters started weeping. It was most humiliating. Bedi's voice was choked. He wiped his tears with the back of his hairy hand and said, "I'm sorry. A foolish sentiment. My daughters love me. They understand and respect me...I am touched by their affection."

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message. This film is my dream. Even if I have to go abegging, I will. I hate glamour. Those canned smiles, polished faces, celluloid heroines... hundreds of them with lush bosoms and legs. I'm not interested in this meat-market. I've chosen a simple girl, unglamorous, earthy...an absolutely new face. She does not look like a heroine. But I will give her a small role because she has an unusual appeal. Shall I show you her photograph?"

Bedi got up. His cigarette had turned into an ash pencil. He picked up his black leather briefcase, clicked it open and brought out an envelope. He took out three photographs and showed them to me.

The girl was plain-looking. She had lackluster eyes and a big bosom.

"How do you like her?" Bedi asked.

"I don't know...I'll be guided by your opinion."

He said, "She is marvellous. You know...when she first met me I did not care for her. She rang me up many times. Once she came to see me here...in this shack. She said she liked me. Not because I was a great writer or a film maker. But as a man. I laughed and teased her, 'Then why don't you become a woman?' She looked at me, her lips half-parted. She opened her blouse and revealed her large, firm breasts...I had never seen such breasts. They blinded me. It was not her face or intelligence but her breasts which maddened me. She held me and started kissing me.

"For the first time I realised what I was missing in life. I had been living like a barren person. This young woman revived me. I started meeting her more often. My friends started a whispering campaign against me. They suddenly turned into medieval priests. What do

they know of me? Most of them are busy piling up money and have lost the taste for life. Their minds are soggy...Life is passing. What will they do with their lives. They call my passion simply physical lust and condemn me. But it's the greatest spiritual reality...This girl has revived me. There are quarrels in my home. Mad scenes. Hysterics. Once my wife stomped into my office, her eyes wild, and pounced on me. A thin line of foam appeared on her lips. She shrieked, 'You are a bastard! Running after that whore. I spit on your face!' She went out cursing and houting. That ended my home life. They don't understand that in order to live, to breathe, to create, I must taste life — this evil which lies chained in my body. My family doesn't understand me, nor my friends. How can they? How can anyone understand anyone? I know what I am doing."

He paused a little and then said, "That girl is nineteen. I am fifty seven. Thrice her age. But believe me there is no difference of age in passion. When she is with me we become one...the same height, mind and body. I know in four or five years I will be sixty two and she will be twenty four. Then she will betray me. But I am ready for that. Such a passion cannot last. It's rare."

Bedi had an inspired look, an exalted animality. He looked archetypal. Very powerful and profound. What he was saying was in fact a verbalization of my own thoughts about Raji...exactly the same passion and beauty were raging in my blood.

I said, "What you say is the truth. The truth of our existence. I value your sentiments. I understand you."

We became quiet, lost in our thoughts. After a little while, I asked, "What's the theme of your film?"

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“The film is about the brutality and callousness of our privileged class towards the downtrodden. You know in a village in Maharashtra some Brahmins flew into a rage and pounced on the Harijans. They gouged out their eyes. It’s incredible. These blinded Harijans are a witness to our brutal caste system. We preach humanity, non-violence, tolerance, but we are the most violent and inhuman people in the world... We are killing each other all the time. We are in love with death. Ours is a philosophy of death. The *mahurat* of the film is tomorrow. I haven’t asked any ministers or stars. These two blind Harijans will be my chief guests. The first shot will be at 10 a.m. Please come. You’ll see this girl also. She is playing a role... She does look like an untouchable...”

He lit a fresh cigarette and poured another drink for me and a large one for himself. He reflected, “I hear you have some trouble with Jeannie...that you are splitting...”

I told him in brief that Jeannie and I had decided to separate. We were living like two strangers under one roof. Waiting. For what? Just the children to grow up a little so that they would understand our separation a bit better and keep the link. Why were we parting? Reasons? Just psychic and emotional estrangement. A sense of boredom. Of exhaustion. The outer layers of emotion-sharing had peeled off. What was left was bald existence. Not worth living. But we did not want to destroy each other. I said, “She is missing her country, her friends, her environment, her emotional ecology. She is wilting away slowly...She has had her fill of India. Of me. Of life here. Now she wants to leave with the children. I shall be in touch with them, wishing them a good life in Seattle, a secure and safe life with their mother...I want

her happiness wherever she can get it. I can't forget that she once loved me and left her country, her friends and everybody and followed me to be with me here. Also she is the mother of my two children..."

I could not speak further. Suddenly my heart became a pool of tears and I started sobbing. I was saying things at a wrong time and felt embarrassed. I was unprepared for the gush of sudden yearning for my children who had asked me to bring toys for them from Bombay and where I had come in search of money...

Bedi held my hand. "We are all lonely. What's important is life. We must live it, face it, conquer it, before we are in turn conquered by it. The ultimate is death. Such a great reality. Man is the only animal who knows about his death. A dog doesn't know that he is to die...nor do ants or birds. But in reality we also forget. Look at the rat-race in Bombay. Poets, writers, actors, journalists spouting the philosophy of life and death, of eternal existence, of noble deeds, of truth, of heroism and beauty...But they really do not know what they are talking about. In reality they are not conscious of life. Only a fakir is. You are living a life of honest passion and people misunderstand you. It's bound to be that way. This is the price you must pay, as I am. But...I am with you."

Bedi's words calmed me. After the overflow of my pent-up thoughts in the shape of tears, a sudden emptiness and loss. His words were soothing. I smiled.

"Let's not moan our losses. Let us turn them into creative jewels," he said.

It was past twelve.

We came out of the shack. The beach was murmuring. The moon was high and the waves rising. The trees looked slim and tall, and very romantic. Bedi dropped me back to Pali Hill in his car.

I ducked into the square opening of the iron gate and walked down the winding path. The smell of rich foliage was in the air.

When I entered the house, I found my host, Gian Sachdev, sitting in the main hall, writing a letter, waiting for me.

Gian had worked in films in fits and starts for almost twenty five years, starting as an assistant to a director and graduating to being a film maker himself. Debts. A broken home. Divorce from an actress wife. Frustration. Yet clinging to the film world.

Gian told me that Raji had called thrice. She was frantically searching for me through long distance calls, these sensitive coils groping and trying to locate me. I called her back. She was in tears. Due to the faulty lines, her voice came in fitful moans. She was alone, in spacious Chandigarh. Tired of domestic chores, she had gone to the movies with her children and was now back in her house. She wanted to join me. She was having problems with her mother and family. She arranged money and flew to Bombay.

Gian threw a party at his house for Raji and me. There were about thirty people.

The party was in full swing. Everyone was drinking. Two aspiring actresses in heavy make-up were trying to

please a film producer from Punjab. A short dark man with froglike eyes, who had spent over a million rupees making only six reels, was offering roles to every girl in his next film. A merchant dealing in Persian rugs and his charming wife, a Bengali woman anxious to become a playback singer and her fat lawyer lover, a stock market broker, two pudgy south Indian starlets and the bald secretary of the character-actor Pran...everybody was anxious to outdo the other in gaiety.

Suddenly Javed entered and everyone howled with joy. Women ran to greet him. He hugged them one by one. He held a buxom woman, called her "sister" and kissed her on the lips. She pushed him away. "Don't!"

He grabbed her and whispered, "Once I call you sister, I have the right to hold you, kiss you and even poke you!"

Javed was the darling of the film crowds, handsome with an impish smile. He sparkled at parties. A fabulous screen playwright, he dictated terms to producers and made directors wait on him. Heroines begged him for more lines. He could float any girl and make her a star.

He was already high when he entered. He gulped three drinks in a row and waltzed around, cracking jokes, telling anecdotes about heroines and making the company roar with laughter.

Raji was fascinated by his wit. She had read about him and seen some of his jubilee films. Now she was right in his presence.

The south Indian sisters were dancing in a most vulgar way. The elder sister had played a small role in a film and her father and mother were presenting her at

every party as a starlet. Javed had no interest in them. He walked up to Raji and offered her a drink, which she declined politely. He said, "You don't drink? And you want to be an actress? I tell you it's very difficult to become an actress in this corrupt industry. You are an honest girl. You should not join this industry."

A woman dragged Javed away, saying that he should not drink any more. The food was on the table. Everybody was waiting for him to start.

Javed thundered, "Don't worry about me! I can hold twenty drinks and I won't stumble. I have stamina, girl!" There was a glaze in his eyes and his gestures were expansive.

"I starved in this very Bombay and nobody cared for me. Nobody gave me food or drinks at that time. Now all the bastards want to serve me. Why? Because I am a star. Isn't it a joke that I—the son of a poor poet who threw me out of his house because of my stepmother...an orphan...who picked up crumbs of knowledge from the houses of poets and film writers—should become a super star! A writer who sells. My fee is one million. I can't believe it myself. Huh! I can buy all of you! Don't tell me to eat. No I won't eat. Take away this food! This *roti*! This whore. I kick her! I ask her, 'Did you come to me when I was starving: When I was dying on the road for a morsel. Why should I come to you now? You kicked me, now I kick you. Mistress of richmen, I spurn you!'"

He kicked at the plate full of *kababs* and *biryani* and it went skating across the marble floor scattering food, hit the wall and crashed into pieces.

He lurched to our corner. "You are Balwant Gargi! The great Gargi whom I always read in books? My father talked about you...a legend for me. My dream was to see you in flesh and blood. I cannot believe I am shaking hands with you. My dream! My super star! My Dilip Kumar! What luck to be in your company!"

I did not reply. He turned to Raji and said, "Why are you so quiet? Afraid of Mr. Gargi? Will he mind if you join films? You're a glamorous girl. Much better than many ugly ducks who are our stars. You have a beautiful face...If you like, I can introduce you to top producers. No problem. My new story has three sensational female roles..."

This was the pet line he always fed women, a tested bait for aspiring actresses. If he got interested in anyone he would pay her lavish compliments and "fix" a role for her and introduce her to the director and the producer. A routine check-up and screen test. After the director and the producer had "tested" her, each would blame the other for not casting her. Their apologies would be so genuine and sweet that the young "heroine" would believe them, lest she lose her chance for the next film.

Very few women have been able to climb the ladder of stardom by going to bed with movie makers. Yet what is going to bed with a producer, when weighed against the maddening joy of seeing one's picture in film magazines and having screen close-ups witnessed by millions. A heady ale of abnormal success and fame. Its incredible. Its lure, beyond sin or virtue. The point is success. How to reach that high point. In this competition of legs and breasts, the most degrading gestures seem noble.

Ultimately, it is success which is broadcast. Even the early struggle and asslicking are glamorised.

I knew all this due to my deep involvement with my friends in films. Most of them had shifted to Bombay in the fifties. I stayed behind in New Delhi, working in the theatre and writing in Punjabi, committed to the logic of a mother-tongue writer. I had a sort of contempt for the film people, whom I found appallingly pompous. In fact I was jealous of them, as they had earned big names and money. My colleagues of the radio and theatre had become legends. Nobody asked for any of my plays for a film. When I read two of my plays to my director friends, they were cold and said these did not have enough incidents. That discouraged me. I didn't like their unrealistic sequences and cliché-ridden stories. Everything looked artificial. That was my viewpoint in the fifties. After Satyajit Ray's art films, my views changed. In the sixties there was a scramble for art films. In the seventies, almost every theatre actor and stage writer was dying to be in films. Raji's desire to join films was a part of this celluloid rush.

The party was getting noisier. After dinner they started playing games. Sick of the noise and shrieking, I dozed off on a sofa. Everybody was feeling gay as a duty, a kind of put-on act to feel high in the presence of Javed who danced, kicked, and barked, bragging of his days of struggle.

I watched their drunken games in glimpses. Raji was absolutely charmed by Javed. I wanted the mad games to end but the party went on. I got up and went into the bedroom, closed the door, and lay down. Suddenly I was

awakened by a mad shout. It was Javed's savage voice hurling insults at a guest and his wife. Confused noises and the shuffling of feet. I heard people go down the hallway. A babble. Then calm descended on the house.

Gian and Raji came to my room and put on the light. I sat up and thanked him for ending the party. Raji looked wide awake and cheerful. She said, "It was fun. Why were you so nervous?"

I did not reply. My eyes were hurting.

"Are you jealous?" she laughed. "But I tell you he is great. Very interesting. His wit is fantastic. We laughed every time he spoke. And you know...he said that if I wanted to get some role in films he would help me. He asked me to ring him up tomorrow. He will take me out for lunch and introduce me to one or two directors. What do you say? Should I go out?"

I looked at her, rather puzzled. Angry. "We will talk about this tomorrow. It's late. I am feeling sleepy."

"You are jealous!"

"We shall talk about it tomorrow."

"I am asking your opinion. What sort of man is he?"

"You will meet one hundred wolves in this industry" I said. "Everyone anxious to promote you. Praising your talent. Assuring you of stardom. Everyone asking you to stay in Bombay a little longer. Everyone will say why did you not come last year when he was looking for a heroine...with just your face...and you will believe him. Javed is no exception."

"You doubt every man. You are sick. Has he any dearth of girls? So many women follow him. He does not answer their phone calls. He has no time."



During a film shooting there is high concentration and cooperation. The attention of every worker is focused at one point. The actor, the trolley man, the lighting boy and Raj Kapoor became one mind. They operate at one level. They shake hands, backslap and hug each other. Raj Kapoor walks over to a clapper boy and offers him a cup of tea. I saw three cameramen, locked into each other, bending and clasping, like a six-armed sculpture in motion. A magical world of fantastic self-generating energy and involvement. This is what makes this industry so different. In spite of the obvious super-high and deep low there is a sense of fraternity which you feel only when you belong to it.

Thousands of struggling actors and artists live with friends, sleep in their homes, eat with them. In this world of glamour, of crookery and seduction, of cut-throat competition and opportunism, there is a sense of hope, a warming, soothing, elevating sense of the future. It keeps you afloat. In a government secretariat the clerk can seldom hope to be a super boss. He knows that he has to move at a slow methodical speed, halting at each step of the ladder. He can calculate his future promotions and retirement. But in the film world, the hope gives you a different sense of life — the excitement which one experiences at a gambling table, the pulse, a continuous sense of the unfolding future.

WHEN I returned from Bombay, I found that all my clothes had been neatly hung in the wardrobe of my study. My letters and files had been properly arranged in the shelf. Without a word, I removed myself to the study. There I worked and slept. The children would nestle with me for a story while their mother sewed or ironed or copied recipes in her notebook. I would enter her room with a knock. We were like two strangers moving in the dark conscious of each other's presence but avoiding each other.

I would sit drinking tea in my study, but my whole being evaporated through the window and stood on the zigzagging dirt track waiting for Raji. Mechanically I would read the paper, shuffle the half-written pages of a story, shave, looking at my dilated eyes and stretched skin, the pores magnified wherever the Gillette had scraped the cheek. A part of me sensed the activity in the bedroom. Jeannie brushing her hair, putting on her bandana, her slim steps in the hallway, ta-ta to children. I saw her going through the iron gate riding her cycle,

her long auburn hair done in a braid, its tendrils secured with a silver clip. She had given up wearing her hair in a Cleopatra cut, as a burnished cascade of golden silk. Now she twined the mass into a disciplined braid.

Jeannie was eating a papaya, scooping out its bright flesh with a long silver spoon. She continued eating in an absorbed manner. As I stood there she looked through me. Her thoughts were somewhere else. I wanted her to say something, anything, regarding her music, church, women's club. She did not break her silence. The air in the room became hostile, barbed and bleeding. I hesitated to speak. Her hard look had a kind of finality. She had furled her wings, encased her being tightly, protective of her inner world. When I was present the activity in the house was subdued. Everything was muffled, as if the volume control was turned low.

My life changed inwardly. I was drifting, marking time, letting events flow. I hardly went to any formal party and spent most of my time in the theatre. I did very little reading, nor had any feeling to write.

I experienced a million fleeting images, a micro-film of impressions — so subtle, so elusive, so vivid — full of cubistic forms and colours. I wished there was some mechanism to photostat them or directly tape my thoughts. They changed as soon as I started writing them in my scrawly hand, framing sentences. By the time I finished a paragraph the mental experience was gone. The writing looked fake.

Once I was driving around the Lake Road when I saw

Jeannie with the other man...both cycling side by side...going ahead of me. I slowed my car. They were on their evening jaunt. I did not want to follow them...nor stop. Instead I raced past them, "not seeing" them. After a mile I took another turning and aimlessly drove around and finally went to a friend, a high government official living in Sector 7.

I heard loud conversation and laughter in the drawing room. They were having a party. My friend welcomed and introduced me to his guests and fixed a drink for me.

I sipped whisky and listened to the conversation with soft Mantovani music in the background. The guests included a poultry-farm owner with his charming wife, a doctor, a bird watcher, a police official. The conversation was thick with cross-talk, shouts, giggles. Golf... Sanawar School... dispensary... rose garden... heart attacks... music... oil sheikhs...

I was submerged in my thoughts. The conversation came to me in bits...like glimpses of clothes squelched in a soaptub...little bubbles bursting. I felt comfortable because I was free to dream...Jannat running in circles on the lawn, Manu making cardboard houses, Jeannie eating papaya, two cycles, marble eyes...super-imposed with images of sail-boats, the Space Needle, pines, elms, freeways, fog...

I was jolted out of my reverie. The bird watcher was speaking excitedly.

"Imagine! The Arctic terns fly four thousand miles at a stretch without food and water. They know the direction, the distance, the elements. They lay their eggs in Siberia...thousands and thousands of them, and fly over

the Himalayas to India. They return to the Arctic it's warm. Meanwhile their eggs have hatched and chicks are ready. The mothers recognise their babies out of thousands and thousands of them with same colour and shape. Fantastic! These birds computers in their heads...telephoto lenses in eyes...a sophisticated radar system..."

I was fascinated by the details. I asked, "If they fly above Mount Everest, don't they freeze?"

"No...They are in motion...they even sleep flying..."

"Tell me more about this bird. It sounds like a tale."

He said, "It's a small bird related to the gull but with a more slender body, smaller feet, a long forked tail and a more graceful flight. It is fifteen inches long and its wing-spread is three feet with white, black and blue plumage...We are forming a society of bird-watchers. Would you like to be a member?"

The organisational trap frightened me. I felt as if I were casting a net to catch me. I shrank and my thoughts wandered.

Tani, wife of the poultry-farm owner, had been educated in a convent and had a western music background. Their farm was in Karnal, an Indo-American enterprise amidst trees and flower beds. Here they raised Hy-Line eggs from specially imported parent chicks. From them were produced broilers and large eggs of American parentage. Once on my way back from Delhi, when I stayed with them overnight, they had presented me with a basket of 12 dozen fresh eggs.

Tani loved music. At her husband's farm she felt out of place and longed for the cultural comforts of a big city. Her adoring husband had created a little oasis in the rugged land of Karnal: an airconditioned bungalow, french windows, modern paintings, a well-equipped kitchen with imported gadgets, and a little bar in the drawing room.

Tani sat on the carpet in shalwar-kameez, her combed-back hair highlighting her face and intelligent liquid eyes. She sighed, "What lovely music! It has a sensuous, haunting power...like the white lilies on my farm. Have you ever seen those lilies?"

"No," I said.

"They are called Bethlehem lilies," she said. "Lovely fragrance. It invades our lawn and floats to our bedroom. This smell is secret. At midnight once a year...when the moon is full...like the mating of antelopes in a desert...musk filling the air, the scent of desire...These white lilies wait for one full year and bloom only for an hour. One has to catch them at their most luxurious moments...they open, bloom, tremble and die. It reminds me of the Samurai who builds his body to perfection and dies. A philosophy of dying at the prime of one's youth...one learns chivalry from these lilies..."

The conversation about birds and lilies, so removed from my life, interested me. This was another dimension of existence to which I was not exposed.

I returned home very late that night.

I was sitting in the garden writing a letter to a friend when Jannat and Manu came running, "Papa we are going to America!"

I stopped writing and attended to the jumping children. "We are going to America, Mummy says. Will you come with us?"

I held Jannat in my lap and kissed her cheek which she angrily wiped with her hand. "Don't kiss me. It's not good. Mummy says that."

I said, "I'll come next year."

"Why Papa? Then we also won't go."

"If your Mummy insists, then?"

"I'll hide in the garage."

Jannat held my chin and stroked my cheeks.

"Papa, Surti died. She was old. Now she is happy in the sky. She is with God. She is very happy."

"Who tells you all that?"

"Mummy says that Surti is with God in the sky. She was old. The parrot also is with God in the sky. With Surti. Papa...you are old."

"Yes."

"Then you will be more old?"

"Yes."

"Like Surti?"

"Yes."

"And then you will die?"

"Yes."

"And you will go to God? With the parrot."

I held her tightly and pressed her against my chest. "What lovely little thoughts you have, my precious!"

"When will you come to America?"

I realised that the children were already thinking of America. They were excited. Milkshakes, icecreams, cars, lakes, sailboats. I kept quiet for a little while, holding her tightly and feeling her little heart pounding

against my chest. She gave me the feeling of a bird, a plump little bird as she kept nuzzling against my shoulder. Suddenly she became restless. I put her down.

Jeannie had returned from the church. They ran to her.

Jeannie had decided to leave for Seattle in six months and was planning her departure with meticulous care. Her father had written to her that he would send an air ticket but she would need money for travel, gifts and for shipping her boxes. I had agreed to provide this.

In spite of a professor's salary and free accommodation, I could not cope with the mounting expenses. We lived a spartan life. No drinks, no smoking, no extravagant habits, but money melted like ice-cubes. I gave Jeannie nine hundred rupees every month and kept a few hundred with me for the car and sundry expenses. She could barely run the house on that money. The kitchen was neglected. Everything in the house was falling apart. There was no direction or coordination. I had written a book and saved a few thousand but this went for pending bills. I had promised her a lumpsum of five thousand rupees for her pre-departure expenses, but I kept postponing the date. This made me look like a liar. I was the debtor and she the creditor. The house became a little court where I was hauled up for non-payment. All emotions and phrases to live together in poverty and prosperity "till death do us part" became meaningless. I must pay the money... Haunted by guilt I thought I must go to Bhatinda to sell a leftover piece of my ancestral land...



I left for Bhatinda with a promise to return with the money.

My childhood was spent in a sandy village by the side of a canal where my father worked as a clerk in the irrigation department. We lived in a small brick house. The sandstorms blew and the wind howled and our windows rattled. My mother told us that witches were howling and dancing in the storm. I could hear their wild laughter and jingling bells in the desolate noon overcast with clouds of dark brown sand. The sands spread for miles and miles, an ocean of golden grainy particles which rippled and shimmered in the sun. I did not wear shoes until I was nine because they seemed to imprison my feet. Besides, none of my playmates, sons of poor cobblers and farmers, wore shoes. In summer while returning from the school, we would walk fast on the burning sand so that our feet were more in the air than on the ground.

My mother was illiterate and could not count beyond twenty on her fingers. There were no books in the house. I came to know about the existence of a dictionary only when I was fourteen. A book which contained all the words of English! I learnt from my environment: the stories old farmers told at night or the songs women sang at daily spinning sessions or at weddings, and from the flaming curses of my mother. Also from the Mirasins, the Muslim hereditary singers, who drummed and danced and sang at every ceremonial occasion.

My mother took me and my two brothers to a blackclipped sadhu who wore three parallel vermilion

marks on his forehead, and had dreadlocks. She asked in which of her sons was destined to receive education. He looked at us intently, made a circle in the air with his finger and pointed it at me. That settle my career. My other went to the local school and begged the teachers to put a few characters in my stomach.

I was seven when the family shifted to the neighbouring town of Bhatinda, our ancestral home place. Though an important railway junction, no road connected it with other towns and villages. A huge ancient schooner-shaped fort dominated the sandscape. According to a current story, a small cotton ginning factory had caught fire. Telegrams were sent to Patiala for the fire-engine. The fire-engine arrived after one year! Being a part of the princely State of Patiala, Bhatinda was kept aloof, isolated from political currents and modern democratic concepts. This made the area backward but it helped to reserve its vigour and folk culture.

Bhatinda was famous for its ninth-century fort and for its dust-storms. You could not eat a morsel without getting sand into your nostrils and mouth unless you shut the doors. Purple dust filled the sky and whirlwinds raged during the hot summer. But during the last ten years the town had developed at an unusual speed. The normal plant with its four giant chimneys — each 440 ft high, almost double the height of Qutab Minar — had cost Rs. 200 crores. Every month millions were being pushed into the market to build up factories. Vast expanses dotted with sand-dunes were being cleared and roads and new colonies laid out. New cafes and markets had sprung up. Shops were flooded with the latest goods.



Sanjay got up from his seat and came to the microphone. There was a hush. People's hearts throbbed. Women nudged one another. College girls gaped — a feverish delight coursing through their bodies. Sanjay began in a monotone. It was a most matter-of-fact speech. After four minutes he suddenly stopped and returned to his seat. There was thunderous clapping. Many had missed his words because they were still getting ready to listen to him. He had said, "Don't talk, work. It's time to work and not talk. I want things done...I stand for five points: eradication of illiteracy, planting of trees, cleaning of slum areas, family planning and the eradication of dowry. These things must be done so that our country goes ahead. I like Bhatinda. The people are very energetic and good and hardworking...Thank you."

There was authority and pride in his mien, taking for granted the people's total submission. He did not care for the fawning Congress leaders, businessmen and officials and women. Everyone was eager to register his presence, dying to be noted by this proud jet-set son of the greatest woman in the world. Mod girls in their swanky cars had raced from Chandigarh to surround him. Chief Minister Zail Singh had worked like a sanitary inspector and spent sleepless nights, spending millions, in order to please Sanjay with an unprecedented reception. *Lalas* with their ear-to-ear grins and Sikhs with their well-oiled beards were beaming like traditional clowns. Sanjay hated their false smiles. They were straining every nerve to humour him. Their laughter had a half-frozen quality of fear because Sanjay was unpredictable.

After his speech, Sanjay got down from the dais, went to his open car and drove with Giani Zail Singh along the

man is noble. This monster of a woman would shout and rave, quarrel with everybody, break things and at times would engage in fistfights. She returned to her father's house last year and joined the youth movement. Outside her house she has fixed a signboard in big bold letters, "Office of the All India Young Women's Association. President: Sudarshana Devi. Time to meet the President — only between 3 and 5 p.m." She is a self-styled leader and has strange brainwaves. Falling at Sanjay's feet was a trick on her part, a ruse to get publicity and humiliate her in-laws...It's terrible. Any mad woman can get up and say that she is being tortured by her husband, though she herself may be making the house a hell. It is a handy weapon for psychotic wives. There is no enquiry. Just a report and the wheels of law start grinding. Now that poor English lecturer, who taught Shelley and Keats to his students, has been arrested. He is trying his best to prove his innocence. But no one is going to believe him."

His remarks set me thinking. Woman has been projected as an exploited and tortured soul. She is a poor mother, a poor widow, a poor wife. Our films and potboilers have perpetuated this image. But does anybody know the tyranny of a woman? The cunning with which she rules the house and slowly demolishes even the most powerful husband. I thought of my own clan. Out of thirty homes, I could count twenty in which the men died earlier than their wives. When my maternal uncle expanded his business my aunt always moaned that she had no ornaments or gold. When the uncle turned sixty, and fell ill, he sold his business and converted all his possessions into gold. She grabbed it all. Her three sons

sided with her. The poor uncle was reduced to a doormat. He did not require even two square meals a day. The poor man died few years later. But she is still active as a horse. Many women of my clan had tortured their husbands to a slow death.

I had not visited my home town for years. Now suddenly it looked so much a part of me. I felt a new sense of life. I met old friends who had changed beyond recognition. I also must have changed...Everything was changing. The little school where I studied had disappeared. The sand-dunes which had frightened me in my childhood now looked innocent and small. My aunt, a powerful woman who had once caught a thief single-handed, was now shrivelled and sat in her courtyard, slowly turning her spinning wheel. A slim revolutionary of my school days had opened a ghee store and become fat.

My friend Kanwar Chand Gupta, who had inherited much land and property from his father, had wasted his life doing nothing. Haunted by the new land reform laws which gave tillers the right of possession, Kanwar had started having fits of depression...Visions of self-persecution. His sad eyes had deep dark rings. He stopped talking to people. When the doctor came to give him an injection, he would struggle hard to speak...a duck's quack came out of his mouth. He was committed to an asylum where he was given electric shocks. He returned after six months. He spent most of his time reading old masters like Dostoevsky, Zola and Schopenhauer. He suffered from insomnia. He would get up at noon, lie ruminating on a quilted mat in his

ancestral home, take his breakfast and get ready by sunset. I always enjoyed his company.

Now when I went to see him he was sitting in his armchair, cigarette butts littered all over the floor. I lit a cigarette and was reluctant to flick the ash but he said, "Don't mind. The whole room is an ashtray. Use it."

We talked about our lives. Kanwar said, "Man says that only he has the faculty of thinking. It's wrong. Even stones think. And plants. And human beings. But we cannot understand each other's mind. How can anyone know what is happening in my mind? I myself don't know. Thoughts come suddenly from nowhere and I do things which I had not thought of a minute ago...What I am saying just now is also an instant reaction... I cannot communicate with my wife...nor with my ten sons...They do not understand me nor I them. Then how can we understand the conversation of a plant or a stone? The stone also has life, movement, tension and must be communicating with other stones as flowers communicate with fellow-flowers, and birds and ants...These days I am thinking about the life of an owl. It keeps aloof, meditates, sitting on a branch for hours, watching its surroundings, wondering about other birds who are flying all day, flapping, singing, cawing, busy in search of food. The owl has all the time to itself to reflect...Life is beautiful. Everything is happening automatically. No one can control it. It's just beautiful. One does not need powder or lipstick to make life more attractive. The forest is beautiful, so is a ruin. The life of a donkey is beautiful, so is that of a Rockefeller..."

The following morning I learnt that Kanwar Chand had died. He had woken up early in the morning and

asked for tea. He lit a cigarette. His daughter brought a cup of tea and placed it by his side. Kanwar never got up. He had passed away...The most troubled mind of the town was at rest.

The price of land had up. Even the sand-dunes had become precious. Our family field had slowly come within the precincts of the new township. I thanked my great-grandfather who had bought this wasteland, believing that some day this untilled earth would turn fertile. People had laughed at him when he had paid fifty rupees for the sand-dunes beyond the cremation ground. Now the cremation ground had become a respectable residential area.

My brothers had sold their portion of the land. Mine lay neglected. My younger brother had built a brick-hut on his portion and furnished it sparsely for an occasional stay. I stayed there because I liked the surrounding wasteland which would soon be devoured by the encroaching habitation. It was a solitary place. Here I lazed and philosophised and dreamed of my childhood.

Night had fallen. I stood at the wicket gate and looked up. A big yellow moon with pinkish edges hung in the sky. Its pale light gave the field a gloomy look. Dogs barked in far-off streets. I walked through the field. It had clumps of flowery *ukk* plants with fat juicy leaves — their milk bitter like hemlock.

Ruminating over life, I came to the edge of the field, and saw two weather-beaten mud-tombs which preserved the bones of my great grandfather and great grandmother. They had been cremated here. In memory of their pioneering spirit, their sons had built these *sa* *dhi*-



tombs in one corner. In the wan light of the moon, the tombs evoked memories. The old man was wise to have acquired this land and left it for his progeny. I paid homage to the memory of this visionary — this illiterate farming moneylender, this Jew of the clan who never spent a paisa on anything and kept the keys of his coffers tied to his waistband. His yellowed bones must have crackled and dissolved into the chemistry of the earth and become a part of it...manure for the *ukk* plants and the solitary mango tree whose roots reached down, deep to the dead for nourishment — groping, searching, and clutching at the meanest crumb of food. The old man's bones must have fed this mango tree, supplying sweetness and lushness to the fruit which I had tasted many a time. While eating their succulent flesh, I was perhaps eating my great grandfather...

How life disappears from the surface of this earth and again becomes a part of it. Now nothing remained of my ancestors except the hulk of two tombs occupying an eight foot by eight foot piece of land. Were my ancestors really resting here? Their souls. Were had they gone? Where does the soul live? Is there any soul?? Is it merely a whim? What consolation is it to the dead if lamps are lighted on their tombs and incense burnt. What does it matter to the dead...I had never thought of the two old souls as I did now. In fact I had forgotten the existence of these tombs. I touched the tomb and a mud-brick crumbled. I picked up a clod of earth and closed it in my fist. The clod turned to powder...so frail...so weak.

I walked back to the hut in long strides, afraid, as if

I woke up to the sound of thunder. Blue lightning flashed through the window-panes. I heard the sky reverberating, then the patter of rain which soon settled to a steady roar.

Lying in bed, my mind wandered to my piece of land. I should sell it now that I needed money. There was no use feeling the pinch of rising costs when I had this precious piece of land to sell...Again I thought of the tombs...eight feet by eight feet...Here the remains of my ancestors lay. But to what use? No member of my family ever went to the edge of the farm to look at them. Their present state was a disgrace. An ugly site... a nightmare of old times. I calculated the price of the land at Rs. 250 per square yard. So the old couple were occupying land worth three thousand rupees. No! More than that. Who would build a house around this cemetery. One must leave a lot of space all around...maybe ten yards on each side...a hundred square yards. That was almost twenty five thousand rupees! I had not thought of it. It was a criminal waste of money. Foolish to gift this expensive patch to the dead who were nowhere...What if I could level the ground to sell it? I trembled. Was it fear? Or excitement? Who would know if I were to take the spade and level them in the dark...People would think they had been washed away by the rains.

I came out to the varandah and put on the light. I picked up the old spade, left by the gardener in a corner, hitched up my trousers, rolled up my sleeves and stepped out.

The rain beat down on my face. My feet sank in the cold sandy mud. I walked to the edge of the field, led by instinct and occasional flashes of lightning. I raised the

spade and with a furious swing hit the tombs. A part crumbled. I hit the tombs again and again, levelling and stamping them under my feet. My cruel blows wiped out the last vestiges of my ancestors's earthly abodes. Two souls resting in their separate tombs mingled with each other for the first time after death.

As I finished levelling the earth, the rain thinned to a drizzle but lightning still flashed on the horizon. Exhausted and drenched, I returned to the hut, washed the mud from my feet with water from the earthen pitcher in the verandah, put my slippers on and went in. I was shivering.

Lying awake I went over my struggle in life, my love for the children and the promise to Jeannie. Now I was secure, happy at reclaiming a dead piece of land which would fetch twenty five thousand rupees. This money would be a godsend. I thanked the old bones. I could safely pay off my debts, give money to Jeannie for her travel back to America and buy new clothes and gifts for the children...

The following day I learnt that my eldest brother had already sold this piece of land to a farmer nine years ago, signed the legal documents on my behalf and taken the money!

I came out of the Coffee House with a feeling of uselessness. I was wasting my time. I wanted to go back to my desk, take up the pen and scribble whatever came to my mind. That was the way to write. The blank paper gave me ideas. I always started work by emptying my mind...a total void. That brought me to a different psychic plane and suddenly images would start rushing. What I needed was to be alone in my room, isolated from people, so that I could evoke my lived-in world.

I walked down the corridors of Sector 17 glancing around. Rain had washed the square. The sky was bright indigo, almost unreal, cut by the tall concrete buildings. On the pavement a gypsy woman was roasting corn-on-the-cob on a charcoal fire. I liked the smell and asked her for one. After roasting a fresh milky cob, she rolled it in its green sheath and handed it to me. I walked munching it. Suddenly my eyes caught the sight of Adarsh through the glass panes of his shop. I went inside. He was as usual sitting behind the counter — visible from chest upwards — a broad smile on his face. He was looking at a strip of negatives against the light.

A dimple in his cheek appeared and dissolved and his eyes screwed up now and then. He seemed happy with the results and he placed the strip aside.

"From where do you get so much energy?" I asked.

"What energy? I am sitting on my ass all day! Does it need energy? I wish someone would take away a bit of my energy. I have it on the wrong end!"

His eyes glinted with a pleased look.

"Excellent results! These are poses of your girl friend. She came yesterday for a photo-session."

"You can make out from the negatives?"

"Of course! What have I been doing all my life? Watching negatives. Thousands and thousands of them. When I look at them they appear positive to me. I am addicted to negatives. You know, it's great fun. Also an art. You reverse everything and see the true picture. So also with human beings. I always invert them to get to the truth. When a girl comes here to model and says she does not want to reveal her full bosom, she is telling lies. In fact she is dying to show it. Where else can she show it? How? To whom? My studio is the place. And you know—I don't care to see her tits. I only see their defects, the faults in their shape, the play of light and shade. Sometime I hobble over on my crutches to pull her bra down and arrange her breasts...like two apples...to deepen her cleavage, to give an illusion of firmness to those fleshy appendages. I create sex appeal for the viewers. At work I don't have the time to feel sensations. I am like a man in a trench with his finger on the trigger. He cannot fuck, he can only piss...it's tension of a different nature. In that sense I am a coward...or you can call me a professional."

He talked about shy women, resisting females and their pretences. Young mod girls dying to be film heroines. All posing like Zeenat Aman. The more ambitious ones copying Komila Virk and Katy Mirza, their shirt always unbuttoned down to their navels, revealing their boobs.

It was nearing lunch hour. Adarsh took me to his special cabin for a quick snack. His invitation was always tempting. Munching a sandwich, he asked, "What are you writing these days?"

"I am planning a novel," I said.

"Good. But don't write just about good things. Even about me. Paint me a devil and people will love it. They want excitement. Good writing has always been about evil deeds, murders, betrayals. Not about good people...How long will it be?"

"I don't know...maybe..."

"Well, it shouldn't be too long. One hundred and fifty pages make scanty reading. Five hundred pages frighten the reader. Its length should be about two hundred and twenty-five pages. And put a sexy picture on the cover...naked thighs or breasts. The book should be displayed at every bus stand, scooter stand, railway platform. If a customer sees two tits on the cover he'll wonder how many more there are in the book. Human nature...Take my case. Once I was travelling in a bus with my camera. A man, carrying a load of books on his arm, was hawking" "*Read The Torn Skirt. A masterpiece! A tale of great passion!*" I saw the cover displaying a woman with naked thighs. I bought the book and read it. Throughout the book there was no *torn skirt*. No naked thighs. It was just salesmanship...I'll tell you another story. A young painter of Chandigarh held an

exhibition of his works for ten days. At the end, not a single painting was sold. He was on the verge of committing suicide. I saw his work. It was good. He had talent. But who cares for talent? One needs talent to discover talent. People have no time. They are ignorant. They have to be told that here is talent and they will start shouting *wah, wah*. You see a beautiful play. Before the curtain comes down, people start getting up to hurry home for dinner. They scratch their balls and yawn and leave the hall. But if you get three people to clap, then the entire hall starts clapping. You start throwing eggshells at the actor, the entire audience starts booing and jeering. It's contagious. So I told the painter, "Don't lose heart. Let me organize your exhibition." I asked him which paintings he would not like to sell. I marked these prominently with captions: 1). 'By the courtesy of the Maharaja of Travancore,' 2). 'From the personal collection of Palkiwala, Bombay,' 3). 'Specially loaned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Baroda,' 4). 'Not for Sale.' The visitors hungrily started at the paintings. Perfumed women and turbaned industrialists gaped. All the paintings except those four were sold out! A bit of swindle is part of business."

He went on speaking about his life and struggle for existence with a devilish glee.

He leaned across the table, "I was thinking of talking to you about Jeannie. I don't want to interfere in your private affairs. I respect you deeply, Balwantji, but I think its my duty to talk to you."

My heart missed a beat. I knew what was coming. Adarsh said, "I know your marriage is on the rocks...I feel sorry. These foreign marriages always end in divorce.

quiet for some time. A sullen hate shone in her eyes. I cursed myself for the act. Was it me? Or nature? Or she? I had always felt a shadow of danger, of her strong seductive power, a blinding ecstasy. Now I hated myself.

She said, "Don't look so pitiful. I alone will bear the brunt. It's always the woman... After the taste of the body, all your heat and passion are drained out along with that discharge. That sticky ill-smelling fluid. The stinking fuck! And you are calm. Objective and rational. I turn inside me, my mind in my womb, my feelings lodged in that pit where a new life is being formed..."

Her thoughts were for the impending torture, the nightmare which she had been dreading. Somehow I had felt that soon I would face this blood-soaked moment. Now it looked unending, full of remorse and agony.

She tore a sheet of white paper into sixteen equal strips wrote "go" on half of them and "not go" on the others, folded each strip carefully and rolled them into tiny balls. She shook these like dice in the hollow of her palms and threw them on the bed. Closing her eyes, she mumbled something gravely and picked out three balls, opened out each, and read the magical scribble.

Her lips twisted with renewed bitterness. "I'll go. You'll sit in your room, drinking tea, while I'll be lying on the table—that horrifying scalpel!" Her chin trembled. A cold grey fever raged beneath her skin.

I didn't know how to soothe her, express remorse. I said, "I'm sorry. I understand your pain." I did not speak further lest she flare up.

"I'm going to the doctor. Alone. At that moment of scalding pain, I'll be alone. The very thought chills me. The worst criminal is not so tortured in his cell as a



Small quarrels erupted in our daily life. Grudges. Problems. Complaints. I understand it. It's life. One cannot predict it..."

We became quiet.

After a while I said, "I waste my time visiting friends. Loafing, and do not write a word for weeks. I see other people working, third-rate writers writing and rewriting. Many of them float on the crest of popularity. I realise how foolish I am. I squander my money... emotions... life... and then develop guilt."

Adarsh tugged his beard, "Don't reject guilt. It's precious. Worship it. It was guilt which inspired Dostoyevsky... Goethe... O'Neill... all were obsessed with this dark shadow, fighting to break the chains of evil which surrounded them. An artist creates from this source-energy. Balwantji, don't waste your time. You have nothing else but your time... this must be used in creation. Women are good only for a massage, a kind of emotional bath, and again one is fresh. Use your time. Here in this bloody town you have squandered yourself, exhausted your energies."

I felt a surge of cheer... His words rang honest and full of concern.

Raji was sitting in my study, waiting for me. Her face was pale and drawn. I sensed something wrong.

She said, "I was fearing this all these days... Now... what shall I do with this contaminated body?"

"What?" I gasped.

"I went to the temple... prayed... but a life is being formed within me."

My legs went limp. I sat down in the chair. We were

women in it. Its colour was steel-grey which I had mistaken for blue...I walked up and down the road for almost an hour and looked at every car which turned into the campus but there was no sign of her. I felt exhausted...fear gripped me...maybe she had not woken up from the table...she had looked at me with such deathlike eyes...

I walked back home and saw that Jeannie had returned unexpectedly and was in the kitchen. I went to my room and lay down on the bed, worried and obsessed. Surely something had gone wrong...Why had she taken so much time? Had she gone to her own house? No, she had said she would come here. A pain split my head, a hot screw drilling into my skull. What had I done? Why had I been so foolish? Now I must pay for it...Anything could happen... courtroom... denials...jail... oh God! What had I done? An unending torture. Like a prisoner in the cell waiting for black warrants...or a pardon...Suddenly I heard the sound of a car stopping and after a little while the slamming of the door. Steps. I jumped up and opened the door. It was she. I led her into my room. She lay on the bed with her head propped on a pillow.

She breathed, "It's all right. I have come straight here...had to wait there. I am very weak...my head is dizzy. I don't know how I drove to your house. But I kept my word...I have no strength. Is there any soup or some hot drink...?"

I went to the kitchen. The soup pot with chicken pieces, celery and spring onions gave off a fragrant whiff. I took a ladle and started pouring soup in a bowl when Jeannie appeared. "Don't touch it. It's for the children."

“Don’t snatch away the children’s food for that woman! Let her go to her own house. Her mother is rich. Can’t they afford chicken soup?”

Jeannie was so indignant that I did not want to create a scene. Also I did not want Raji to overhear this nasty family squabble.

Hearing my steps Raji opened her eyes and ran her tongue over her dry lips. “Just...hot soup will do.”

I said, “Just now...there’s nothing in the house. I’ll go and get it from Ginza...hot chicken soup with mushrooms.”

She looked at me piercingly, “Why didn’t you get it earlier? You were waiting for me. Were you not? I come here all the way driving half dead and you don’t have anything.”

I stood there like a criminal. I had no words to justify my inertia...I ventured to touch her hand in order to soothe her but she reacted like a viper, “Don’t touch me! You are selfish to the core. Lying there on the table I thought of you...and then my house where my mother would have given me hot soup and massaged my head...And here you are...I simply hate you! I’m going to my house...Better...to die there.”

She propped herself up with an effort and fumbled for her black alpaca coat. I dared not help her. She slipped it on with a bitter shrug and hobbled out, banging the door. I followed her sheepishly and sat in the car beside her, conscious of my guilt. No amount of reason or explanation could convince her. So I kept quiet...faceless... We drove to a small Chinese restaurant.

She said, "I could pardon you for everything...for that act which was mutual...the act of passion for which I blame myself also...although I had always warned you of the danger... but I'll never pardon you for this callous indifference. Man serves woman in this condition. He nurses her with devotion. That's the only way...but you...? Nothing for me. Only your wretched emotions and self-pity."

She left the soup half-finished and drove away alone.

**D**URING the earlier years of my married life I had been a faithful husband. Not from any moral considerations or religious or social taboos. Simply because of Jeannie's blind trust in me. When I decided to marry her I shook off all emotional ties with other women and moved on to a new plane of existence...of married love...of fidelity. It was not forced. It was just there...a new way of living. Now suddenly it had become different. Eight years....Ibsen's Nora had had her flash of understanding after eight years. It takes that much time to mature a separation. I started finding existence a dull routine.

I was yoked to the grindstone, earning, feeding the family, raising the children and looking after my beautiful Nora. My reward: getting grey, wrinkles, a slow death. The children were growing up..Maybe Jeannie would go back to America after some years. She would be morally and psychologically justified. After a few years when I had finished my assignment with the university and would be out of a job, she would want to return to Seattle. She would say: "I gave you my youth. My passion. My devotion. I left my country and everything.

What have I got? Lines on my face...I have lost my youth... How horrible. That's what you have done to me!"

I could see the impending separation just as farmers can see the signs of drought by looking at the sky.

Jeannie had changed during the last three years. I too had changed. Everything had. If three years ago someone had told me that my family would break up, I would have considered him crazy.

Why do people change? It is not possible to give a psychological explanation of the mystery. Every situation is too complex, too full of unknowable layers of emotions and compulsions. The way heredity flows and dictates form...like a plant which, at an appointed time, hidden from outside manifestation, decides to burst into flowers. Ancestral impulses and attitudes manifest themselves at a given period with biological regularity. Who can control this. A goldsmith's son was my classfellow. The goldsmith died. After thirty years I was surprised to see my friend with his teeth yellowed and looking exactly like his father. A lanky cousin of mine was totally unlike my robust tall uncle. In thirty years my cousin's face had become exactly like my uncle's. Manu was four when he walked into the courtyard of my ancestral home. An old aunt remarked that when I was four I too had walked into the courtyard the same way. Jeannie was changing and slowly becoming like her mother...the same nervous and jerky mannerisms, the worried look, an obsession for food...She used to read out letters to me from her mother and laugh. "Look, Mother is always talking about food!" But she herself had become like her.

One day Jannat caught a glow-worm, put it in a bottle, and corked it. Manu came running to tell me about it. I went to her room. She was looking intently at the blinking glow of the insect. I told her, "Don't keep it in the bottle. It'll die."

"No!", she replied

"If I shut you in a room and lock it, then?"

"I'll break the window and come out."

"If there is no window?"

"I'll break the door."

I patted her cheek. "Darling, the glow-worm is sad. It's crying. Look."

She removed the cork, looked into the bottle and turned it upside down. The glow-worm fell out on her palm. Weak, breathless, confused. She started blowing on it. Its wings flapped, radiating a greenish glow.

"No, Papa, it's sleeping. Look, it has light."

"Don't touch it. You'll kill it. Leave it."

She placed it on my palm.

I said, "I'll put it on the mango tree and it will fly away."

I went out but the glow-worm was already dead. I came back and told Jannat that the glow-worm had flown away.

She said, "Papa, you are going to Bombay?"

"Yes."

"To bring money for us?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"What will you bring for me?"

Manu jumped, "Bring me a fire engine! A long one with eight wheels, two red stripes on its body. But don't tell mummy. She won't let me take it with me, because she says there are all sorts of toys in America. But I will hide it in my suitcase."

Jannat pouted, "What will you bring for me? Please, Papa, bring me a motor boat. Will you?"

I said, "Certainly."

Manu ran to his room and brought a magic marker and paper and drew on it an engine with details. I folded the paper and put it in my pocket.

I knocked on the bedroom door and gently opened it. Jeannie was sitting on her bed, weeping silently. I walked up to her. Her long silken hair fell on her knees, partly covering her face. She wiped her tears and looked up. Her eyes were pink; her lips trembling.

She said, "There's no money in the house. You promised me this money in February so that I could buy a few things to take back to America. Some little gifts for friends. Our air tickets have arrived from Seattle. But I can't plan my departure without money."

I said, "I'll clear the pending bills and bring five thousand for you. You can plan your departure."

"Thanks," she said, "I'll be leaving with the children but you can join us maybe after six months. Or a year when you are through this university. It might be easier for you to come when I am there. Chandigarh is no good for your talent.... When I was sorting out things, I started crying. Eight years of my life here. Suddenly I



felt sad and tears came. It happens when a woman leaves her home...I'll be leaving this house in the first week of June. Or by the 15th...Come back soon. I'll be waiting."

Her face assumed the same innocence and girlish helplessness of her earlier days. I felt her warmth.

She packed my suitcase, putting in my red shaving kit, a flashlight and freshly laundered clothes.

We had dinner with the children. They reminded me about the gifts and kissed me. Jeannie came to the gate and hugged me. "Come soon. And safe."

I left in a scooter rickshaw for the railway station and caught the midnight train for Bombay.

IN Bombay I received a letter from Jeannie that she was short of money and had had to borrow from the office clerk for the kitchen expenses. I must send money. She was perturbed.

I had been trying to get payment for my film and that very day received a lumpsum of ten thousand rupees. Gian and I went to Crawford Market, which I had always associated with clucking chickens, trapped in huge baskets for slaughter. It was a big shopping complex. I bought the puff-puff engine Manu had drawn for me on a piece of paper. It was battery-operated and could run on the floor, hit the wall and return. A motor-boat for Jannat. Books of Indian tales and a silk dress for Jeannie. New trousers and shoes for myself. I booked my seat on the Bombay Mail and sent a telegram to Jeannie, "Reaching 28th morning."

As the train raced homeward, clanking and changing tracks, sadness filled my heart. Before leaving Chandigarh, Mahendra, the scenic designer, had filmed the children and me in the theatre studio with his 8 mm

movie camera. The children talked, painted, ate icecream and caressed me. My chin quivered as I hugged them. I felt as if I was acting out a scene of parting. The situation looked so unreal. I still did not believe that they were going...They told me to return soon from Bombay with gifts, not to tell Jeannie about the puff-puff engine and the motor-boat because she would throw these toys out of their suitcases. There was no need to cart this junk to America. But they had conspired to smuggle the engine and motor-boat to America.

Jeannie had told me that she would go with the children and settle there and I could join them...maybe after a year to work at the University of Washington or in California.

We had talked about it over and over. Earlier, when the war with Pakistan over Bangladesh had broken out and Chandigarh was bombed by Pakistani jets, Jeannie received a letter from the American consulate offering to fly her and the children to the States. This was a war measure. I had urged her to visit the States at government expense, but she had refused to go alone. At night we used to huddle in a corner and follow the precautions announced on the radio in case of an air raid. With the lights switched off, the shutters put up, glass panes covered with black carbon and a shaded candle, we held each other...

I sat in the train thinking of the children and Jeannie, and dozed off.

In the morning I reached Delhi. I stayed for the day, attended to some pending matters, bought brown bread, shelled walnuts and raisins which Jeannie loved and caught the night train for Chandigarh.

The night was hot. The compartment oozed the smell of rexine and the stale breath of the passengers. The train reached Chandigarh at five in the morning. The slopes of the Himalayas in the pearly light of the sky were visible in the near distance, but the air was still hot. A coolie helped me put the bundles of gifts and the suitcase in a taxi. En route I saw the flowering *gulmohars*, the looming secretariat, the Rose Garden and was thrilled to be back among familiar surroundings, happy at the thought of my children jumping off their beds to see their gifts.

The taxi reached home. The house was silent.

Every time I had returned from out of town, Jeannie would wake up with the arrival of taxi and open the door, hug me and help me carry the packages. Then she would set the tea kettle boiling for my early morning cup.

I rang the bell and waited...peered through the gauze door of the bedroom. The double door was shut. The window was bolted from inside. The air conditioner was on. I again rang the bell...What was going on inside? I had come a day earlier to surprise her and the children. Why had she locked the bedroom door which opened into the verandah...Maybe that fellow with the leathery smile...Surely...I felt a sinking. It was just like those novels where a husband returns from a long journey before time and finds his wife in bed with another man. A sudden desire arose in me to humiliate her. Also anger...I had warned her not to see that fellow, never to let him visit this house, as long as she was staying with me.

Suddenly the airconditioner stopped. I felt the end of a storm within me...one minute more...a shuffling of feet in the hallway, the screech of the latch...the door opened.

It was Dulo Ram. He greeted me sleepily and picked up my luggage. I walked in. The hallway was stuffy. A stale smell hung in the air. I opened the door to the bedroom and walked in. There was nobody inside. My eyes wandered to the shelf. The picture of Christ was not there, nor Jeannie's comb and brushes. I opened the cupboard. It was bare. Puzzled, I walked to the other room where the children used to sleep. This too was empty. I returned to the hallway and asked Dulo Ram, "Where is Mem Saheb?"

He replied, "Gone to Simla for some days."

"Children?"

"With her."

"When did she go?"

"Yesterday."

"Didn't she get my telegram?"

"Yes, sir." And he burst into sobs.

"What happened?"

Wiping his tears, he said, "I don't know...Mem Saheb said she was going to see her friends for some days and will return."

I wandered through the house. I discovered that there was nothing of Jeannie and the children left in the house. She had removed everything. I went to my study and found my books scattered on the floor. All her photographs, bundles of letters, and packets which she had tied with rubber bands and marked were also gone. Even my clothes were not there. I returned to her

bedroom. The wall almirahs had tiny locks on them. With a faint hope that she might have packed all her things and kept them in the almirahs, I brought a hammer from the kitchen and broke open the locks. The shelves were bare. On the hangers were three pairs of trousers, three jackets, a velvet waist-coat, several expensive ties, a few shirts and a torn pullover... Sk... I jumped back.

Dulo Ram told me that Mem Saheb had sold many things. The stove went for two hundred rupees. Carpets were sold at throwaway prices. Manu's bicycle was mortgaged to the sweeper for eighty rupees. Jeannie had packed her Wedgwood, silverware, American plates, cups, mixers, waffle iron, grinders and gadgets in boxes she had preserved in the storeroom for years and carried everything away... A car came thrice... A man with the marble eyes had helped her move her things... She said they were going to visit friends in the hills.

I saw the faces of my children in a blur and began to shudder. I could not believe it. Strange things and irreparable disasters always hitting me without warning and at the wrong time. For a moment, I lost control. Tears sprang in my eyes and I let out a long moan. I felt a pain in my head and all over my body. My mind was a temporary maze of madness; my sense of being was tossed violently out of my body and mind until it became clear that it had gone for ever and ever.

Where could she be? She must have left for America with the children and everything. My foggy mind slowly began to see the pattern of the past three months: she was gradually removing things from the house.

packets, clothes, flute, utensils...Every time I returned from the theatre I had found the house a bit more desolate.. I dared not ask her what she was doing because there was sealed silence. Her eyes, once beautifully blue with golden lashes, were now haunted by a vague fear. To reassure her of my trust in her I never touched upon the subject. She was always busy in her room behind bolted doors. She would say, "At least one room is mine. You can entertain your friends in that damn sitting room. The house belongs to you."

I asked Dulo Ram to prepare tea as I was feeling weak.

After tea I again wandered through the rooms...looking at things and the emptiness...I found Jannat's red shoes in the ayah's room and a lone sock. Also Manu's little cycle in the garage which the sweeper had still to take away.

So she had left. Where could she have gone ? I sat down and started thinking logically. Must have gone to Delhi with her suitcases, trunks and other possessions to fly to America. It fitted in the scheme of nature's irony. Right when I had come back with money and gifts for children she had fled, driven away by her shadow.. The shadow was myself.

She had behaved like a typical American pulling out of a country. They don't leave; they flee. Whether country or home. And removing the children... they would be out of bounds, out of my reach... The faded blue curtain of the window rippled, diving in space, making strange rustles. I started rubbing my cheek against it...a foolish act... I wanted to do something...hold something...some action.

I must do something. Must find them. I would go crazy sitting here going round and round in my mind, the same shelves, the same thoughts. What could I do? Must consult... whom? I thought of the Inspector-General of Police whose son was my pupil. I went to see him. He listened to my story and said, "You must act promptly. Lodge a police report immediately. Meet the Chief Commissioner and telephone the immigration authorities at Delhi airport. She cannot take the children. Let her go alone. She doesn't deserve you. Don't feel upset. Act firmly. For the sake of your children she will be stopped at the airport. And your children will be with you."

I informed the police. Telegrams were sent to New Delhi and the airport authorities. While Jeannie, carrying her bundles and handbags, was going through the customs with the children on her American passport, the authorities stopped her. The children were kept behind. She was asked to leave. As she staggered forward to board the plane, the children ran after her shouting, "Mummy... don't leave us. Mummy..." The iron hand of the law grabbed the children, and there I was to hold them. At night as I made them sleep by my side, Jannat woke up and started sobbing, "Mummy!... Mummy!" What could I tell her? What answer had I to her heart-rending sobs? It was cruel. The children would never pardon me. They would think me a monster, a barbaric Asian who drove their mother from this country... And when they would be fourteen or sixteen they would go in search of her to America and find her. No power on earth could stop them. And they would hate me for having thought of my pride and not of their happiness...



Suddenly I woke up. I was in my room drinking tea and did not realise that I had dreamt all these thoughts. I had lived the reality of the coming days, and seen exactly what would happen. I had already experienced the triumph, the torture, the pangs...and tasted my own cruelty. I must view my actions from Jeannie's viewpoint. I simply could not set the police on her. It would be wrong. I shuddered at the thought...She had gone away... mother and children... the children were dreaming of America, Seattle, grandma and grandpa, ice-cream, lakes... A little paradise... I should pray for them.

I went to an old friend and ate with him. On my return I asked Dulo Ram to sleep in the compound of the bungalow because I did not want to be alone. At night I had mixed dreams: sleep-heavy Jannat in my arms, Manu's drawing pictures, the mixer churning cool mangoes...vast spaces of the desert merging into the empty studio, Raji lying on the doctor's table, the smell of Dettol, a leathery faced priest playing on the flute with a silver cross dangling, the children going to a distant forest church, their heads shaved, wearing skull caps, a rosary and a cross...their names changed to Alasdair and Cedar McLaren...wiping out every Indian trace, transforming them into aliens and selling them in some distant market...the poor fatherless urchins wandering...

I woke up with a headache and a sense of guilt. I must rush to Delhi and see them off properly. Must give them their gifts, the engine, sailboat, the shelled walnuts and the wad of fresh currency notes to Jeannie. Must keep my promise. I picked up the bundles and my suitcase,

sat in a scooter rickshaw and raced to the bus-stand shouting at the driver to go fast...fast...fast. I bought the first available ticket and sat in the bus which raced along with crazy tilts and jolts. I could not stand the five-hour wait before I reached my destination.

On reaching Delhi I rang up a few friends. With my contacts, there would be no difficulty in finding out from the American visa consulate if Jeannie had left. In any case they would have to endorse her passport for the children.

I went to the cultural section of the American Embassy to meet an Indian official who knew me very well. He had requested me many times to do an O'Neill play for them. He heard my story and referred me to another person, saying that he was not allowed to telephone the visa consulate directly. Only an American could perhaps help. I met an old American woman officer. She directed me to the visa consul. I telephoned the consul, and his Indian secretary asked me the purpose. When I tried to explain he didn't listen and asked me to come to the office and try.

My grief mounted. Here was I—a professor honoured by an American university and given a Special Achievements Award by an American Foundation, knocking at their doors to know about his children. I felt puzzled. I reached the consulate at the back of the big embassy in Chankyapuri, set like a jewel amidst the spacious lawns. I asked the taxi to wait. As I went in I was surveyed by many suspicious eyes and poker-faced Indian officers. The foyer was cramped with Indians industriously filling out visa forms. I moved to the enquiry counter. It was blocked by about two hundred

Indians, nervous like criminals, their eyes beseeching and faces full of hope and fear.

I returned to the outer enquiry clerk and said that I wanted to meet the consul immediately. At my repeated requests, he shrugged his shoulders, "Can't help. Fill that form and wait for your turn."

I looked around and saw a plaque "For American citizens only" pointing to the interior of the embassy. Three American women came out smoking and chatting loudly.

After waiting fruitlessly for one hour I came away in disgust. I felt like a beggar. I could not cut through the fortified consulate. It was a blind wall of law, of discipline brutal as any. Rich men develop a sense of insecurity, of suspicion. They think everybody a crook, a thief, a needy bastard. Rich nations also behave like that. The whole of Asia was a needy bastard. My frenzied search in this jungle of heartless rules resigned me to the situation.

I returned to Chandigarh after a fruitless search. It was like returning from a burial. All day I stayed in my house. My cook had gone to the hills where in a family feud his uncle had hit him with an axe chopping off two of his fingers. The part-time ayah had also left. The house looked lonelier than ever. The wind moaned through the tall shrubs. I felt a deep sorrow.

Three weeks passed.

I walked to the department to pick up my mail. A large envelope with US stamps and registration label sat at my table. It was from Jeannie.

I opened the letter. It was a five-page document electrically typed on crisp American paper addressed to the Vice-Chancellor who had forwarded it to me for an explanation. I read the first line and my head swam. I sat down on the chair, took out my glasses and started reading it slowly. The letter had five captions: personal behaviour, public behaviour, marital relations, financial frauds, danger to society. She had listed charges of corruption against me with a request to the Vice-Chancellor that I be dismissed from my job. She summed up by saying that my shadow should never fall on the children. I should never be allowed to set foot on American soil. Copies of the letter were sent to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Chancellor, the President of the Teachers Union, the Minister of Education and the American consul.

The drafting was cautious, as if in a law suit. I again went over the letter—her charges were that I had been married earlier and had a wife living in my village. That I sold my slide projector to the university and charged money illegally. That I took \$ 5,000 from an American university to do research on the *Ramayana* but never kept my word. All these charges were the outcome of his nervous crazy mind.

I went to see the Vice-Chancellor.

He sat behind a large polished teak table stacked with papers and files. Two shining paperweights, a glass inkstand and an embossed tumbler. Golden pearls embellished the table. A red rose adorned his tweed. His clipped moustache and high forehead gave him an imperious look. He offered his limp hand to me. "Take your seat."

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I was shivering with agony as I sat down. His note asking me "to explain" had shocked me. It was a private matter, a domestic problem. I explained to him the entire situation, how Jeannie had stripped the house, taken away the children, and run away to America under the consulate's umbrella. He should judge me by my eight years' work on the campus and not by the crazy letter of a deserting wife. I requested him to come to my house and see the ravage. He sat in the chair with the same Baluch smile, crossing his fingers and rubbing them, "I cannot come to your house. It will harm you."

"How?"

"Thereby I become a party. I want to be detached."

"But you must know the facts. Please come and see for yourself the condition of my house. It's important...You must understand my situation. I am hurt...I beg you to come...even for two minutes. Please..."

He smiled, still rubbing his fingers, "You write what you have to say regarding this letter."

"If I were you, I would have torn it into pieces and thrown it into the wastepaper basket!"

He looked disinterested. Again the same smile.

I was exhausted and returned to my house, wondering at how educational and art centres became police cells.

I wrote three letters to Jeannie and the children but received no reply. I telephoned friends in Seattle but they failed to reach her. My soul wandered in search of my children.

Where were they? I had visions. Jeannie might have shifted to California, to a distant village of tall pines and little churches and changed the children's names...might have baptised them, branding their minds with the ritual of holy communion, and filled them with hate for India. They might never come back and refuse to recognise me....Where could I find them? Nobody could locate her, interfere with her personal freedom...she was safe in the golden mist of a distant world. American law fiercely guarded an individual's rights.

Two years ago when I had gone to Calcutta from Chandigarh to make a documentary, she had carefully packed my suitcase, put it along with my camera and typewriter in the car, and prayed for my safe journey. During the shooting I received a letter that Jannat had burnt her stomach when she toppled a boiling tea-



kettle. She was in the hospital. I phoned Jeannie. She said I need not worry as Jannat was progressing. A few days later I phoned again. Sondhi, the office clerk, answered. Jeannie was not there. He said Jannat was all right. Then he added, "You know, Sir, Manu and Jannat are being baptised this Friday in the Sector 19 church."

I gasped. A cruel pain ran through my body. It was the severing of filial bonds, a primitive soul-branding ritual. Any forcible conversion, I felt, was a spiritual crime. The visions of this would-be-baptism tortured me. She did not believe in Christianity or any other religion, brought up as she was in the humanitarian traditions of a Unitarian household. Now perhaps her great-grand mother's Christian soul had awakened in her, those blood compulsions, psychic loyalties, and she wanted the children to conform to her clan, to belong to her in total.

Should I rush back to Chandigarh? What would I do here? Inform the authorities? A lawyer?...How could I stop her? I was ignorant of the law. She had designed the move carefully and coldly. I could not predict her actions. When she married me, she wanted to embrace Hinduism. I had laughed it away as a sentimental gesture.

I slowly sorted out my thoughts and the line of action. I sent a legally worded telegram to the Bishop of the Church: "Stop conversion of my son Manu and daughter Jannat to Christianity without my knowledge or permission otherwise legal action against you and the Church community!" I sent copies of this telegram to the Deputy Commissioner of Chandigarh and to Jeannie.

This worked. Jeannie felt terrified and the conversion was stopped. When I returned to Chandigarh she was repentant and said "Let's be friends. We should learn from the ants who sift the sugar crystals from the sand. We should treasure the crystal moments of our life."

Now that she was in the safe environments of America, she must have changed my children's names. In her letter to the Vice-Chancellor she had specifically mentioned that she did not ever want my shadow to fall on the children...The words had haunted me...I might never see them again...But then I thought...Manu may return when old, searching for his roots, my ashes, and go to the village and buy back the 8ft x 8ft piece of land where the bones of his ancestors were mixed with dust, and visit the little dingy room where I was born...Maybe he returns earlier while I am still alive..the split atom searching for the other part to reunite. Was it wishful thinking? Was there such a thing as a blood bond? Or was it only a superstition?

I walked with Tara Chand down the narrow road lined with mango trees. The fragrance of the mango pollen mingled with the intoxicating smell of the lady-of-the-night. I was thinking of my children. Jannat mimicking a cat with an impish smile...shafts of sunny rays, like the cat's whiskers. She might have forgotten the game she played with me...

Suddenly Tara Chand said, "We should always carry a stick and torch on nights like this. There might be snakes."

We walked for some time without talking. He broke the silence. "I think Indira's party will lose in Punjab. It's quite possible that she herself may lose. A great wave is sweeping against her in Punjab, Haryana and Himachal. The Congress has no chance. She is heading for her own ruin."

"How can that be?"

"She thinks people are with her, but they are not. Only her sycophants and courtiers are with her. Millions are sitting on the fence. She'll lose."

"Why doesn't she postpone the elections?"

"She can't."

"Why not?"

"It's not in her power any more."

I became quiet. Tara Chand walked with a gentle stoop, a mobile silhouette. I felt depressed. Why couldn't Indira see the reality? She was going to lose. Nobody could save her ...

I said, "I have an idea. She has many advisers, but they are afraid to even hint that she might lose. I know her a slightly. I would tell her that she should do three things: have a bomb thrown at the Congress Bhavan in Chandigarh; it will shake the town. Secondly, a train going to Bombay should be derailed. Thirdly she should organize in Delhi a march of one thousand committed followers carrying Janata flags and shouting *Indira ko hatao!* They should capture the radio station; make fiery speeches announcing their victory and arrange a few clashes. Immediately she should declare martial law and uphold the status quo. It won't be dishonest if she does it. It'll merely be politics. Not a sparrow will

flutter if she takes this dramatic step and returns to the Emergency.”

He said, “Who knows. She might be thinking on these lines...Everything is unpredictable.”

A week later the election took place. Indira Gandhi made hurricane tours of the country, addressing people, urging them to vote for her party. Her manifesto was socialism, secularism and the removal of poverty. In her home constituency, Raj Narain, the political clown, went about shouting “Remove Indira!” As an election tactic he put himself in an iron cage, symbolic of the country’s prison, and appeared before the public, yelling, “Take me out of the cage!” India had not witnessed such an exciting election.

I was in deep slumber when Tara Chand shook me by the shoulder. “Wake up! The scales of power have changed. Indira Gandhi has lost!”

I sat up blinking as the light of the naked bulb hit my eyes. The mini-transistor was croaking the news. She had lost. The radio again announced that both Indira and Sanjay had lost. I felt a strange elation, the way one feels at the sight of a jet plane catching fire in mid air and crashing in flames... It was a fated tragedy from which she could not escape.

I lighted the stove and prepared tea. As we sipped it, we speculated about her. What was happening at her house? Was there depression or anger? Or desire for revenge? Who could imagine her grief? What was the military doing...? The generals she had appointed, the secret service and the intelligence people? Where were the poets and painters who had projected her as the

goddess Durga? The masses who had shouted slogans in her praise...where had they gone? Was her defeat a reality? How could she — the Supreme Leader — be suddenly rejected?

While her defeat was being broadcast, planes took off and landed on schedule, teleprinters clattered, railway trains were steaming, and postmen continued sorting mail. The full rhythm of work went on without missing a beat. The military and police, who for years had been conditioned to Indira Gandhi's command, had now switched over to the new rulers. In a country which is tied by bonds of loyalty, this modern touch of democracy looked unreal.

The morning papers were full of headlines about Indira's defeat. Details of jubilations. How people at midnight had distributed sweets and danced on the roads, mad with joy. Marches and processions. A glorious change. A new era. Even small towns celebrated the Janata victory by lighting earthen lamps and fire crackers.

What was happening? I glanced through newspaper headlines: floods hit Andhra; two-year old child bites cobra and the cobra dies; murder of chowkidar; education minister opens Triennale; eunuchs set up all-India body.

The last caption caught my interest. A "female" eunuch who had matriculated from Delhi University, was organising a conference with the slogan: "Indian eunuchs, unite! What have we to lose except our shame?" They wanted the Constitution to be amended and a clause added acknowledging them as the third sex for travel in

trains, voting and on passports. The law knew only two categories: male and female. They insisted on a third category—eunuchs. They also demanded special grants to promote their traditional culture of song and dance and wanted their delegations to be sent abroad. If their demands were not met, they would march to Parliament. They traced their heritage to the Vedic Age. The great Shakhundi, hero of the *Mahabharata*, was of their tribe. Eunuchs had played a great role in India's history. Their detachment, loyalty, secret contacts and decision-making power in the harems and courts. Changez Khan won 52 battles in his life and lost only one — and that to a great Chinese general who was a eunuch.

The new sense of freedom had given courage to eunuchs. It was like the emergence of a third power bloc.

After the first flush of joy, the routine set in. The same courses, the same teachers, the same administration, the same vice-chancellor, the same courtiers.

I was creating in a small town. A superb theatrical event died here immediately, leaving no trace. The following day it became unreal as if it had never happened. As if it was an illusion. It was like making designs on sand...masterpieces which disintegrated in no time. Most activity is like this. We are like ants who discipline their armies, marshal their forces, cart sugar grains and store these in their homes, working with patience and instinct. But the next moment a duststorm sweeps away their achievements...No one believes in anything. You may pour millions of gallons of milk, the fertile creative energy of a man...and it turns into sand....

It had been raining all day. I heard the splash of a car. It was Balwant Kapoor, who had come to Chandigarh to meet his former friends, including the Governor and the Chief Minister of Haryana. Both were out of town. He had inquired about me from various sources and located me. He entered full of energy and embraced me strongly. Slapping me on my back, he said, "You have put on weight....How?"

"Out of sheer boredom and laziness."

He pulled out a bottle from his hip pocket, fixed two drinks and said, "I must speak to you frankly about myself. I'm not ashamed to say that I am a bastard. A sex maniac. I want you to do me a favour."

I wondered what he was going to ask for. Certainly not a girl...

He said, "I want to write a book about my sex adventures. I have slept with at least five hundred women. I mean, slept with them properly. Of these, at least thirty were fantastic. I'm the Mohammed Ali of sex. I am proud of it. Now you must help me write this novel. Come to London and stay with me for two months. I'll send you an air ticket and give you a stenographer — not a white girl, but a Negress. You know these black women are very good in bed. You must write this book for me..with me. We shall share the royalty fifty-fifty.

He always had fantastic schemes. This was one of them. I did not want to question his offer. I said, "I'll help you."

"God has sent me on a mission," he said. "It's to satisfy sex-starved women. I am their Messiah. You have no idea how hungry people are for sex. Their faces are faded, their bodies shrunk, their soul, dark...because

they do not know the joy of sex. I have gone abroad and given joy to the sex-starved women of almost every country. The first was a Yugoslav actress who met me in an aeroplane..Then two Spanish women — both sisters—who met me in a park..Then a ferocious Negress...I'll tell you about English girls also."

He talked about women of various nationalities — their sexual behaviours, intimate moments, pet phrases, the smells of their armpits, shapes of their nipples.

"The best way to know a nation is to sleep with a woman of that country. I have known these nations in bed. I know Africa and Spain and Yugoslavia and England..." His down-to-earth descriptions were illuminated by his technicolour imagination.

After he had bragged about his sex exploits for two hours, he said, "I admire two women-Uma Vasudev and Liz Taylor. Both are glamorous and indestructible. Liz is still beautiful. Her breasts are lovely. Such breasts should be kept in a museum. I can say the same about Uma, but I could never approach her with sex in my mind. I don't know why. I think I am afraid that she will reject me. That fear makes me impotent..." He laughed loudly.

Kapoor had started life as a political worker when he was a slim boy with coiled-up energy. He was a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and was arrested in 1942 in the Quit India Movement. He worked as an errand boy of political leaders in prison. The jail had its own hierarchy. Among criminals, the chief boss was the "lifer," followed by bandits, thieves, down to petty pickpockets. The same was true of the political set-up. The young Kapoor was the darling of senior political prisoners. He was



released in 1945. For fifteen years he had lived in Delhi as a Congress worker wearing hand-spun white khaddar. He would shoot to Pandit Nehru's house to present him flowers, visit Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the frail spinster health minister, and then race to the Coffee House, where he would sit all day talking excitedly of sex scandals and political news. His conversation was larded with sex. He was one of the rare men in whose mouth the four-letter word sounded literature. He had countless affairs with women, from an ambassador's daughter to the fat mother of a vegetable seller in the neighbourhood. His first sex encounter had been with a distant aunt when he was hardly fourteen. While he was engaged in the act in the upper storey of his house, his mother had come searching for him and beat him up.

He had gone to Vienna in 1959 as a delegate to the World Youth Festival and from there to the socialist countries and had finally settled in London. He educated himself and became the correspondent of an Indian newspaper. Then he joined hands with a Gujarati woman, started a weekly and soon became prosperous.

He had come to India after eighteen years and was catching up with old friends, jetting around in fashionable parties and political circles.

He said to me, "Indira Gandhi is an industry. Everybody is writing about her and getting rich. It's more profitable than any other writing. I have met her. She appeared cheerful. She is making hurricane tours to win back the confidence of the people again. She will come back to power. But she should avoid sychophants. You know one of her flatterers was Barooah. A parrot-eyed opportunist. A glib talker. He had coined the phrase "India is Indira

and Indira is India!" Now he is after her blood. This is what happens to leaders. Nehru brought her up in the best traditions of humanism and Indian culture. Where was the need for her to build her image? When crooks and sychophants start building up your image, they are destroying it."

Suddenly he looked at his electronic watch. "It's nine, I have to go to dinner with the Speaker. Will you come with me? This dinner is in my honour. Let's go. He is a very good person. You'll like him."

I excused myself. Kapoor hugged me with the same fervour, reminded me of my promise to visit him in London, and left.

I had come to New Delhi to attend a film festival. I stayed at my old apartment. The telephone woke me up in the morning. It was Uma.

She said excitedly, "Ved is in town. I think he should meet Satish...I am getting the two together. It might seem a cruel joke....I'm eager to see how they react to each other. You must come for dinner."

I had met Ved Mehta in New York ten years ago, in his apartment in an aristocratic complex, where one had to be cleared by a guard and a receptionist before being permitted to ring the door-bell. Here Ved held merry parties at which he revelled in showing off his wordly knowledge and enjoyed shocking the company with his uninhibited talk. He would abruptly ask a woman, "How many men have you fucked?" To another he would say, "I don't like the cut of your blouse. Don't blush. Let me feel your lovely tits." Still to another, "You know my friend K. He is impotent. the bastard can't fuck, I danced with his wife and she wanted me to screw her on the floor."

In between he would talk about the *New Yorker*, the Indian writers seeking his help to get published, their baby talk and cowardice, and the mawkish stuff they wrote.

Ved is admired for his frankness and barbed wit, but he can't stand anyone else's frank opinion. Most people, afraid of losing his friendship, swallow his remarks. His sightless face becomes a mask, an oval eye, and hypnotises one. It makes the profane sacred. His sexual imagery looks innocent. Women feel free in his presence, without the danger of exposing themselves to the naked eye.

In his writings, Ved vividly describes colours, textures, light, the changing architecture of New York, a nibbled cloud, a crumpled smile, a green scarf. In the beginning his unusual writing made me curious. But on second thought I started doubting it. Either his blindness was a fake or his writing.

His two books on India had sold well. His remarks about Indian society and its politicians made interesting reading. In his book on Gandhi, he made fun of the Mahatma's sexual and political whims and painted him as a fraud. He documented his writing with an intelligent index-carding mind and revealed, in a believable way, the hidden facets of Gandhi's life which the West loves to gloat over.

Who would care for his writing if he were an American? His credibility and saleability depended upon his being an Indian. Also being blind. He had to return to India again and again to keep alive his Indian-ness.

Uma's parties were always well planned, where one met

the most unusual combinations: politicians, musicians, divorced couples, a supporter of Indira Gandhi and her implacable enemy, journalists and artists.

In the evening I went to her house. I was climbing the stairs when I heard loud voices. Satish and Ved were locked in a heated argument. Recently Ved had done a TV colour film, "*Chachaji, a poor relation.*" It was about his 83-year-old uncle, a delinquent sponger. The one-hour film portrayed the daily routine of his uncle and his good-hearted parents. He had held some private showings of this film to a gaggle of admiring females. Even the most negative of critics, Amita Malik, who had waged a war against Satyajit Ray's superb film *Distant Thunder*, praised Ved.

Ved said to me, "Have you seen my film? People have praised it...rather too much for my taste. But you must see it. It's good."

Satish did not like Ved's self-praise. He lost his temper. "This country is infested with liars. How can you all praise Ved for making a film? It's primarily a visual medium. Here's a man who is lauded for creating something which can be created only through the lens directed by the human eye. It's *bakwas!*"

He directed his words at Ved. "You pretend to see. You try to hide your blindness. In fact, it is a blessing because it makes you different from your family, who are all middle class. You are trying to ape them. You are ashamed of your blindness whereas you should be proud, because it is this quality of non-seeing which makes you special. I am deaf but I don't hide it. I went through a lot of shame and ridicule as a growing child and suffered tortures but these refined my soul and gave

me a new vision. A creative power. It flows into my painting. We are both unusual. In old times in Mexico, they used to keep murderers in a jail at the bottom of a deep well. Nobody could come out. Nobody knew what those criminals suffered in that underground hell. Once a prisoner escaped and he told the world of the horrors. You and I are two fortunate prisoners who have come out. We can tell the people about these mystical and unusual experiences. We are privileged to tell the truth of the unknown world. But you are ruining your talent by pretending that you can see.”

Satish described his days in Mexico. “I learnt from Sequeiros and Rivera but my spiritual guru was the late Orozco. His art fascinated me. He was anti-politics. I was a believer in political art, the art of commitment, but on my return to India I too became anti-politics. I had never voted because I thought it useless. Today I am eager to contribute my bit to shaping the events..People of this country will not learn. Once you make a name in any field, it never dies. Mrs Gandhi’s name is being tarred, the Press and the Shah Commission are painting her in dark colours. But they cannot destroy her image. We always preserve our ghosts. People are still looking for Subhash Chander Bose though he died thirty five years ago. Here the dead don’t die. And Indira is a living person!”

Ved said, “Our leaders are decadent. And their talk...utter shit.”

“Will Indira Gandhi come back to power?” interposed Uma.

Ved said, “Well, I wrote something about her and she was angry. I applied for a visa and my friends in the

embassy told me that if I went to India she would jail me...Now she is out of power. But you never know. One thing is certain: she lost the elections because she was too much the daughter of her father and not sufficiently the mother of her son. If she returns, she will be the mother of her son. Then she will rule indefinitely. We are cursed by our sons. When the father dies and his body is placed on the pyre it is the eldest son who is privileged to pick up a burning stick and smash the father's skull, spilling his brain...A most gruesome act. Who performs it? The son. He takes posthumous revenge. When Nehru died he had no son. His grandson was specially flown in for the funeral ceremony. He was in time to pick up the burning stick and smash Nehru's head."

He continued. "When one nears sixty one starts looking at life through one's progeny. The son becomes one's ears and eyes. One's extension. Purely biological. Nehru started looking at the world through his daughter's eyes...She, after ten years, has made Sanjay her ears and eyes. Something to do with our philosophy, the cycle of life which one completes through one's son. She once remarked, 'I am a Prime Minister, not a woman' But basically she is a woman. A mother. How can she fight nature? If someone were to ask her 'Choose! The country or the son?' Will she sacrifice her son? What's a country? A vast land peopled with strange mouths and legs. So she sticks to her son, her salvation. She is not Mahatma Gandhi. People condemn her. But they should understand that she is completẽ only with Sanjay."

Ambika said, "I got frightened of her growing power. First, I was attracted by it. It sucked me into its orbit.

Magical and gratifying. I believed in it and worked with passion, worshipping her. That's how a dictatorship comes about. People believe in the leader blindly, glorify his impulsive actions and create a myth around him. A dictator is genuinely loved by his people to begin with...He becomes a monster later. By then, it is too late."

I said, "It was the greatest irony of history that a woman who decided at a particular moment—whatever the reason—to lift Emergency, order free elections, remove censorship and let the crushed, dispirited, tired opponents out of jail and created a free atmosphere should now be punished for that. I mean she has been rejected by the people and that is the biggest punishment. Indira's saddest day was that night when she heard the news that she had lost. Her heart must have dropped to her ankles. That was the day of judgement and punishment. The victors have made it a pastime to bait her. Look at their faces distorted with churlish joy. It bursts out of their skin. One has to just watch them...their faces and eyes and mouths. Barbaric. It's like the medieval ages when the entire village would stone a woman to death if she was suspected of being a witch. Burn her on the stake! Drag her to the flaming pyre to immolate her if her husband died. Man has ruled for centuries. Corruption, cruelty, killing and murder are his prerogatives. He must command. Now by a chance of history, a woman came to rule. How could he forget this insult? How could he ever forgive her? It's vendetta...the revenge of the male species."

Ved said, "At least she did one good thing. She punctured all the windbags. Fixed all the *Patey Khans*. 'Who is he,' she would ask. The fellow would swell has



chest: 'I am a journalist. Non-partisan. Voice of reason.' And she would order; 'Slap this idiot and drag him away!' All the journalists knuckled down and fawned on her. If a lawyer bellowed. 'I know all the rules. The law. The constitution,' she ordered: 'Beat this pompous ass with shoes!' All the lawyers praised her decision. She asked, 'Who are you?' The man said: 'I am Jayaprakash Narayan,' she simply said: 'Put him in jail and let him cough out his days there!' No one protested. Everyone admired her guts. She was called Joan of Arc. The soul of India. The greatest woman. Now all the rats have come out of their holes and are condemning her. The revenge of the male against the woman. Where were they when she dictated? They were a party to all her decisions. Why didn't they speak up? At least they could have resigned. But they clung to their seats. They have been ruled for thirty years. Thirty years of sitting would make anyone's ass sore. One would get piles! But these are the professional survivors. Here they are again...smiling and pontificating. They will not let go the bone even if you humiliate them, kick them, spit at them. No disgrace is sufficient to snatch the bone from them."

A retired Muslim army General with a trimmed grey beard and elegant jacket who sat sipping whisky said, "It's not Indira who should be pilloried, but her double-faced and double-bottomed colleagues. They made glorifying speeches in favour of the Emergency. They are the real culprits. Indira believed in the Emergency. But these people didn't. All the same, they were ready for any criminal act, any monstrous deed, as long as they were assured a bungalow, a car and a fat salary.

They sold her to the public and the public to her. It is these people who should be tried...you set up commissions...ask retired judges to sift through the most complex lies. And who helps the judges? The archangels of corruption, of falsehood. They come forward in the witness box, place their hand on the holy book and swear that they were forced to tell lies. How can we believe them now? What's the guarantee that these very people will not turn up before the next commission and say that they lied out of fear. The "truth" becomes a "lie" when the situation is reversed. What about the previous commissions? The persons who were proved corrupt are today occupying the seats of power. Yesterday's criminals are today's judges. It's a mockery of law, life and history."

The talk shifted to Morarji. Uma crinkled her nose. "How can he drink his own urine? The world is laughing at us. How can he inflict his fads on us, banning liquor and prescribing urine."

The General said, "In our religion urine is the most unclean liquid. It pollutes. Even a drop of it. That's why the Muslims perform the *astanja*, blotting out the last droplet. It's horrible to think that Morarji drinks his own urine!"

Kapila, a bald professor of neurology, said, "Urine is good for one's health. It is not a poisonous fluid. On the other hand, it has vital properties and can cure most diseases. I was suffering from colitis. I tried every medicine but to no use. A friend suggested auto-urine therapy. I hated the idea but overcame my disgust within a week. In three months, I was completely cured. Now, I never miss my morning dose."

Uma blinked her long eyelashes, "What does it taste like?"

"Sharp and saltish," replied Kapila. "It's strange that educated people should be horrified at the thought of drinking their urine when they feel no disgust at swallowing the most foul-tasting medicines. Doctors don't prescribe urine because of vested interests. We are foolish to reject this elixir of life. One hundred years later we shall be considered primitives of the 20th century...supersititious idiots!"

I returned to Chandigarh by luxury coach. They were showing a feature film in it: shrieking songs, blaring, shuddering images. I pulled the window curtain aside and looked at the landscape rushing by....trees... huts...Raji's shadow running alongside. I reclined in my seat and felt the aroma of her body.

WHEN I learnt that Thakur was in town I invited him to act in my production of *Medea* so that students could learn something by working with a sensitive actor like him, who had created a sensation in Delhi and Bombay. His literary background was poor, but he had a great aesthetic sensibility and range. His rough beard, receding forehead and hill people's gawkiness made him look unimpressive. But on the stage he was great.

He agreed to act although he was very busy directing a play for his friends, who had a small amateur group. This play had three men and two women in the cast. They had found the actors, but were in search of an actress who could play the passionate, neurotic ravaged daughter living out the nightmares of her incestuous relationship with her father. Thakur asked me if Raji could act in his play and I said, "Why not."

Raji was keen to play *Medea* but I had been forced to cast another girl in the role because of the tension in my group. There were arguments over the casting and Raji fought for her right to act this role. Why was I afraid of the public? Didn't she prefer me to everyone, rejecting

every other group and director for me? Why was I keen to please others? Didn't I believe in her talent? To her my decision was a kind of treachery. She felt publicly humiliated, disowned, rejected. She could not accept it.

She had gone over the lines of the play and strongly felt that she was Medea. How she had followed me, betraying her father and her brothers, and lived with me as an outsider for years. Now I had betrayed her by casting another actress. It was worse than going to bed with another woman. When I asked her to play the chorus woman, she flung the script at my face and walked away.

After the most violent scenes of hate, Raji's boiling rage would simmer down during the night. She would come to the theatre with the same silken rustle and smile as if nothing had happened. She had an immense power to revive and reclaim. While I would be thinking that this was the end of our relationship, obsessed with her image, craving for her, smouldering with anger, she would turn up suddenly. Everything would be the same again.

After three days she came and sat down quietly. She said, "Please...understand me. I am dying to do the role. I haven't acted for six months. Now there is a chance for me to play Medea. This would satisfy my desire to act with a known actor. What chance do I get in this little town? Always acting with amateurs, small actors, small situations...What stops you from casting me? Why don't you give me this role? You could perhaps cast me as a double...make two Medeas...just to fulfil my dream..."

She made the role a focal point of our relationship. I don't know why I perversely denied her this little favour.

Her aggressive demand irritated me. Suddenly she said with a vicious look. "You want to please that woman! I tell you that if you don't give me the role I will never act in your plays!"

"Your demand is wrong."

"I am a wrong woman! My dreams are wrong. My passion, my desire, my demands. Choose! A right action or a wrong woman?"

We had heated arguments. She burst out, "I warn you...that if you don't give me this role, I will never, never act in your plays! I'll have nothing to do with you!"

Her threat made me lose my temper, I resented her emotional blackmail and shouted, "Yes, if you don't want to act for me, you may not. I don't care. You are mad!"

"Yes I am mad. Mad!...I'll see how another woman acts in your plays. I'll pick out her eyes!"

I left her there sobbing on the floor and went out.

She did not come for two days. I couldn't work, worrying about her. I went to her house and persuaded her to be in my play as the chorus woman. I quoted the Stanislavsky cliché: it's the actors who are small or great, and not the roles.

She was a picture of ravaged emotions. She said, "Other people beg me to act in their plays. They give me importance and inspire me. And here you are rejecting me all the time...I couldn't sleep last night, roamed in my room, wondering. What's our relationship? Why do you always torture me? But now I have accepted everything. I am calm...I have no grudge. No pride...I'll play the chorus woman."

However, she did not turn up for the rehearsal. I wondered why she hadn't come. Where could she be? What was she doing? I looked for her on the campus and went up the Student Centre, a giant three-storey high circular concrete building shaped like a cup on a slender stem. I had not been there for almost four months. As I walked up the ramp I heard giggles. The coffee house was filled with smoke and spicy vapours. I felt cheered by the youthful bustling energy.

Suddenly I saw Thakur in his Kulu cap sitting with Raji at a table in a corner. I sat at a separate table away from her and pretended to ignore her. Occasionally I had glimpses of her profile and hands. She did not look around. When I saw her paying the bill, I slipped out.

The same evening she turned up at the rehearsal. I asked her if she had seen me in the coffee house. She said, "Yes...Thakur was talking about his family. Very interesting. He has a wife and two children. He left his home and family for a girl who passionately loved him. But she betrayed him and married his friend. He does not condemn her. It's life. He is a great soul."

Her face beamed and she started giggling. "Last night at the rehearsal he was telling us how this neurotic woman should shriek...a guttural howl rising from the pit of her stomach. He howled like a woman. It was so funny. He made me run across the stage howling...very very funny...I covered the entire stage in a crazy circle, in one long mad howl...I laughed till tears came to my eyes. He's a great teacher...has a great sense of humour, yet very reserved. I don't understand him...but it's fun to be with him..."

She went on like this. Three or four times I tried to change the topic but she would again go back to her subject— Thakur — his talent, his poverty, his ailing mother and the way he was building his production on a shoe-string budget.

I noticed a change in Raji. She was cool and pleasant but distant. Was she involved with Thakur? Or with her role? Busy in the highly concentrated theatre work? Was she drifting away or was I jealous? I had had the same experience two years ago when she had played Groucha in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* under a visiting director. I had gone to Europe for six weeks on a cultural exchange programme. I received her letters in every capital on my itinerary: Moscow, Prague, Berlin, Paris. But when I reached London, there was no letter. Perhaps she was expecting me back and did not risk sending me a letter here. Still, I felt uneasy.

On my return she told me, “Don’t feel jealous if I embrace that young man on the set.”

I went to the rehearsal and saw her in the love scene. There was desire in her eyes...the way she placed her hand around the young actor and held him. The following day when I asked her to stay for dinner she declined. She ate with the players at a wayside stall. One of the actors went to see her off in her car because she was afraid to drive alone at night. I was angry. When she met me the next day, she argued with me, rational and cool. Her mind was in the play. I was sure that the young actor with the golden beard had escorted her, though she denied it. That night I drove to Madhya Marg, parked



my car behind the trees and sat watching and waiting...It was cold, almost mid-night. I wondered what had happened. Had she already gone? Taken another route? What could have held her for such a long time? Tired and angry, I drove back and saw them sitting at a wayside stall in the light of a Petromax. They were surprised to see me so late and invited me for a bite. I refused, and went home. A month later, when the play was over, Raji again became her former self.

Now working with Thakur she showed the same kind of involvement...the same apathy towards me. No— it was different. There was a kind of chemical change in her, a change which I could not tolerate. I would see her going with him carrying the script under her arm, walking with freedom and excitement. I was sure she was in love with him.

Every morning I would wait for her, listening for the sputter of a three-wheeler or the murmur of a car down the uneven path. This wait was a torture, a daily punishment. By nine, exhausted, I would slip on my corduroy jacket and walk to the theatre.

She would arrive at the studio fresh and beaming, exuding sexual magic. The studio would be filled with her presence. She would go away leaving behind large patches of sex. I did not know how to kill my hunger for her body.

Sometimes she would ask for my car and I would readily give her the keys. She would drive off with Thakur. I went on my errands by scooter-rickshaw. I was playing the mortified lover, the self-sacrificing hero, without realising that it is only in films that the heroine has telepathic pangs. I sulked and sat in my

room hoping she would come and see how miserable I was. Every morning I woke up early and waited for her. But she did not come.

She was in love with him. A torch of strong light had changed its direction. I was no more the receiver of those hot waves. Right before my eyes she was following another man. He had no money. She would save out of her pocket expenses and spend on him. He wore heavy scuffed shoes, smoked cheap Charminar cigarettes, and had grown a short beard. He often went away with his actor friends after rehearsal, leaving Raji to search for him.

It was early December. Heavy snow had fallen on the Himalayas and a cold wind blew over Chandigarh.

I had invited Thakur to dinner. I set the little table in my study and asked the cook to bring the food there. I drew the window curtains lest someone see me with him. Raji might turn up and peer from in. I waited for him, wondering how to express my anguish to him.

I heard a knock on the door and opened it. It was Thakur, dressed in a rough high-necked pullover, a dirty grey jacket and the familiar Kulu cap with the red band. I shook hands with him — strong, cold hands. He had walked from Sector 22 where he had gone to see a friend.

He was rubbing his hands for warmth. I had not seen him alone for a long time. Raji was afraid of his ever meeting me lest I disturb her growing relationship. Now it was a relief to meet my rival...the one whom I hated in my dreams, wishing him to die and disappear from

this world. A deep prayer welled up from my heart for his death.

We sat down to dinner and he ate with great relish. During the dinner we exchanged only pleasantries, both waiting for the important subject — SHE.

He ran his tongue over his gums and palate, clearing bits of food and relishing their taste. The inside of his mouth was visible, the charged flesh. From this cavern came those superb speeches of Creon and Othello which sent shivers through the spectators. He would work himself into the character with yogic concentration. Nothing could disturb him. He would become quiet and withdrawn as if he had reined in all his energy. In scenes of passion his forehead would redden and two blood-gorged veins on his neck would stand out. Words came out from his mouth, sonorous and resounding.

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, cleared his throat and took out a pack of Charminar. He tapped it with his yellowed index finger. Two cigarettes appeared. He offered me one and lighted it. I smoked slowly, collecting my thoughts.

I told him what I was feeling. My passion for this woman. Shamelessly I poured out my heart to him and he listened calmly. He said, "I know that. I told her that you are in love with her. Also that I am poor. I cannot afford this luxury of love. I have a wife with two children. No job. I must return to my acting career. It's a struggle...everything uncertain...But she is in the grip of a mad passion. I wonder why I reject her. Why I disappear after the rehearsals. Why I do not turn up after giving her time...Last night she took your car and insisted on dropping me in far-off 'Sector 33. I feel a

iminal when she takes me in your car, leaving you  
mind. It's terrible. Your goodness frightens me... I am  
uman being. What stops me from sleeping with her?  
thing. Just an actor's reserve...I'll go away in a few  
ys. Then everything will blow over."

He got up. I walked him to the gate and saw him  
appear in the dark.

cept wondering all the time how she could change. I  
uld not believe it. Yet I had completely accepted it. I  
d become will-less. I would boil with anger, helpless.  
would take tea in my room, shut off from the outside  
orld, and resolve to show total indifference to her.

I should not let her feel that I have any pain, should  
ot give her the chance of pitying me. It was degrading.  
must look busy in my work, detached, cool. I put on the  
ask of an absorbed smile. But when I heard the rustle  
f her steps in the corridor, my heart would go out and  
would clutch the table, my papers...a pen...and start  
riting. Something. A letter to the office...or to my  
rother...or to a publisher for my royalty.

She would enter. "Busy? I won't disturb you. May I  
hone?" She would pick up the phone, leave a message  
or Thakur and go away.

Earlier I could feel her passion over the long-distance  
telephone. The phone coils transmitted the warmth of  
her body. Now I could not touch her. She had switched  
off her emotions. I looked at her black-rimmed eyes and  
at the silver necklace and the Kanjeevaram sari I had  
chosen. She was wearing these. I knew the special  
colour of her eyes when she looked at me with desire.  
Now the same colour was there when she looked at



Thakur who had promised to meet her there. He had not turned up. I asked her to stay awhile, but she would not.

She said, "I am a one-track woman. I don't feel anything for you any more. That's an honest fact. You must recognise this. Let's be friends and help each other...You are neglecting your health. I'll come and cook for you. Also act in your plays, if you want. And work with you. But our previous relationship is dead. Please understand it."

She spoke with a cool warmth. Seeing me tortured, she said, "It was that evening when you left me lying on the floor, sobbing, begging for a role. That day you died for me. As I lay panting like an animal Thakur came to pick up his script and saw me. He placed his hand on my shoulder and gently asked me why I was weeping. There was warmth in his hand. At that time I needed a hand to protect me, to give me strength. Any hand. And his hand became a fountain of sympathy, of understanding. I calmed down. He asked me why I was upset and I told him my story."

I knew she had developed a mad passion for him. She would eat lunch with him on the pretext of going over the lines with him. She said she wanted to be perfect in her role. She would meet me only for brief intervals. Whenever I asked her about their relationship, she avoided the topic.

"What's your relationship with Thakur?" I asked her.

"We are just friends."

"You like him?"

"Well, yes...as an actor."

"You love him?"

"Nonsense."

"Have you slept with him?"

Her face flushed with anger and her nostrils trembled.

"How dare you ask me this?"

I again asked, "Have you slept with him? Tell me...I am burning...I beg you to tell me the truth. Say that you have slept with him even if you haven't. Say these horrible words...only this can calm me...I beg you...Tell me..."

A bitter smile appeared on her face, and her eyes shone with contempt. "How low and despicable you are! A great writer, a genius, a tower...Hah!"

Suddenly blood rushed to my head, and I shouted, "You are a bloody whore! A cunning selfish whore!"

"You call me a whore? I gave you my love. Was it that of a whore? I kissed your feet, took out blood from my arm and gave it to you to fill the parting of my hair. Was it the love of a whore? I left my children and followed you and served you...praying for you...Was it the love of a whore? I loathe you!"

There was a look of frenzy in her eyes. Anger rose from some deep well of her physical self. She had entered that sphere of estrangement where arguments and pleading aggravate anger. Her eyes narrowed with hate. "I can never pardon you for your sin!"

"My sin?"

"Yes! Your sin! I carried it in my body. You were liberated and I became the prisoner...I had to bear it alone. Oh God! That seed of yours was growing in me and you were busy in your production, in the distribution of roles, in rehearsals, in the psychological analysis of your characters. You can never know the pain I suffered."

"I know...I know..."

She stepped back, "Don't come near me! Your features have changed, just like my husband's...the same cracked eyes and selfish lust. I wonder...Who are you? Did I commit this sin for you? How could I? And yet I did, possessed by evil. At that time where could I go? What could I do with my contaminated body? — this evil body which carried your seed. I hid it from my parents. I had no money. I borrowed from a friend and went to a doctor...God knows how I got this power in me. Alone, lying on the table I thought of you. And where were you at that time?"

"Please pardon me. I understand your pain..."

"Don't talk rot!" she shouted. "Which man can ever know the pain of a woman? This torture of flesh. A hundred knives rent my belly. It was far more painful to lose my baby than to bear it...To see my unborn baby in blobs of flesh...like cotton wool soaked in blood...perhaps these were the hands of my child, or his chin, or his eyes flowing in the thick black blood. I was writhing in pain. You simply said 'I know your torture.' This sentence burdens me. I pray to God that you also should be tortured. You too should beat your head against a wall and cry alone as I was crying in the dark, holding my stomach...When that baby flowed out of me, it was you flowing out of me. You died for me then."

"I belong to you," I begged. "for a whole life to pay for this sin, your unfortunate partner..."

"If I had died I am sure you would have completely denied any contact with me. You would have gone to Bombay...with your smiles and apologies and helplessness...and got busy in your theatre world...in



your world of creation...in your bloody writing. At that time my mother would have wept for me...or children...or my old father...My head is bursting...Save me! Save me! Oh God, save me from this torture!"

I saw a demonic energy twisting her features. She had assumed the features of Medea, horrible and destructive. She had become Medea...ready to destroy me and herself. She shouted, "Get out from here! Get out! Get out of my sight!"

Her face writhed with hate as she walked out. I heard the engine start, its peculiar heavy shudder, the grinding of the gear and the whir of the engine. I rested my head on the table and felt a great throbbing pain, echoing the whirring of the car's engine, an unending agony. Clutching the table with my outstretched hands, I moaned. I wished she were there to see me nailed to a cross. My pain became deeper. Tears gushed in my eyes and I started sobbing.

I knew she would not come back now. For what was I shedding tears? Why was I moaning? Why couldn't I kill her within me? Why did I ache for her? Why wait for her all the time? — her image howling in my blood...?

I was filled with contempt for myself. Exhausted, I got up slowly; I walked to the window and pulled the curtain aside. A whiff of fresh cold air laden with the smell of citrus. I stood there for some time inhaling the air, drinking it in deep gulps. I looked in the mirror and saw my swollen eyes. I smiled a little at myself. I thought I would go to Tara Chand or to Basant, whose actress-wife had been my pupil. Or better yet, Adarsh. I put off the light and walked back to the



large pot with pepper and salt and a dash of butter. The fragrance of the chicken was nostalgic. I saw mixed images of Manu and Jannat running in the house with squeals of laughter, the wise old face of the dead Surti, the smell of her coarse woollen shawl, and Raji. Bakhshish would come with the pot of chicken and we would sit eating it. If I was silent, he wouldn't talk. I would wake up from my thought-currents and speak some half-formed sentence and Bakhshish would join the conversation. I was living like a hermit and had all the time to reflect on the distorted reality of my existence...with all its millions of impressions and super-imposed images.

While I drank tea in my little room I wondered who I was. Who was I sitting in the chair drinking tea? I watched this "I," my hand taking the yellow cup to my lips, and back to the tray. Its reflexes, involuntary movement with perfect coordination and discipline...billions of cells sending signals to each other, blood pulsing through my veins in perfect rhythm...the intricate mechanism of my brain and its computerised working. A little bump and the whole machinery would go out of order. I did not know how my lungs, heart and kidneys were working day and night. What made them function? They had never been checked...I saw a spider's web hanging from the ceiling. The room had not been cleaned for a week. My lungs must have gathered webs...and some day my heart would stop. I was so ignorant. I didn't even know about my body. I took off my shirt and started gazing at my arms and chest. I stood before the dressing table mirror and watched myself, my reflection...I opened my mouth wide and saw my dilated eyes and my

teeth and palate...I got frightened. I returned to my study.

In the morning I went to the cremation ground and sat there for hours watching the dead, the burning fragrance of the sizzling marrow...I had time to reflect...a flux of thoughts...Time has its own movement...it moves on and on and our activities are infinitesimal, not even a tiny straw in the great ocean...limitless...I felt as if I was seeing a dream...the dream merging into a strange super-reality. I watched the burning fumes of my dead body mixing with fragrance of the incense and ghee. We were all condemned to die...Why work, amass wealth, chase the bubble of reputation, and go on writing and correcting proofs...?

Raji kept up a cool relationship with me while I burnt with the memory of our cruel exchange. Seduction and treason intermingled in her. By being detached she had become charmingly pleasant. She never flared up. When I lost my temper, she used kind words. This further hurt me. I wished her to be her former violent self.

One day she said, "Find a woman for yourself. I hear you have reconciled with Jeannie! Is she returning? That would be good. Why don't you and Jeannie reunite?"

She always had new ways of hurting me. I did not reply.

"I have to go very soon. Is there gas in your car?" she asked.

"Yes, Enough for at least a hundred miles."

She took the key. I had resolved not to ask her any questions.

While leaving, she gave me an elusive smile. Suddenly my reserve broke and I asked, "Did you go with him after rehearsal?"

"Yes. It was late...almost twelve. He had no conveyance. I drove him to his apartment."

"Did you go to his room?"

"No. His friend was out. He did not have the key. We sat in the car talking, waiting for his friend."

"Did you kiss him?"

"You are mad!"

"Tell me the truth. I beg you...Tell me the truth."

"You are deranged! Leave me alone! Every man I've met has turned out to be a bastard. Lusting for my body...I never got love...true love. I am dying for it."

With the surge of emotions her lips trembled.

I said, "Raji, I belong to you...I love you...I can't live without you...I can't believe that you are here with me and yet not with me...How could you forget all those vows? Your magical words...Why are you looking at me so coldly? What are you thinking? Why don't you reply? Why can't you understand? I love you..."

Suddenly she burst into tears; "I don't want your love! I just want to live my own way. I want nothing. I want...I want...I want...only Thakur! My body is aching for him...oh God! Give me power to bear it...He doesn't even know that I want him. I am hungry for him. I am burning...I had thought you were my destiny. I would work with you, act in your plays. You were my life. Future. Everything. But I never knew that I would fall in love with him. I had only dreamt of such a passion. Now I don't care for acting or my future. These are trifles. I only want him...I am constantly thinking of

him...waiting for his heavy steps, his resounding voice, the tobacco smell of his fingers. I wake up in the middle of night and look around...I am alone...terribly alone..."

I was struck by this reality. She was in the grip of a frightening passion. I didn't know how to react to this awful fact.

She wiped her tears. Her face looked like the face of another woman.

"Why didn't you tell me all this earlier?" I asked.

"I was afraid of you," she said. "I postponed this moment. But how long could I hide the truth? Your love died a year ago. I carried its corpse until it started rotting. I felt suffocated.

"Thakur came like a fresh breeze. It has nothing to do with the play. It's Thakur. Wherever I had met him in life, I would have fallen in love with him. I have never loved any man like this. I don't know how it happened. I thought it was a sin to shift from one man to another. I hated actresses who changed their husbands. They were worse than prostitutes. But now I understand them...All my vows and blood promises are washed away. The solemn oath I took on the Gita seems meaningless...I'm changed."

She only confirmed what I had already known and suffered for. I knew it had happened the day she had gone with him in my car and I had sat in my room alone, visualising how she must have driven the car down the poplar-lined narrow road, how she had parked it under a tree, how she had held his cold hands to her burning lips and how they had both kissed madly.

Suddenly she said, "I must go. I have been looking for him. He was not in the hospital...nor at his

friend's. May be he is at the cafe. I'm sure he is there. I must go."

She picked up the car keys and left.

The office clerk brought my mail. He acted as a personal typist also.

"Any letters to dictate?" he asked.

"Well...I would like to dictate some personal notes.

As I dictated, he stopped typing and said, "I hear Raji is thinking of marrying Thakur."

The word "Thakur" stung me. "How do you know?" I asked.

"It's all over campus. She is marrying him. He is going to Bombay, to act in a film."

The following week I learnt that Raji had left for Bombay.

I had wound up everything in Chandigarh and was aching to be back in Delhi. I gifted away my woollen suits and neckties, wooden divan, wicker chairs, the room cooler, kerosene stove, shelves. All the junk. And carried with me the essentials: the typewriter; camera; tea kettle; table lamp and books.

In the evening Adarsh came to see me. "I hear you are leaving Chandigarh. The university has thrown you out. Here every crook is getting an extension. Special pay, new assignments. But they don't want you. Am I right?"

I smiled.

"How about a goodbye drink with me?"

We got into his luxurious car and drove away. When the car raced over the railway bridge onto the highway, I asked, "Where are we going?"

"You know you can't buy a drink in this Shitty Beautiful. All the shops have been closed down by Morarji. So we must go out of bounds."

He drove to Red Robin, a tourist bungalow of Haryana, set amidst tall trees. It had a glittering bar. The waiter



brought chilled beer, an ice bucket, fried fish with sliced lemon and mayonnaise. After a while we started talking about love.

Adarsh said, "There is no such thing as complete love...We cannot give back what we promise. We are petty thieves, filching emotions..a race of pickpockets...All human relations are unequal and based on this thieving, couched in the lovely language of honey and sacrifice...deceiving and betraying and stealing the other person's treasure of loneliness... the inner refuge, the centre of one's being. We must guard our inner core of being like the gold lingam inside the concentric circles of a temple, which the woman tries to break through in order to grab the inner shining centre."

I said, "A woman forgets a man when she finds his substitute. There is totality in her passion. She belongs completely to one man and then to another. She has to be possessed..When she rejects a man he cannot touch her emotions. His beseechings are meaningless. But it is not same with woman. She has a hundred ways to seduce a man, a natural cunning in her body. She can be a mother serving you, feeding you, caressing you...tears, warmth of the body, begging, tantalising..all her natural weapons. Man's will is poor. I am not talking about the wife. A man never loves his wife. She is a different area. I mean she is not to be conquered. She is already in the stable...I am talking about the woman as an object of conquest."

He said, "Women will always betray as long as they are passionate. The charm of their seduction lies in betrayal. Women who make declarations of faithfulness always have a lurking desire for treachery...It's good

that you are leaving Chandigarh. I have become a cabbage here. I wonder why I am living here. Perhaps one cannot leave; one has to be thrown out. I am a bloody pendulum — from Sector 8 to Sector 17 and back and forth. I thought I should come and see you...Don't kill yourself with self-pity. Use your time creatively. Write. That's most important."

He looked at me for a while and said, "I have never talked to you about my life. Mine is the same story. I was aching for love. A dark American girl fell in love with me through correspondence. She flew to Chandigarh. My being a cripple did not bother her; she fell in love with my mind. We got married in a gurdwara. Together we went to New York and I became a photographer for CBS and went around the world. Then we settled here. A son was born to us. You can imagine my happiness. I provided her with every comfort. After eight months she went to visit her mother in America, but never came back. For months I was in deep depression. I couldn't talk to anybody about my sadness. I had to fight to live. I started this little shop. Now I have dozens of friends. I love good food and young women. It's great! Women should be used like toilet paper. Only then can a creative person survive. Otherwise they devour you."

A smile spread to his little beard.

I left for Delhi by car..the familiar road which I had travelled many a time...the wayside ovens, ponds, huts and smells of fields and smoke..I thought of my little theatre, Adarsh's tilted eyes, the woman roasting corn on the cob, poplars, parrots, Manu and Jannat, their heads shaven, wearing a Cross around their necks,

Californian forests, echoes of spirituals mixed with the hissing of the tea kettle, the inky smudge, swaying reeds and rustle of silk sleepy noises on the highway...the past resounding in my head. Raji's and Jeannie's images mixed in no-man's land, the betrayal and bitterness of these two women who were now passionately loyal to their new men, the same fury and hate and passion in them.

Who was waiting for me in Delhi? I had no wife, nor children, nor home...yet my heart was filled with longing. I was the tribal who had gone astray...wandered away from the iron pole pitched deep in the heart of the earth, the magical centre of my consciousness, the centripetal force. Delhi was reclaiming me to the fraternity of artists and theatre people..the world of tensions and quarrels and jealousies the world I had lost ..coffee fumes and old smells of the backlane of Curzon Road, the little house where I had spent 2 years of my creative life...countless friendships, affairs, artistic battles, the courtyard with the Ganesha image, the kitchen where my friends made coffee. Everything was waiting for me.

My mind was like an island washed by typhoons, the waters running over me and drowning me..Now the contours of the island were emerging in the sun.

