

Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard—stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; stories that are jokes, and sometimes prayers; and those that are not always a figment of the mind but are, at times, confessions.

Because stories live in every heart, some get told, like the ones on these pages . . .

Laburnum for My Head

Every May, something extraordinary happens in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town. Standing beyond the southernmost corner of the vast expanse of the old cemetery—dotted with concrete vanities, both ornate and simple—the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory, with its blossoms of yellow mellow beauty. The first time it happened, some years ago, surprised visitors to the concrete memorials assumed that it was an accident of nature. But each year as the bush grew taller and the blossoms more plentiful, the phenomenon stood out as a magnificent incongruity, in the space where man tries to cling to a make-believe permanence, wrenched from him by death. His inheritors try to preserve his presence in concrete structures, erected in his homage, vying to out-do each other in size and style. This consecrated ground has thus become choked with the specimens of human conceit. More recently, photographs of the dead have begun to adorn the marble and granite headstones.

But nature has a way of upstaging even the hardest rock and granite edifices fabricated by man. Weeds and obstinate bramble sprout from every inch of soil uncovered by sand and cement. So every Easter week, the community comes together to spruce up headstones and get rid of the intruding natural growth. The names on individual gravesites are lovingly wiped clean of dust and bird-shit by loved ones; occasional strangers read them as incidental pastime.

But the laburnum bush will not or cannot reveal readily who or what lies beneath its drooping branches during its annual show of yellow splendour. That particular spot displays nothing that man has improvised; only nature, who does not possess any script, abides there: she only owns the seasons. And the seasons play out a pantomime of beauty and baldness on the tree standing on the edge of the lifeless opulence, spread over the remains of the assorted dead: rich and poor, young and old, and mourned and un-mourned. The headstones in the old cemetery bear mute testimony to duties performed by willing and unwilling offspring and relatives. The laburnum tree on the other hand is alive and ever unchanging in its seasonal cycles: it is resplendent in May; by summer-end the stalks holding its yellow blossoms turn into brown pods; by winter it begins to look scraggly and shorn. Springtime brings back pale green shoots and by May it is wearing its yellow wreaths again, to out-do all the vainglorious specimens erected in marble and granite.

But the story is running ahead of itself and must be told from the beginning. It all started with a woman named Lentina and her desire to have some laburnum bushes in her garden. She had always admired these yellow flowers for what she thought was their femininity; they were not brazen like the gulmohars with their orange and dark pink blossoms. The way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture. So she decided to grow a couple of these trees in her own garden which, though not big, could accommodate them if they were planted in the corners, without affecting the growth and health of the other plants. She purchased saplings from a nursery and had them planted at the edge of her boundary wall. She followed the instructions faithfully and hoped that within two years, as the nursery man assured her, the bushes would flower.

That first year, her new gardener pulled out the small saplings along with the weeds growing around them. After loud recriminations, Lentina bought some more saplings and this time, planted three of them in three corners of the garden. She hoped that at least one of them would survive. But it was not to be. One day she heard loud barking and cows mooing very close to her compound. When she came out to investigate, she found that some stray cows on being pursued by her neighbour's dogs and finding her gate slightly ajar, had rushed into her garden and were blissfully munching on the plants they found there, including her precious laburnum saplings. She began to wonder about these accidents in her garden ever since she had planted the laburnum saplings. Nevertheless, she did not give up and the third year too, she planted some more saplings of her favourite flowering tree. Almost miraculously they survived the first few months and began to thrive.

Lentina was thrilled and could not wait to see them bear the magnificent yellow blooms she so admired. But before her wish could come true, another disaster struck. One day, a worker from the health department came while she was out visiting a friend, and sprayed a deadly DDT concoction on the edges of the garden. As ill luck would have it, it rained heavily that night flooding the entire garden. Except the full-grown trees, all her flowers including the laburnums, withered and died. Lentina was devastated and began to think that her efforts at bringing the strange beauty into her garden would never be successful. But whenever she saw these flowers in bloom, on highways and in gardens, the intense yearning to have them closer home began to overpower her. Her husband and children were convinced that she was developing an unhealthy fetish for laburnum and began to talk openly about this in close family gatherings. She could not understand their concern and was inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to

beauty around them. But she never gave up her hope of having a full-grown laburnum tree in her garden some day.

Lentina did not mention laburnum to any one any more; nor did she attempt to plant the tree she so ardently admired and wished to have in her garden. Meanwhile, her husband began to show signs of a strange disease and before any proper diagnosis could be made, he passed away quietly one night in his sleep. The funeral services were long and elaborate because the deceased was a respected and prominent member of society. On the burial day, while the hearse was about to leave for the cemetery, Lentina surprised everyone, including herself, by announcing that she was going to accompany her husband on his last journey. Usually it is men who take part in the last rites at the gravesite and stay on to supervise the erection of the temporary fence around the fresh grave. But when Lentina saw the group, including her sons and her own brothers, stepping out of the house behind the hearse, some impulse urged her to join them. Her words were met with silence, because no one was prepared to voice dissent at such a moment. So the party departed, and in the graveyard while the last prayers droned on, Lentina stood among the assortment of headstones and began ruminating on man's puny attempts to defy death; as if erecting these memorials would bring the dead back to life.

Lentina decided that she did not want any such attempt at immortality when her time came, and at that thought she experienced an epiphanic sensation: why not have a laburnum tree planted on her grave, one which would live on over her remains instead of a silly headstone? This way, even her lifelong wish to have such a tree close to her would be fulfilled. In spite of the sombre occasion, she began to smile but when a relative saw her, she quickly went back to looking appropriately bereaved. But

the sense of elation she felt could not be hidden for long. So she looked around for her driver and gesturing to him to follow her made her way home.

That night she could not sleep from excitement: it was as if a big problem had solved itself; but how was she going to accomplish it? It was clear that she could not confide in her relatives or children; so she had to find someone who would understand her deep-seated longing for the yellow wonders. She turned her attention to her servants: whom among them could she trust? Not the cook or the gardener, they had families, and secrets in families are never sacrosanct. Suddenly her mind turned to the driver who had been in their employment for more years than she could remember. He was a widower. She decided to make him her confidant. She would take him for a drive the next day to the cemetery and would explain to him what she wanted for a headstone when she died, and why. But there would be one condition: she had to see the tree bloom during her lifetime. The driver's name was Mapu but every one called him Babu because Lentina's grandson called him by that name, unable to pronounce Mapu at first. The name stuck and Mapu good-naturedly did not object even when the older people began calling him Babu.

The next morning, she sent for Babu and they took the road to the cemetery. This in itself would not appear strange: a widow paying a visit to the grave of her husband. But Lentina's intention was different; she wanted to survey the still-empty sites and to reserve a spot where she would be buried. It had to be a spot which would not be disturbed in a long while and would not pose any problem for others. When they reached the cemetery, instead of heading towards her husband's grave, Lentina marched to the extreme corners of the ground, as if looking for a lost treasure.

After what seemed to be an arduous trek, she settled on a spot in the southernmost tip of the cemetery and began to nod her head, as if she had found what she was looking for. Babu was puzzled and was almost beginning to see what his young masters had said about madam losing her mind. When she gestured to him to approach, he went hesitantly. Motioning to him to walk faster, she pointed to the spot where she was standing and said loudly, 'This is my spot, I want to be buried here when my time comes.'

Babu was taken aback and began to protest, 'But madam, your place is already earmarked beside my master!'

'Nonsense, it can go to whichever son goes first. My place is here and you are going to see that the Town Committee gives a written commitment on this. But mind you, no one at home is to be told.' She knew that Babu's son-in-law was a petty officer in that office. 'Arrange it with your son-in-law. I'll pay whatever amount it costs. And also swear him to secrecy just as you are going to do now. Will you keep my secret?'

Babu, seeing the fire and intensity in her eyes, answered, 'Yes madam, I will keep your secret and I will see to it that my son-in-law does the same.' Lentina added, 'He is not to tell even his wife.' Babu nodded and said, 'Yes madam.' Having made this momentous decision, she stretched her hand to him and with her leaning on him, they made their way to the car parked outside the gate and came home. The old woman looked exhausted and went straight to bed. No one thought it strange, because the funeral activities had taken a lot out of everyone and even the young women of the household were looking forward to an early night. But lying in bed, Lentina was wide awake and planning her next move: she wanted to plant a laburnum tree on her gravesite while she was still alive to ensure that all this trouble of securing

the plot and keeping everything quiet had the desired results. She *had* to see the tree bloom before she breathed her last. Even for this task she had to enlist the help of her faithful Babu. But unfortunately it was almost winter and they had to wait till the next spring.

In the meantime Babu began the preliminary discussions with his son-in-law about reserving a plot in the cemetery. At first the young man was puzzled; why was his father-in-law talking of such a morbid subject? Was he suffering from some terminal disease that he had kept secret from his own family? But he kept his thoughts to himself. From him Babu learnt that most people wanted the front rows in the cemetery and there was always some dispute or the other about such issues among the more prominent people of the town. Babu's request surprised his son-in-law because it was for the most insignificant plot in the cemetery. He assured his father-in-law that as far as the location went, he could foresee no trouble at all. But, he told him that there had to be an official request; only then could the Committee take appropriate action.

Babu informed his mistress about this and once again Lentina was faced with a dilemma. Should she sign on the application form or devise another ploy to keep the identity of the applicant secret? The latter seemed to be a better idea but how was she going to achieve it? As she pondered, she remembered a conversation she had with her husband long ago. They were discussing the prospects of real estate and he had said, 'If you want to gain from investments in land, go for inconspicuous plots, but ones which have future prospects. That way no one will pay attention when you buy it, and when the town expands, your holdings will appreciate in value many times over.'

Taking a cue from this, she abandoned her original idea of buying a plot in the already-congested cemetery and went for another visit there the next day. This time she invited Babu to walk with her around the perimeter of the wall, and told him to examine the direction in which the cemetery would expand. Babu at once caught on and asking her to rest a while did a quick survey of the surrounding area and came to a conclusion. He helped her to the car and after they were seated comfortably, he said, 'Madam, the land adjoining the southern boundary will be the best, though I do not fully understand why you want to do this when a small plot of land would serve your purpose.' She looked at him with a glint in her eyes and replied, 'Be patient Babu, time will answer your question.' With that enigmatic reply she dismissed him and they drove home in silence.

Once again, Lentina withdrew to her bedroom and began to worry about the prospects of acquiring the adjacent plot of land. The only person she could rely upon to accomplish this was Babu; she decided to entrust him with the job. But before she could talk to him, fate intervened and an opportunity presented itself to her in the person of a man from a neighbouring village who was the son of her late husband's friend. The friend himself was dead and the son, named Khalong, had been away at the time of her husband's death. When he heard about it he came to pay his condolences. Lentina noticed a certain dejection in Khalong's demeanour and when she pressed for a reason he blurted out how bad his financial situation had become as a result of the father's prolonged illness and many hospitalizations outside the state. He sighed, 'If only I could sell our land! But unfortunately now that the cemetery has expanded, people only laugh at me when I talk of selling our land adjoining it. They even joke about

it and say, turn it into another cemetery and charge rent! Aunty, I do not know what is going to happen to us.' The poor man was on the verge of tears but Lentina, instead of sympathizing, appeared to become excited about his outburst.

After what he considered to be a period of rude silence, Lentina turned to him and began to ask for the details of his land. Khalong thought that it was simply her way of expressing concern. But what came next completely floored him. 'Will you sell that piece of land to me?' she asked in an excited manner. He could not answer immediately because he was debating with himself whether it would be right to sell her a piece of unsuitable land just because she felt sorry for him. It would amount to taking advantage of her sympathy and would certainly be unethical. Reading his mind correctly, the old woman said, in a gentle voice, 'I know what you are thinking, but let me assure you that it is not merely out of my concern for you that I am doing this. I have a selfish motive. For quite some time now I have been looking for a suitable plot where I want to be buried. And before you say anything, let me add that I do not wish to be buried among the ridiculous stone monuments of the big cemetery. I need a place where there will be nothing but beautiful trees over my grave. So, tell me now, will you sell your land to me?' Khalong was convinced that Lentina meant business and uttered a feeble 'Yes'. But the woman was not done yet; she continued in the same serious tone, 'Listen, I will buy the land only on one condition: you are to tell nobody about the transaction yet, not even your wife. If you agree to this condition, tell me how much you want and come tomorrow with the documents and we will finalize the deal.'

Khalong was so overcome by the unexpected turn of fortune that he stated an amount beyond his expectation. He was

even more shocked to hear her say, 'Ok, come tomorrow at eleven.' He did not wait for any formal dismissal after she gave her instructions, hurrying out of the house in a daze, still wondering whether all that had transpired was actually real. Lentina knew that had she bargained a bit, the price would have been reduced but she felt that heaven's gifts should be accepted without any murmur, and simply proceeded to put together the amount needed for the next day's transaction. Once again she enlisted the help of Babu who was to be a witness to the deal. When Babu reminded her about the negotiation with the Town Committee and that he would have to explain the abrupt halt to his son-in-law, Lentina smiled and told him, 'Let him think that it was a wild scheme thought up by someone going senile.'

As instructed by Lentina, Khalong came with the thumb-print of a relative on a paper where the Agreement was inscribed. The deal was accomplished without a hitch and Lentina became the proud owner of a plot of land right next to the south wall of the old cemetery. Lentina ordered Babu to engage some labourers to erect a temporary boundary fence. It was only when the fence was almost complete that her sons came to know about their mother's 'crazy' plan. They remonstrated with her, they sulked at having been left out of the deliberations and even threatened to move out of the compound if their mother treated them like rank outsiders; they were upset that a mere driver had usurped their rightful place in her schemes. But even then, they were not aware of the full extent of her designs for the new cemetery. She tried to pacify them by saying that she did not want to burden them with tasks which she and Babu were perfectly able to handle. The sons kept quiet but the elder daughter-in-law wanted to assert herself and began to accuse Lentina of putting too

much trust in a servant and this, she said, amounted to insulting them. Lentina, smarting from the unfairness of the charge, blurted out something which she overheard during her husband's funeral and had decided to keep it a secret. It was an argument between the two daughters-in-law about who was to pay for the funeral expenses. The elder one had said, 'It is not fair that we alone should bear the costs, you and your husband should pay half of it.' To this the younger one had replied, 'How can I say anything? Tell that husband of mine, if you feel like it. But I am not going to give a rupee towards this unnecessary show.' Everyone knew that the younger daughter-in-law had money of her own and that gave her an edge over the other. She continued, 'And if you think that we are going to waste money on some grandiose headstone for the old man, think again. Such pretensions this family has!'

Lentina had kept this knowledge to herself and had resolved that she would never divulge this to any one. But, being goaded into speech by interference from her family on a matter she thought did not directly involve them, she decided to speak out. She addressed the two ladies, 'Why are you all worked up about such a trivial matter? After all, I have not spent anyone else's money. And another thing: you need not worry about any headstone for me. I want none.' The two ladies were completely taken aback; they had assumed that they were alone in the room when the altercation had taken place. The deft and crafty manipulation of her knowledge helped Lentina put an end to all opposition. When the husbands learnt how their mother 'took care' of their wives, they merely chuckled and muttered, 'That's mother for you. Hope you've learnt your lesson.'

News about Lentina's acquisition of the plot of land adjacent to the cemetery soon became public knowledge, and she knew

that sooner than later she would be visited by members of the Town Committee and the issue about 'ownership' would be raised, because all such grounds were to be only in the custody of either the church or other religious organizations, with due permission from the Committee. Anticipating their move, she had already drawn up a legal document with the help of her nephew who had just started practising law in the District Court. In the document she had declared that she would donate the piece of land to the Town Committee, and not to the Church, if, and only if, they gave a written undertaking that it would be managed according to her terms:

1. The new plot of land could be dedicated as the new cemetery and would be available to all on fulfilling the condition that only flowering trees and not headstones would be erected on the gravesites.
2. Lentina, as the Donor, should be the first to choose a plot for herself.
3. Plots would be designated by Numbers only and records of names against Plot Numbers would be maintained in the Committee Register.
4. The terms were to be widely publicized and the Town Committee would ensure that they were adhered to strictly.

As expected, the members came one day and were ushered into the big drawing room where they seated themselves with obvious ceremony, stressing their eminent status in society. Lentina greeted them amiably and expressed surprise at their 'official' visit. The Chairman cleared his throat and began first by expressing the Committee's collective sympathy for the bereaved family. Lentina replied in a befitting manner and inquired to what she

owed the honoured visit. The Chairman looked at his colleagues and launched into his rehearsed speech about ownership of sacred grounds and what the Town's administrators had to say about it. Gently but firmly, Lentina interrupted him and said, 'Thank you Mr Chairman, I want to assure you that I am aware of your responsibility regarding the matter and I have taken the initiative to seek your cooperation by drawing up this legal document for your consideration. Kindly discuss this with your colleagues and let me know as soon as possible if the terms are acceptable to you.'

The Chairman gave her a sharp look but refrained from saying anything, though it was clear to all that he resented being cut off in the middle of his speech. He turned to an elderly Member and asked, 'What do you say, brother? Shall we discuss this here or take it back with us and discuss it in the office?' The other read the document and said in a voice more authoritative than that of the Chairman, 'We can do it here; it seems the terms are quite simple. I see no harm in accepting them because the town is getting a substantial plot of land, the need for which has long been felt. The kind lady has indeed come to our rescue, she must be congratulated.' After this emphatic endorsement by an important Member, there was no need for further discussion of the terms. Through another Deed drawn up a few days later, the new cemetery with its unusual stipulations came into the possession of the Town Committee. On the day the legal formalities were concluded, this time in the presence of her sons and their wives, Lentina said, almost like an afterthought, 'By the way, can I choose my plot now?' Every one in the room was struck by the ingenuity of this seemingly innocuous request. It was as if she were asking for a candy, and not for a place where she would eventually be buried. The entire transaction was of a somewhat morbid

nature but she took the sting out of it by what she added next, 'You see I want to plant something there.' No one could say anything to this and as the visitors departed, the faint voice of the Chairman could be heard, 'After all, she being the Donor, it is only right that she should be given the first choice.'

Lentina and Babu made frequent visits to the new ground. Then one day Babu drove up with the gardener carrying laburnum saplings which he planted on the prepared ground. Lentina discontinued her visits to the cemetery because she was beginning to feel a fatigue that comes after a sustained effort and achieving a long-cherished dream. How that plot of land came into her possession was still a mystery to her when all she had craved for was a spot to be buried where a laburnum tree would bloom every May. Ah, the laburnum tree! Would the saplings survive this time, she speculated? Would they really bloom and would she live long enough to actually see the trees with flower? Before one knew it, another May with laburnum blossoms everywhere had come and gone. A small consolation for the frail woman was that her plants out 'there' were doing fine. Babu, the ever-faithful friend, for this is how she thought of him now, brought news about many things including that of her treasured plants.

Once in a while she would tell Babu that she wanted to see them herself to which he would say, 'Soon madam, but not today.' Her days were now threatening to blur into dusk. Sometimes they would find her roaming in the garden barefoot and without a shawl. That winter Lentina caught a bad cold and fell seriously ill. Every one thought that she would not last the winter. Even her doctor, usually a jolly person, began to show signs of strain after every visit to her room. Only Babu remained calm and steadfast during the crisis. When relatives and close friends were allowed

brief visits, it was Babu who stood guard outside the door to see that they did not stay too long. Sometimes Lentina would pretend to be sleeping when noisy and nosy relatives came to visit; Babu then had the perfect excuse to shoo them out quickly. During the day Babu would disappear for some time and when he returned, he would make straight for Lentina's room. He would tiptoe in and she would turn her eyes towards the door and as their eyes met he would give a faint nod and withdraw. This was a message that he had just visited the trees and that they were doing well. This seemed to provide her with the will to live where food and medicines seemed to have failed.

To every one's astonishment, Lentina survived the fierce winter and one clear February morning she rang her bell peremptorily. The maid went in to find her searching for her gown and bedroom slippers. She offered to bring her tea to the room but Lentina ordered her to take her to the drawing room. She sat by the fireside where her tea was brought and she sipped the hot brew as though she were tasting it for the first time. From that day on, she began to move about the house and resume her old routine of supervising the activities in it. When her daughters-in-law visited, she was warm and amiable with them; occasionally she would even give them pieces of jewellery: a ring, ear tops and necklaces. The sons too, sensing a new spirit in their mother, began to ask for her advice on business and family matters, something which had never happened during the father's lifetime. They were pleasantly surprised to find how sharp her mind still was. They also discovered how uncannily like their father she sounded sometimes! There was a visible easing of tension among them and it became apparent that not only Lentina, but the entire family, was heading towards a healing that was more than physical.

That year, the year of Lentina's recovery, something happened in the new cemetery that only Babu saw; he kept the knowledge to himself. Of the two laburnum trees planted on Lentina's plot, one languished and died. But the surviving one had flourished and, wonder of wonders, even produced a tiny sprig bearing a few yellow blossoms. One could not see this from the road because the plant was still small and the flowers sparse. But Babu frequently visited the site and discovered the shy showing one fine May morning. He was tempted to tell Lentina but decided against it because the excitement might have been too much for her. And, if the plant did not develop as hoped for, the disappointment might have a devastating effect on his mistress, weakened by her recent illness. He was both happy and afraid: happy because the long-cherished desire of his mistress to see a laburnum bloom had been fulfilled; afraid, because he instinctively knew that as soon as Lentina laid eyes on the blossoms next May, she would conclude that the right moment to leave the world had arrived. Not that she would do anything drastic like taking her own life, but she would let everything slide and simply bow out of life, with a contented sigh.

But, for all his apprehensions about the future, Babu knew that he could not hold back the force of nature that had accomplished the small miracle of the first showing that May. By next year, the bush would be taller and the flowers more plentiful; it would become visible to all who passed by that lonely road to the new cemetery. He had to tell his mistress about this, but when? He thought about it for many nights and finally decided that the best time would be the next season's flowering and hoped that she would be alive to hear the good news from him. If Lentina now thought of him as her friend, Babu was also beginning to re-assess his relationship with her. Till the time of her husband's death,

though she had treated Babu with civility and kindness, she had always maintained a discreet distance as befitting a master-servant relationship. But she gradually broke down the barriers by showing her dependence on him, first by only extracting 'dutiful service'; then imperceptibly as a friend; and finally a confidant. Outwardly, the protocol demanded by their positions was never breached or altered, but it soon became apparent to everybody how much Lentina relied on the old driver for things she wanted done. And surprisingly, this was accepted by her sons and their wives—it relieved them from the onerous duty of being on call for their frail and aged mother. A strong-willed woman and her faithful servant were thus drawn into an unusual bond of common humanity, based on trust and loyalty.

By the time the new year came, Lentina showed signs of fatigue brought on by old age. Her family watched her keenly all through the winter months and she was never left alone. When March came and the weather became warmer, she wanted to be taken out in the car. Her wish was at first just ignored but when she refused to eat unless she was taken out for a ride, the family decided to accede. And so a routine was established: twice a week, weather permitting, Lentina would go out in the car accompanied by her maid. Lentina did not object to this arrangement and came back from these outings a much happier person. She ate well and some colour returned to her pale face. But during these jaunts, she sat quietly, without uttering a word, and even when Babu or the maid commented on something new or strange they had seen in the town, she did not respond. On return, she would head straight to her room and remain there until dinnertime.

And then another May was upon them and every one noticed a visible change in Lentina; she wanted to go out more frequently. But the doctor put his foot down and the twice-a-week routine

continued. Seeing her agitation, Babu approached her door one day and sought permission to speak. He assured her that he was keeping a close watch on the plants and that he was confident that they would bloom this season. He still did not tell her about what had happened the previous year. He promised to give her reports on the days she was forced to stay indoors. But during the outings now, the first thing she wanted was to drive by the new cemetery, to see if the laburnum trees were showing signs of producing flowers. She had seen other trees in town with their gorgeous display of cascading yellow flowers. Her disappointment was acute and after a few times, she refused to go out at all.

And then one day, late into the month, on his daily excursion to the cemetery Babu discovered the miracle that they had been praying for: the little laburnum tree was awash with buttery-yellow blossoms! The unflappable driver gave a shout of joy and darted away, heading to his mistress with the wonderful news. On his way, he rehearsed how he was going to break the news to her. He cautioned himself that he should do it gently, so that his dear mistress would not get too excited. When he reached the house, he walked slowly to the lady's room and knocked gently. To his surprise, he heard a sharp command, 'Come in Babu, I've been waiting for you.' He entered and started to speak but she cut him off, 'I know what you are going to tell me; I felt it in my bones.' He saw that Lentina was dressed as if for a grand occasion and standing by her side was the maid, also dressed. The old lady fumbled for her walking stick and said impatiently, 'Let's go, what are you waiting for?'

The bewildered driver and the slightly dazed maid followed the old lady who suddenly seemed to have a spring in her walk, and proceeded on their apparently routine outing. But only Lentina

and Babu knew what this phenomenon signified. Once they reached the site, Lentina withdrew into a more sombre mood, as did Babu; only the maid exclaimed at the sight of the luxuriant blossoms on so small a tree. Lentina gazed at the flowers for a long time and sighing deeply, told Babu to drive to the Park, located about four kilometres from the town and was the highest point from where the entire town could be seen. It was a popular picnic spot and was full of people at weekends. When they reached the peak they found that not many people were around because it was a weekday. Choosing a quiet corner, Lentina and the maid sat down to rest. The maid had packed some biscuits and a flask of tea, which the three of them shared. After about half an hour they drove back home. As she entered her room, Lentina turned to her maid and Babu and shook their hands, murmuring, 'Thank you and God bless you.'

Lentina stayed in her room for most of the week. She turned down suggestions of any further outing and busied herself with tidying up her room even refusing help from the maid. On the fifth day of this self-imposed isolation, she called the maid and asked her to help her with her bath and to dress her in her favourite outfit. Having done that, she ordered the maid to bring her some food as she wanted an early dinner. The maid did as she was told and bade her mistress an early goodnight before retiring to her own quarters.

The next morning when she knocked on Lentina's door with the morning tea, there was no answer. She knocked again but only silence greeted her. She entered the room and found Lentina stretched on the bed; she seemed to be sleeping soundly. Putting the tray on the bed-side table, the maid said gently, 'Madam, I've brought tea.' She went and drew the curtains as usual but when

she came near the bed, she noticed a certain stiffness in the body and an unusual palour on the old lady's face. Distinctly alarmed, she went out and urgently called the others, the sons, their wives and all the servants. They all came rushing, except Babu, who stood near a post, crying like a baby. They entered the room and the elder son bent closer to determine if his mother was breathing. He straightened up with a sharply drawn breath and shook his head. When the doctor came, he pronounced that Lentina, the mistress of the house, had died in her sleep.

So ends the story of the un-dramatic life of an ordinary woman who cherished one single passionate wish that a humble laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown.

And every May, this extraordinary wish is fulfilled when the laburnum tree, planted on her gravesite in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town, bursts forth in all its glory of buttery-yellow splendour. And if you can tear your eyes away from this display and survey the rest of the ground, you will notice that in the entire expanse, there is not a single stone monument. Instead, flowering bushes take root, blooming in their own seasons on the little mounds dotting the landscape. Hibiscus, gardenia, bottle-brush, camellia, oleander and croton bushes of all hues comprise the variety of flowering plants, and at one or two spots you can see some jacaranda trees trying to keep up with the others. A lone banyan and a few ashoka trees standing on the far edges also seem to be doing quite well. And if you observe carefully, you will be amazed to see that in the entire terrain, there is so far, only one laburnum tree bedecked in its seasonal glory, standing tall over all the other plants, flourishing in perfect co-existence, in an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality.

So every May, something extraordinary.

Death of a Hunter

The hunting season was on and the hunter was oiling his much-used gun. He was quietly humming a tuneless song, the reason for the suppressed giggles coming from the adjacent shed where his daughter and niece were husking paddy. As the giggles grew louder, he became aware that the girls were laughing at his efforts at singing. So he began to sing even louder and when he faltered at a particularly high note, all three of them burst out in unrestrained guffaws; the girls even let go of the husking pestle, spilling the half-husked paddy on to the mud floor. Almost immediately the chickens hovering outside the shed flocked in, cackling in glee to peck at the fallen grain. When the girls caught their breath, the niece called out, 'Why are you so happy, uncle? Is there a big animal waiting for you?'

The hunter took a deep breath and replied, 'Who knows? Maybe the big boar who has been eating our best paddy these past years will make an appearance soon. I am giving my gun a thorough cleaning so that this time I do not miss his heart.'

For the last five seasons, the hunter called Imchanok had been after this particularly vicious boar which had been devastating the rice paddies of the village and in his field; the animal chose to feast in the areas where he had planted the best variety of rice. When it happened for two consecutive years, his wife suggested that they change the site and accordingly they planted this variety on the western ridge of their vast field. But to no avail;