

THE HOMECOMING

BANAPHOOL

You wanted a story, didn't you? Well, here you go, then.

I was on my way home from Shimla, a couple of days before Durga Puja. I am an insurance agent who has to travel on work. I had not succeeded in claiming the 'life' I had been chasing. Someone else had grabbed it before I could. I was feeling low.

The compartment I boarded turned out to have not one but three exquisitely beautiful women. My eyes were dazzled. A young man was accompanying them. He was extremely handsome too. Being dark and stout as I am, I felt embarrassed to take a seat next to them. Yet, I did. After a while, I asked the young man diffidently, 'Where to?' His eyes were glued to a film weekly—the photograph of a half-naked actress seemed to have mesmerized him.

'Where to?'

'I beg your pardon?' he asked, startled.

'I was asking where you're going.'

'Calcutta.'

'Me too. It'll be nice to travel together.'

He immersed himself in his magazine again.

The magazine had an advertisement for our company. In the hope of attracting his attention to it, I said, 'That's an ad for our company, the kind of bonus we offer...'

His eyes transfixed by the half-naked actress, the young man said, 'None of this stuff makes any sense to me.'

'Bonus payouts don't make sense to you! You *are* insured, aren't you?'

'Makes no sense to me. I'm looking at what does make sense.' He went back to the photograph. But I wasn't about to let go easily.

'I find it hard to believe that a man of such refined taste does not understand life insurance. If you'd just spend a nominal amount every month, your life would—'

'Don't bother me about money,' he interrupted. 'If you do want to discuss financial matters, do so with my mother.'

I greeted his mother cordially. 'It appears your son does not wish to discuss this,' I said. 'I'm sure you agree with me that life insurance is a must for everyone.'

The glow of a gentle smile spreading across her face, she said, 'I don't know much about it either. If you don't mind, would you care to explain a little more?'

'Certainly!' I began to spout our hypnotic catchwords—but, amazingly, they seemed to make no impression on her. The other two women listened to my sermon with close attention too, but remained unimpressed.

Pausing, I said, 'I hope I've been able to explain everything.'

'Oh yes, you haven't left anything unexplained,' said the first woman. 'It's just that I don't need life insurance.'

'Not you, perhaps. But your husband? Your son?'

'My husband has conquered death. Why would he need life insurance?'

At this point Ganesha poked his trunked head out of the top bunk and said in a stentorian voice, 'You people are talking too much. Do you suppose we'll get any sleep the next four days? Better get some sleep now while you can.'

My eyes popped out of my skull. I realized my error. Ma Durga was travelling to Calcutta, her children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik and Ganesha with her. Prostrating myself, I said, 'I am an imbecile, forgive me.' Smiling, Durga said, 'You have done no wrong, son. Show me your form; let me get the Calcutta pujas insured. Your sermon has charmed me.'