Anthology for the Rosalie Road Group

Members of the Rosalie Road Group

2020-06-30

Contents

Foreward by Gouri Datta

Some thoughts come as fleeting butterflies and float away. Some turn into more solid ideas and establish roots. A few of these ideas, nurtured by the soil and water of interest, in the company like minded friends with the desire to create, turn into a compelling call to lift their boughs to the sky and do something.

The idea of forming an English writing group with some of my friends with a literary bent - came to me over twenty years ago. However, the push to actually start a group as such came five years later. A group, writing in Bengali, called " Lekhoni" had already been established at our house and met one Sunday a month since 1999. An initial mom and pop type gathering had blossomed into a stable club of nearly twenty-one Bengali writers.

The success of that gave rise to ambitions of expanding our creative writing repertoire. Why not an English writing group for those of us who are bilingual or only English speaking. I called a few friends. The language lovers amongst my friends, both Americans and Indian, immediately formed a small ragtag group, with varying writing skills in English but all of them diehard literature lovers.

The original joiners were Manisha Roy (an anthropologist and an Jungian analyst), Carl von Essen (a physician) - a husband and wife team, Rahul Ray (a scientist and researcher for the Department of Medicine at Boston University), Abhijit Sanyal (a marketing executive), Nilay Mukherjee (a research scientist in the bio- engineering field, Kunal Joarder (a robotics engineer) and myself, Gouri Datta (a psychiatrist).

There were others who came for varying periods of time but stopped due to moving out of state, lack of time, or simply because they lost interest. Members who joined later included Nila Rakhit (an accountant and tax specialist), and Jia Roy (a fellow in Creative Writing and publishing at Harvard University)

This core group of members still forms the basic central axle of the entity since the last 15 years.Saborna Roychowdhury , a writer and member of the prestigious Grub Street writing club of Boston, was a member for a year, but then had to move to Houston with her family. She subsequently published a novel based on the Naxalite times in India that was well received and acclaimed. Sudeshna

Sen, an English teacher, moved to Minnesota. Fariza Hassan joined us for a few months, and then had to leave due to other issues.Srila Sridhar (a business woman) came for a few sessions, and then left to attend to family and business matters.

The group started meeting one Sunday a month around the dining table at our house on Rosalie Road in Newton, MA. This became the chosen permanent venue due to convenience of its central position and the ubiquitous availability of that dining table. Each of the sessions ran for three hours, from 2 to 5 pm, an apt time for most families involved, being after lunch and before the dinner hurly burly. In each session members' writings were reviewed on a first come first served basis, adding up to two writings reviewed per session. Almost all genres of writing were par for the course - poetry, short stories, excerpts from a novel, plays, memoir pieces, essays, all except translations.

The author would send in his or her creative writing piece to the other members, electronically, at least one week ahead of the meeting and, would also bring in some paper copies for the visual representation. On the day of the meeting, the author would read aloud to the rest of the group. The rest of the members would take turns to critique the piece in terms of language, syntax, structure of the piece, theme, characters etc. and make suggestions for improvement or to remove redundant verbiage. Refreshments were provided during the meeting, snacks brought in by turns by the members, and accompanied by tea offered by the host.

This helped to assuage the sting of the criticisms, and also to keep the mind focused on the task at hand, instead of drifting towards a well - needed afternoon rest or siesta for people busy at work all week. In the second year of its existence, a thought about giving a name to the group came up. Each member came up with a suggestion that was duly weighed by the group for acceptability. Manisha's suggestion was "The Rosalie Road Writers Group ". I jumped at that as it was the address of our house where the meetings were held. It pleased my narcissism that the house would become a permanent part of the history of this writing group, I imagined (in an inflated state of fantasy) posterity viewing it as a place of literary pilgrimage, as much as Emerson's house was the meeting place for Branson Alcott, Henry Thoreau, and other thinkers, writers and philosophers of that century! The naming of the group was done.

Then arose thoughts of publishing an anthology of the collected writings of the group, not only as a means of crowning our efforts, but also to document the progress of style and voice in our writings. We had seen other writing groups successfully publish collections of their members writings, the Bengali counterpart, Lekhoni, having already published two anthology books. Thus, was floated the plan for Rosalie Rd Writers Anthology.

Two co-editors were chosen by common consensus, Carl and Abhijit - both being more diligent than several of the others, though all were dedicated to the art of creative writing. Carl had already published several books before

joining the RR group, his favorite topics being adventures in nature, namely fishing and sailing, medical themes, his Swedish heritage and spirituality. He had also spent several years in India, and a couple of the stories in this collection reflect those experiences, as in "Yelllamma". Carl had also established his own publishing company called "Shyamol Publishers ". The word Shyamol 'derived from a Sanskrit word meaning green, a word used frequently in Bengali and Hindi speaking parts of India.

Abhijit had contributed about eleven remarkable memoir pieces, touching on growing up in Iraq as a very young child, and tongue in cheek humorous essays about various aspects of his life, including his self - perceived quirks.He is also handling the repository of the collected writings, and Carl and he are editing all pieces. Abhijit was also the pioneer in another ancillary writing project a couple of years ago, This was for a novel written jointly by all the members, with each member writing a chapter, and Abhijit choosing the title of "The Strength of Weak Ties" and starting off with the first chapter. This novel will be our next publication once the current anthology sees the day.

Carl chose the design, color and format of the front cover of the anthology book.Abhijit whipped out his camera, went outside to the front yard and took three pictures of the house and the magenta foliage of the Japanese cherry tree, standing as a sentinel in the center of the lawn. One of the three pictures was voted in.

There was much debate on the format of the book - but finally a simple form in a binder, like the review book for schools, was selected. This-was as a way to keep costs low, the group being small — a way to document our efforts without breaking the bank. We all agreed with that practical decision.

This anthology is a collection of all the writings of this group since its inception, some of us being less prolific than others. The birthing pain for this project has been prolonged and the forward progression slow, due to members having other lives. I was myself, was late in delivering the Foreword, as I was assailed by a severe writers' block.

Moving forward the rest will be easier, and, hopefully, the Rosalie Road Anthology will be in all the members' desks, if not in all the book stores of Boston, as is our future dream.

Chapter 1

Coming to America - A Prequel by Abhijit Sanyal

When I finished engineering school and my management studies I did not harbor any thoughts of leaving my hometown – Calcutta and going abroad for any work or further studies. I was fortunate that even before I joined engineering college I had travelled widely in Europe, Middle East and Asia with my parents – so the "wanderlust" issue was not important. I wanted to work in Calcutta and stay in the same city with my parents and friends and family.

I joined Dunlop India as a "Management Trainee" after my engineering degree from IIT Kharagpur (Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur) and was based out of the factory in a town called Shahgunge where Dunlop India maintained a sprawling factory spewing automotive and other industrial rubber products. The factory campus also included a huge township with very well maintained and manicured lawns, hospitals, club-houses and even squash and tennis courts. We stayed at the "Chummery" – a bachelor's hostel and I went every day to the factory for some work, came back to play squash, tennis etc and then drinks at the club. In the weekends, we would go back to the city – on either the pool car or take a train. Life was comfortable but fairly boring. After less than a year of this – a group of about 10 of us – management trainees – all of us from IIT Kharagpur – decided that life had more to offer than making rubber products and we all applied for the fairly tough competitive examinations to the management schools – the Indian Institutes of Management. The results came in on a sultry summer afternoon of 1979 and we found that all of us were accepted – but in different schools across the country – Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Calcutta. The next morning – we all trooped in to the General Manager's office starting at 8 AM in the morning at intervals of 30 minutes to submit our resignations. The General Manager – a short aggressive looking fellow by the name of Mr Gonsalves – told us later at our going away party – that he was

expecting the whole "Chummery" to leave Dunlop by the end of the day. We got drunk over the next few days at our "success" in getting out of Shahgunge – not really knowing what we are now getting into.

The two years for me at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta was a memorable period. The courses were fairly easy and straightforward and during placement time since I wanted a job that would allow me to stay in Calcutta – I joined "The Calcutta Electricity Supply Corporation" as a purchase executive in their headquarters at the Victoria House office. Victoria House was in the center of the city – a 6 storied imposing domed structure built during the 1930s. The name was taken from the Company's Holborn Headquarters, in London. The company was in the business of generating, transmitting and distributing electricity to the perpetually energy starved city of Calcutta. A "pucca British" company – it was founded at the turn of the century and its shares were till recently quoted on the London Stock Exchange. Tea was served in your office twice a day by liveried waiters and a three-course lunch was available daily in the officers' dining room. It was interesting to see these dying vestiges of post-colonial British culture in an otherwise crumbling economic situation. I was also continuously reminded during our meetings and cocktail party gatherings that I was very privileged to be working there. Most of my colleagues were the scions of the very well-connected business and professional elite class of Calcutta. I was the company's first few MBA hires – and was a corporate orphan since I came with no recommendations.

I got bored there very quickly even though I had corporate perquisites like a car, club privileges and other such benefits. I hated the corruption, sloth and indifference around me. I also did not make much money since a large bulk of our compensation was in various perquisites – unlimited gasoline for example which would have a real perquisite in today's world. In order to make really good money as I later found out – you had to join the dark side – which I was not yet willing to do.

Calcutta and West Bengal was then in the grips of the Communist Party of India and continues to be even today. The general economic malaise combined with the lack of opportunity and the poor quality of life were all factors that prompted me to explore alternatives. I started frequenting the offices of the United States Education Foundation in India or USEFI – to explore the opportunity of doing a Ph. D in marketing or finance. Nearly 50% of my class at the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta – had already left for the US or were in the process of leaving. The USEFI offices were then housed in a stately colonial mansion on Outram street. It was policed by a steely eyed woman called Kumkum Mittal and her factotum a reedy fellow called Ganesh. Mrs. Mittal interviewed you and then told you what your chances of being remotely considered for admission at any American university were and thereafter of your suitability of studying for the SAT / GMAT / GRE examinations in the air-conditioned comfort of the USEFI – which was a huge luxury in electricity starved Calcutta. Most of these preparatory books were not available at local book stores or were outdated. She

was withering in her assessment of your prospects and political correctness was not what she practiced.

I met her with some trepidation and filled out the form outlining my education and grades – which she reviewed and deemed that I was worthy enough to borrow the books and therefore study there. I gave the GMAT and GRE examinations – the fees for which were equivalent to a month's salary. I initially applied to schools that did not require application fees since the standard application fee of $50 was for me a month's salary. I was accepted at all of the few schools I had applied with offers of a fellowship and full tuition waiver etc. My mother very alarmed at the flow of steady mail from the US and came to know of my plans and was very upset. I shelved my plans and sent a polite regret letter to all those schools that had accepted me. This was before the advent of the personal computer and email and phone calls to the US were an unheard-of luxury. We did have a telephone in the house – which was used by all our neighbors and was even on the visiting card of one of them. Such was life in Calcutta during the late 1970s.

Two years went by and I was getting extremely frustrated at my job. I was in charge of purchase of steel and cement for building the company's 240MW power plant – which was a major milestone for power-starved Calcutta and a huge achievement for the local government and the company. I was assisted by a couple of clerks and one administrative assistant. A team of four in charge of purchasing steel and cement you might ask – that is rather ridiculous. However, steel and cement were extremely valuable commodities in India in the 1980's. There was a huge demand and tremendous short supply – which opened up opportunities for significant corruption. Even though there was domestic production of both these products they both had to be imported and I had to continuously manage my relationships with the Calcutta Port Trust, Shippers, extract permits from the Joint Plant Committee, get allocations from the Iron and Steel Controller (that is another story), cajole local suppliers etc., to ensure that they delivered the products they had promised to the construction site. I suspected that the imported products were also prized since there was lower probability of their quality being compromised on the way from the warehouses to the construction site.

One of the byproducts of a construction of this magnitude was the large amounts of very valuable imported scrap steel that was generated. I sought permission from senior management and organized the sale of this scrap steel along the lines of an auction process – making sure that I extracted the maximum consumer surplus etc. (Remember I was one of the few IIM MBAs in the company!). The company profited enormously from this sale and this was recorded as one of the highest sales of scrap steel in recent company history. However, I sensed – that something was wrong and within the month of that sale I was sent to the "Gulag" – i.e., - I was transferred out of the luxuries of the head office and sent to the Central Stores and Garage – a hazy lazy place where nothing really happened and you just had to "Wait for your retirement" – I was told. "Retirement" – I

was 27 years and that seemed that to be a very long wait. I do not have any proof – but I suspect that my transfer had to do something with the sales of scrap steel that I had organized. The volume and revenue from the sales of scrap had historically been very low – for obvious reasons since the surplus "not extracted" was otherwise distributed to the powers that be.

I settled down to life at Central Stores – there was virtually no work and I used to go home for lunch, a two-hour long siesta. I also spent a lot of my time in the evening watching old black and white movies by Fellini, Truffaut and other movies by obscure Russian, Swedish and Czech directors at the Max Mueller House, British Council and the Alliance Francaise and other local movie halls. I had no girlfriend and did not even know how to acquire one – but that did not matter. Most of my friends still left in the city also did not have access to any female company. My Calcutta based friends were few and dwindling since most of them had either gone abroad or were working in other parts of the country.

One day I came to my office and found that the office and workers I was in charge, was closed and still not open at 8 AM. I asked the "Chowkidar" and the security personnel to open the office and get it ready for the day's work. They said that there was a union meeting planned at that time and they were told not to open up the office – till the head of the local branch of the union instructed them to do so. I told them – that I was running this office and not the union and they reluctantly opened the office and the warehouse. At about 8.30 there was huge commotion outside my office and I looked outside my office windows which was on the second floor to see that about 100 workers had gathered in the courtyard below and led by the local union leader, were all yelling – "Sanyal Sahib Murdabad", "Sanyal Sahib – Nipath Jao". It did not take long for me to realize their ire was obviously directed at me and was loosely translated as "Death to …" and "Go back…." The local police force was called – and after an hour of protest and more death threats I was spirited out of the back door and was told to go on administrative leave for a week. I was later charmed by the fact that even though they wanted me to murder me – they would still attach the honorific – "Sahib".

After nearly 4 years at this job – I thought it was now time to think of other alternatives. Opportunities in Calcutta were non-existent and based on my judgment and most of my friends I possibly had the best job in the city given my education and values. I could not argue with that – since I had a car, some nice perquisites (a gasoline allowance among other things), a nice salary and no work. I started writing to business schools in the US expressing an interest in applying for a Ph.D. program. My mother distressed at the resumed flow of large envelopes from the US filled with glossy brochures and forms told me that I had to get married – which I did in the winter of that year. I had to again put a hold on my plans and asked my bride to be during our first conversations (at the local tea-room called Flurys) whether she would be willing to move to the US if I decided to leave for further studies. As far as I can remember she agreed.

After my wedding, I went back to Kumkum Mittal and USEFI and started preparing for the GMAT / TOEFL examinations and again applying to US universities. I also bribed the postman (compromising on my value systems) to ensure that my mail would be delivered regularly and not stolen because of the US stamps. My marriage and honeymoon expenses along with the subsequent application and examination fees had depleted my meager savings. I was accepted at a few US universities along with offers of a fellowship and tuition waivers. The fellowship stipend seemed rich – once translated into the weaker Indian currency. I went and perused the 2 months old New York Times and other US newspapers to determine the cost of living from the grocery store sales and coupons that were still available. I kept a detailed chart of these costs and was able to determine that even eating shrimp everyday and a glass of wine – I would still have $50 left from my fellowship stipend. Life would be good – studying, eating shrimp and drinking wine – no militant unions and recalcitrant office "babus" to handle.

Soon after I also came to know that my wife was pregnant which now definitely complicated matters, throwing all my shrimp and wine calculations awry. I wrote to friends in the US to determine my chances to survive (now with a family) on the fellowship amounts. Most of these letters would take about 2 to 3 months to get a reply. Some of these replies came after I had left for the US.

Finally, my visa papers arrived, and I went to the US consulate for issuance of a student visa. A woman called Laura Livingston was in charge of issuing visas. She had a reputation of terrorizing the local "US aspirants" with her ability to withhold or issue student visas. The local grapevine had rumors of what were her decision criteria – which were according to most people who went through the experience, fairly arbitrary and ambiguous. My interview with her was for about 5 minutes. She asked where I had studied in India and what my GMAT score was. She then asked me whether I was going to ever come back to India. I said – "I am going to try – but I can only give you a hypothetical answer". She replied – "I do not think you will ever come back – you will very much enjoy studying and staying there in the US". I left the consulate with my visa and grim forebodings.

I flew out of Calcutta airport on a gloomy monsoon night in end August 1987 en-route to New York. There were tears all around and in spite of my assurances to my parents they felt that I was abandoning them. I had tried for 10 years after finishing my engineering degree to build a career in India but could find little to look forward to or hope for.

I had with me about US $250 after cashing out my retirement savings which was also the maximum that the Indian government would allow. That would be about 2 weeks of living expenses at rates well below US poverty levels. Throughout the long plane ride – I thought - how do I bring my wife and unborn child to join me and …. what next?

Chapter 2

Penurious Graduate Student by Abhijit Sanyal

My old expired passport has on page 15 – "Sept – 5 – 1987 – Admitted" over the full signature of "Laura Lee Livingston" – consular officer of the US Consulate General, Calcutta. I arrived at JFK airport on 5th September 1987 after a long flight from Delhi on now defunct Pan Am Airways. A friend of mine who received me at the airport – and I spent a night at his apartment in Manhattan. The next day he drove me and my two puny suitcases to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He knew a professor out there who was also in the business school and he decided to meet him as well. On the drive to Amherst – we drove through all the places that I read about – Pelham, Greenwich, Stamford, New Haven and Hartford. I noticed that as we went through the toll booths – he greeted and was also being greeted equally vocally by the toll booth collectors with a big "Hello" and a few seconds worth of conversation. I asked him if he personally knew the toll booth collectors – and he said "No" – "This is the US – there is optimism everywhere". It seemed to me that the sun never sets in this country.

I joined the business school thereafter and started getting busy with classes and some other "Fellowship" responsibilities. I talked to my wife as much as I could afford, long distance calls were very expensive. I placed my name in the queue for the University married students housing. There was considerable demand for this housing since the rents were cheap – but the waiting list was over a year long. In the meantime, I arranged to rent an apartment at a housing complex called Puffton Village.

I witnessed my first New England snow fall during the month of October 1987 which everybody said was very early for that time of the year. I still remember working in the Computer Lab room and looking out of the window as the snow started to fall. In the next few hours everything was covered in white and

what was previously ugly now looked beautiful and what was beautiful was now absolutely magical. I marveled at the snow and still remember walking back to my graduate dormitories, with my feet completely freezing. I still had not bought any winter clothes and I still had my new shoes from India made by the famous Indian company – Bata. Within a few days the soles of the new "Bata" shoes came apart completely and I desperately needed new shoes. I went to a local thrift store and bought winter shoes. My professor friend from Albany called me one day to check how I was doing and I told him that I never realized that winter would be so severe. He came the next weekend and he took me shopping to "Steigers" and bought me nice warm "London Fog" coat. Steigers was a fancy store at the mall but is no longer in existence, a victim of the creative retailing destruction that continuously goes on in the US.

I also arranged for my wife's visa papers. I was nervous that the "Visa Gods" in Calcutta might deny her a visa since she was pregnant and advised her that she should wear loose clothes, so that her condition was not immediately discernible. She said that she would try, but she also said that it was getting very obvious that she was expecting. The first time that she went to get her visa she was denied. She tearfully called me and said that they wanted some confirmation from me that I was a genuine student at the University. I ran to the International Student Office and explained my situation to Fred Schulten – the student advisor and he promised to send a message to the US Consulate General's office in Calcutta. The next time she went to the visa office, she was awarded the visa and she arrived just before Thanksgiving, 1987 to the JFK airport at New York. I received her at JFK and the next day we boarded the Peter Pan service that ran from the Port Authority to the town of Amherst. I did not have a car and I asked a friend of mine to receive us at the bus stop. I did not realize that it would be getting bitterly cold and his car – an old Volkswagen Beetle had as he described it "Non-functioning heat". Both of us froze but thankfully the trip was short. That would explain as to why my friend kept extra blankets and warm clothes in the car.

We settled down to life at Amherst – I was busy with my classes and seminars and my wife was also busy making friends and finding out about groceries, how the bus system works and building relationships with the UMass medical system. I also started looking at my desperate financial situation. My fellowship stipend was $650 – out of which I had to pay $400 for rent and $100 for medical insurance that left us with about $150 for groceries, utilities and entertainment – which consisted mostly of meeting at friend's houses for dinner or movies. Contrary to my expectations, life no longer consisted of affordable "Shrimp and Wine" that I thought would characterize my student life.

During one of my wife's regular check-ups the nurse showed us the ultra-sound results on the screen and told us that it was a boy – "See you can see his weenie!" and we squirmed in our Bengali middle class embarrassment. There was now a concern whether the medical insurance would cover the birth of our child – since it was a pre-existing condition. I researched the issue and found out at

the average cost of a child birth was about $30,000 but if you were indigent then the Commonwealth of Massachusetts might pay for the cost. We did the round of all the doctors and the other officials – but nobody could give us a clear answer. One night a few weeks into her stay while returning from the local mall sitting in a bus on Route 9, my wife very excitedly pointed to a blinking neon sign in red – which said, "FAST FREE DELIVERY". [Psychology – when you are hungry everything points in that direction] She said that should surely solve our problems. I reassured her that it would not. The sign was for a local pizza shop and they would not take responsibility for the birth of our child.

In the meantime, I was thinking of ways that I could earn some extra money to alleviate our dire financial situation. The baby was on its way and we needed a crib, a stroller and other "baby" stuff. We had no furniture except for a mattress donated by a friend which we used for sleeping. A friend in the Ph.D. program got a job and donated his sofa set to us. The sofa had unfortunately one leg broken and I had to somehow prop it up and had to warn visitors to our home not to lean too much on the "broken" side. I bought a desk and some chairs from a used furniture store. My academic advisor donated his child's crib to us. We painted it and it looked like new. I could not work legally anywhere outside the campus and most on-campus jobs would conflict with my classes and academic schedule. Somebody however said that they needed tutors in the minority education program and I applied there. The pay was $10 per hour and you had to make appointments with your students and help them with their homework and classes. I started teaching these students multiple subjects – Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, History and Psychology etc. A young girl once came to me and said that she needed help in French. I drew the line there since with my full course Ph.D. program workload I did not now want to learn a new language. In a very mildly entrepreneurial fashion I would organize three to four students together in a single hour session and teach them simultaneously various subjects. There was no rule that said that I could not do this and over the next few months, juggling my classes and my students I was able to save some money with the ultimate goal of buying a used car.

We were poor but happy and the days seemed to fly fast. Winter had turned to spring and the birth of our child was due in end March or April. We went for Lamaze classes and the couples we met were all uniformly friendly and helpful. Since we did not have a car they volunteered to pick up and drop us off after the classes. Some of the male partners of these couples were also introduced as a "coach and a friend". My wife would ask me – who is therefore the father and are they not married? I told her that it takes all sorts of people and relationships to make the world. It was end March and I was busy with my classes and examinations and during one of Anuradha's regular examinations the doctors advised us to go to the Cooley Dickinson Hospital at Northampton for a few check-ups and to make ourselves familiar with the hospital. The hospital was about a mile from the bus stop near Smith College and we had to walk the rest of the way there. There was about two feet of snow on the ground and it made for very heavy trudging to the hospital. I helped my wife walk the distance. I

told her it was good exercise and she would enjoy the walk. Till this day she says that she has not forgotten that walk but hopefully she has forgiven me for making her endure that walk.

The doctors at the hospital after examining her said that she should be admitted immediately since the baby was on his way. She was admitted to the hospital and I went back to our apartment and brought her suitcase that she had very carefully packed in preparation for this event. She went into labor that night and our son, Aniruddha was born on the morning of April 2nd. We were deliriously happy and I held my son in my arms. I looked at my wife and she looked tired but was otherwise calm and at the same time exultant considering the labor pain she went through over the last eight hours. I wondered at the amazing process of child birth and what a miracle I had witnessed. My wife told me that she had a list of people to call and I should go to our apartment and start calling these people. I thanked the nurses on duty and told them that I would be coming back in the next few hours. The nurse on duty said "There has been some more snow and the roads are slippery. Drive safely". Smiling to myself, I thought that was not yet a worry for me as I trudged through the snow towards the Smith College bus stop.

Chapter 3

Job Hunting During A Recession by Abhijit Sanyal

It was the summer of 1990 and we were on our way to Washington, DC for the annual American Marketing Association conference. The main objective of the conference was to act as a job market with employers – universities and business schools to meet and interview prospective employees – graduate students who were close to finishing their PhDs, as potential faculty starting in the fall of the following year. The business school had graciously decided to fund our hotel expenses for the duration of the conference, but we had to pay for own travel and meals. I decided to take my wife and our three-year-old son – we would all stay in one room and have an opportunity for a low cost vacation. The hotel where the conference was being held was the Hyatt Regency Capitol – a grand hotel near the US Capitol and other Washington attractions.

We arrived in the afternoon after nearly an eight-hour drive from Amherst, Massachusetts. My old 1983 Toyota did not have very efficient air-conditioning and also had a leaking gas tank which would leak minute to alarming amounts of fuel depending on the incline of the slope where it was parked. The mechanic who used to repair my car said that the cost of repairs was higher than the replacement value of a car of equal vintage but assured me that it was very safe to drive. I decided to keep on driving it till it fell apart. I arrived at the hotel and noticed that there was valet parking. Our arrangements included hotel parking and I parked my car behind a silver Porsche 911 after dropping my family at the reception area. I handed the keys to the parking valet and told him that if possible he should avoid parking on a slope. He took the keys with a quizzical look. I did not explain the details.

The conference was interesting, and I met many potential employers including faculty from across the country and even as far away as the University of Waikato in New Zealand. However, the mood among the graduate students

was very somber, unlike the buoyant attitude during last year's conference at Boston. There were rumors that all the schools and departments were interviewing prospective students but there was going to be no real hiring since most University funds and jobs were being cut back. However, in order to "keep face" the employers continued to meet "employees" in a comical hiring kabuki dance. We had a great time in Washington, saw all the museums, the Lincoln Memorial, took pictures near the White House and drove back to Amherst with the hope that I would be employed within a year during the Fall of 1991. That would mean a befitting end to our current poverty-stricken way of life and many years of struggle.

That did not happen. The recession of the 1990's wiped out most potential academic jobs in 1990 except at the top research-oriented universities. The next year in 1991, I went to the AMA conference in San Diego and again interviewed with many universities. In anticipation of a job in the fall of 1992, we had even planned our second child to coincide with an expected upsurge in our income that year but that did not happen.

Ever optimistic I went in 1992 to the AMA conference which was held in Chicago that year. My wife Anuradha was pregnant with our second child and was due on any day. I returned home on the night of August 11th but my flight was delayed. I called from the airport and my wife said that her "water had broken" and she was going to the hospital with her friend. I hurried to the hospital as soon as I landed and our second child – "Ayan"anghsa was born during the early hours of 12th August, 1992. My wife asked me after we came back from the hospital as to how the interviews went and I said that I was very hopeful that we would be in a much better place during the fall of 1993.

That did not happen either as none of the universities that I had interviewed that year called me back. I was living the adage – "The rich get richer – the poor get children".

I had finished all my course work and my qualifying examinations by 1991. I had also completed most of my dissertation work and was ready to defend my thesis but without a job and a completed thesis, I would be "out of status" and would have to leave the country according to the immigration rules. I continued to be a student and the department chair, and the university authorities graciously continued to extend my fellowship which meant that I could continue to take classes across the university departments. I started taking courses in the departments of psychology, mathematics and engineering. In order to earn some extra money since I could not work outside the campus, I also started consulting at the statistical consulting center (SCC) which was attached to the Department of Mathematics and Statistics. The SCC was set up to help the student and academic community with all their statistical programming and software problems and applications. I had some experience in using statistical software through regular coursework, but it seemed that there were few takers for the job – so I got the position and was soon very busy working there or taking classes.

After 6 months into the job – I was approached by a few graduate students who said that they needed help with the analytical work on their Ph.D. thesis. They were worried that they could not defend or graduate until they finished all the required analytical work. They offered me reasonably handsome sums if I would "consult" with them on completing their Ph.D. requirements. I had now entered the shadowy world of "analytical gun for hire". I readily agreed with their request but told them they should inform their departments and their academic advisors that they were taking assistance from the SCC. I ended up doing most of the analytical work for their Ph.D. thesis and also wrote up the relevant chapters. I now think that there are at least three currently tenured faculty members who were able to graduate after I spend sleepless nights analyzing and modeling their data and writing up the results. C'est la vie.

One day during the month of March, 1993, our supervisor at the SCC – Trina Lemeshow said that there was a Boston based strategy consulting firm looking for statistical consultants and would I be interested in the position. She said that the salary was at about 9-month faculty salary levels. I leapt at the chance and applied for the position. The next day I got a call asking me to drive to Lexington for an interview. It was a wintry, snowy day in March and I drove to Lexington in my "leaky" Toyota. I spent an entire day at the offices of Mercer Management Consulting meeting about nearly everybody at the office and was entertained with a very nice lunch. Ever optimistic I started the drive back home to Amherst on route 2 in the late afternoon.

The snow was falling very heavily by that time accompanied by heavy winds. My windshield wipers were wiping away furiously as I crawled back home. Suddenly without any warning both my windshield wipers came loose from their moorings and continuing their furious back and forth motion disappeared into the swirling heavy snow and the ongoing traffic. I pulled onto the side of the road and tried desperately to search for the errant wipers –but they were nowhere to be found. I ended up driving a few miles – stopping to clean the snow from the windshield and then continuing for the next few miles till the visibility had deteriorated to a point where I had to again repeat the process. As I was continuing this process, I suddenly heard a crack on my driving seat and the back of my seat fell back onto the back seat. It appeared that the driver's seat of my Toyota had suddenly lost its "backbone". I continued the "stop and go" process except that now I was driving hunched forward with my son's car seat wedged behind me to give me support. A normal two-hour journey from Amherst to the Boston suburbs took me six hours that night. That winter storm of 1993 was one of the heaviest recorded snow falls in the history of Massachusetts. On the drive back home, I thought the god's portent well for me – only out of such great pointless struggles can there be genuine achievements.

The next day I received a call from John, the head of the analytical group at Mercer, saying that they were ready to make me an offer and he went on to describe details with regard to the salary (which at that time seemed astronomical), signing bonus and other benefits etc. On hearing the salary, I blurted

out that it seemed to be too high since I was told that this was a 9-month faculty salaried position. He ignored my comment and told me that if I accepted the offer over the phone they would start the paperwork. Anuradha standing anxiously next to me, signaled to me: "Say Yes – Accept the damn offer". I accepted the offer and the next day all the paper work was completed, and I had a job to fulfill my vision of the American dream, about 3 years late.

We were very happy and celebrated by going for dinner in a Chinese restaurant in town and ordering regular food from the menu. We were not going to do the $9.95 buffet any more. The day I received the appointment letter, I took it to the local credit union and the Ford Mercury dealer and we purchased a mini-van in keeping with our demographic status as a single income family with two kids. I was also informed that Mercer had a dress code and my wife went into a pleasurable tizzy of shopping for suits, shirts and ties. All this spending was even before I received my first pay-check.

At school the graduate students and faculty members started asking me questions as to how I had got the job and whether I had any connections in the management consulting world — 'Mercer only hires from "Harvard Business School" and never from the University of Massachusetts'. I gave everybody different mysterious answers with reference to my Karma and the "leaky" Toyota. Even my faculty advisors were mystified and made oblique inquiries as to the salary levels and benefits. I only told them that the firm would be paying my moving costs as well as hotel expenses till we found a suitable apartment. I think that made quite a few people jealous, but I enjoyed the fleeting moment of perverse pleasure. It was worth a three year wait.

The movers called and asked me how much "stuff" I had. They asked me whether I had any horses or boats since they are only going to move one horse and one boat and two cars. Rather flabbergasted, I said we had many books, all my academic stuff and toys and no furniture since all the furniture we had were hand-me downs or picked up from the dumpster and my wife did not want to take them. They seemed to be relieved that I did not have any horses or boats. The movers came – a group of heavily muscled large men and said that they would take care of everything. They literally did so and all we did was to pack enough clothes for a few days stay in a hotel till we signed the lease for our new apartment.

We moved from the hotel to our new apartment within my first week of work. The movers unloaded our stuff and arranged it to the best of their ability and my wife's instructions. On the second day of our stay we notice a terrible smell coming from the kitchen. Further investigation revealed that the movers – who said that they would move everything, had also moved our garbage from Amherst to Lexington.

Chapter 4

My School Days in Baghdad and Calcutta

Home Schooling, Day Dreaming and a Preamble to Calcutta Boy's School

In 1964, my father took leave from Indian Airlines in Calcutta and joined Iraqi Airways in Baghdad. He was a flight engineer with the RAF during World War II and was subsequently one of the first batches of engineers to be trained on the Vickers Viscount, the new airliner of the 1960s. The opportunity with Iraq arose from that experience. Talent has always been from time immemorial, mobile.

My sister and I joined a French school run by the French Dominican order in the old quarters of Baghdad, housed in a church and convent dating to the time of the Crusades. The school was housed alongside the church in a beautiful stone building with huge windows, tall graceful wooden doors and stone arches with lovely stone carvings on the abutments. There was also a small luxuriant rose garden which was a riot of colors in the winter and spring. We learnt Mathematics, History, Geography, French Literature and Science in the French language. I had no introduction to the French language or culture except for one solitary picnic to Chandanagore, a onetime French colony near Calcutta where we visited the churches.

I and my sister struggled, but I was able to learn and converse in the language within a few months. My prized possession from that period is a tattered Tintin comic book, in French, "Le Trésor de Rackham le Rouge" (Red Rackham's Treasure) by Belgian cartoonist Hergé which I received as a prize for recitation in French. I still have that book. I was eight years old.

Within the first few years we became reasonably fluent in French and Arabic. After two years, my parents moved us to a school run by a Mr. and Mrs. Hartley an expatriate British couple where the language of instruction was English. The school had children from the expatriate community in Baghdad and my friends

Figure 4.1: Receiving a Prize for Recitation at the French School in Baghdad, 1964

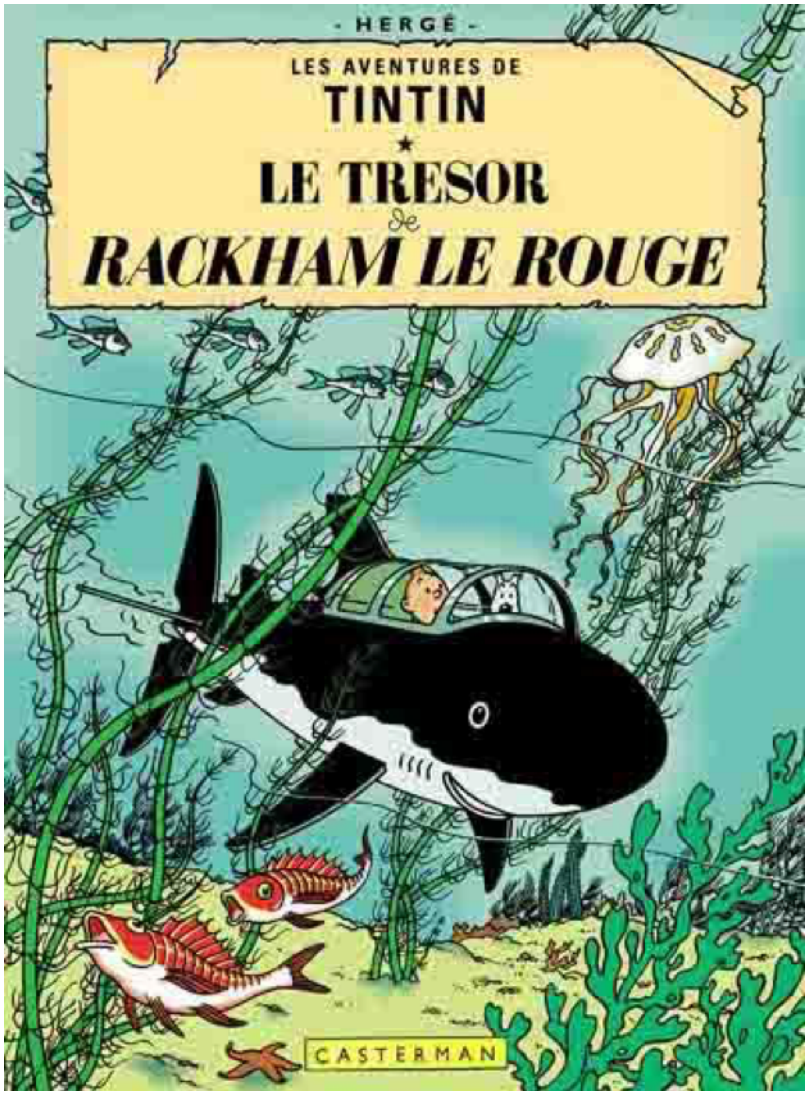

Figure 4.2: Le Tresor De Rackham Le Rouge (Red Rackham's Treasure

were from all over the world. It was a great experience; the academic materials were easy, and I breezed through school spending most of my time playing various outdoor games that we would make up with my friends in the hot midday sun.

After a year at Mr Hartley's school, my mother decided to take us back to Calcutta to see if we could live there and study while my father continued to work and stay in Baghdad. I re-joined Don Bosco School and my sister went back to Pratt Memorial School, both in Calcutta. This experiment lasted for a year.

Calcutta in 1965 was an incredibly hard place to live. There were endless shortages of bread, milk, butter, fish, eggs and other daily necessities. Cooking gas was not available then, so everything had to be cooked on Kerosene stoves or small portable ovens fueled by briquettes made from crushed coal and cow dung. These portable ovens were difficult to use, and the Kerosene was only available through your government issued ration cards. You would receive your weekly allotment of rice, wheat, sugar and Kerosene after standing in a line for a couple of hours. It was a realistic and brutal manifestation of Nehruvian socialist policies in its fullest glory. All the acquisition of these necessities including the buying of provisions was done by servants, but the process was enervating. India also went into a war with Pakistan in early August of that year of which I have some recollection. The war only compounded the shortage of food and made life even more difficult. Something as simple as a regular supply of milk was hard to arrange and if available was likely diluted or of doubtful provenance. A local "khatal owner" offered to sell my mother a couple of cows to provide fresh milk and he would take care of their feeding and milking, but they would have to stay in our house. My mother wisely demurred and opted for "sweet shop milk". She made arrangements with a leading sweetshop for our milk supply. Sweet shops were allowed to have specific access to their own cows or diaries. My mother knew the owner's daughter and we were given special dispensation to access the milk. They would not deliver it since it was illegal to sell their milk and so every day after school, we would go to the shop and drink large glasses of frothy, steaming, sweetened milk served in large earthenware pots with the added bonus of snacking on Samosas, Kachuris and other delicacies.

That year we went to Baghdad for the summer holidays and my father also came and visited us. I could however see that the stress of living in Calcutta was taking its toll on my mother and after a year of living in Calcutta, my parents decided that we were to be home-schooled and we wound up the Calcutta house and moved back to Baghdad. My mother met the Principal of Don Bosco School, Father Rosario and requested that I remain a student of the school for which she would be paying the full year's fee in advance. In turn, the school would forward their books, examination papers etc., and my mother would teach me and proctor my exams. Subsequent to my taking the examinations she would mail them to the school for assessment and feedback. It was an unorthodox arrangement and I guess we were the pioneers of long distance learning with the

usual "air mail' from Calcutta to Baghdad then taking about 2 – 3 weeks and sometimes never reaching its destination.

My sister was packed off to a boarding school in Beirut where she stayed for four years and finished school completing her GCE 'O' and 'A' levels. She later went on to finish her Economics degree from Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta and her Ph.D. in Econometrics from Jadavpur University. She is now a Professor at the Madras School of Economics.

My parents had an extensive library of English and Bengali books which included a few books that my father hinted were not appropriate for me to read. He did not explicitly forbid me to read them but made the suggestion that I might find them difficult to understand. If I remember right, the books that I read and a few that were hard to comprehend were the following:

- Lady's Chatterley's Lover by D. H. Lawrence
- Two Women by Alberto Moravia
- Never Love a Stranger, The Carpet Baggers, A Stone for Danny Fisher, Where Love has Gone – All these books were by Harold Robbins
- Bonjour Tristesse by Francois Sagan
- The Continent of Circe by Nirad Chaudhuri
- An Area of Darkness by V. S. Naipaul
- Poems by Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Most of these were compiled in a small book called "The Golden Treasury".
- My Family and Other Animals by Gerald Durrell
- The Secret of Santa Vittoria
- All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque – A book on World War 1
- The Dam Busters
- The 20th July Plot
- Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler
- Lolita by Vladmir Nabokov

I also had an extensive collection of "my" Enid Blyton and Richmal Crompton books – "Five Five Outers", "the Billy Bunter books by Frank Richards", "the William … series" by Richmal Crompton and the books on Biggles created by W. E. Johns. As an adult, I would continue to read and re-read most of Nabokov's books. I read a few chapters of Mein Kampf and completed most of the other World War II books since I had a strong interest in that era with my father having served in the RAF during that period.

I continued to be home schooled and enjoying every minute. We tried to "maintain" normal school hours and my mother would determine the curriculum, homework and lesson plans. I would finish my daily school work as quickly as possible and spent the rest of the day outside creating imaginary cities and war scenarios in the wild jungles of my mind and our backyard, playing with my toy cars, boats and planes in the cities, deserts and oceans that I had created amongst the long eucalyptus trees and my father's rose and vegetable flower

beds. When I got bored or it became unbearably hot, I would come back inside and pretend to study, while actually reading "Two Women" or "Lady Chatterley's Lover" or even "Where Love Has Gone", "Biggles", "Billy Bunter" which were tucked into the inner recesses of the comfortable large black and brown sofas of the vast mostly unused living room.

I am not sure how the Harold Robbins books got into such august company, but I enjoyed the explicit descriptions with no real comprehension of what it entailed. I had the faint realization that I was growing up to be somewhat weird, with hardly any friends, spending most my time playing imaginary war games or reading "Two Women" or "Billy Bunter". My parents were also becoming apprehensive that my schooling was unconventional, but I think that we all pretended that the problem would resolve itself over time. Most of the children of my parent's friends were dispatched off to boarding schools in India and England. I was attached to my mother and in spite of the hilarious descriptions and escapades of Bill Bunter, Frank Nugent, Bob Chery and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh and others that I would read in the Greyfairs school of Billy Bunter yore, the thought of boarding school filled me with foreboding and gloom. As I learnt much later in life, good times like an analogous bull stock market do not last.

Our extensive book and record collection also included the Rabindra Rachanabali, packed with care and imported from Calcutta, as well as an extensive collection of EP and LP Bengali records which kept my mother and her friends busy and engaged. My parents would host occasional Bengali plays in our house where the whole family would act in some role or the other. I remember that we acted in "Kabliwala" and "Khokababur Pratyabartan", "Mayar Khela" along with other members of the Bengali community in Baghdad who would direct, act, sing or provide music. These cultural nights were usually followed by dinner served on tables groaning with Bengali food and deserts.

Iraq had been the cradle of civilization and there were numerous ruins and unexcavated archaeological treasures within a couple of hours of driving distance from our house. We went to the fabled "Hanging Gardens of Babylon", then in ruins but full of archaeological artifacts lying unprotected and yours for the taking. I then decided that I want to become an archaeologist and started collecting cuneiform tablets, pieces of pottery and miscellaneous relics and objects during these visits of ours. Over the next few years my collection became so large that my parents moved them to a room on the second floor. I would read history and archaeological books borrowed from the British Council library and painstakingly label and catalog my archaeological collection based on my readings in an exercise book. This is when I read about Gertrude Bell, a British woman who was responsible for the birth of the various Hashemite kingdoms of Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. I also read books by Leonard Woolley a British archaeologist, including one I remember called "Ur of the Chaldees". He was responsible for the excavations at Ur which was supposed to be the real location of the Garden of Eden.

Many years later being an Agatha Christie fan and as part of my everlasting effort of collecting mental trivia, I came to know that Agatha Christie had based her book "Murder in Mesopotamia" on her experiences during her visit to the excavations at Ur. The murder victim was based on Katherine Woolley, Leonard's Woolley's wife who was universally disliked. Agatha Christie also met her husband, archaeologist Max Mallowan, one of Leonard's Woolley's colleagues during her visit to Ur. In 1968 my parents realized that the schooling problem would not resolve by itself and I needed a formal and structured education. My father wrote introductory letters with the help of some his friends to Doon School in Dehra Dun, Bishop Cotton School in Simla and a few other boarding schools. Doon and Bishop Cotton replied favorably and invited my parents and me for a visit to determine the possibility of transferring to either of those schools. A friend of my father in UK also suggested that we should apply to Manchester Grammar School and my father immediately sent off a letter and the school responded by giving me provisional admission.

In the spring of 1968, my future schooling still undetermined we went for our usual holiday to Calcutta. The subject of my education was on everybody's mind and my uncle suggested that we should meet with the principal of Calcutta Boys' School – a certain Clifford Hicks who might be able to help out. After some due diligence, my parents found out that getting admission into Calcutta Boy's School was virtually impossible in the middle of the year and also directly into Grade 8. The admissions process was based on an examination and an evaluation process held each summer that admitted students into only grade 1 for the subsequent year. Rarely were students admitted into higher grades.

We met with Clifford Hicks, an imposing large man of distinct Anglo-Saxon origins, sitting behind an enormous circular wooden desk in an office surrounded by cavernous book shelves and framed sepia pictures of past principals, deacons and church officials. My parents told him about our predicament and Mr. Hicks asked me a few questions about my areas of interest. I told him about my interest in geography, archaeology and the history of Mesopotamia. After an hour's worth of discussion about the situation in Iraq and what my father did there and "sniffing around" a few relatives in Government of India circles in Calcutta and Delhi who Mr. Hicks knew, he told my mother who was doing most of the talking that "Your son can start boarding school tomorrow". My heart thudded when I heard those words and I was crestfallen. We went back to our uncle's place with tears welling up in my eyes at the thought of leaving home and my parents, my toys, my books and my archaeological collection. My parents were as pleased as Punch at achieving such an unexpected and quick solution to their problem. I was 13 years old.

I learnt a lesson. Everybody including your parents will take the easiest solution available to them.

Chapter 5

Shearing, shortening and embellishing your name - the American Way by Abhijit Sanyal

On October 19, 1885, the S.S. Eider approached Sandy Hook, New Jersey, and the Narrows, twelve days after it had departed Bremen, Germany. Donald Trump's immigrant grandfather, Friedrich Trump came abroad on that ship. He was processed through what was then known as the Emigrant Landing Depot where the state of New York processed immigrants before they began pursuing their American dreams. The Trumps in Germany had simplified their name from Drumpf and the immigrant recording ledger in New York records the barber's apprentice name as Trumpf. Friedrich in pursuing his dream would soon discard the 'f' and the family name would become Trump. What an interesting uplifting journey for Drumpf as an awkard unpronounceable, name to the bold and convincing Trump, a word pregnant with decisive and overwhelming power as in "He has the trump card".

My name is Abhijit Sanyal and I am originally from the city of Calcutta, India. I flew into JFK airport on a PanAm Boeing 707 in the fall of 1987, not as an immigrant but as a potential one in the garb of a graduate student. PanAm is long defunct and most likely the aircraft has been long mothballed. I have always thought whether it is worthwhile to change my name to make it easier to flow on occidental tongues. Some of my friends and acquaintances have tried various approaches to make their names flow smoothly.

Changing complicated names to single syllable ones is nothing new. In Bengal and Calcutta where I grew up, the British ruling Raj in encountering and

working with the Bengali Babu changed many of their names. Bandhyopadya became Bannerjee, Chattopadhya became Chatterjee but mysteriously Gangopadhya never became Gangarjee but was reborn as Ganguly. Even the illustrious Thakur family's name was changed to the mellifluous Tagore.

In India, the most complicated names are most likely from people in the southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Venkataraman would become Venky and Shridarahan was transformed to Shri, Rajaratnam would be referred to as Raj etc., A friend of mine whose name was Banawara Venkataramanya was popularly known as "Bunny" and I believe that is what was called out during his graduating convocation address. Even Gautama Buddha's name Siddharth has been shortened to Sid – a short economical turn of phrase straddling the west and the east.

Are economical poetic names powerful and important? Juliet's argument to Romeo in the oft quoted lines from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose. By any other name would smell as sweet;" seems to suggest otherwise.

However, Juliet was in love, young and inexperienced and their lives ended in tragedy. History is replete with the success and destructive power of short easy names. The exhortation of "Heil Hitler" gave birth to World War II, enormous devastation, countries annihilated, carnage and political upheaval on a global basis. Would "Heil Schicklgruber" work? That was the original family name of young Adolf's father. If Adolf did not change his name, maybe the course of history would have been different.

I have a friend whose first name is my namesake – Abhijit combined with the last name of Biswas. In an effort to achieve cultural acceptability after his arrival in the US, he adopted the nom de guerre of Abe Bis. He was trying to make his last name one syllable. However even though he insisted his last name started with a B, some people would hear it as a P and he would encounter raised eyebrows and faint snickers. "You said your name was Abe Piss". He soon changed introducing his name to Abe Biswas with the last name now its original two syllables. I have sometime thought that it would be a great idea to change my first name to Abe and ally myself with a towering figure of American history but Abe Sanyal really sounds desperate.

My two sons are Aniruddha and Ayanangsha. Both these names are tongue twisting multi-syllabic names too complex for time starved Americans. When they were born, I strongly lobbied for easily pronounceable names, but I lost to my wife's family in Calcutta. This was also a family that had been seemingly blighted with a succession of wonderful daughters in the previous generation and the first grandsons' in the family were auspicious occasions and welcomed with celebration. For naming purposes, venerated and distinguished astrologers were consulted, and the eldest child was christened Aniruddha.

Aniruddha was Krishna's grandson and the name itself means something that

cannot be governed or restricted. I heaved a sigh of relief as there was a way out since Aniruddha could be shortened to Ani. As a child, Ani was extremely obedient and "governable".

The entry of the second male child, four years later was greeted with even greater joy and this time, I believe that there were frantic and increased efforts to choose a name that was a rare beauty, which aligned with the stars of this birth would bring prosperity and success to the new born child. All obstacles would dissolve at the very mention of the name. The choice was Ayanangsha. The name means "Pathway to the Sun".

My side of the family tried to have their choice of names accepted but they were all rejected. I argued as to why would this lovely baby want to go directly to the sun burning at 6000 degrees Celsius. It was all to no avail. Ayanangsha it would be. Again, I saw a silver lining. Maybe this too could be shortened to "Ayan". Ayan was actually quite ungovernable. I wondered that this was surely an odd cosmic shift or miscalculation in names and personality.

My wife during subsequent doctor's visit for the kids or herself would be greeted with confusion and questions of whether she was born in 1988 and she surely was not 8 years old? Sometimes it would be "This was your son's appointment and why was he born in the 1960's." The Doctor's office had mixed up the files of my wife Anuradha and my son Aniruddha. They sound the same and therefore they must be the same. Thankfully this was soon sorted out.

Later when the kids had left for college, my wife started a business dealing in handicrafts, ethnic Indian wear, garments and other gift items. She named her business – Anu's Collection and over time we opened a website. One day while checking the website, we realized with horror that it was very hard to make the apostrophe in Anu's collection really distinct. A friend of ours reported that if you searched for Anus Collection, then her website would turn up. This was during 2003, when Google's algorithms were gradually increasing in sophistication. We hurriedly took down the website. I had visions of huge volumes of traffic from the gay community crashing all the servers and how to handle the hordes who would surely be disappointed by the range of the products and services available. We changed the name to Anuradha's Collection. The same multi-syllabic problem remained unresolved or was this an opportunity.

My son last week was on New York local TV plugging for organ donors to register as it was National Organ Day. I winced as the TV anchor introduced him as Ani Sayal. Sayal in Bengali is very close to the word for fox. Ani later explained that they had rehearsed their line multiple times. What is the motivation for brief, easy to pronounce names? I believe that it arises from the nervous energies of an immigrant nation trying to assimilate and unify people from multiple countries, religions, languages and traditions. It is the imagined America of great spaces and limitless opportunities, provided you are willing to work hard. To achieve that success, you cannot be tripped by complex multi syllabic names. However, I believe that as the US becomes increasingly diverse

as result of demographic shifts, it may be more accepting of complex names. I do also believe that simplifying complexity will always be a well pursued and worthwhile goal which in the context of my previous statement may appear contradictory.

If Zbigniew Brzezinski can become President's Carter's National Security Advisor and the chief architect of President Obama's foreign policy, I can try to remain Abhijit Sanyal. I do however respond to being called Abe with the hope that a minuscule amount of one of US's most distinguished President's by some method of cosmic transference might explain and illuminate my otherwise mundane existence.

Chapter 6

Sounds and memories of my childhood by Abhijit Sanyal

The only sounds I hear in Lexington – are the hum of my computer and the occasional ringing sound when I get email or the reminder for another conference call and of course the ring tone of my cell phone or my wife's. When I go outside I am greeted by the call of the birds in summer which is very soothing against the dull background roar of traffic from the nearby highway on route I-95.

My early childhood was in the city of Calcutta – now also known as Kolkata – a chaotic maelstrom of a city with now over 14 million inhabitants located in the eastern part of India. My father having served in World War II, left the Royal Air Force and joined Indian Airlines in post independent India. We initially used to stay at a long, gloomy and cavernous, multistoried building called Karnani Mansions near Park Circus. In the late 1950's we moved to Ballygunge. I was then nearly 4 years old.

Calcutta was named the capital of British India in 1772 and the city grew to be subsequently called the "Second Capital of the British Empire". The city then and possibly still is the largest and only industrialized city in the eastern part of India. The city's relative prosperity and wealth continues to attract the population from the surrounding hinterlands of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Certain parts of the city were well planned, presumably during the British regime but grew up otherwise without much planning and thinking by the city fathers.

Memory and recall are complex and poorly understood topics. It is said that smells and sounds can trigger long lost memories and I wanted to determine how much of that would happen if I sat down to evoke these "sensory features". This personal history of my childhood is based on the memories of what I can remember during my early childhood days and my boarding school days in

Calcutta.

We had the sound of crows cawing all throughout the year. This was a constant cacophony then and still is. I suspect a city with little or no organized garbage system encouraged the buildup of nature's scavengers. You would wake up with their incessant cawing and the patter of their feet on wooden windows and in our open verandah. They were rambunctious, bold and would enter the verandah and tangle with the laundry out to dry. The domestic help would run out to shoo them away, but they would invariably return.

During the monsoon it was the unremitting sound of the rains. When I would wake up it would be raining and when I went to bed in the night it would be still raining. The streets would fill up with water, the public transportation system would break down and schools would be closed. The only sound on the roads was the ting-a-ling of the hand-drawn rickshaws that were the only affordable means of transportation for the common person or the deep throated growl of the large trucks and jeeps that could navigate the waters. As a pastime I would make paper boats out and throw them into the streets from our second-floor window – to see them slowly unravel in the swirling waters and disappear in the drains. A large paper boat that I made out of stiff paper once was strong enough to withstand the waters and float out of sight. I used to imagine that it would go down the Calcutta sewers, down the Ganges and cross uncharted seas.

The other sounds were the sounds of all the various street vendors – each of would have their own characteristic "signature call" to attract customers. There was one fellow who would shout "Sil-A-Kattaoow". This was the knife grinder who would sharpen your grindstone. Electrical grinders and mixers were not available, and most homes would employ a domestic help whose major chore was to use the "Sil" – a flat grindstone coupled with another cylindrical stone – "Nora" to grind up the fresh spices every day for cooking the day's meals. The spices to be ground were put on the heavy 'sil' and were crushed by repeated movements of the 'nora', a smooth stone you held with your hands. We were lucky to have a refrigerator but, in most homes, including ours – fresh vegetables, fruits, fish and meat were bought cooked every day. Leftovers were taboo and to be given to the domestic help or the beggars. This was before the days of the cold chain, supply chain logistics and fresh sushi that we are used to in our current day lives. The "sil" and "nora" would lose their grooves over time and that is where the "Sil-A-Kattoow" would come in – or "Let me sharpen your sil".

There was another fellow who would look for work to refill and fluff up your pillows and mattresses with fresh cotton and fresh cloth – a mattress reconditioning business. He would not use his voice but his instrument which was the shape of a single stringed sitar which he would then use to generate a twanging musical noise. The instrument was used to beat up the cotton and make it fluffier before refilling the pillows and mattresses. He would have a couple of young helpers with him. The domestic help would bring him in and after a long haggling process my mother would finally agree to the terms and conditions. He

would rip open the old mattresses and throw out the old cotton – fluff up the new cotton to be refilled and sew up the mattress – which was now good as new. It was glorious to watch him work. There would be little flecks of cotton everywhere and I loved to see how he would use his instrument to whip up the cotton. I would compare that sight with a snow globe that I had, where the tiny figures of Santa Claus and his reindeers would come to sight when you agitated the globe. That was the closest I came to see and imagine snow before the long harsh winters of New England.

The other sound was the "key and locksmith" man. He would yell "Chabi – Sharabein" – in other words – "repair your keys" and then follow it up with a magical jingle of a huge roll of keys and locks that he would continuously roll using his hands. I always suspected that this guy was in cahoots with the local goons to determine how to open the keys and locks of unsuspecting home owners when they were away.

Then there was of course the "Kwality" ice-cream man. At that time "Kwality" was the only reputed brand of ice cream sold in Calcutta. This gave birth to countless imitators who would sell their ice-cream as "Qwality", "Quaality" and so on and so forth. The genuine "Kwality" man wore a branded uniform and cap and was very conscious of the value of his brand. He would shout the name of his brand – "Kwality Ice Cream" to attract his customers. We would look out to the street and try to determine if it was the genuine brand or one of the many imitators. If my mother confirmed that it was genuine, she would then allow us to get our ice-creams – a "Tutti Fruiti" for me and a "ChocBar" for my sister.

Recycling was not only executed by the crows. There was also the scrap paper man. His signature call was "Poorano Kagoj, Boootle Bikri". This translated to "Want to sell old newspapers and bottles". His role was to buy old newspapers, bottles and containers. This was a long awaited once every 6-month ritual since the money was used to replenish our ice-cream allowance. I suppose it also took that long to accumulate sufficient materials to recycle. A modern-day testimony of our increased levels of consumption and consequent increase in recycling materials is that we now have to recycle every week. My mother would send for the domestic help to bring him in and she would agree to trade only after negotiating rates. There were different rates for Bengali vs. English newspapers – I am still not sure why. Was it the quality of the paper and newsprint ink? These newspapers were all recycled into paper containers and were used to bag everything from groceries to sweets and candy. Newsprint has since faded from that role with the advent of plastic and polypropylene bags.

At this point my uncle who was then staying with us – would immediately ask that the vendor's weighing scale be examined – since 'these guys are always trying to cheat us". After his scales were examined to satisfaction, we would bring out the old newspapers, magazines, bottles etc. We would not trade the "Time" or "Life" magazines that my father would occasionally buy. These were premium products, which the vender would invariably ask for. The vendor

would also ask if there were any "Foreign Liquor" bottles – again a very premium product. He would then weigh the newspapers, count the bottles and containers and total up the amount he owed us. He would then give my mother the money and we would all feel proud of having executed a complex deal and feel very rich for a few moments.

The other recyclers were the so-called merchants dressed in riotous colors from Rajasthan who would exchange your old clothes for stainless steel utensils. These were very complex transactions since the deal values were significantly higher and would take the better part of a day to complete. I do not remember their war-cry – although I am pretty sure they had one. There were also the beggars and the occasional professional mendicants each with their signature tunes. Some of the newspaper money was reserved for them as well.

Many of these sounds have disappeared in Calcutta and possibly their associated professions as well. During my trips to Calcutta – I always try to search for these sounds. During my last trip to Calcutta – the "Kwality" ice-cream man came around one day and the flood gates were released, and memories rushed through my mind. I enthusiastically offered to buy ice cream for my young nieces, but it was declined. The refrigerator at home had enough ice cream and anyway they preferred going to the ice cream parlor at the Mall.

Chapter 7

To oblivion and back by Abhijit Sanyal

The call came when I was down to running my last mile. I noticed the caller was Brigham and Women's' Hospital (BWH) and I immediately pressed the answer key. It was Kristen, one of the nurses at BWH and she said that the results of the pre-operation blood work had come back and I had to meet the Hematologist Oncologist as quickly as possible. With mounting anxiety, I asked "A Hemonc at this stage. Why what is going on?" She would not elaborate any further and with my heart now racing, I literally ran from the Willards Woods near my home in Lexington to the hospital.

My son Ani, was born with renal insufficiency, which meant that he did not have enough capacity in his kidneys. He was diagnosed with this condition when he was eighteen months old. The doctors said that he had about 60% capacity when he was born which would gradually decline over time and he may ultimately need a kidney transplant. Family astrologers were duly consulted on both sides of the family and there was unanimous agreement that this too shall pass. Comments ranged from "It was nothing to worry about" to "I do not see this in his stars". Ani was on a bi-annual regimen of routine check-ups and blood tests and everything seemed to be normal. We were lulled into thinking that this too shall really pass. It did not.

Ani had a normal childhood and went to Lexington High School. He played soccer, was crazy about basketball, became a black belt in Karate and won the State debate championships. He was good in studies and secretly harbored a passion for hip-hop music and created "beats" with friends. He had a choice of colleges after finishing school - Carnegie Mellon, NYU, Boston College etc. but chose NYU due to the glamour of New York and its music scene. He became a New Yorker and in his final year in an assertive and independent move, shifted to a shambolic apartment in hip Brooklyn. Majoring in Economics and Finance,

he worked for some time in a hedge fund and a consulting firm but then chose to concentrate full time on his music and also working as an English and Math teacher for the Harlem Children's Zone. Ani's kidney functions were inexorably deteriorating.

I read everything about kidneys and its functioning over the years. We made sure that Ani received the best medical treatment. After all we were at Boston, the center of the universe as far as progress in American medicine is concerned. It was at BWH that Dr. Murray had pioneered kidney transplant in 1954 starting with dogs and then with the first human kidney transplant from a healthy male twin to another. This was the best place to be if we had to have a kidney transplant. During our six-monthly check-ups, we would anxiously ask Ani's nephrologist if he would ever need a transplant. He assured us with a "maybe" and we would go back to our lives pushing the dreaded thought from our minds.

A key indicator of kidney function is the level of serum creatinine. It is an easily measured by-product of muscle metabolism that is excreted unchanged by the kidneys and measures above 1.2 being classified as abnormal. Throughout the first twenty years of his life Ani's creatinine level ranged from 1.8 to 2.2. From 2010 his creatinine levels started increasing. In late 2011 there was a sudden jump in his creatinine levels. Ani's nephrologist changed his tune and in early 2012, told us to prepare for a transplant and handed us over to the transplant team at BWH.

Rather bewildered by the turn of events, we started mentally preparing for the transplant and who within the family would be the donor. I was the obvious choice since an earlier test had screened me as a potential donor due to the blood group and antigen match. My wife, Anuradha was not a match but our younger son Ayan was a potential donor. Ani's condition deteriorated, and his creatinine was now higher than 8. He had recently worked on providing music for a Bollywood movie and they had invited him for the movie premiere and a tour of five Indian cities. He begged the transplant team at BWH for permission to do the trip which was reluctantly granted and in May 2012 spent 5 weeks in India with his mother in tow. He came back to New York and insisted that he was doing well but indications of incipient kidney failure were apparent. His skin had turned blackish green and the toxins in his body were causing occasional bouts of confusion and forgetfulness. The Bollywood movie was a dismal failure and sank without a trace in Mumbai's murky celluloid graveyard.

He unwillingly closed his apartment in New York and came home to Boston where we had to rush him to hospital to install a catheter and prepare him for dialysis. The installation of the catheter was a major surgery done under anesthesia. Ani was in constant pain after the surgery and during dialysis. We felt frustrated that neither the doctors at the hospital nor at the dialysis unit were able to alleviate the pain.

I was cleared for transplant by BWH in early August and was required to do a 24-hour blood pressure test. I also reduced my professional commitments and

in theory became “unemployed” to focus on the transplant. We were given a surgery date of October 11th. The thrice a week dialysis was a bearable torture with the transplant imminent. However nearing end September, my nephrologist called me up and informed me that they were cancelling the surgery since I was now diagnosed with high blood pressure and an enlarged heart. We were all devastated but I was assured that with medications, the cardiomegaly could be treated and may be even reversed.

I went into a frenzy of blood pressure reduction approaches. I started taking all my prescribed medications and started researching alternative methods. I completely went salt free in my diet. We went and bought a juicer and I started taking a glass of celery and apple juice concentrate which was “guaranteed” to reduce blood pressure in three weeks. My wife concocted a strong garlic, ginger and honey concentrate which I administered to myself twice a day. We heard of a lady who was a recommended expert in “relaxation techniques” and had worked with patients at BWH. We made an appointment and she heard our story and then started crying intolerably. Panicking, I was not sure who was the patient and who was the counselor and we tried to assure her that we were mentally strong and confident that we would achieve our stated goals. She gave me her relaxation tape which was a set of breathing techniques and positive statements that I was to listen and repeat every night before going to bed.

I obsessively tracked my blood pressure every hour and entered all the data in a spreadsheet which I tried to link with time of day, diet and major and minor events, exercises and my daily running. I also knew that an individual’s ability to control blood pressure was difficult and unachievable. My blood pressure refused to become normal. All my Google searches and research appeared to be of no avail. After 6 weeks, we went back for another 24-hour blood pressure checkup and the transplant team gave us a surgery date in end November provided the independent committee set up to review the results gave me the green signal to qualify as a donor. I was refused, and the nephrologist and the surgeons started conversations to put Ani on the UNOS cadaver list and examine other options. Frustrated and disappointed, I redoubled my efforts. Ani went into a complete shell and refused to talk to any of us. Some nights I would cry myself to sleep and then wake up in a sweat during the night.

Sometime in late November, my blood pressure indicators seemed to take a turn for the better. Elated we went back to the transplant team and I was finally cleared as a donor with the surgery date set for the 20th December. We completed the “pre-ops” or the pre-surgery blood work and tests on the 11th December. I had to then meet various counselors whose tasks were to determine my motivations for undergoing the transplant and I was not subject to coercion or bribes. I was also assured that I could back out being a donor at any time and none of my family members would come to know the reasons of my decision! I told the nice lady that I was being paid a fortune in numbered bank accounts on the Comoros Islands and also my son’s first born male child (Swiss banks are so effete nowadays since they squeal to the IRS). She laughed nervously and

asked me who made the decision in the family that you should be the donor. I told her "Father knows best" and we should leave it that.

It was on the Thursday of that week, while running that I received the call from Kristen that I had to meet the "Hemonc". The "Hemonc" – Jean reviewed my blood work and told me that there was no change of this round of results from the results done in July of that year. I found that reassuring and also mystifying and told her that any naïve person would reach the conclusion that there should be no cause for concern if two results across two points in time were the same. She said that even though my blood work had some very strange results which indicated that I have leukemia but since they were also "non-specific", she was willing to give me the green signal for the transplant. I enlisted the help of a physician friend of ours, Sunita and we went through a series of conference calls with Jean and other doctors. Sunita explained that the words "non-specific" actually meant "I do not know what is going on". I was told that the transplant team would be reviewing these results and would also confer with colleagues at Mass General Hospital and other local hospitals.

We started preparing for surgery and assorted cousins and relatives across the country made their travel plans to be with my wife during that time. On the evening of 18th December, I got a call from our nephrologist informing me that the team was not willing to take any further risks and was therefore cancelling the surgery scheduled for the 20th December. He also assured us that the counseling services at BWH were always available although to what intent was not clear. I asked him why they had not checked the results in July and why was this an issue now. He evaded my question and told me that they needed to do more tests to confirm that I had leukemia which would take another five weeks.

Crestfallen I told Ani of their decision and I mentally started to think of plan B – take Ani to India for a transplant where donors are available for a price or plan C which was for my younger son to become a donor. Ani who had become almost normal over the past few weeks shut himself in his room and refused to talk to us or get out of bed except for his dialysis treatments.

I refused to believe that I had leukemia and started going for long early morning runs in the grey, snowy winter weather. I exhausted myself doing physical exercise and sometimes had to nap in the afternoon. Inwardly, I accepted that anything could happen and got my affairs in order. I prepared my will, made a list of the pathetic balances in my bank accounts, stocks, insurance policies, pensions etc., and put them in an envelope and told Anuradha where it was kept. She refused to know where it was and assured me that I did not have leukemia. It was a bleak Christmas and New Year's.

My wife in a fit of anger and frustration went and met the transplant surgeons who confided to her that they believe that they made a mistake in the whole process. They were also confident that it was very unlikely that I could ever be a donor. She requested them to start testing my younger son, who turned out

to be a match in blood group and antigen combinations.

On 3rd January 2013, my birthday we received a call from the Nephrologist who told us that the "leukemia" results were in and the transplant team would announce their decision tomorrow. The next day we were told that I was cleared for surgery for the 17th January. Elated, we went and celebrated at a Sushi restaurant.

We reached BWH at 4 AM on the 17th January. The operating theatres were two floors below the ground of the main hospital building and connected by a labyrinth network of tunnels. There was a large crowd of patients, friends and relatives and the atmosphere was one of anxiety with a sense of foreboding. I told Ani that I think I am the happiest person here now and possibly the only person looking forward to surgery.

After a series of check-in procedures, we went into the pre-operating areas which were a hub of activity, milling with nurses, doctors, hospital gurneys and machines. The environment was that of a smooth well-run factory albeit with humans being processed in and out. We were now in regulation hospital gowns and we had a last conversation with each other before being wheeled into surgery. I hugged Ani and we wished each other good luck and the anesthesiologists took over. A young woman marked the left side of my abdomen with a green felt pen and administered the various intravenous entry points on my arms and asked me if I had any questions. I asked her whether they would be monitoring the different parts of my brain using scanners as it slowly shut itself off. I do not remember her answer as white clouds soon descended everywhere.

The next thing I remember, I was in the hospital bed with intravenous tubes snaking through my groin and the arms and my left side swathed in bandages. I saw the anxious faces of Ayan, Anuradha, friends and relatives. My first question was where is Ani and the doctors said he was doing well and "peeing like a horse". My wife said his creatinine level was down to 1.1. My uncle came to me and assured me that now my troubles were now all over. I apparently looked at my wife and said, "Not really, she is still around!" I do not recall this conversation, but everybody assures me that is what I said. I do not recall my wife's reaction either.

I was visited by occasional intense pain and I had a pain-relieving pump which administered a controlled level of narcotics. The hospital room was a constant bedlam of doctors, nurses and physician assistants, who seemed to be in an endless cycle of giving me medications, measuring vital signs, drawing blood, turning me over and asking me what meals I wanted. There were also the constant beeps and alarms from the monitoring stations, the phones and pagers and the creak of the laundry carts and the sound of my door with each entry and exit. These noises were increasingly absorbed into my dreams and hallucinations and would keep me awake at odd hours of the night.

Before the surgery, Ani and myself used to spend time watching a TV game show called "Deal-No Deal" where the contestant had to guess which unopened box

out of 20 odd boxes contained how much money with the objective being to open the box with the lowest level of money and thereby leaving increasing higher amounts of money on the table to be claimed by the contestant. To entertain Ani, I used to calculate the expected value at each point of the game. Behind each box was a very beautiful woman who would open each one to cries of joy, despair and elation from the contestant and audience. In a recurring dream I was now the contestant wearing a hospital Johnny with nothing underneath and true to my ethnic subconscious, the 20 women were all now wearing beautiful white saris with red borders. I would choose a box to be opened and it would be only $1 thereby increasing my expected value by $250,000 and I was screaming with joy and all the beeps, sounds and strobe lights were reaching an ecstatic level when my Johnny would come off and I was naked in front of 20 beautiful women .....The nurses were back for another round of checking on vital signs.

Ani is back at work in NY. His maniacal drive and relentless energy to achieve his ambitions, I find somewhat terrifying. I constantly remind him to slow down and tell him that the odds are against him in the "winner takes all" music business. His colleague Max, in a strange twist of fate was diagnosed with lung cancer at the same time and had part of his lung removed to contain the disease. Their "Will To Win" music album which was a post-surgery effort was recently aired on MTV. He has also inked deals with Spotify and other music streaming companies. He tells me that his window of time is rapidly shrinking, and this kidney will last him at the most twenty more years. I wish him well. As long as I am alive I have no more kidneys to give him. Where this tumultuous journey will take us, and its' unknown ports of call is anybody's guess.

Dr. Murray died on November 26, 2012, aged 93. He suffered a stroke at his suburban Boston home on Thanksgiving and died at Brigham and Women's Hospital, the very hospital where he had performed the first organ transplant operation.

Chapter 8

The story of two Qasims by Abhijit Sanyal

I was about 8 years old when we moved to Baghdad from Calcutta. My father was offered a position in Iraqi Airways and would be on leave from his original employer – the government owned Indian Airlines. We arrived in Baghdad in the winter of 1962 and I still remember the shock of the freezing desert winter in contrast to the mildly pleasant winters of Calcutta. Our house was in the old Railway colony near what is now the old Baghdad airport and close to the main railway station and the Presidential Palace. My father's colleagues lived nearby, and my father's office was at the airport – which was a 10 minute drive.

In the sixties Baghdad was a relatively modern city with wide clean boulevards, large palm trees, supermarkets and big American and German cars. The weather was very hot and dry in the summer with occasional sand storms that reduced visibility to zero and covered everything with a thick film of dust. The winters were severe with temperatures dipping to below zero and water pipes freezing, but there never was any snow. There were also movie halls that showed Hollywood and Hindi Movies. One particular open-air movie hall used to show Hindi movies all year long. These Hindi movies and their songs were very popular, and they were dubbed in Arabic for the local population.

Politically, Iraq was very unstable. The monarchy led by King Faisal was deposed in 1958 by an army General by the name of Abdul Karim Qasim who took over as the 1st Prime Minister of the Republic of Iraq. When we arrived in 1962 the memories of the 1958 coup was still fresh on everybody's minds and the massacre of the royal family by Qasim and his men was a favorite topic of the cocktail circuit. The Prime Minister to the monarchy - Nuri as-Said - a man responsible for many repressive acts evaded capture for one day but was caught and shot after attempting to escape disguised as a veiled woman. My father would discuss the history of the country and I would read about it

during our visits to the British Council – the local intellectual watering hole. T.E. Lawrence's adventures in "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom" were one of our favorite books along with the stories of Gertrude Bell – an English woman who in a certain way was responsible for the creation of the Hashemite dynasty in Jordan and the modern state of Iraq.

Gertrude Bell was a writer, traveler, political officer, administrator, and archaeologist who between the years 1900 to 1926, travelled, explored, and mapped vast parts of Greater Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and Arabia. Through her extensive travel and contacts with the local tribes and the people she became very influential in shaping British imperial policy-making in post-World War 1 Middle East. At the end of World War 1, with the erstwhile Ottoman Empire in decline, she along with the ruling Arab tribes drew up the borders within Mesopotamia to include the three Ottoman provinces that became Iraq. Using her unique perspective and relations with tribal leaders she played a major role in establishing and helping in setting up the administrative infrastructure of the modern state of Iraq. She along with T. E. Lawrence (of Lawrence of Arabia fame) was held in high esteem by British officials and the local rulers. For a woman in her age and time, she wielded an enormous amount of power. She earned the sobriquet of "al-Khatun" or a "Lady of the Court" who keeps an open eye and ear for the benefit of the state.

In 1963, Abdul Karim Qasim was the absolute ruler of Iraq but he was also loved by the common people. He was not very fond of the western powers and gravitated towards the Soviet Union. He also apparently seized land and assets from the British owned Iraqi Petroleum Company and distributed the land to the peasants. The cold war was at its peak and the US and Soviet Union fought their wars through their proxies. Within a few month of our arrival, Abdul Karim Qasim was deposed in a violent coup and I still remember the gunfire and small arms fire that we could hear from the nearby Army encampment. I also remember seeing aerial dogfights from the roof of our house and fighter jets dive bombing the Presidential Palace which was within viewing distance. My father did not go to work for a few days and Baghdad airport was closed. We later heard that many Iraqis were killed in a vindictive hunt that immediately followed the coup. It was rumored that the coup against Qasim was motivated by the Bath party and interests that were against Qasim's control of the petroleum sector and was carried out with the backing of the British Government and the CIA. Qasim was killed and our neighbors told us that his body was never found so he could not be given a decent burial. In November of 1963 there was another coup against the Ba'ath party and the previous regime was overthrown and a new government under the leadership of Abdul as-Salam Muhammad Arif took over the reins.

After the situation had calmed down my parents had to find a school for us and my sister and I were enrolled in a local missionary school run by an order of French nuns. The medium of instruction was in French and I knew as much French as I knew Arabic which meant that I did not know either language.

However, the school had a very large percentage of children of the expatriate population who were also equally clueless about the French language. Within a year however, both me and sister were fairly fluent in French and Arabic. I have since long forgot both languages – although I do recognize certain words and phrases. I also started to read and enjoy "Tintin" in the original French. At about the same time my mother also hired a domestic help who was also called Qasim. Qasim was a tall strapping young man about 20 years of age who had never completed school. He was in need of a job and started working for us and other such families as a domestic help. He would come and help my mother with the dishes, cooking, running errands and also help my father maintaining our garden. An amiable fellow, he also taught me and my sister Arabic and provided us insights into the local people and politics. We in turn taught him English and over time he was able to converse with us in passable English. He would also help us during our regular parties which my mother had to host. My father would give him a jacket and tie and he would serve drinks and appetizers.

In 1964 an English language school was opened by a local British couple – Mr. and Mrs. Hartley. My parents withdrew us from the French school and we were admitted to Mr. Hartley's school. Life was very good and interesting. I found school work easy and not as rigorous as I would hear from my cousins during our regular trips to Calcutta. I was also very interested in history and archaeology and the village and areas in and around Baghdad was full of unexplored verdant sites. Every two or three weeks we would visit these sites called 'Tels' such as Babylon, Ctesiphon, Ur, Mosul and other such locations and do our own unimpeded exploration and acquisition. Over the years I accumulated many pieces of artifacts that if I had now would be worth an illegal fortune, but I would also be accused of stealing national treasures. I am sure Gertrude Bell who founded the Baghdad Archaeological Museum would have approved of my scholarly pursuits, although not the acquisitive one.

Qasim was still with us. He had saved enough money to buy a big used Chevrolet Impala and drove that around for work. One day he came to work and looked very troubled. After some time he told us that he had been drafted into the Army and would have to leave work to join the training camp for 6 months. During that period his cousin - Ali would work at our house and he would come back to join our household after his 6 months training was over. Qasim left – my mother gave him a fresh set of clothes as a gift and he promised he would come back after 6 months. Ali, his substitute was not as diligent, and my mother had to spend a considerable amount of time training him to get all the household chores done.

We were also getting used to witnessing abortive and a few successful coups and overnight changes of the Iraqi government. The common people were not very affected except there would be curfews and the occasional tank battles inside the army encampments. Occasionally we would get a premonition of an impending coup with the thinning of traffic and a mysterious sense of anticipation on the streets followed by a flurry of activity and movement of armored vehicles and

Tanks from the nearby army base. My father would come back early from work and would talk about rumors that Baghdad airport may be closed for the next few days. The last one I remember was in 1966 when two tanks came and parked outside our street for some time. The tank commanders and the soldiers were very friendly and allowed me to enter the tank and sit on their seats. I still have the shell casing of a large caliber gun that they gave me as a gift.

Qasim came back to work for us after his training was over and my mother was very relieved. We were still attending Mr. Hartley's school, but my parents were not happy about the standard of the teachers and level of teaching. In 1966 my sister was sent to a boarding school in Beirut. At that time that was the only boarding school for girls in the Middle East. My parents also contacted my old school in Calcutta and decided to home school me – so I ended up attending two schools – going to Mr. Hartley's school in the daytime and then would come home and be home schooled by my mother based on the material that were sent every month by the Franciscan fathers of Don Bosco School, Calcutta.

Every few months we used to visit my sister in Beirut and we would then drive to various religious and historical sites in Jordan such as Roman ruins of Balbeck, Jericho, Petra and various points along the Dead Sea. Beirut was a fashionable, cosmopolitan and sophisticated city – the "Paris" of the Middle East. You could ski on the snows of the resorts near Broumana and on the same day water ski on the Mediterranean. The West Bank, Jerusalem and Bethlehem were all then part of Jordan and I still have various artifacts from our trips.

Qasim was still working for us and he also ran a small general store – financed by my father. He had to go back – once or twice a month to continue his military training. His life was improving, and he told my parents that he wanted to get married for which he was saving money. Marriage was an expensive affair since he as the male had to pay dowry to his prospective wife's family.

By 1967 the war clouds were gathering again in the Middle East. In early May 1967, Qasim told us that he was again being forced to join the Army and would be sent overseas and this time Ali also would not be able to work as his substitute since he was also drafted into the Iraqi army. We bid both of them farewell and my mother gave them some gifts and Qasim promised that he would be back as soon as his unit was demobilized.

In May 1967, Egypt expelled the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai Peninsula, which had been stationed there since 1957 to provide a peace-keeping buffer zone. In reaction to the Arab – Israeli tensions, Egypt amassed a huge number of tanks, armaments and soldiers on the border, and closed the Straits of Tiran to all ships flying Israeli flags or carrying strategic materials, and called for unified Arab action against Israel. On June 5, 1967, Israel launched what is commonly viewed as a pre-emptive attack against Egypt's Air force and completely wiped out the entire Egyptian and Syrian Air forces. Jordan, which had signed a mutual defense treaty with Egypt on May 30, then attacked western Jerusalem and Netanya. Iraq also publicly committed its

units to the war effort. At the war's end which lasted for a few weeks, Israel had gained control of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, eastern Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights which were originally part of either Egypt, Jordan or Syria. The Arab armies – Egypt's and Syria's along with a few units from Jordan and Iraq were routed and the Egyptian Air Force was wiped out.

We had no news from Qasim and our inquiries to Qasim's family were to no avail – since they did not know his whereabouts either. One day in early August we were surprised to see Ali at our doorstep and my mother asked about his welfare and also about Qasim. Ali started weeping and then told us his story. Their unit which included both Ali and Qasim were sent to the Syrian border with Israel and were awaiting orders to enter Israel. However fearful that their own soldiers might turn against them, the Army command issued the soldiers weapons but without any ammunition. They did not enter Israel at all and when the Israel Army mounted an attack in the early hours of dawn – they abandoned their positions and fled on foot. Qasim was killed in the attack and Ali saw his cousin fall but never found out what happened to his body.

That same year, in 1967, Iraq severed diplomatic relations with the US and Great Britain. Mr. Hartley's school was closed down. I was shipped off to a boarding school in Calcutta where I spent four miserable but formative years before joining IIT – an engineering college. My sister finished her schooling in Beirut and started university education in Calcutta. My father's contractual obligations with Iraqi Airways ended in 1971 and he returned to Calcutta after a nine year stay in Baghdad.
In July 2004 after the fall of Saddam Hussein's government, Abdel Karim Qasim, the slain Prime Minister's body was discovered by a news team associated with Radio Dijlah in Baghdad. His burial ground is a shrine and he is now viewed as a hero and saint by many Iraqis.

Chapter 9

Hoar frost and the conscious universe by Dr Carl Von Essen

Henry David Thoreau, in his winter wanderings around Concord, observed an unusually heavy hoar frost one morning. He described it in his essay "The Natural History of Massachusetts":

"Every tree, shrub, and spire of grass ...was covered with a dense ice foliage, answering, as it were, leaf for leaf to its summer dress....It struck me that these ghost leaves, and the green ones whose forms they assume, were the creations of but one law; that in obedience to the same law as vegetable juices swell gradually into the perfect leaf , on the one hand, and the crystalline particles troop to their standard in the same order, on the other."

Thoreau expanded these speculations to generalize that other phenomena or "natural rhymes" could "imply an eternal melody, independent of any particular sense."

An eternal melody of nature? Played by what organist?

In his classic masterpiece, "On Growth and Form", the Scottish biologist D'Arcy Thompson described the systematic self-similarity of anatomical structures in nature. He wrote, "Cell and tissue, shell and bone, leaf and flower, are so many portions of matter, and it is in obedience to the laws of physics that these particles have been moved, molded, and conformed....Their problems of form are in the first instance mathematical problems, their problem of growth are essentially physical problems, and the morphologist is, ipso facto, a student of physical science."

His observations on this architectural evolution was later explained as forms of

self-similar sets or fractals by the mathematician Mandelbrot in his "Fractals in Nature."

This evolution of thought began much earlier, perhaps when the Pythagoreans discovered and described the relationship of the harmonics of sound to whole numbers.

Our perception of nature is confined by the limits of sensation. Only our imagination can explore beyond those limits. But indirect evidence from cosmological research suggests marvelous discoveries that can transform our mundane lives. That the universe is alive is one such metaphysical discovery. It is increasingly verified by the calculations indicating the presence of previously unknown cosmic forces such as dark matter and dark energy, existing beyond our range of observing instruments.

The universe is a living presence. Following the chaos of the big bang, it is now possible to see order through the forces we now call the laws of physics, realized by the Pythagoreans and then formalized by the Platonists.

Consciousness did not appear suddenly in one species, Homo sapiens. It has been there in some form from the very beginning.

Today, on our Earth, we, like Thoreau, can marvel at natural wonders and speculate on the forces that have created them. Since the very beginning of life, from the single organism that has led to us and to every living being, there has been an awareness; for being aware and escaping danger has allowed our archaic ancestors to survive, reproduce and evolve. These mind-like properties, a consciousness, is the consequential necessity for the evolution of life.

Human discovery brings closer and closer our awareness that our universe is a living being, throbbing with an energy that governs all, an energy that we have not been able to measure, even comprehend, a consciousness which is shared by all life and matter. Thoreau's hoar frost is such a manifestation.

Chapter 10

Reaching the other side by Dr. Carl Von Essen

Occasionally I find myself looking at something and then have been surprised to realize that I am actually seeing it. As for example, standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon and "admiring the view." This scene registers on my retina which transmits the data to the visual center in the back of the brain. The resulting mental image certainly evokes a pleasurable feeling, perhaps also an emotion of awe or even fear (what if I should fall off the cliff?).

But then something else happens. The image opens wide, like the opening curtain of a play. I enter and become part of the scene, grasping the magnificence of the geological formation of the Grand Canyon, its colors, and its history. I have shifted from looking as a passive spectator to seeing as an active participant, mustering my mind to uncover all the bits and pieces of memories that relate to what I am now seeing.

These are the two landscapes of the Grand Canyon—one through the eye of the body, the other through the eye of the mind. Henry David Thoreau coined an apt expression for the latter," a sauntering of the eye."

This phenomenon happens to everyone. Most of us spend lots of time in looking, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling without fully appreciating what our senses tell us. Like spectators, we are largely looking at existence, rather than, as other animals and as plants are compelled to do, living in the moment, deeply involved with the objects of their senses, using all their experience, because often their lives may depend on it.

Thus then is the difference between being an observer, recording an impression or gathering data, to being a perceiver, distinguishing differences, discriminating the sensory information and creating relational concepts. Indeed the word

perception comes from the Latin, per-capere, to take or grasp through, that is, to actively seize upon an object or process such as an observation.

Of course, we so-called "enlightened" human beings have moved beyond the primitive need to only survive and reproduce; little need nowadays to be preoccupied with the whisper of wind or the sound in the forest that may warn of consequences of life and death.

Indeed, with the distractions involved in living in our complex technological society, I readily lose attention and concentration and do not heed my senses, allowing them to slip by "unconsidered and unnoticed".

Yet the wilderness still resides within through neural connections (engrams) that are hard-wired and inherited early in our evolution. My senses are still acute enough to tell more than I am generally conscious off. A walk along the seashore, however, is an example of a sensory experience that triggers awareness, enriches mundane life and gives more meaning to what I am here for.

Smell is perhaps the most evocative of our senses. Next to touch, it is our most primitive sensation, closely associated with the emotional brain. The sharp, iodine-like smell of tidal flats can breach mysterious reservoirs of memories that have long ago been catalogued and stored away. The sense of smell can work like a light switch, a long-forgotten experience is immediately recalled when an uncommon, but immediately recognizable scent wafts past.

Through vision, I see the clear pools in which delicate anemones, spiny urchins and starfish nestle, while tiny crabs, ignorant of my benign interest in their hiding places, scuttle away from my looming shadow Fronds of filamentous sea weed sway gently in the currents of the crevices and channels that are carved into the submerged rocky formations, creating images of beauty that stir primeval associations. I hear the breaking waves and taste the salt that is scarcely different from the taste of my blood, a sensation that recalls the origins of all of us from the ancient sea. Perhaps these sensations trigger the most primitive engrams of roots from the distant past.

What lies within these sensory experiences? Can I distill them into some pure nectar that can be preserved and ever after be a part of me, perhaps imparting equanimity, wisdom and understanding of the mystery that is life?

Perhaps so. That nectar of experience is the memory stored in the mind, reachable by mysterious neural processes.

However, there is a barrier that limits the reach of our senses. Mathematicians tell us that there is an abyss that conception cannot span. It delimits the fathomless dimension beyond the observable universe. Swedenborg called it the abyss of nature. Our senses cannot get us there, only our intuitive imagination and the cold, pristine language of mathematics. What is this barrier beyond our sensory world? A century ago, a biologist, Jacob von Uexkull, described it in a metaphor that can be readily grasped.

It starts with a story about the world of the wood tick.

The tick climbs a plant and positions itself on a leaf or twig and patiently waits there for days, weeks, even months. When it senses the odor of butyric acid, a component of mammalian sweat from the exocrine glands of the skin, it releases its hold on and drops. If lucky, it will fall on the passing mammal, and through the sensation of heat, finds its way to the base of the hairs where its primitive pincers will penetrate the mammal's skin to enable it to feast on a blood meal. When fully engorged it will drop again to the ground and slowly repeat the process.

Through his observations and experiments Uexkull determined that the tick's senses are completely confined to the small range of smell and to temperature that I described. That is its world. Uexküll studied similar qualities in many other life-forms and eventually conceived a term that he called a subjective soap-bubble to describe the confines of the perceptive universe that surrounds each living thing. According to this model we too are encompassed by this metaphoric soap bubble with a range of perceptions that are comparable but by no means superior to those of our fellow creatures. For example, compare our sense of sight to that of an owl, our hearing compared to that of a tiger, the sense of smell compared to a dog. We have, of course, invented appendages that vastly and artificially extend our senses. The tick's sensory world spans a few inches, our sensory world spans billions of light years and infinitesimally small dimensions with the observing and recording instruments of our invention. Yet our world remains limited to that which we can perceive.

We are, in fact, also confined within that bubble. That is our world. Without our senses there would be no universe. But, as thinking, observing, and measuring beings, the theologian and priest, Thomas Merton believes, mankind has come to isolate himself within this impenetrable bubble which contains all apparent reality in the form of purely subjective experience. Confinement in that world he claims tends to a centering upon our own collective ego, thus we become oblivious to the certainty that the self is not in the center but is merely part of the vast ground that extends beyond comprehension.

We are cluttered too with our own discursive thinking which hinders our perception of a cosmic reality that lies beyond the walls of that metaphoric soap bubble. Although mathematics can surely penetrate it, the language of poetry may make more accessible the knowing of our place in this mysterious place.

Take for example what the poet, Rilke, experienced while sitting in the garden of Duino Castle. Leaning against a tree and absorbed in the surrounding nature, "in a state of almost unconscious contemplation," he felt some "almost imperceptible vibrations," appearing to emanate from the tree, a condition so perfect, so persistent, and different from all others he had experienced. He insistently asked what was happening to him and almost immediately found an expression which satisfied him, as he said aloud to himself that he had reached the other side of nature.

He had entered into the natural surroundings in a unitive experience and through his imagination was looking beyond the walls of the sensory bubble and "reaching the other side of nature." Such too was the moment one night on the island of Helgoland when the physicist Werner Heisenberg, alone, looking out over the sea, described his visionary experience, how he "saw into the very heart of nature," the other side of this abyss, when the solution to the uncertainty principle, a vital part to the quantum mechanics theory, exploded into his consciousness after endless calculations over many days. They both experienced the extraordinary glimpse of the distant reaches of reality lying beyond the perceptive barrier, one in the metaphoric language of mathematics, the other in the metaphoric language of poetry. As I view the Grand Canyon, or indeed any object that stirs the senses, a grander vision may enter my consciousness. It is that moment, when a "tremendous muchness" William James's term, becomes unforgettable, awesome and beautiful.

The state of pure experience does not happen everyday. It is an exceptional moment for human beings, fettered as we are by the symbolic structures which direct our mundane activities. And why should it be otherwise? We have built those structures ourselves, within which we live and survive. But, Wallace Steven's gorilla of nature is there, in the room with us, and can not be ignored. It won't go away. It is well to be prepared when that moment happens, to look into the very heart of nature and to try to reach the other side, the visionary world of spirit.

This then is a primal, basic, deep awareness of existence. Let our mind's muddy river with its ceaseless flow of trivia and trash flow unhindered until some clarity allows us to glimpse the universe's pure reality and sublime beauty.

Chapter 11

Yellama by Dr Carl Von Essen

1. The Village The rising sun lit the barren peaks of the Jawadhi Hills with shades of rose and amber. Soon, its rays glistened on the brilliant green of the paddy fields as six women emerged from the small Tamil village of Elagiri. They walked carefully in single file along the earthen ridges separating the watery rectangles that stretched in a checkerboard pattern along the broad valley. "Ayo," one of them called, "Let us hurry to finish planting before the sun gets too hot." "Yellamma!" Another woman cried in her shrill voice, "You were trying to get out of working all day yesterday too! Today we must finish the whole field.

PLANTING THE PADDY SEEDLINGS

Yellamma said nothing. At twenty-five she was younger than the others and thus was the last in the line. The red sari was already tucked between her legs like a men's dhoti. She was ready for the arduous task of planting seedlings of rice one by one, carefully spaced in the muddy loam that the men had furrowed the day before.

Her eyes betrayed the weeks of constant pain and difficulty in eating enough to nourish her for such work. This was a shameful secret that had beset her small household. The mouth sore was a well-known condition among the villagers and was thought to result from evil spirits. Exorcists sometimes came to the village and sing sacred chants as they danced in front of the afflicted. Yellamma had seen them but also saw the patients usually wither away and die.

Then there was the village healer, Govindaswami, but she was afraid of what he might do, remembering the screams of the men and women who had gone for his treatment. Appiah, her husband was fearful, too, and had tried to ignore her complaints. He was busy, anyway, in dealing with the panchayat, plowing the fields and loading the ripened and threshed paddy onto the village's bullock

cart for the overnight journey to the market town. His mother, Chinamma, lived with them, cooked and looked after the children.

CHINAMMA

She was a small, bright-eyed and witty woman who loved to gossip and was even friendly with her daughter-in-law, but had a foreboding of what was happening and was going to happen. Chinamma had already started cooking softer rice with curds that Yellamma could swallow. Even the breakfast upma was too hard for her painful mouth.

The village lay in the center of the fertile valley. The simple huts with roofs of thatched Palmyra leaves were scattered around a deep well and shielded from the sun by coconut palms, peepal, papaya and mango trees. There were no doors or windows, just openings in the walls of sun burnt brick and clay. Small outhouses and cattle sheds ensured the sanitary state of the village, while the courtyards were swept clean by the women every morning. The men stayed aloof from these mundane chores. They were responsible for the germination and cultivation of the young paddy plants, the maintenance and operation of the irrigation system, plowing, transporting and selling of the threshed and winnowed paddy, and various vegetables in the market.

PREPARING FOR PLANTING

The elders, all men, the panchayat governing the area, lounged most days in the village center, smoking bidis and gossiping.

The village functioned quietly and efficiently in its daily activities but there were many social occasions when the routine was interrupted. Pongal, the harvest festival full of dance and music, came in the winter, and then came the annual pilgrimage to the Venkateshwara temple at Tirumala. The young women had their long black tresses shorn for the glory of Vishnu and the enrichment of the bulging coffers of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams Trust, the hegemony of the temple priests and local Brahmins in the cool highlands of southern Andhra Pradesh. Dravidian hair was said to be the finest in the world and was prized globally for the making of wigs and cross-hairs for the bombsights on aircraft and on other ballistic weapons. Yellamma had already made two pilgrimages and been shorn each time. Then too there were weddings and funerals and births in the village and the periodic pujas at the small neighborhood temple.

Yellamma, large eyed and attractive, was born in the village, married at fourteen, and had delivered three children. Her main occupation was to work with fellow villagers, planting the rice seedlings. At harvest time the women and men used small sickles to cut the plants with the ripe rice kernels. After drying for a week the paddy was threshed over a smooth floor by beating with flails. Finally the threshed paddy was winnowed by slowly shaking basketfuls of grain in a good breeze, allowing the dust and chaff to blow away as the paddy flowed into wicker baskets ready then to be filled into burlap sacks.

Like most of the other villagers, Yellamma enjoyed chewing betel quids when

working. While the men could also smoke, women had no recourse but to chew betel, often with a pinch of powdered tobacco. The habit grew with age and she often slept with the quid between the lower teeth and the left cheek. The tobacco gave a feeling of contentment and allayed hunger pangs.

Yellamma was only twenty-five when a growth in her inner cheek developed that gradually became painful. This had happened to others in the village, when the pain and discomfort became bothersome, they asked for help from the village healer.

Lean but muscular, Govindaswami was a jack-of-all-trades, a member of the Achari caste of artisans and a member of the Panchayat, building furniture, repairing implements and forging iron fittings for the bullock carts, harnesses, and the irrigation system. With his practical mind, his forge, and the support of the Brahmin priest in the nearby temple he became the village healer. Villagers came to him for simple remedies such as hot oil massage for arthritic aches, ayurvedic remedies for diarrhea and constipation. But when a man or woman came to see him with the aching sore in the cheek he prescribed and gave a treatment with a hot poker applied to the face until the heat was unbearable. As the growth became worse, as they all seemed to do, he gave even more drastic treatments until the growth had erupted through the skin. Then he heated the poker in the forge to red-hot heat and seared the growth to the sound of screams that resounded throughout the village.

Over the months, Yellamma's symptoms became worse and she lost more weight from the pain of eating. Chinamma became worried and talked to her son. "Your wife is having the same problem as the others. You must do something, Appiah!" He nodded, reluctantly, knowing that there was trouble ahead. Appiah confronted Yellamma during their evening meal. "Wife, you must have this looked after. Why not ask Govindaswami? He can help you," he asked gently.

"I don't want to go to Govindaswami," she replied firmly. "His patients suffer and then die. Take me in your next trip to the town where I can go to the big mission hospital." Chinamma agreed. She had been to the hospital years before when she had her cataracts removed. "My eyesight became suddenly better although I must wear heavy glasses now" she said. "They will know what to do." "But it will cost money, Yellamma, and those foreigners will try to make you a Christian!" replied Appiah.

"I don't care. You see I am doing no good now and it will get worse." Chinamma said, "I will go with you. The children can stay with my sister. Appiah will have to take care of himself. We can go with him on the bullock cart tomorrow night." Appiah finally agreed and they prepared for the long journey to the town.

2. The Hospital They left the village at midnight, soon reaching the paved highway to the market town. Two bullocks pulled the wooden cart piled high with sacks of paddy. Underneath was a single flickering kerosene lantern swinging under the single axle, barely visible to the occasional lorries speeding past.

Yellamma and Chinamma found a snug place to sleep while Appiah dozed on top of the piled sacks, occasionally urging the bullocks on with a flick of the quirt.

When dawn lighted the sky the cart had reached the outskirts of the town and as traffic increased, all headed toward the market square where produce from the surrounding countryside was bartered and sold. They passed the large, sprawling red sandstone Mogul fort, an outpost of Tipu Sultan, surrounded by a moat, now 160 years later half filled only with hyacinths and some green, slimy water.

A large walled compound appeared; a sign in English and Tamil identified it as the mission hospital. Numerous white multistoried buildings were still lit with electric lights. Appiah gently woke the two women, gave money and arranged a meeting place in the evening when they might return to Elagiri.

Chinamma took Yellamma by the hand into the compound. It was all frightening; numerous figures were hurrying in different directions in the early daylight. A group of nurses, in snow-white saris went by. Chinamma asked them for directions. One nurse guided the two women to the outpatient registration. The surrounding buildings seemed huge, many even with elevators. Strange languages were heard as they went through the registration procedures and finally reached the clinic. But there was no rushing or crowding as so often happened in train stations or markets. Each patient was given a chit with a number, to be called in turn.

Eventually Yellamma was ushered into a cubicle with an examination chair. A young white coated woman, speaking her tongue, interviewed and examined her. After a while a group of older doctors came in and repeated the process. Several seemed to come from other parts of India and there were even two white doctors, one a white haired lady who spoke Tamil in an American accent. Yellamma knew that from seeing American movies in the local cinema. After they examined her they went on to examine the patients in the adjoining cubicles. Eventually the young doctor returned, called back Chinamma, and sat down with both of them.

"Yellamma," she said, "you have a growth that we can treat and possibly cure if you follow our instructions absolutely and complete the treatment schedule." The young woman then gave a detailed plan. Yellamma somehow knew that this reality had come but at the same time was deeply frightened. She turned to Chinamma, who could only nod her head, tears in her eyes. But they knew also that they must get permission from Appiah and approval of the village council to help pay for treatment.

The rest of the day was like a bad dream, people of all colors and languages going hither and thither, nurses, white-clad and blue-clad, students, needles in the cheek, instruments taking samples, big machines that made pictures of the insides, waiting rooms, finally at the end of the long day she was given a charpoy in the women's hostel to rest and a chit to return in a week if she wished to have the treatment.

They met up with Appiah, who had spent the day bartering and selling the paddy, and returned that night, exhausted but somehow hopeful, to the comfort of their village. Appiah agreed to the proposed treatment without question. Chinamma prepared a festive breakfast with uthappam, sambar and rasam, but reserving fresh curds for Yellamma. They all slept the entire day. Yellamma began to feel hopeful and prepared for a long day of planting, resolved not to submit to defeat. The only thing left was to get the approval of the elders and the blessings of the priest.

3. Decision Govindaswami shook his head. "The mission doctors will only take our money and try to make her a Christian before she dies." The village elders who were gathered around nodded. The oldest, Ramalingam, lean and frail, the village headman, listened quietly and then spoke firmly, "Appiah, the honor of the village and temple are at stake. How can she go to these mission people, surely bringing contamination back to our sacred land?"

RAMALINGAM AND GOVINDASWAMI

Appiah felt a tremendous weight pressing him into the ground. What should he do? The priest too supported Govindaswami's argument. Should Yellamma go through the traditional cure, the searing of the tumor, the application of salves, the blessing of the priest? There was one person in the village that Appiah could turn to. Brahmasundaram, the son of Chittoor Doraiswami, the Brahmin who owned most of the village land, was visiting his family, on leave from medical studies in Madras. Surely, he could give an enlightened opinion.

The husband and her mother walked the kilometer separating the landowner's home from the village. It was a pucca red-tiled two story building, built around a central courtyard, in a spacious compound surrounded by a brick wall and guarded by the chowkidar, an elderly man with a fierce military mustache. In a thatch covered carport sat a new white Ambassador automobile. They asked to see the son for a medical question.

After a short time Brahmasundaram appeared, flanked by his father who was clothed in a spotless freshly starched dhoti, bare-chested with the sacred thread crossing the torso after the Brahmin tradition, and three vertical lines representing the trident of Shiva marked in ash on his forehead. His son, bespectacled, tall and lean, who appeared to have come from the tennis court on the compound, wore white trousers, shirt, and shoes.

"How can I help you?" Brahmasundaram asked in the local vernacular. Appiah recounted Yellamma's situation with frequent interjections from Chinamma. "Doctor Aiya," Appiah concluded respectfully, "We have a serious problem. The priest wants Yellamma to have treatment by Govindaswami. He says that it would drive out the evil spirit that brought all this trouble but the hospital doctors say that they can cure her. What should we do?"

The elder man looked at his son and in high Tamil said, "Allow the village elders to decide. This woman deserves the wisdom of the village." The young

man hesitated. His father always supported and nurtured the local traditions and hierarchy that had given stability to the village community for generations. The local priest was a Brahmin too, although of the Ayengar subcaste. But Brahmasundaram knew also stories of the results of treatment by village healers and had knowledge as well of the "Western" treatment of these cancers from his modern medical training in Madras.

The village traditions and his father must be respected, but he knew from local hearsay that the holy man residing in the nearby hills, Sri Krishnapillai, was a retired teacher from Tirunelvelli, a highly educated man, enlightened in modern ways. The son consulted with his father, who nodded approval, and then turned to the two villagers. "Appiah, tell your wife to go for counsel from the holy man at the spring in the hill above us and then come back to see me tomorrow."

The next morning, Chinamma led Yellamma and Appiah up the hill to the shrine. Chinamma had been there many times to meditate and seek advice from the sage. They followed the stream up a well trodden path and entered a small glade, lush with grass and flanked by numerous trees. At the head of the meadow was a small shrine, built of sandstone, consisting of four pillars supporting a conical overhanging cupola with finely detailed carvings of scenes from Krishna's life. The walls of the granite platform supporting the structure had a frieze of gopis and musicians in ecstatic movements and embraces. It was a temple obviously built century before. In the center of the platform, open in all directions, sat an elderly man, white-bearded, wearing only dhoti and glasses. Around him was a group of six children, dressed in the uniform of the regional primary school along with a teacher, wearing a silk sari, all dressed up in their Sunday best, for, indeed, it was that holiday. Sri Krishnapillai greeted the newcomers with a smile and a wave, bidding them to find a place to sit. He continued with his discourse to the school group about the lives of the great saints of India, in fact a sort of Sunday school for the youngsters. In a while the lesson was finished, and the group left with animated chatter and expressions of gratitude.

He turned to the newcomers, and asked, "What can I do for you?" Appiah responded and then Chinamma took over and recounted the story that had been so often repeated. The sage listened intently, frequently interjecting questions on the details of the doctor's findings and proposals and the priest's counterargument. Finally, he turned to Yellamma, who had sat silent through the long interview' "Amma, you know that you have a serious condition, it will cause much pain and suffering before death if it is not properly treated. You must choose quickly."

Yellamma bowed her head and asked, "Nandri, Vellaram Aiya (Thank you, respected divine Sir), I will follow your counsel. But what is your advice?"

Sri Krishnapillai gave her a look of gentle impatience, "Amma, there is only one thing to do. Get the permission of the elders. My note will be sufficient. Then return to the hospital and follow the instructions exactly as the doctors

direct. But go to the temple near the hospital every puja day that you are there and have the priest sprinkle water of the Ganges over the place that the doctors are treating. Then repeat the mantras I will give you twelve times a day. Your experiences at the hospital through this crisis can be of help to your family and village. And also, please convey my greetings to Reverend Jesudas, their chaplain, my old friend and classmate at the university."

The elderly man then recited the simple mantras until Yellamma could repeat them, wrote a chit to give the village elders, and then dismissed the trio with a casual wave of the hand. He then took up the book that he was reading. It was "The Nature of the Universe" by the physicist, Sir Arthur Eddington. Appiah led the group back down the hill and across the paddy fields to their village.

The second meeting with Brahmasundaram went quickly. He was pleased; the village elders would be satisfied and the poor woman would get the best treatment and also spiritual support from her faith. His father accepted the son's recommendation and called in the village elders to deliver the note from Sri Krishnapillai and explain it to gain their approval for hospital charges.

Next morning the air was cold and smoke from the cooking fires lay over the valley in sheets of purple and blue. Appiah and his brother carried the baggage as the two women followed them to the bus stop two kilometers from the village.

4. Return Yellamma's homecoming from the hospital came on the eve of Pongal. The entire village was in a happy turmoil of cleaning the houses and outbuildings, breaking and discarding old pots and utensils, reflooring the homes and grounds with fresh cow dung and clay slurry, and painting the cattle horns, carts and tools in festive colors.

PONGAL DECORATION

Yellamma was joyful to finally be back in her own home and village. She had recovered her taste, appetite and weight after the mysterious treatment that the mission doctors had called "radium." She recounted her experiences repeatedly to fascinated audiences of men, women, and children: the mystery of the operating theater with the masked and robed doctors and nurses surrounding her as if in some sort of ancient ritual; of waking up in her hospital bed with strange devices in her face and neck that remained several days; the pain and discomfort through that time, of taking only liquid nourishment, finally the removal of the magic needles but the continued pain relieved by injections of medicines that gave a wonderful feeling of pleasure; finally, after weeks, the return of comfort, taste, and the ability to eat normally.

The festivities soon became the whole life of the village. Drums beat day and night. There came itinerant musicians and dancers, tribal people from the nearby hills who improvised theater sets and in the light of hissing Petromax lanterns performed scenes from the Ramayana, the performances often lasting until dawn. The Brahmin zamindar and his family, sponsors of the imported artists, sat and observed discretely in a panoplied pandal.

Yellamma and her family rejoined the flow of village life. The priest blessed her with the mark of Vishnu upon her forehead when she went to perform the puja of thanks at the temple. She walked up the hill along with Chinamma to the little shrine where Sri Krishnapillai, surrounded by the usual attentive audience of worshippers and of the curious, bade that a way be made for them. He interrogated Yellamma at length and heard her recount what she had experienced.

During recuperation in the hospital (Yellamma recounted to the sage) she had met young women in uniforms different from the nurses. They asked about her family, home life, and village. Yellamma liked one particularly. Radha was a tall, fair young woman from Kancheepuram who had come nearly every day to listen to her problems. She told Radha about the loss of her second newborn son from "the black disease." She related how the village midwife had helped to deliver the child, cutting the umbilical cord with a knife and tying it off with sinew. Within a week the umbilical stump began to fester, turning black as the newborn infant developed high fever, and then convulsions, and was soon dead. Yellamma told of other horror stories, of other newborns and infants dying of intractable diarrhea, of small pox and of measles.

Radha had listened intently and wrote everything down in her notebook. She talked to Yellamma about sanitation and making water safe to drink, of ways to avoid mosquitoes, and the dangers of walking barefoot in the fields where the villagers went for their daily bodily functions.

"Radha"' she asked one day, "Why not come to our village to help us to understand the things that you ask me, about matters of health and proper nutrition, things that we know little about?" Radha nodded her head enthusiastically, "Oh, Amma, that is a wonderful idea. Let me talk to my boss about the possibility."

The next day Radha returned with her department head. A trim, short, animated man in white bush shirt, trousers and sandals, he questioned Yellamma and then asked, "Amma, will your village want our help?" Yellamma wagged her head vigorously in the South Indian gesture of agreement. "Yes, Doctor Aiya, if the men agree. I will do all I can to get it. I know that the women will all agree. We need help from someone who knows our problems. The government health center is too far away, they never come to see us, and the people there are fat and lazy with their government salaries."

"Very well," the doctor replied, "If you can get the permission and invitation from your panchayat, we will seek the necessary approval from the District Medical Officer and the Tahsildar to set up a visiting clinic. It will not be easy because there are prejudices against us even though most of the doctors and nurses are non-Christian. It may take time, but here in India, time is known to be eternal and need not worry anyone, because it is always there." The doctor, who was called Professor Mathai, head of Community Medicine, smiled at his small joke.

With Radha's help, Yellamma practiced reading and writing Tamil, improving

on the remnants of her brief schooling in the taluk. She began to read pamphlets that Radha had given her about health and nutrition. A new idea burned in her mind as the words of the sage echoed, "Your experience can help your family and village."

She finished by telling Sri Krishnapillai that she had been blessed with good fortune, and if her health continued that she could help carry back to the village some of the modern ideas of health that she had learned at the hospital.

Sri Krishnapillai listened to Yellamma's long discourse and then said, "Amma, you can bring the blessings of your healing to your fellow villagers. The people at the mission hospital mean well and they have much to offer. Inform the panchayat of their goodwill and ask them to invite Radha to visit the women of the village. I am sure they will agree after seeing what has happened to you." Yellamma gratefully left the offering of fresh fruits and coconuts, leaving the shrine with a shining smile.

5. Trouble Govindaswami again shook his head, "What ideas are these, Yellamma? You want the foreigners to come to this village and change the way we do things?" Ramalingam nodded in agreement. Yellamma answered calmly, "You misunderstand. They are fellow Tamils, who do not even think of changing your ways or anyone else's. They want to help us with issues of health. The women want this and have asked me to speak for them. We are now an organization, the Elagiri Women's Association. Don't you understand why we want it?"

The assembled men shook their heads. "Look at the children who are weak and not growing well with their blood like water. Think of the infants who have died this year of the "black disease". Look at your own nephew, Govindaswami, with scabies," she spoke with heated emphasis.

Govindaswami gave her a startled look. He turned to Ramalingam and asked, "Should we let these women run our village?" Ramalingam turned to the others on the verandah of the village clerk's hut. No one answered. Some shrugged their shoulders and others busied themselves with lighting cheroots or bidis. "Perhaps we can let them come for a look," answered Ramalingam. The others nodded.

6. One Year Later It was a holiday, a three day festival called Adi Kappu celebrating the goddesses of each caste, the Grama Devathais. Music, dances, dramas with actors and bands of musicians were celebrated with the neighboring villages. A special event had been organized by the Panchayat for the second afternoon. Yellamma was nervous and anxious that afternoon, arranging and rearranging her sari, putting on her make-up of turmeric and kohl and dressing the children in their newly bought clothes. Appiah proudly wore a new lungi made of fine cotton by the weavers of Malevelli and a long sleeved shirt of rayon made in Japan.

Soon the dignitaries arrived: Sri Krishnapillai was mounted on the temple ele-

phant with the mahout, flanked by two priests, with many of his followers, mostly young women in bright saris, beating tambourines and strewing flowers along the elephant's path to Elagiri; then the Tahsildar of the district along with Dr. Subramaniam, the Chief Medical Officer, in traditional dress, in a government Matador Jeep; finally a delegation from the mission hospital, Professor Mathai, Radha and several of her co-workers, the blond haired doctor who had performed the operation on Yellamma, and an American, Professor Hamilton, a young parasitologist, in the hospital Land Rover.

Electricians from the town had come to set up a generator, wiring and a loudspeaker system for the ceremony. The band beat drums incessantly and blew on shernais as the dignitaries, village officials, and the crowd of spectators gathered. Finally, things settled, the dignitaries seated in chairs on the dais in front of the microphone, the village officials seated to the side, while the Brahmin landowner with his family sat a slight distance behind. Dominating the scene was a new building, a pucca construction of brick and mortar with a tile roof, festooned with multicolored ribbons, with a sign, in Tamil and English, "Elagiri Panchayat Primary Health Center, established by the Women's Association of Elagiri."

Govindaswami, resplendent in white lungi and tunic, had been selected by the Panchayat to preside. He proudly introduced the guests of honor, one by one, as young women of the village came up to drape a garland of marigold and jasmine around the neck.

The dedication ceremony dragged on through the afternoon. One after another, starting with the Tahsildar, the speakers droned the usual platitudes, the audience, half-dozing, clapping at the right moments. Finally, came the turn of Sri Krishnapillai, now dressed in a flowing robe that streamed behind as he briskly strode to the microphone. The audience awoke, alert to hear something original He turned toward Yellamma and folded his palms together saying, "To this woman we should all be grateful for the creation of this center of health care and education for this entire taluk." Heads turned toward her as she blushed under her dusky complexion, instinctively pulling the end of the sari across her face.

The holy man continued in his resonant, teacher's voice, "She has mobilized the women to lead the charge against ignorance and apathy. And the men responded and brought their creative efforts together to construct this building, a symbol for progress and enlightenment. I wish to especially mention Govindaswami Appa who led the effort and whose skill has resulted in this beautiful and solid structure."

Heads turned again as Govindaswami acknowledged the applause with a bowed head. "And last but not least", he smiled at the platitude, "Doraiswami Aiya contributed funds to supply the building with modern equipment, including a gas sterilizer and refrigerator for medicines and vaccines. As you already have heard, Dr. Subramaniam will send a district nurse bimonthly and the mission hospital will send a nurse and registrar also bimonthly so that there will be a

weekly surgery (clinic)."

"I commend this project and this building to the cosmic energy that the universe bestows even handidly on all positive good deeds and ask Pundit Ramaswami-ayengar to bless this building and all that is within it."

PANDIT RAMASWAMIAYENGAR

As the priest came forward with a bowl of burning incense, the crowd of spectators erupted into applause and began to move closer to participate in the ceremony and partake of the prasadum.

In the turmoil Yellamma became the center of attention with her proud husband protecting her from the pressure of the crowd. She became quickly involved in talking to the nurses from the DMO's office and from the hospital to organize a daily reading of health issues that Yellamma and other village women would deliver at the health center.

The doctors clustered together, discussing the coordination of efforts to treat and eliminate hookworm, malaria and dysentery in the area, and to begin a vaccination program against smallpox and measles. The Tahsildar talked to the panchayat about the new scheme of bringing electrical power to the village. The young American professor was introduced by Brahmasundaram to the village elders to discuss his project to collect and examine stool samples for parasites.

After a simple but sumptuous banquet of rice, rasam, curds, vegetable curry and fruit, served on banana leaves, that lasted into the evening, Sri Krishnapillai ended the function with a brief prayer in Sanskrit, translated to Tamil by the village priest, and, as he was leaving, surrounded by his acolytes, said to Yellamma, "The Lord has blessed you and you have blessed the village with your goodness. Come to see me whenever you wish."

Yellamma turned to Chinamma and sighed, "What a nice old man!"

Chapter 12

New Year's Thoughts by Dr Gouri Datta

This is the way the landed poet thinks
Of the past and new year in metaphors –
The old man in torn fatigues hobbles past
Some keloid scars, some badges pinned,
Gratitude for bullets dodged
Scattering casings of memories for the pickup truck
A picture becoming a shadow
A warrior becoming the steam
Of tearoom chats.
The New Year is a child at the gatepost,
The New Year is a wide-eyed earth-cub child
My poem takes a deep breath watching, heart fast
Of what is to come as saps rise.
We watch him with a patron's kindness, and hope
He will find daisies in the fields,
For him the taps that played the old man's walk
Will be the light foot polka of sunrise .

Chapter 13

The Showing by Dr Gouri Datta

The tempo of the usual hustle and bustle of daily life seemed to have jumped to a faster gear at the large old house, that stood like an ancient mastodon, at the end of the winding narrow small town road in Bengalitola, Phul-jharia.

Mrs.Hema Basu pushed her gold-rimmed glasses down to settle more firmly atop the bridge of her nose, and jerked the red Parker fountain-pen to encourage the ink to flow unhampered. She started writing what looked like a menu on the long thin notebook with lined paper, usually reserved for making grocery lists and keeping a running tally of expenses.

'Ma,' said the cook, Shivji, coming out of the kitchen . His face was flushed from the heat of the a Janata kerosene stove, a gas heater, a cooker and a traditional clay stove spewing coal smoke. Most household help called the mistress 'Ma 'in ordinary Bengali households all over northern India. Whereas in the fashionable corridors of parts of Kolkata, the capital of Bengal, the uniformed chaprasis or peons would call the lady of the house –'mem-sahib', a word originally reserved for western white women, a throwback from past colonial times.

Last year Hema had visited Rekha , an old school friend, who had married a prominent businessman in Kolkata.

Not only did Rekha live in an impressive mansion that used to be the living quarters of some long dead and buried British East India Co official, but she also had a special haunted room said to be visited on occasion by a sepulchral Lord Warren Hastings , Viceroy to India from England in the eighteenth century.

Rekha, Hema had noted with awe, had seven servants, all in blue and khaki liveries. They would address Rekha's husband as Sahib or the great white man, and Rekha as Mem-sahib or the great white woman. , the adjective 'great' being

mentally supplied to the meaning by Rekha.

Since that visit., Hema had tried to train their new chauffeur, Jailal, to use the Sahib and Mem-sahib routine, which he falteringly but faithfully followed. However, Shivji having been with the family for years, found it unacceptably hard to give up what he was used to. He reverted to calling Hema's husband, Aswini –' Babuji ' or respected father and Hema –' Ma' within a few weeks of Hema's enthusiastic coaching, much to the latter's chagrin.

Aswini Basu was a tall, lanky man with an absent-minded air, who had studied advanced Statistics in England, but had turned down a coveted actuarial position in London to return to India to be a part of the country's newly earned independence. He now taught Mathematics in Darbhanga Mithila College nearby , and felt satisfied and fulfilled. He also wanted to be with his aging parents, his father nearing retiring age .though still running a busy practice as an Ayurvedic medicine practitioner.

Aswini was a man of patriotic principles. He had participated in the ' Quit India ' movement to end British rule, and had walked with Mahatma Gandhi in the famous 'salt marches ' of the forties. . To this day he wore only khadi, a coarse off- white cotton fabric originally made from hand- turning spinning wheels locally, as an act of national solidarity, and to shun imported western clothes. He had moved in with his parents and in a couple of years had married through ghatak negotiations, this fair skinned and dimpled woman, Hema, distant relative of distant relatives . He and Hema had had three children, all growing up in that large mansion of a home designed and built by his father, the Sr Mr Atul Basu , who had made a good living and a name for himself in his profession as a healer. The house had seven bedrooms, two levels of terraces, large airy windows, and high ceilings. There was a spacious lawn, an orchard of guava, papaya, lichi, and banana trees , and four different varieties of mangoes.

Atul Basu, stopped working three years ago after Aswini's mother died of a sudden heart attack, and surrendered himself to being cared for, if somewhat bullied, by his strong -minded daughter in-law, Hema . He created his own complete world within the confines of his second storey bedroom, and his neighbors had not seen him leave the house in the last couple of years.

The Basu family , though originally from Bengal, had migrated two generations ago to the nearby state of Bihar in search of jobs –when Bihar had plenty to offer with its mica mines, flourishing forestry and fishery departments. Managerial and supervisory care-taking positions in the many palaces of the Maharajah of Darbhanga, were also desirable job options, who still managed to keep up some semblance, though rapidly declining, of pomp and circumstance.

The family spoke both, Bengali, their original mother-tongue of Bengal , and also Hindi, their adopted dialect of the state they had migrated to. The Bengali migrants, known to the Calcutta Bengalis as ' Prabasi Bangali's , spoke their original mother tongue, Bengali , fluently enough. But over the course of generations their accents would become tinged with the Hindi tones of their adopted

state. In addition, influence from the latter would affect also their food habits and certain aspects of their dresses – a change not looked upon favorably by the authentic cousins from Bengal proper and, in fact, considered material for ridicule and sly mimicry.

Hema was especially sensitive to this as being considered a Bengalis' Bengali was very important to her when she visited her relatives in Kolkata.
. She was a woman of contrasts, in many ways, as her daughters sometimes pointed out when they were in the middle of their not infrequent mother-daughters arguments.

Hema, though very conservative and down- to- earth in certain matters, was like a mother marsh heron, grounded and wading through one of the monsoon-made water puddles in the fields next to their house. She occasionally wanted to flap her wings and take a soaring trip with the eagles that at times flew down from the mountains of Nepal, not so much for the spirit of fancy-free adventure, but for the advantage of wearing sun-kissed plumes and looking eagle-like.

Hema had done her matric degree from a high school in Burdwan, close to Calcutta, and though she did not speak much English herself, she had several western touches in her household décor to tweak her neighbors' curiosities and envies.. There was Wedgewood imported chinaware, her tea- trays held serviettes of English linen embossed with an impressive English name a, and a tea-cosy that she had bought at an upscale store in one of her shopping forays to the New Market in Kolkata . There were also puddings and soufflés in place of the regular Indian desserts when she had the local Binapani Club's Ladies' Auxiliary meeting at her house, recipes she got from the local missionary school's Anglo Indian teacher.

She was often frustrated by her husband's what she considered-old fashioned stolidity This characteristic thwarted, if not completely wiped out, her desire to be in step with some of her snobbish upper class acquaintances.

'Ma-ji ' , repeated Shivji again, breaking her concentration. ' What would you like me to do with all that chhana '.

Hema got up, flinging the end of her sari, to which a bunch of household keys were tied, over her shoulders. The keys, knotted to a large circular silver key ring , were a power symbol for most women in India, Tying the keys on her person for safety and security , yet being able to flaunt them with the characteristic jangle –was something that the traditional lady of the house would do in the old fashioned zamindari days, when the rich land -owner in his fiefdom was the one whose stylish living was to be emulated. Those powerful zamindars were long gone, though there still were vestiges of that rich heritage in some parts of rural Bihar and Bengal.

Hema walked down to the kitchen at the end of the long corridor that ran between the dining room and the well-stocked pantry . She inspected the white cheese like curde that had had been produced by adding a large quantity of

lemon juice to a tureen of boiling milk, delivered fresh by the milkman , Nathni, that morning.

She stirred the pot vigorously with a long handled ladle to make sure that the milk had curdled properly, and then had Shivji hoist the heavy tureen over the kitchen sink. so that The pale whey liquid was to be strained out through an old square piece of a torn pillow-cas , that had become thin gossamer like over the years due to constant use and washing.

The kitchen and household interior still held the old heritage , while the outer parts were presented as modern and western, mostly by Hema.

Hema poured a portion of the liquid into a tall glass, stirred in two large pieces of misri crystallized sugar, that she had especially ordered from the sugarmill in Sakri. Though a long hour's drive in their old Ambassador, it was worth it to take the trouble. Hema knew where to get the best things from even though they lived in this very small town with limited number of stores.

She set the glass on a tray with four arrowroot biscuits. It was to be taken to the second floor where her Father in-law's bedroom was.

The senior Mr Atul Basu preferred this particular drink late morning every day, as it worked wonders on his ' constitution '. Much better than the draughts of Phillip's Milk of Magnesia or even the ayurvedic cure-all, Chyavan -Prash paste . Hema dutifully made up a glass for him for eleven o'clock on the dot, the prime hour for the fiery pitta waves of the diurnal Eastern health cycle to be buffeting the body, as her now-deceased Mother-in law had trained her to do before the latter had died. Hema squeezed the remaining watery liquid out of the lump of white cheese, knotted it in the cloth, and hung it around the kitchen faucet to drain it drier. 'This is to be made into rasgullas for tomorrow,' she told Shivji, who nodded. He understood that special preparations were afoot for the big day tomorrow.

It was not a time for Pintu Mishti Bhandar store sweets or kebabs from the corner Moslem mughlai snacks bistro . Everything had to be home-made and from scratch. Otherwise it would be a negative reflection on the worthiness and social standing of the host family.

Rasgullas were sensitive sweetmeats. The dessert of Rajahs, thought Hema. The cheese had to have the finely tuned resilience and texture, kneaded hard with a balanced sprinkling of flour and semolina , shaped into balls the size of koel-bird's eggs, and boiled in a sugar syrup of ' one thread consistency ', indicating a thin, light solution –till the balls swelled up like yeast –leavened bread, soft and smooth. It was the mark of a well-run kitchen to produce the perfect rasgulla, the ultimate of Bengali sweets and always a challenge to the culinary artistry of the cook. The maid, Bibi-dai, entered the kitchen with a small platter of unripe turmeric roots, gnarled and fingerlike. 'Is this enough ?', she asked.

Hema looked at them and pondered. The turmeric was to be peeled, smashed

with a heavy pestle on a stone spice-board . The stone base slab was pockmarked with drilled holes to give the act of grinding more friction, The turmeric was to be wetted with slaps of gauged amounts of water from a bowl , and then mashed down into a bright yellow paste, the color of summer sunshine. Hema smiled inwardly. She had gone through this ritual herself twenty years ago. Now it was her daughter, Vaidehi's turn. 'Let me see,' Hema said, briskly, feeling the turmeric spuds.

The spice paste was to be blended with yoghurt, sandalwood paste and chickpea powder. It would then be applied as the traditional facial pack for the brides to be. For tomorrow was to be a special day for Vaidehi. It was the day of 'showing' a preliminary interviewing prior to an arranged marriage being finalized, an occasion when the prospective groom and his family would come to meet the would –be bride for the first time.

Vaidehi looked for a place to hide from the rest of her family. She found refuge in her GrandFather's room. The senior Mr. Atul Basu sat with reams of paper spread out on the large old ebony four poster bed. 'Dadu', said Vaidehi, using the Bengali word for grandfather, 'What are you doing with all these papers?'.

'O Vaidehi', said Sr. Mr Basu , looking up above his round steel-framed glasses, ' Come and sit down , right here ' . He patted a small bare spot on the bed beside him, shifting around some papers to make room for her. ' I'm looking at these astrological charts.'. Vaidehi had seen her Grandfather do this for hours, pouring over strange markings and graphs . He had been comparing charts for her future marriage alliances ever since she was sixteen , which was a good four years ago.

To her secret joy, he had discarded one prospective bridegroom after another, as the planets, according his readings, were not congruent.

'Venus and Mars are in conflict ,' he would say.Or 'Saturn is inconjunct with the Moon –the match will not work.'

Finally he had given a partial nod to this particular young man, Devraj's astrological chart But there were still a few concerns and he was not totally satisfied.

Vaidehi's mother, Hema, had begun to despair of ever getting her older daughter married –due to the rigors of astrology.. She had been greatly relieved at what amounted to a green signal from her Father-in –law about this marriage prospect . . She wasted no time in arranging a date quickly for 'the showing of the girl '.. Devraj's family lived in Ranchi, about three hundred mile sfrom Phul- jharia. . In one of their telephone exchan ges about working out the logistics, it was discussed that Devraj 's family would drive down in their own Maruti van, to see Vaidehi and put up with relatives who lived in Darbhanga, next town to Phul-jharia.

The fact that they had a car, and a sturdy one at that, capable of traversing the long three hundred miles of distance—impressed Hema.

Vaidehi made herself comfortable beside her Grandfather on the bed . , She stretched out with a pillow under her stomach and her chin on her elbows. She loved this part of the house, especially this particular room, which was haven due to her GrandFather's comforting presence.

The chrysanthemums in the terrace outside ,stood up on the clay pots like colorful jack-in -the –boxes. White, pink, mauve, yellow. The zinnias looked like smaller versions of them, equally colorful and festive.. Pansies with elves' faces—a child's magic land. A few ladylike kalavatis with yellow and red flowers shaped like conch shells, and large furling green leaves, added extra color.

However, Vaidehi's favorite was the juhi plant with the tiny star like flowers and heart-breakingly sweet smell. The scent brought an ache and swirling pleasure into her at the same time, a mixed sensation that sometimes bewildered her. Did other's find that scent so magnetic or was it only for Vaidehi and all the delicious secrets it signified for her. Vaidehi sighed and brought her attention back into the room. The walls were lined with all kinds of books from Tagore to Shakespeare. Some had textured solid leather binding, appearing important and aristocratic loking . Others were coming apart at the spine with pages leaning out of them , as if money hastily half pulled out of a wallet. Several were bound in tight colourful cardboard covers of paisley prints by the local book binder , who almost had a fulltime job here in this house , A few were carefully glued together with home-made glue made from flour and water.

A red and white Murphy radio stood atop the bureau, used for the nightly news from Akashbani Kolkata , or if there was a classical music program by a favorite artist.

A stack of His Master's Voice gramophone records were on a small turn-table next to the bureau . Grandfather had made classical Hindustni music a focal point in his life, his every waking hour literally defined by either khayals by his favorite singers or classical pieces in sitar sarod or flute A sad requiem of malhar played on a rainy afternoon with the juhi's exuding their magical scent sometimes made Vaidehi want to weep and weep with strange longings she could not explain, and was too embarrassed to talk to anybody about.

She looked at her Grandfather again and gave a long sigh, moving around on her stomach to get comfortable. He smiled at her, his face serene and faultless in her eyes, despite the scar below his right eye from the claws of a mongoose that he had once surprised while walking in the heavily wooded hillsides of Hazaribaagh, in quest of a rare herbal plant . This was one of his stories , amongst many that he would tell and retell his grandchildren. Sometimes they were bedtime stories. At other times they were tales for dark evenings , when the electricity would be out , the hurricane lamp light would be too dull to encourage reading. The children would all crowd under his mosquito net to avoid the inevitable bites., and imbibe the stories with their round wide eyes, as well as their ears.

The room , Vaidehi thought, had interesting dents like her GrandFather's face. There was a deep crevice in one corner of the cement floor, a result of the

notorious earthquake in the 30's that left much of Bihar in ruins. The steel door of the Godrej almirah against the wall bore the starburst mark of a bullet from a robber's gun. That was another hair-raising story , Vaidehi remembered, thank goodness , it had happened before she was born. It was a room with stories and experiences, a room with a character.

'Escaping, are you? ', said Grandfather, glancing at her with a knowing smile. He knew that she was not happy about what was to happen tomorrow. ' I know you are upset about this 'showing ' coming up tomorrow . Am I right?'. Vaidehi nodded silently and with a hint of a sulk in the shrug of her shoulders. 'How else will you get married then,',he went on gently. ' Arranging our children's marriages is our tradition . That's how it's done,'He cleared his throat a bit , and added, 'In most traditional, conservative Indian households'.

'It's a terrible tradition !' , burst out Vaidehi. She wound the ends of her bandhni printed dupatta sash into knots like fists . 'Why do Bengali girls have to go through this¿.

'Your Mother had to through it, and her mother and grandmother too, before that. Your Grandmother had to go through this. I never went to see her, you know, but my parents did, and I took their word for it .Thank God they had good taste!', he smiled, trying to ease her.

'It's not nice being on display like a mannequin or cattle at the Noyatola bazaar ', retorted Vaidehi, half sitting up on her haunches on the bed , her cheeks flushing . 'Your Mother must have felt nervous, too, when she had to sit for her showing when we went to see her 'He went on in his coaxing voice smooth like the polished ebony surface of the bed-posts ' Where would you be if the showing hadn't happened and the marriage hadn't taken place with your Father ? '. ' Oh , Dadu . You know very well what I mean ,' Vaidehi sat up straight now ,alternately fidgeting and practising a lotus position in trying to calm her excitement.

Her Grandfather was suddenly quiet.

'I know it's not pleasant for the girl at all' , he said finally. 'It was even worse fifty, sixty years ago.' He added with a remembering smile of memory seeping in. 'Your Grandmother was told that she would be marrying me without her ever having seen me before, and for that matter, I her , I was very curious on my wedding night as to what she looked like'. He paused to look around for his bottle of Chyavan-pras , the herbal cure-all , He dug out a teaspoonful of it to have it with his afternoon glass of milk that Bibi-dai had brought in.

He cleared his throat as he swallowed the brown herbal paste . ' For the immune system , you know, Rishi Chayvan put this formula together aeons ago. . I have to get it by mail order from this special store in Delhi. None of the others sell the authentic stuff . All modern chemicals in the mixture that gave me heart burn . Always go for the real stuff ' .

He paused , peering at Vaidehi who was impatiently playing with the two gold

bangles she wore on her right forearm . ‘ Oh, where was I ?Yes, Yes, So throughout the long marriage ceremony all I saw was this small person wrapped like a mummy in a red sari and veil, and almost falling down with the weight of all those marigold garlands. ‘.,

He gave a short laugh, showing a gold upper tooth . ‘Then later that night when I did see her, she turned out to have the prettiest eyes in the world. But that was the luck of the draw, She could have looked like a shakchunni,’ he said ,using the Bengali word for a particularly ugly witch , ‘ and there would have been nothing I could have done about it . In those days, it was even stricter – the choice of the bride was in the hands of the groom’s parents . We just had to trust our parents’ words ‘. Vaidehi was restless, She changed positions several times,

She finally lay on her back and concentrated on the two lizards spread-eagled on the ceiling. She hoped they would not make their lizard sound, ‘tick-tick-tick’. A lizard’s ticking was an omen that a person’s last words would come true, her Grandmother used to say. She did not want her parent’s choice for her life partner to be her truth . Vaidehi’s thirteen year old sister, Rohini, and eleven year old brother, Aridra, entered the room. .

‘Ma has been looking for you,’ Mrittika announced with a wait-till-she-finds-you type veiled foreboding in her voice. ‘ She’s been calling your name for hours.’. Vaidehi made a face, but not as defiant as she wanted to in order not to set a bad example as the older sister, She pulled the shepherd’s check blanket from the foot of the bed over her head.. ‘I’m tired’ , she said, ‘ Tell Ma I need a nap ‘.

‘She’s not going to be happy about you napping in the middle of the day .’ Rohini’s voice took on a sing song of controlled bossiness.

‘ Yeah, Ma wants to go over what we have to do tomorrow ,’ chirped Aridra. ‘ It’s your showing, Didi

‘ He called Vaidehi the word reserved for ‘big sister’. ‘ I don’t know why we have to go get dressed up too .’ .

Hema appeared at the door, bearing a covered bowl. She pulled one end of her sari like a veil over her head on seeing her Father-in-law, ‘Here you are, Vaidehi . I thought you were studying in the attic. Here’s the facial masque for you .You have to keep it on for half hour before you rinse it off with warm water.’.

‘Why do I have to put all this on ? ,’ complained Vaidehi, repeating what she had already muttered, whined, and tearfully argued before..

‘It’s to make your skin look fairer, Sona’ , said Hema , using the term of endearment in Bengali, denoting a’ golden child’ .. ‘How do you think we are going to justify what we had printed in the newspaper about you in the marriage ad –that ‘you had a sunny complexion like ripened wheat ‘ ‘ ..

Vaidehi winced. It was the typical euphemistic description of a dark skinned girl by anxious parents, trying to create a pleasanter illusion of beauty with words All this exaggerating was in order to persuade the reluctant choosy would-be grooms and their families.to accept the girl , who was : mere object ‘, Vaidehi thought angrily.

‘What a farce all this is.!’, Vaidehi said, rebellion in her tone.

‘Also I have picked out a maroon sari for you to wear tomorrow’, went on Hema , trying to control her exasperation with a show of ignoring Vaidehi’s comment . ‘It will make the complexion look brighter’.

‘They will be lucky to get Vaidehi as the bride,’ interjected Atul - babu,. ‘Where are they going to find such a pretty smile and graceful ways ? ‘.

‘Graceful !’ Hema , exclaimed, trying to keep herself from raising her voice in deference to her Father- in-law. ‘That’s what you think ,Baba ‘. She used the word for ‘father’ to address him. ‘ She doesn’t listen to a thing I have to say. All girls have to get married , and this is the way it is done in most families.like this. .’

‘No,’cried Vaidehi, finding a loophole, ‘ What about Ketaki? ‘.

Hema took a breath . Ketaki was the neighbor’s daughter, a Hindu girl who had eloped with her Muslim lover when both families had strongly opposed their union.

‘Look at the shame it brought to her family,’ snapped Hema ‘ Ketaki’s mother has not gone to the Kali temple or any public function since then for over six months ‘. .

Vaidehi knew that Ketaki was living a life of intense romance though shunned by the community. They had very little money and were barely surviving hand to mouth in neighboring Jhanjha . . She had seen Ketaki, looking very thin and half starved , working on some documents at a local bank , trying to get a job. .

‘It’s very hard not to be able to see your own family and to feel you’ve brought stigma and shame on to them .’ Ketaki had said., her eyes sunken but intense.’ But I couldn’t have married anyone else but Iqbal. Maybe things will get better ‘ . She had added wistfully.

Vaidehi opened her mouth to say something in mild repartee to her Mother , but shut it again. ‘Listen to your Mother, dear ‘, said Atul -babu . peaceably ‘ Go on down stairs with her . I’ve got to look at the young man’s chart in more detail ‘ ‘ He shut the big , thick ephemersis book, inserting his blue-green peacock feather that Vaidehi had found for him, as a book mark .He also picked up his quilled pen and dipped it in the ink-well of Supra Royal Blue ink to make some more markings on the astrological parchments. This was his way of saying that he wanted to be left alone. .

A gibbous moon covered by tissues of clouds hung,.faint and diaphanous, behind the trellis of willowy plantain trees.

Vaidehi lay on the double bed she shared with Rohini, but could not sleep. She was thinking of Mainak, something she had done every waking hour since he had first spoken to her about two years ago. She had seen him in passing over the years as they had grown up in the same neighborhood.

But had never directly met as they lived in two different social worlds.

Mainak had spent two years away in college in Calcutta , living with his maternal uncle as his father could not afford college fees or books here , rumors said. He had returned subsequently to live in the nondescript small house with the corrugated tin roof and peeling paint at the edge of town to live with and take care of his Father, who was riddled with arthritis, and stayed mostly in bed,

Vaidehi would see Mainak chatting with his friends for hours , under the sprawling tamarind tree that was a landmark in the center of Bengalitola.. Such aimless hanging around or 'adda' was considered a characteristic of loafers and ne'er-do-wells by the neighborhood elders,.and much frowned upon Mainak would cycle back from college, late at night, whistling the latest Hindi movie musical hits, quite tunefully, Vaidehi thought, -when such behavior was deemed feckless and recalcitrant;

On the other hand, Mainak had, stunned his critics, by being able to recite innumerable pages of poetry by heart at the annual elocution contest during the Saraswati Puja festival at the local Binapani club, and winning the best actor's trophy three years in a row. .

His reputation as the talented 'Bad Boy ' of the town made the girls curious and intrigued about him , and their parents wary and uncertain.

Vaidehi remembered the day she had actually spoken to Mainak for the first time, as sharply as a Jatin Choudhury wood etching that hung in her Father's study.

It was two years ago when she had attended the All Bihar Book Fair held on the lawn behind the Binapani Club., closely chaperoned by her Mother Vaidehi had been enthralled by the piles of books, stacked like Shivji's potato parathas or tumbling willy nilly like icing on a cake done by a child's hands, laid out on dusty tables inside canvas tents .The tables of books seemed in separate small feasts like the Spanish tapas she had read about– for the book gourmand's , such as her, hungry eyes. O how she had loved the fair, and to think that Mother almost forbade her from coming , claiming that there would be too many loafing young men standing about in a public place like that for a girl from a decent family to be seen in.

Had it not been for the fact that Father was the president of Binapani Club that year , which had proudly sponsored the event –Mother would have had her way !.

Vaidehi entered more deeply into that rather thrilling reverie.

Yes, it was at the point that she had picked up a book in Bengali by Mahasweta Devi and another book in Hindi by Amrita Preetam , both well known Indian woman writers. She had then heard a baritone voice near by. say: 'Ah, good selections ', said the voice.

Vaidehi had wheeled around to find herself looking at Mainak .

He was tall. But rather thin with sharp edges of cheek bones showing like cliffs and precipices.. He spoke in this slightly husky , resonant actor's voice. His eyes had an interested but cryptic smile, that she felt was both fascinating but disturbing, as if he could read her mind. ' Have you read Mahasweta's 'The Mother of Case Number One Thousand and Eighty Four ' ? It's a torpedo of a book—aims right at police brutality'.

Vaidehi did not quite know what to say. Her uncle , Mejokaka , was the Police Superintendant of Muzaffarpur.

She did not quite know whether Mainak had made that comment to assess her views or get arise out of her.. At first she thought it was rather too forward of him to lay out his beliefs before her within a few minutes of their meeting.

Mainak went on, as if he even read the reason for that discomfort in her eyes and understood the need to disarm, He went on to talk about other books. He had pointed out several more stalwart authors, impressing Vaidehi by the minute by his detailed knowledge of even their lesser known writings. He had a skill with his words, smooth and flowing like the Kosi river , all the while his eyes holding hers.

She had looked around nervously for her Mother, who, she was sure, would not have appreciated Vaidehi's being involved in a long conversation with any non-related young man, much less a young man with a dubious reputation.

Especially, thought Vaidehi bitterly ,all the while crinkling her eyes as she intensely tried to visualize every nook and cranny in Mainak's face that day as the sun slanted in through the tent flap and touched his lips.. She was taken aback by how sensuous and full his lips were, on that rather rugged face.—mobile and softly curved, a contrast to the cragginess.. She felt herself blushing.

A raucous Hindi movie song blared on the loudspeakers belying the finesse of such a cultural event, But Vaidehi found it suddenly appealing , as if it was a part of the whole picture—light through a tent, dark eyes with another language , of a promised adventure, a puma through the undergrowth, a beautiful mandoline at her feet.

'You'd better move along', he said, mesmerizing her again by deciphering her thoughts., ' Your Mother wouldn't want you to be seen hobnobbing with me'.

His eyes had laughed , both reckless and .empathetic at the same time. And Vaidehi had quickly walked away.

Fortunately, Hema had been engrossed in getting her book signed by her favorite local author, Bibhuti Mukhopadhyay , in the adjoining tent, nd had not noticed the interchange.

The next day , Mainak had met Vaidehi at in front of Lady Rotterham Women's College, and walked along side her, wheeling his bicycle She was surprised, excited and yet embarrassed to see him –as if he were a manifestation of some guilty but pleasurable. thought .

She walked from the Common Room of the College to her classes, her light blue kurta matching his shirt„ her shyness , almost parallel to his nonchalant controlled insouciance. Again a sensation of hidden rippling muscles like waves under the surface, a look that was in charge but begged her at the same time. Begged her for what ? She was not sure. . . . They chatted ostensibly about mundane and every day things , about novels and movies, and all the while his eyes had had spoken to her of something else..

The meetings happened, sometimes every day, sometimes less when Vaidehi would be paralyzed by fear that someone would tell her Mother about Mainak walking along the College paths with her, and he would beg him to not come , He would stop for several days, and then suddenly appear, both aware of each other's desperate attraction and yet the need to maintain a façade of casual chit chat .

As Vaidehi feared, the walks through the college compound, though initially lightly taken by her classmates as the natural but temporary course of an admirer stalking a girl, were now beginning to cause sniggers and snide comments even amongst her closest friends who thought that she was giving the young man much too much inappropriate encouragement.

One day, he gave her a book of of love poems by the famous, Vidyapati, the fourteenth century poet of Bihar, who wrote of the intense fascination and the heart-wrenching forbidden love between Lord Krishna and his married paramour, Radha. That was the first time , after the initial body language stage , that there had been an object exchanged as a symbolic expression of the word 'love'.

Mainak had gone on expounding about psychology and transitional objects, and Kant and a priori and all the words that entertained and stimulated her, but she had been trapped inside the flutter of her own heart and all his words had turned into wordless Vrindavani sarang for her, played on her grandFather's antique turntable, the sitar music streaming out of that corrugated 78 rpm, twirling her round and round into the laugh of a sunshine after a baisakhi summer cloudburst .

Subsequently they had to stop meeting at College as Vaidehi was afraid that a wisp of a rumor reaching Mother's ears would ban her from going to College. The relationship went on , conducted now in creative and surreptitious ways, mostly through artful letter brought back and forth by trusted, sworn –to-secrecy friends.

There were an occasional rare hour or two of stolen time together, in the guise of going ona college trip with girlfriends that Hema perceived as trustworthy as Vaidehi's alibis .

Once they had sneaked in a visit to the Maharaja of Darbhanga's palace court-yard to see the peacocks dance during monsoon season, remembered Vaidehi with a pang.

The memory of that coursed through her blood like absinth , fearsome and fiery in a heart-somersaulting hide -and -seek way; intoxicating because he would hold her hands for a few minutes behind the long flap of a cloth that the friendly rickshaw -puller had draped over the front of the rick -shaw in order to give them brief , much-coveted privacy; and bitter-sweet because of the hopelessness of their situation.

They had , planned and plotted, and role-played various scenarios.

Mainak would go up to Vaidehi's Father to ask her hand in marriage, which, of courese, the latter would refuse, and have the durwan, a trained laathi warrior, literally show him the door with his oil slick bamboo stick with the brass head. Thus failing this afore mentioned plan, they lovers would elope in the dead of night, much like what Ketaki and Iqbal had done, to start a life of their own. Initially, the scenario would further unfold as they added pieces to each others imagined scenes, the Basus would be very angry and humiliated , and send a posse of police after them , with Mejokaka advising and directing his counterparts in Phul-Jharia . . 'Charges of kidnapping', Mainak would bark in a stentorian voice, twirling n imaginary iron ferruled baton and patting a ferocious cascade of mustache over his upper lip in imitation of the local havildar. 'You are under arrest, youngman -Deleted swear words, in front of the ladies etc. I have come to take the girl back to her parents' .

'It's too late, police chacha,' Vaidehi would put on a solicitous but victorious voice, and address the policeman as her respected uncle. She would then cover her head with a kerchief in imitation of a married woman's modest veil and add coyly,. 'We're already married'. The prospective fantasies of such an exciting outcome kept the both of them regaled for hours.

However, Mainak would have to get a job first, before any such bold move could be implemented.

Vaidehi fell into a fitful sleep. Her dreams felt like a woven magical fisherman's net, that had trapped her day- time thoughts, and was now gathering them up at night transformed shiny, scaly haulings of hallucinations.

She dreamt of a yellow shamiyana, a large tent pitched in their backyard. It was hung with colored streamers and panels of gold thread embroidered Banarasi cloth .

Guests were streaming in and out in waves. Musicians wearing red fez hats sat atop a scaffolding type high dais in one corner, blowing out their cheeks over

their shehnai horns, and nodding their heads like snake charmers, in time with the rhythms.

But why did the sounds, instead of being the joyful and heady crescendo of a happy wedding alliance sound out as the mournful dirge-like notes of the sad requiem raga , megha-malhar ? Vaidehi , in her dream , found herself dressed in the traditional red Bengali wedding colors, walking as her Father held her arm. She treaded slowly on the carpeted floor strewn with pink rose and milky white hasnuhana petals, heel to toe, heel to toe, the red alta on her feet bright as her heart's blood, as if she were trailing her wounded heart behind her. On she walked towards the groom, who stood at the far end of the tent, as if a thousand light miles away, wearing a topor , a bridegroom's white crown, handcarved from shola, the cork plant, with scrolls of jonquil and jasmine garlands hanging from the tiers of the headgear, covering his face.

Vaidehi's eyes were brimming with tears, cresting like the Mirza talab pond next to their house during heavy monsoon showers and threatening to spill into the arhar lentil and sugar- cane fields. She knew that the man wearing the wedding topor was not Mainak. Her legs were ready to give way when she heard her Father urgently whisper to her: 'You have to forget about Mainak. Not only does he not have a job, but he is also a Naxalite !' .

Vaidehi woke up with a sharp longing like an ironmonger's stave through her heart. She had fallen in love with a completely unsuitable man—a charming, feckless, jobless, penniless man, who in addition to all these handicaps, also happened to have the wrong political leanings..

He was a fearful word that made newspaper headlines—someone an average citizen did not understand and was afraid of, a Naxalite. .

The dream had been very vivid, She could almost smell the Aguru scent that had been sprayed on to her Father on his bundy and khadi pajamas as he entered the shamiyana by the welcoming bevy of bejeweled nieces and cousins. His khadi cap, crisp and white, sat slightly angled on his partly bald head . Even on his daughter's wedding day he wore his favorite khadi from his days of national allegiance, instead of the tussore silk kurta that her Mother had wanted him to wear . Vaidehi steadied herself against her Father in the dream and looked up at him. A man who wore a Gandhi topee and voted for the Congress Party would never accept someone from a militant political group as his son-in-law…

A cool breeze came in through the windows, and woke her up. She pulled a blanket on her self and looked out at the sky. It was her favorite month of Kartik though she felt no joy this year. She would be able start seeing the Orion constellation, now that the skies had changed for winter, Her Grandfather had taught her to recognize the Hunter with the red and blue stars forming the belt at his celestial waist.. She preferred the Indian name –Mrigasira, the head of the deer.This was her nakshatra, the smaller archipelago of star grains , on a line going up to the bigger planet Moon, which had been scudding on the doorsteps

of of Leo when she had been born . This is how her grandfather had explained it.

She lifted her index finger and outlined the star's silhouette in miniature against the mosquito- net fabric. Her Mrigasira. It spoke of freedom, of scented woods, gentle animals with pea-pod eyes nibbling sugar-cane leaves, of lightness of spirit, of speed of happy hooves.

However, tonight she remembered that in the olden days the sailors dreaded the appearance of Mrigasira on the eastern sky, as it usually portended a storm. Vaidehi felt afraid too.

Nakshalbari..

The name of this small town in West Bengal carried the impact of a Molotov cocktail bomb, that its most infamous inhabitants were so given to using. From there rose a core group of young men with socialistic militant views. They were young, angry, intense and passionate.They burned with the fire of outrage at social and financial inequality amongst people, and demanded reform and fairness, if needed, at the point of a gun..

They were dedicated to their visions and would stop at nothing to achieve their idealistic ends, Vaidehi had read in brochures left by unknown hands in her college common room, –equality for all, raze all useless, ostensible riches and all institutional behemoths to the ground, eliminate the difference between the rich and the poor, give rise to a new social class of shared resources.

This powerful political vision had spread like floodwater into all crevices and corners of India, and swept the Indian youth off their feet . It was threatening to rock the cornerstone of the foundry of traditional government rules. .

The Naxalites, as the members of this group were called, were known to bomb, kill, kidnap powerful old-order political figures. The police suspected and blamed most crimes, initially political, later almost all varieties , to being sponsored and masterminded by the Nakshalbari group The authorities were thus quick to arrest them and recommend the harshest of jail sentences, if not downright death.. Police brutality went toe to toe with the Naxal's violence

That their adolescent child would fall under the sway of this political affiliation with its charismatic leaders and idealistic visions– was every parent's grotesque nightmare. .

Each person suspected of being a Naxalite was automatically registered in secret police diaries.

Mainak's name, if not heading the list, was certainly a part of it, Vaidehi knew. Dipti, Vaidehi's best friend, came in with an arm full of books.

Vaidehi was sitting on a chair in a shaded area of the courtyard, near the basil bush where a clay lamp and wilted flowers lay scattered from evening worship the night before.

Hema was massaging Vaidehi's hair with warm coconut oil to be washed off with green tea and grapeseed extract shampoo, that she had obtained as a gift from a sister in law who just returned from Japan ,

The Japanese certainly had shiny black hair , and knew of ancient secrets and formulae to turn ordinary objects into things of better quality,-even make food out of seaweed, Hema thought Bibi-dai, the maid, who had cared for and partly raised Vaidehi since she was six years old, was delicately painting designs on the soles of the latter's feet with a cotton swab dipped in alta, a vermilion red liquid used for decorative art on the soles of the feet, mostly of married women.. 'Don't move so much,'said Bibi-dai, holding Vaidehi's leg firmly. 'You're tickling me,' groaned Vaidehi , her voice commensurate with her disgruntled expression. . 'Alta is a part of auspicious rituals of a women's body,' Hema said, separating Vaidehi's hair on her scalp in rows with her fingers and pouring oil along the rows as if to irrigate the roots. 'More like it is a sedutive ritual,' grumbled Vaidehi under her breath, making sure that Hema couldn't actually hear her words. 'Oh, Dipti, good thing you are here early ,'said Hema . 'Maybe you can braid Vaidehi's hair after she washes it.'.

Dipti dutifully touched Hema's feet in the usual Bengali gesture of reverence in greeting a senior person and sat down on the madur bamboo floor mat, close to them . 'That oil smells beautiful, Kakima ',Dipti said, using the word for 'Aunt ' in addressing Hema. 'Did you add some Jaba-kusum oil to the coconut? ' 'Oh, it's a big concoction,' Hema said proudly, as Vaidehi made a face at Dipti. 'It has rose water, almond paste, shikakai powder that your uncle's student got all the way from Madras, honey and aniseed paste'.

Hema got up wiping her oily hands on a red and white checked duster, tucked to her waist
'And tell Vaidehi that she needs to have a better attitude about the 'showing of the bride' that's going to happen . Maybe she'll listen to you,.' Hema said, in parting. to Dipti , ' Your sister just got married to the nice boy from Patna .Didn't she have to go through the same ceremonies and rituals ? Tell Vaidehi that' .

Dipti and Vaidehi exchanged rapid glances.

Vaidehi knew that Dipti had probably snuggled in a leter from Mainak inside the cover of one of her books, a form of postal delivery that they had to resort to due to restrictions and monitoring of Vaidehi's movements, more so since recently since serious arranged marriage negotiations were in progress. In addition, Vaidehi's transformation to the somewhat more than ordinarily necessary defiance of all girls to be ' shown ' was beginning to worry Hema a little.

Holidays and vacations were even harder, making meetings w Mainak almost impossible as college was closed and Vaidehi was house-bound,. Mainak, though, always made creative efforts to see Vaidehi one way or the other.

He once came in on the pretext of asking the Senior Mr Atul Basu about the

astrological implications of his uncle's date of surgery and whether it would be wiser to change the date when it was discovered it would fall under the auspices of the hostile constellation Magha..

They had been chatting intently a good twenty minutes when Vaidehi came into her GrandFather's room with his afternoon tea and puffed rice spiced with ginger. She stopped in her tracks to see Mainak, of all people there. He winked at her roguishly, when Dadu briefly looked away to rifle through some papers.. She frowned back, warning him to be careful, as though her grandfather was neutral and accepting of most people, Mainsk would have hell to pay if Mother ever found out.

She also marveled at his putting on a show of great interest in astrology, when she knew that he thought of it as unscientific mumbo jumbo.

She heard Mainak ask as Hari Pasad Chaurasia played on his flute the plaintive and beautigul raga Shiv-Ranjani : 'Your two main interests, sir, astrology and Hindustani classical music –is there a connection ?' Vaidehi grinned inwardly. Trust Mainak to have studied up on natal charts and the different aroha and avaroha of the different ragas just for this occasion –the devil !

Grandfather looked at Mainak for a brief second as if to appraise the question. Now here was a thoughtful young man, Vaidehi could hear him thinking.

'Well, music and astrology they are both about healing, about comforting the part of the being that may need replenishing. Astrology is not just about predictions. It is a form of preventive medicine or protection by anticipating the future or existing gaps. And as far as music is concerned, you know about soothing the savage breast'.

Vaidehi had put on another record, raag Gauri, by Nikhil Bannerjee, a contemplative piece for the evenings, espoused especially by devoted Sikhs , she had learned from Dadu. She knew his likings to a T.

He especially liked all the sad ragas, more since Didu had died three years ago.

There was a sequence to how the music would be played most days: Basant of loneliness, Shiv- ranjani of contemplation, Behag of compassion Occasionally sounds of Darbari Kanara or Kamoj in sharod instrumental would filter in from Dadu's room if Vaidehi happened to awaken for a drink of water or to get an extra blanket. She would realize that the insomnia was bothering him more than usual that particular night. Dadu always had a smile on his face and never moped but the music expressed his missing Didu, thought Vaidehi.

On the days Dadu did not feel well physically,Vaidehi heard mostly Jaunpuri, Hindolam, Ahir-vairab and Pooriya—the ragas for healing the body

Vaidehi also remembered that Dadu had enquired through his several musical contacts about getting a rendition of Raga Vindu- dhani when Didu became very ill with a sudden stroke. The Raga was out of stock in the Kolkata stores, and arrived several months after Didu had passed away. Dadu had played it

only once, and then packed it away in its cover and foam packaging and placed it in the back of his bureau drawer.

'Don't you like this record ,' she had asked, surprised at his act .

' I do like it very much , but it become unbearable for me to hear it', Dadu had said quietly. Later he told her that it was a raga meant to give life to the dead. That her Dadu, who was always so strong and appeared in control of his inner world, could become so sentimental with grief even years later, was a revelation to her that day.

Her brown study was interrupted as she heard Dadu say 'Carnatic Claxsical music especially has a great correlation with astrology.There are 12 zodiac signs, as there are 12 swaras or notes' Mainak was listening intently but Vaidehi knew that he was only doing this to get some more time in the room –the quirk of defying convention and authority in Mainak, and the oh so sweet daredevil romantic sneakiness.to see her,jut to see her., she hummed to herself internally to the playing music .

'Just as the Sun and The Moon are the most important in astrology , so are the two swaras Sastha and Panchaam the most important,' Dadu went on. ' There is so much more, but that will take me a week to tell you all that , My family knows how I am obsessed I am with my interests ' he smiled a bit ruefully.

Just then Hema entered the room with a heap of washed towels on her arms, and recoiled seeing Mainak. How did a good- for- nothing young man who had nothing better to do than stand around under the tamarind tree with his equally lazy friends, and with such a rapscallion's reputation –gain entry into the Basu house –Vaidehi could almost hear her Mother thinking. Especially a house where a nubile girl was being nurtured and prepared for a well-arranged marriage, added Vaidehi mentally,bitterly..

'Baba, it's time for your massage. Rajinder is waiting with the camphor oil,' Hema said sternly, flashing her Father –in-law somewhat of a warning glance. Rajinder the , gardener, had wiry muscular arms, not only from lifting and pouring heavy buckets of mulch and sod for Hema's prized eggplant, cauliflower and tomato garden but also for his exercising them in daily kneading of Dadu's arthritic joints and stiffened muscles to form .

'Ah well, then,' said Dadu, looking somewhat sheepish, and realizing he had inadvertently displeased his daughter –in-law in some way.'Time's up, I guess. Saturn the Master of Time and Discipline-can't disobey him.' He added rather obliquely or in his doddering old-man– act that he sometimes put on to get out of scrapes, Vaidehi thought,

'I'll move along. Thank you for the fine advice on the dates , sir ', said Mainak , all handsome courtesy and attentiveness , moving towards the door. Thank goodness he had not attempted to touch Hema's feet in the usual gesture of greeting or addressed her as 'Kakima' in a last wicked act of tease as Hema may have kicked him , Vaidehi thought with trepidation..

Vaidehi saw a flash of Mainak's blue shirt, breathed the slight hint of interesting bad-boy , cheap tobacco aroma , heard the rapid whirr of his Hawaii sandals slapping down the stairs—and then he was gone.

'I thought I would stay the afternoon and help Vai with her make up.' Dipti was saying to Hema.. 'I can do her hair in a elo khopa that she looked so good in during last Ashtami Puja'.

Vaidehi felt like making another face at Dipti for egging Mother on with all her suggestions, but curbed herself. She settled down to Dipti working on her hair, and leaned back in her chair.. Her hair was still wet and needed to be brushed out to dry.

She closed her eyes as the brush strokes relaxed her

She struggled to focus on reality, but today seemed especially hard for some reason as the day-dreams crowded in. This could be a bad omen , But she let herself get swept into them just to be able to tolerate the tension of all the turmoil that was happening in her. .

She remembered another one of Mainak's escapades. –always into drama, he was.

The bahurupi festival season occurred in the autumn of every year. The villagers whose families were trained in this particular art form, would dress up in various guises of mythological gods and goddesses or characters from the epics of India, and go from door to door, delighting the children and earning a few paisas

Last year Mainak had disguised himself as a hermit from the Himalayas, his face caked with ash and soot, wearing a wig of long, knotted uncombed hair atop his head, twanging a rickety ektara to supplicate for alms..

Vaidehi who had accompanied her excited sister and brother to the door, had no idea of the true identity till his trademark roguish wink stopped her in her tracks, She had played along, and slipped the bahurupi an extra couple of rupees secretly to indicate that she had recognized him .

'Oh, elo khopa sounds great,' Hema was saying to Dipti, as Vaidehi's attention returned to the room. 'I have so much else to do.' She bustled away to supervise the kitchen , leaving the two girls to escape a bit later to the verandah outside her grandFather's room. There Vaidehi could surreptitiously read the treasured missive from Mainak, as Dipti kept watch for intruders..

Vaidehi loved Mainak's letters. They were rushed and urgent like his intensity, and yet his feelings for her stated in both calm directness and in the sweet euphemisms that lovers are spontaneously inspired with.. They made her laugh, they made her cry. They were filled with unusual quotations from T.S Eliot to Sunil Gangopadhyay.to Jibonanada Das to Dom Moraes Even his doodles at the margins were interesting.

Vaidehi's heart beat a faster lub-dub as she read on .

Mainak knew about the 'showing' today , and realized that should the event progress as smoothly and successfully as her parents hoped and Mainak feared, it would only be a matter of days before a date would be firmed up for nuptials with this would -be groom.

In the letter, Mainak was asking Vaidehi to prepare herself to elope with him. He even had a date planned—a week from today, on a nigh when there would be no moon. Mainak would have a taxi ready and waiting behind Vaidehi's house. She would have to pack only the most essentials, and sneak out from the servants' entrance, as the main big corrugated iron gate would be double pad-locked. Vaidehi gasped and related the contents of the letter to Dipti.

'I couldn't do it,' she whispered, as the two sat pretending to look at books together, ' The shame of it would kill my parents.'

Mainak had planned to approach Vaidehi's father once he got a job, but because of his subversive political background and police records, he had found most doors closed despite a Master's degree in journalism.

Once he had even received a call for an interview for the Indian Nation newspaper in Patna. But this offer had been suddenly withdrawn once the editor found out that he had marched in the anti-government parade last year on Independence day in August. Vaidehi had shed bitter and frustrated tears over this. 'Just my luck, 'she had wept to Dipti, her confidante and messenger.

Vaidehi and Dipti spent the rest of the afternoon, conferring gloomily and desperately by turns , as grandfather poured over his charts in the next room with occasional clearings of his throat and requests for tea with basil and honey to take care of the tickle..

Rohini came in, full of almost- grown- up- sister importance, to remind them that it was time for

Vaidehi to get ready. Dipti jumped up with a guilty groan. Hema would be upset if she saw that Vaidehi's hair was still not done .

Vaidehi got up with a resigned sigh, and held out the boxwood and cherry wood comb set that Hema had newly bought from Chatterjee Brothers just for this occasion.

Dipti separatedVaidehi's hair into eight strands with quick fingers, and plaited it deftly into an intricate mat of tresses,black ribbon and gold skeins. She pinned the plait in a low slung bun with a turquoise antique pin, that had belonged to Didu, when she came as a new bride. It copied an old Persian design of two birds , holding a bowl of perfume. . The stopper could be opened to pour out scented oil on the woman's hair in Mughul times.. The replica had the same design, and Vaidehi pictured Didu dressing up for Dadu to come home, pouring out a drop of the perfumed oil on her ring finger, and lightly rubbing it on her hair parting. To this day, a faint flowery scent lingered at the tip of the stopper.

'I bet they used pheromones in the oil,'commented Dipti, patting the last stray strands into place.'I wish Mainak could see you now.,' she added, standing back to admire her handiwork. .

'I thought you said you'd do just a loose old bun of an elo khopa,'grumbled Vaidehi. 'What happened to that ? You could have done a less elaborate job, you know.' .

'I didn't want Kakima to suspect me of being in cahoots with you,'Dipti whispered back. 'Besides, Didu's hair pin may bring you good luck, who knows '.

The guests were already seated in the drawing room.

The daytime covers of the sofas had been removed. The floors had been scrubbed and polished by Rajinder, and the whole house had been sprayed with Flit to chase away mosquitoes and flies, and then rose water attar had been sprinkled lightly to dispel the smells of marathon cooking . Incense sticks smelling of jasmine and bel -phul burnt in strategic corners.

Rohini was re- pinning the pleats in Vaidehi's sari, while Aridra was running back and forth with running commentaries.

'There's a very fat man, Didi', said Aridra in the loud sotto voce of a child who hasn't quite mastered the art of whispering yet., 'He's the father'..

'Shhhh', hissed Rohini, trying to hush him 'The mother looks very strict,' continued Aridra, ignoring Rohini, and looking at Vaidehi sympathetically, 'and she has a mouthful of paan'.

Vaidehi now understood why her Mother in the past two days had been so intent on teaching her how to make a real classical paan preparation.-'as they did in the old time zamindar and babu houses ,' Hema had said. , ' Making the after dinner mouth- freshner is almost as important as making the payesh perfect for dessert'. Hema had even written out the instructions in her rounded script for Vaidehi to memorise. :

Wash each fresh leaf. Paint the inner side white with lime paste. Place a small amount of filling in the center, Fold it in the shape of a triangle, Pin it with a clove.. There was an elaborate description of all that could go into the filling. It read like an alchemist's mix to Vaidehi.—silver-foiled cardamaom seeds, rose petals preserved in sugar water, dry roasted coriander seeds, anise, fennel , saffron, coconut shavings, sliced sweetened betel nuts , catechu bark paste.

'You might as well put in motor oil and the whole spice box too.' Vaidehi had grumbled, irritated and miserable. ' And order a brass spittoon for her to spit the stuff into as well.'.

'Don't be disrespectful ' Hema had given Vaidehi the warning look The ' She Who Must Be Obeyed ' look, as Vaidehi had describe it to Maina , when exchanging family anecdotes.

Paan was not customary in their house. It was an un-beautiful habit as far as Vaidehi was concerned, making the teeth stained reddish black from the juice. The only good thing she had heard about it was the fact that paan leaves had leukaemia curative properties in Ayurvedic Shastra treatments, something she had heard from Dadu from his reminiscences of his herbal doctor days.

Hema had had the house and servants feeling hassled, in trying to obtain the moghai variety of paan leaves, apparently the best kind . Rohini's job had been to obtain a good pinch of of liquorice yasthi-madhu powder from Dadu's medicine chest, to be used as a filling for the would -be mother-in law who was apparently a connoisseur of this.

Father had drawn the line at putting in granules of Zafrani Zarda, derived from tobacco products, that produced the actual feeling of well being. In a household where neither cigarettes nor alcohol had ever entered – tobacco grinds, even to please a groom's family, was unacceptable.

Vaidehi smiled inwardly as she thought of Mainak, and his love for Chaar-Minar cigarettes, the worst kind. Unfiltered tobacco, the toying with danger, the intoxicating aroma of smoke and sweat. She liked this on Mainak,like it were his signature smell, but on no one else.; and yet feared for his health. 'And the groom, Didi, ' pattered on Aridra, ' He seems real nice. He gave me a whole bar of Cadbury chocolate '.

'Don't call him a groom .' snapped Vaidehi, a little more abruptly than she had meant to address her little brother. 'He's not one yet.'

A little before six thirty in the evening, her father had come to escort Vaidehi down to the drawing room. At six thirty sharp she stepped over the threshold into the room. Not a minute before or after. This was the time, the muhurat, that was astrologically auspicious for her, her grandfather had sanctified, a time when the Moon would enter her Seventh House in her natal chart, or some such thing, as Mainak would laughingly say..

Vaidehi entered the room in her maroon sari, pinned together by an array of large and small safety- pins to ensure every fold in place, several pairs of slender gold bangles, the red and gold meenakari cloisonné ear rings reserved for very special occasions, and her Mother's necklace with the ruby locket. She felt stiff and artificial.

'A cross between Madame Tussaud's wax figure and a clown,' she thought bitterly.

She remembered only in a haze how the next two hours had passed. Her mother had shown the visitors all the cross-stitched table- cloths, appliqué bed-covers, and sundry other embroidered pieces that Vaidehi had done in her Home Science classes while in high school..

There had been an extended argument with her mother over this the evening before. 'You might as well show them the running stitch, stem stich , chain stitch

practice pieces that I had done in grade two,' Vaidehi's tension had spilled over into every little aspect of what she was required to do for the ' showing.' ' I feel like a performing flea' .

The portly would-be father- in- law bit into his third samosa , and asked Vaidehi if she could sing.

Vaidehi had demurely said 'No', when Hema overheard this and quickly jumped in to say:'Oh, yes, she can sing'. She has taken classical voice lessons from an ustad for seven years.'

Immediately all the guests were clamoring for a song, much to Vaidehi's increasing anxiety. She caught her mother's gimlet look and complied. It took her several minutes to think of a song to sing. She was actually surprised that her mother had not hounded her to have something prepared.

Perhaps Hema had feared that Vaidehi could go to the extreme of standing out on the terrace in a thin salwar –kurta during the early morning dew time just to catch a cold so she wouldn't have to sing!

Vaidehi closed her eyes and tried to think of a Tagore's song . The one that seemed to rise in her was 'Kichhu bolb o boley eshechhilem ' ' I came as I had something to say ' , which she sang acapello with a slight nervous quiver in the beginning , but bold and free as she went deeper into the song.

They all clapped vigorously as she finished the song. She remembered with a tug in her heart how a few months ago she had sung the same song when she had made a clandestine visit to Mainak's home with him.on one of their rare trips together.

Mainak and his father lived in a small, two bedroom unprepossessing structure, a shack compared to the huge house she had lived in all her life.

Mainak's mother had died of tuberculosis when he was only twelve, and Vaidehi had marveled at how much like her Mainak looked in the large framed picture in their musty , small, dark parlor.

Mainak's father had lost an eye and a leg in trying to escape from prison, where he had been jailed for plotting with other Freedom Fighters at the time –to assassinate a British official.

He had been black- balled from most jobs due to his jail record, and had to remain content with a low paying clerical job at the local State Bank.

Vaidehi had understood then the passion for political justice and fairness for the masses that ran in Mainak was inherited from his father. It was a glow that urged them on but it had taken its toll on both their lives.

Vaidehi had sung several songs that evening at Mainak's house, including this particular one she chose that day, as if singing it to Mainak again, in absentia.

Mainak had recited yards and yards of poetry from memory- Tagore, Nazrul, Bishnu Dey, Ram Basu, ShaktiChatto, Subhas Mukherjee as if they were a matching pair in a jugal bandi musical lyrical duet..

Mainak's father had nodded at her appreciatively . Vaidehi had been surprised at how openly he had accepted his son's girl, and how different this had felt from her own family's strict constricting views.

Vaidehi was pulled back into reality by the young man, Devraj, leaning towards her to ask :

'What are you majoring in College? ' . She had answered him politely , but all the time her eyes had silently pleaded with him : ' Please don't make this difficult for me . Please understand I want to marry someone else'.

Devraj's mother had chewed on one paan leaf triangle after another like cud, Vaidehi thought, and had to visit the bathroom a couple of times to spit out the remains. She had finally shifted the mound in her mouth to one side of her cheeks, and had asked Vaidehi to come and sit down next to her on the divan, She had patted Vaidehi's hand and said, 'My son actually works in Bangalore . I hope you can accept being so far away from your parents,'.

Vaidehi hadn't answered her directly, but lowered her eyes in that particular gesture as she had been indirectly trained and expected to do as a shy young fawn of a girl from a protected environment. .

The guests had eaten the rasgullas, chhanar murki, samosas, and shrimp cutlets with great expressions of praise for their large sizes,and gourmand taste. The guests had been quite unprepared for such food temptations in a small town, almost a village in a poor state of Bihar . They had sipped the Orange pekoe and Makaibari mix that Hema had brewed in her best English Royal Doulton teapot with the thinnest hairline of a chip that she could hide if she kept her thumb on the right spot , again with surprised delight that such good taste and sophistication could be expected in a rural area, so far away from the bigger cities. . They had left with promises to call the Basus with an answer the next morning.

Aswini had taken off his saved –for –special days Nehru jacket that he had worn for the occasion with the relieved air of someone being allowed to exhale bated breath, and commented that the visiting family and the young man seemed very decent. , He had a good job as an engineer, had respectful manners, and no younger sisters to marry off

Hema was equally pleased.. She finally a piece of cutlet that she had been too keyed up to eat before, she mentioned that in a way the son living far off in Bangalore away from his parents was not a bad thing at all . It would allow Vai to get to run her own household and establish closer bonds with her husband faster.

'They ate all that food ' , Hema, said, 'That's a sure sign that they liked Vaidehi.

When we had gone to look ata girl in Varanasi for my brother, my motherwould not eat a thing, not even the special ladoo sweets they had brought in special from Delhi. That's when I knew that my mother did not like the girl '.

Vaidehi left the room feeling unbearably miserable. She couldn't bear to be a part of this conversation.

Later, much later that night Shivji and Rajinder came into the dining room as the family sat there after dinner –to report that there had been news of a huge bombing in Patna, the state's capital.

Several people had been injured, including a prominent judge and his aide . All towns in Bihar were now under a state of Emergency, surveillance having been ratcheted up especially at the borders of Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa, Buses, trains , private cars leaving or entering a city were being stopped at check-points , and all airports of Bihar had been shut down.

The family piled into Atul-babu's room to hear te eleven o'clock nightly news on the big radio. The damage was far more extensive than servants' sources at down town Darbhanga Tower and the newspaper hawker boys had conveyed.

The bridge that spanned the Ganges river near Patna had been around eight o clock that evening. Credit for that had been claimed by the local Naxalite group. It was in protest against recent cruel and unusual police acts of violenc, especially that of forcibly blinding prisoners for punishment before even the due process of law had taken place.

Though no one had died in the bombing, much damage had been rendered to the bridge. This would bring much of the functioning of the city to a prolonged halt, In addition the bridge and it's supports would need extensive repairs, and transportation to and from Patna to the other side of the river would be a nightmare.

Arrested soon after the episode, the newscaster went in his solemn tenor reading, were Mukund the Wolfman, leader of the Naxalite subchapter of North Bihar and his two main lieutenants, Gopal Ghose and Mainak Ray.

It rained all afternoon the next day.

Usually the rains would bring on the stack of monsoon ragas on the turntable –the line-up of malhars, malkaus. sarang. But Vaidehi was shocked to hear strains of Maru Behag streaming out into the cold wet afternoon. A night raga played in the afternoon , and one of poignant loneliness and viraha –the heart cry of longing and loss that marks separation. Why did Dadu choose this raga of all ragas today, when she didn't need those extra twinges. ? What was he thinking of ? Dadu who always instinctively understood her needs and emotions –today seemed to not read her. Bibi-dai entered the family room , with laundry basket of dried clothes that she had rescued from the outside nylon clothes-line just in time before the afternoon down pour started, and started folding them.

Aridra ran around excitedly. peering closely at the earthworms, snails and tadpoles that seemed to have been awakened by the rains, and were crawling and coiling and jumping , as befitted each—all over the courtyard.

Rohini exclaimed ' Awful,' 'Yuck' ' E-ma ' as she shuddered over the school of frogs and small, harmless water snakes as they collected near the puddles of water near the courtyard steps. . Vaidehi's mood was as dismal as the day.

She was also angry and bitter. She had frequently begged Mainak to give up his militant political activities, but it was always difficult to get through to him in this matter. He would look at her and smile and enact a soliloquy from a historical play 'Shah Jehan ' or quote Ovid or Kalidasa or Rumi, or completely disarm her with a compliment as if to perversely but charmingly say, 'I don't want to talk about it'. Her dreams of ever marrying Mainal had always been fragmented and faint, but now with this new development—they were about to evaporate for ever. Not only was he an impoverished good-for nothing, but now an identified, if not condemned criminal as well. She trudged heavily upstairs and sat on the armchair near her grandFather's bed, trying to distract herself, by flipping through the Desh and Bartamaan magazines.

'Dadu,' she said softly trying not to break into an audible sob, 'Can we stop this Behag record, and try something happier like Hansdhwani or Tilak kamod , please Dadu?'.

Dadu looked at her for a minute. Why don't we stop all the music for a bit ', he said , quietly, and just feel the silence.'

Vaidehi turned the turntable switch off and sat down.

The sound of the raindrops on the on the terrace and against the windowpanes soothed her for a bit, In a while she heard the distant repetition of prayers being sung from the nearby Ram temple, ' Jai Sia Ram , Jai Jai Sia Ram', chanted to the thump thump of dholak drums . Vaidehi could feel one of her daydreams about Mainak coming on like a great epileptic spell, and though she tried to stop it, she was swept into it.

She remembered last year' college trip to Janakpur, the birth place of Sita, wife of Ram, and the epic Ramayan's heroine.

Vaidehi had been intrigued and thrilled to find that Mainak had taken a separate public bus , and turned up at the site as well. Not wanting to miss a n opportunity to be with Vaidehi away from the onerous supervision of her family.

Vaidehi's classmates rising to the occasion , had formed a cordon around the pair to allow them to walk away from the range of sight of the two chaperoning professors.

They had walked fast and had found refuge behind a bullock cart piled high with hay. It was not romantic but offered a temporary camouflage. They sat on a pile of bricks and chatted.

'This part of Bihar was called Videha , centuries ago ', Mainak had said, making Vaidehi marvel as usual about how much he knew about a lot of different things.

'The farmer king who ruled here, was Janak. One day he was doing his royal duty of initiating the ceremonial sowing of the crops, and began tilling the soil with his golden plough. Suddenly, lo and behold, the ground parted, and there emerged this beautiful baby girl, Sita, whom he adopted as his own daughter. Because she was born from the land of Videha, Sita was also called Vaidehi—so that's the origin of your name.'

Vaidehi had listened in rapt attention as she did to all of Mainak's words, as he spoke them with the well-spun magic of a born story teller, and his muted drama voice of an experienced stage actor who had taken many local stages by storm. . Vaidehi, daughter of the land, Maiden of the Earth. She had loved her name even more since then.

Mainak had taken out his ubiquitous Charminar cigarette packet, and was attempting to extract a cigarette. Vaidehi snatched it away from him, half- playfully, half seriously. 'These are poison, for your lungs and heart'.

'Who says'?, Mainal had begun his teasing banter, which meant that he would half drive her crazy with his charm and the other half insane with his incorrigibility.

'You might as well smoke those bidis they sell on the streets, They have even a higher percentage of nicotine.' Vaidehi came to with a start as she heard her grandfather clear his throat through the mists of her dreams.. 'What's the matter, dear ?,' said Atul –babu, looking at her intently . 'Oh, nothing, just these long days of cold drizzles,' replied Vaidehi, trying to sound casual. .

'It's something much more than that, it seems to me.'. . There was a period of silence.

'I don't want to marry this man , Dadu , ' , she burst out suddenly, her eyes bright wwith tears. He looked at her.' Why not ?'. 'I just don't. Dadu waited a while and cleared his throat again, 'Is there something you disliked? ' 'Yes, Everything'.

'He seemed a nice enough young man from when he came upstairs briefly to meet me, and from what your parents said ,' Dadu remarked, sill looking at her. 'Is anything else the matter ?'.

Vaidehi could not speak any further as tears were rolling down her cheeks.

Dadu continued to ponder her silently 'Hmmme,'he uttered finally. 'Hmmme , Is this about the young man in the newspaper ? He asked. ' Is this about Mainak Ray ? '.

Vaidehi straightened up startled. . How did Dadu, this old man in his eighties, who never left the house, and in fact had not left his room in three years –know about Mainak ? 'How, how did you know' she stammered. ' Don't tell me you

saw it in my stars! ‘ She added with a faint smile. I met him once, remember¿ said Dadu, his eyes with their ghost reflections of cataracts, now bearing a small twinkle. Yes, indeed, Dadu, had met Mainak during one of the latter’s devil-may -care visits to the Basu household, a place Mainak called the ‘lion’s den’.

‘How could you tell? ‘, asked Vaidehi , surprised and embarrassed., ‘I saw how he looked at you , and how you looked back ‘. Vaidehi was quiet, an amalgam of emotions quagmiring her words. ‘I don’t think your parents have an inkling‘, he went on. ‘If you are serious about this young man and he about you, it will work , but it will not be an easy road‘. ‘I don’t see how it will work , Dadu ‘ asked Vaidehi , ‘ Everything seems such an impossibility. ‘Nothing is impossible if both people want it. But both have to want it truly,’ He paused .’Are you willing to wait ?’

Vaidehi nodded wordlessly.

Dadu coughed slightly. . ‘Well then. I’ll just have to find all your prospective bridegrooms’ horoscopes incompatible with yours for the next few years. ‘ , he said ‘ His eyes crinkled in a conspiratorial smile.

Later that day, Vaidehi heard her Father call Devraj’s father, Mr Das. The latter had wanted to move ahead with the arrangements, and have the marriage set for next Spring Her Father’s voice was firm and without hesitation.. Since the horoscopes showed some serious conflicts, she heard her Father say, it would not be wise to proceed and though he regretted this deeply, he could not very well go agaist his own Father’s concerns.

Even later the sme day, Vaidehi had sent out a large wad of hundred rupee notes via Dipti to contact the best lawyer in Patna, someone who had political clout and the fight in him to handle even the most impossible- seeming cases.

With the right amount of money, a lot could be done.– money that her grandfather had taken out from that large locked Godrej almirah in his room , money that he said he had been saving to contribute towards her wedding trousseau.

The billowing winter rains had stopped late that night and the gentler rajani gandha scented winds had wafted away the light tattered rags of clouds to reveal a starry sky . The mrigashira constellation sparkled .like a diamond toy animal etched by a happy child.

A fresh crop of mushrooms had sprouted in the hollow of the guava tree trunk, and Vaidehi could see them through her window, as a nodding bunch of survivors in the ocean of opal moonlight.

She smiled and tucked herself in for the first night of restful sleep in weeks.

Chapter 14

Cremation by Manisha Roy

[This is an excerpt from my novel Professor Hamilton"s Passage to India (Yapanchitra Books, 2009, Kolkata, India.) The book is about the adventures and misadventures of an American physician who goes to India with a fellowship to do research in infectious diseases. Despite all good intentions, Dr. Hamilton faces huge problems in both professional and personal life. The chapter below describes one of them.]

By the time Charles reached the sandy bank of a stream that skirted the village on the north, it was twilight. From a distance he could make out a group of people who had already built a funeral pyre with layers of freshly cut wood and bamboo. Bina's body was already being hoisted onto the pyre when they arrived. Sanat approached him gently pressed his palm to console him as if Charles had been the one who had lost a close relative.

"I'm glad you came," Sanat said.

"I really don't know why I'm here. But I couldn't stay away. I had to do something." Charles whispered. Sanat nodded.

It was only forty-eight hours before that his Indian friends Sanat and his wife Sumita had requested him to help their young friend Bina, who had been ill with fever and an infected appendix. In his long career as a medical doctor Charles has seen many cases of infected appendix and he knew that the patient needed immediate surgery before the infection became fatal. With great difficulty Sanat arranged for an old car to take them to the nearest town – over thirty miles distance – where there was a hospital. But Bina's appendix burst before they could reach the hospital. Charles was devastated. He was angry and frustrated that he could not save a girl from such a simple problem only because of the lack of any medical facilities in rural India.

Charles was doubly frustrated because this was his chance to give the young couple back something in return of all the help they offered him ever since

his arrival to the village for his research on parasitic diseases. So far in his six months stay in India Professor Charles Hamilton, M.D. had succeeded in annoying Indian doctors and the American Consul General in the city with his over enthusiasm and his need to cut through the bureaucratic red tape. It was only after he had arrived to the village that he had found people who seemed to accept him with respect and eager to help. Sanat and Sumita welcomed him with open arms and their warm hospitality won Charles over.

Barefoot men covered Bina's body with two more layers of wood leaving her head uncovered but supported by the lower layers. On one corner sat a few women, also barefoot crying softly. Sitting in the center must have been Bina's mother. Charles wished he could do or say something to her, but refrained from it. He was sure that Sumita had said what needed to be said to the family. His only hope was that they wouldn"t blame him for what happened. The western sky on the other side of the stream was still pink. The sand banks stretched wide on either side of the narrow winter river. Dots of light twinkled from a distant village. A few crows and vultures sat quietly on a dark tree branch waiting for the burning to be over. Charles felt a shiver. It felt as though he was on another planet where people from this world go only to burn their dead.

Stepping forward was a priest with a tuft of hair hanging on the back of his shaved head. A piece of red silk was wrapped around his upper body over his clothes. Lighting a torch made of bamboo and dry twigs, the priest gave it to Bina's father and led him to the pyre. The old man walked in a daze and touched the torch to his daughter"s mouth and repeated a few words after the priest. The priest then took the torch from the father"s hand and lit the pyre at different places. The dry winter air fanned the fire immediately, and soon smoke began to cover the place. A wail from the small circle of women cut through the evening sky and Charles inadvertently put his two palms on his ears. A stout, dark man with a red headband came forward with a big stick and began to poke and probe at the burning wood as if attending to a large fireplace. The group of people eventually broke up, some going near the water to find driftwood or a stone to sit: others walking away. Sanat led Charles away a bit and they sat on a rotting tree stem.

"I was a teenager when my father died. It was in Calcutta and he was taken to the crematorium of the city where the fire is never extinguished, they say. The line of the dead was no smaller than the line in front of the movie house on the other side of the street. I was at an age only to notice the bizarre aspect of death and I didn"t have the courage to feel anything else. I didn"t know what my father"s death meant for me at the time." He stopped.

By now an acrid stench of burning flesh hit their noses. Charles felt nauseated, but didn"t dare take out his handkerchief from the pocket to cover his nose. The wails from the circle of women became more subdued. By now the sky was dark without a trace of color. The only color was the hot orange of the fire, which was now blazing above the pyre occasionally spitting sparks into the air.

Sanat wrapped his shawl closely around him and continued, “Since then I have been to many funerals where I have seen the burning of the body like this. It takes me somewhere otherworldly and gives me a message that my own death is a religious event. You see, for the Hindus, fire is a god who witnesses all our ceremonies including the rites of passage. This god is present at weddings and embraces us at death. Fire burns the mortal body to release the essence of life. Watching the slow disappearance of a lifeless body of someone you love is the only way to accept death.”

Charles was getting angry at Sanat”s philosophy. How could any one feel better about death by watching the body of his child burn to ashes? He said, “I don’t know what you”re talking about. It”s none of my business, but I can tell you, if my daughter died without proper medical treatment only because I couldn’t get her to a hospital, I”d raise hell. In my country we try hard to make treatment available to everyone.” He paused briefly before adding in a lower voice, “I’m sorry. It”s not easy for me to stand by and do nothing when something like that happens.”

“But Charles, what could you have done? We did everything we possibly could. Bina’s parents are grateful for your efforts, but they accept their misfortune. The philosophy helps. Believe me, having lived in a village many years I now understand why and how they accept such tragedy. Their only other option is to fight against all powerful gods, who are anything but predictable. Tell me, with so much science, technology and good intentions, can you control illness, aging and death?” “Illness and aging to some extent, but not death. Not yet. But in the meantime, we save more lives than we did a decade ago.” The words sounded out of place as soon as he uttered them. Sanat touched his shoulder and said, “I’m really sorry, Charles. It must be hard for you to be so far away from home. I wanted you to come to watch this, because despite the stench and crudity of burning a body, one can see that this body is nothing but a shell even though it lived, loved, and laughed. I don’t know how, but it helps. Thanks for being with us.”

Charles looked in the direction of the pyre. The stench was stronger than before. “I”d no idea that the body of a frail girl could take this long to burn,” he thought. A woman was distributing shawls and wraps to the remaining onlookers. Some went closer to the fire to warm up. Charles forgot he had a sweater. He could feel the warmth of the fire even at this distance. Sumita joined them. Her voice was broken from the tears she hadn”t shed. They sat in silence. At some point Charles stood up to stretch his legs and walked slowly toward the pyre.

Bina’s father sat on the sand only a few feet from the fire, his eyes fixed on it. Charles lowered himself next to him and touched his hand. Sanat”s words were still fresh on his mind. He remained sitting with the old man watching his daughter”s body being swallowed up by the crackling and spitting fire.

When the whole thing was over, the man with the red headband salvaged a piece of bone from the ashes and gave it to Bina’s father. He also gathered some

ashes in a clay pot and gave it to one of the women. The priest accompanied the father to the river and chanted some mantras before the bone was thrown into the stream. Everyone washed their feet and hands in the cold water and turned back to go home. The man with the headband cleared up the remaining ashes and threw everything into the water. Now that the fire was gone Charles felt the chill of the evening air and put on his sweater that was hanging from his shoulders.

"I convinced Bina's family not to bathe in this cold water," Sumita said to Sanat. Then she said to Charles: "everyone witnessing the cremation is supposed to bathe, then change into new clothes before returning to life again."

They began to walk back single file. The sky was now clear with a million stars and a boat moon throwing a dim light. The village was quiet except somewhere a night bird flew from a tree flapping its wings. Following the silent procession Charles lost all his bearings and felt empty inside. He was relieved when they approached his little house. He declined Sumita"s invitation to join them for a bite and rushed into his house.

Chapter 15

California Stories - Welcome to California (Part 1 and Part 2) by Manisha Roy

[I studied at the Universities of Rochester and Chicago between 1960 and 1963 and obtained my second Master's in Anthropology. In 1964 I went back to India hoping to live there a few years to finish the fieldwork toward my doctoral research. I was lucky to land a cushy job at the Anthropological Survey, Gov. of India as a research scholar which would offer me ample opportunity to do the fieldwork. Within a couple of months I discovered the dark side of this lucky break. I was 28 years old at the time and invited a lot of jealousy and animosity since I believe that I was offered the position due to my foreign degree over many senior and perhaps deserving candidates. I have written about this extremely painful time elsewhere (see My Four Homes, a memoir, 2015) but this article is not about my sojourn in India. I want to write about my re-location back to the US in 1969. The events below are experiences of my initiation to the next three years of graduate school at the Univ. of California, San Diego.]

Welcome to California - Part 1

My fieldwork in India was over. After four years there, I was returning to America – to the southernmost campus of the University of California – for further studies. I had never lived in California before; I chose to now because, remembering the hard winters of the Midwest, I preferred a mild climate.

A letter from a woman named Joyce Wallace had reached me in India, inviting me to stay at her home in California for the two or three weeks before the start

of classes.

This is a volunteer organization of stable families who open their doors and hearts to foreign students and help them adjust to the new environment. My family looks forward to providing you with a "home away from home in the beginning of your stay ." We'll help you move to wherever you wish – to the campus dormitory or to a private apartment. Please let me know the date and time of your arrival. I'll be at the airport to welcome you personally…

I was impressed by this gesture. The first time I went to America, no American family had welcomed me then with such a letter. Of course, it had been the cold Northeast, not friendly California. As soon as I got my plane ticket, I wrote to Mrs. Wallace and accepted her hospitality. The day before I left, I spent the afternoon finding an appropriate gift for her. I chose a beautiful length of silk, embroidered with gold, ideal for making a dress or shawl.

When I arrived at the airport in California, I looked around for an eagerly waiting family or for a sign bearing my name. Since no one appeared, I went to baggage claim. I had always thought it would be embarrassing to see my name in bold letters on a cardboard sign, held up above the heads of a crowd. Right now I wouldn't have minded at all. I was tired from the twenty-one-hour flight over a continent and an ocean. It would be good to go somewhere and rest.

I wheeled a luggage cart toward one of the exits and spotted a telephone booth. Nearly twenty minutes had passed since I landed. Perhaps Mrs. Wallace had forgotten. As I looked in my handbag for the telephone number, I saw an attractive woman in her thirties walking toward me, dragging a little girl. She kept brushing the girl's long blonde hair.

"Welcome to California," she said, extending her hand. "Sorry we're late. Jennifer insisted on coming too and I had to pick her up from school – then she insisted on changing before coming to meet you. Say hello to Manisha, honey."

Jennifer came forward and handed me a small bunch of red oleanders. I thanked her and tried to shake her hand, but she disappeared behind her mother.

"Is this all of your luggage?" Mrs. Wallace asked. She began to wheel the cart through the exit. Once in the car I relaxed, but felt even more tired. The forty-minute drive seemed interminable. Mrs. Wallace called my attention to various points of interest – buildings, museums, hospitals, parks. "Here is the largest park in the city. It includes a magnificent zoo. We'll have to bring you here as soon as you're rested. Right, Jenny?"

"Mommy," said Jennifer, moving up to the back of our seats, "where will Thomas sleep if she sleeps in the guest room?"

"Sit back, Jenny, you'll hurt yourself." Then, "Thomas is our cat," said Mrs. Wallace to me. "He likes to sleep on the guest room bed. Do you mind? I've heard that Indian people are not that keen on animals. Is that true?"

I did not feel much like talking about Indian people and animals, but I did want to tell her that sharing a bed with Thomas, even if he was only a cat, was not something I would choose. It is, at least, true of people in India that their pets do not sleep in the same bed with them. But before I could say anything the car had entered the driveway of a huge ranch-style house with a three-car garage. The driveway was lined with bushes of red oleander. We stopped at the front door to unload the bags, and then dragged them to the guest room, next to the living room. I was relieved to see there was no cat on the bed.

"Would you like anything to eat or drink?" Mrs. Wallace asked. "Dinner won't be for over an hour." "Yes, thank you, Mrs. Wallace," I said. "I'd like a glass of water, please. I am not hungry. If it's all right with you, I'd like to skip dinner and go to bed. I'm so tired and sleepy – must be the jet-lag."

Please call me Joyce. I feel I know you already. I feel good vibes from you. It's perfectly okay for you to sleep through tonight. Don't worry about a thing. You can meet Jim and John tomorrow at breakfast." She stepped out and returned in a minute with a glass of ice water. "Sleep well. Yell if you need anything. Lock the door if you don't want a visitor tonight." She winked before leaving. "Good night and thank you for everything, Joyce," I said. Jennifer stood there for a few more seconds before following her mother.

I was pleased to have an attached bath, fully equipped with fresh towels and soap. After a hot shower I felt clean and ready for bed. I had not forgotten to lock the door.

I awoke in the grey light of early morning. The ceiling was not that of my Calcutta home. A quilt of geometric design, whose pattern I had never seen before, covered the warm bed. Vaguely, I recalled that I was in another country, not in familiar surroundings. I opened my eyes wider. The clock on the bedside table read four. On the dresser across the room was a framed photograph of two children and a cat. I was in California, in the guest room of the Wallace family.

I rose, feeling fully awake, and suppressed an impulse to calculate the time in Calcutta. I knew it was long past morning there. I opened the venetian blinds to peer out. It was still dark. Street lamps glowed through the fog. My room looked out on the driveway. I had a desire to go outside and explore the area. The fog bestowed a look of mystery on what had seemed quite ordinary a few hours before. I had not known that California had fog as in the hills of Assam. Of course, I thought, one might expect it in a coastal town.

Suddenly I was hungry, very hungry. I had eaten nothing since breakfast in Hawaii the day before. I put on a bathrobe and slowly opened the door. There was no sound except the faint hum of a refrigerator. Following the hum to its source, I located the kitchen, beyond a formal dining room. I opened the large refrigerator.

"Meow." Something furry touched my ankle, startling me. It must be Thomas, I

thought, hungry after his nocturnal adventures. On two shelves of the refrigerator were cartons of yogurt – in rows – peach, orange, strawberry, even mango. On another shelf were half a melon and a few cartons of cottage cheese. I did not feel like cold fruit or yogurt early on a foggy morning. Were the Wallaces a family of staunch vegetarians? Perhaps they thought I was. I recalled what I had heard about Californians – the Wallaces could easily be "health food freaks." I closed the refrigerator.

I heard a small crunching noise and found Thomas eating from a plate on the floor of a pantry. Good, I thought, perhaps I can find something here, some bread or cookies maybe. But the shelves held only cans and bags with pictures of cats on them. In this house a cat had better luck finding something to eat than a guest did, it seemed. I went back to my room.

I had bought a bar of chocolate when the plane from Calcutta had stopped in Singapore. It was still in my handbag and I looked for it. Thomas had quietly followed me and was now securely on the bed, in the place where I had been only minutes earlier. He looked very content and satisfied, and closed his eyes. By the time I found my chocolate bar, the cat was fast asleep – a half-moon bundle of fur. I opened the blinds again, sat on the chair and watched the California sun rise slowly through the fog, beyond the hazy street lamps.

I must have dozed off. A knock on the door woke me. "Are you up yet?" came my host's voice. "Yes. Please come in." I was gazing at the oblique ray of sun on the carpet when a pair of pale bare feet with painted toe-nails moved into view. I looked up to see Joyce standing in front of me – without any clothes. I was now wide awake.

"Good morning," she said. "The sun is out. Isn't it lovely? It can be quite foggy around here all morning. You've brought the tropical sun with you. I see Thomas found his way in. How about some breakfast?"

"Good morning," I answered, with my eyes averted. "I would love some breakfast, thank you." Joyce left for the kitchen. So she was not going for a swim or anything like that. Was this the usual practice here? What about the rest of the family? Mr. Wallace? I got up from the chair, washed my face, and changed from my robe to some real clothes.

When I got to the kitchen table, Jim Wallace was at its head, leafing through a newspaper and drinking his coffee. Jennifer was sitting next to a boy slightly older than her, who was John. They were eating cereal and talking. Joyce was at the counter, preparing toast. Everyone but Joyce was fully dressed and seemed unaware of her unclothed existence.

"Good morning, everyone," I said, trying to sound normal. Jim Wallace lowered the pages from his face and stood up.

"Good morning," he said. "Have you slept well? Sorry I have to rush – I've got an eight o'clock meeting. See you later. Enjoy your stay. I'm sure Joyce will

show you around." After giving Jennifer a peck on her cheek, and ruffling the boy's hair gently, he hurried out. Not a word or gesture to his wife, I noticed.

"How do you like your tea, Manisha?" asked Joyce. "With milk, or black?" Sugar? Would you rather have herbal tea?" I felt like saying I liked my tea with clothes on. For some reason it seemed sacrilegious to stand naked in front of the stove.

"With milk, please. I can make it myself if you like." I was trying to be helpful – or perhaps to bring a sense of normalcy to the kitchen.

"Sure, help yourself," said Joyce. "We've got all flavors of yogurt. But you may want a hot breakfast, eggs and toast or such."

"That's a great idea. I'll make some eggs. Actually, I'm very hungry. I woke up early this morning and came looking for food. Did you hear me in the kitchen?"

"You must be famished," said Joyce. "I should have shown you where to find stuff for snacks. You see, I don't eat those things myself. I'm on a macrobiotic diet. Jim is the other extreme, a meat-and potato- man. And the kids will eat anything. So you get every kind of food in this house."

I wanted to ask what "macrobiotic" was, but decided to concentrate on making a hearty breakfast. The children got up, leaving half-finished bowls of cereal on the table. John pulled on his backpack and headed for the door, but Joyce ran after him with his lunch box and gave him a hug. She then combed her daughter's long tresses and tied them in a rubber band. Jennifer kissed her mother and said goodbye to me. After the children left Joyce said,

"It's the next-door neighbor's turn to give the little kids a ride this morning, Joyce said after Jennifer left we carpool. I wanted this morning free to be with you." She gathered the dishes from the table.

"Thank you," I said as I finished my breakfast. "That's very nice of you. I'd like to see the campus and find out about dorms and so forth."

"I'm going to take a quick dip in the pool first," she said, walking out to the patio. "Do you want to join me? The campus offices won't be open until ten. We can leave by nine or nine-thirty."

"No, thanks," I said, rising, and followed her to the door. "I think I'll wait till later for a swim. Maybe in the afternoon. You go ahead."

Joyce had stacked the dishes near the sink. I took the opportunity to wash them, though I realized there must be a dishwasher. I wanted to be useful. Something about the family was strange – and sad, at the same time. I began to feel sorry for Joyce. Her nudity began to bother me less already, as long as I was not expected to behave as she did. The children seemed at ease with it. I could not be sure about the husband. She is so friendly and helpful, I thought. It must be my own inhibitions. I was almost envious of her easy-going manners. She was quickly making me feel at home.

When we were ready to leave, Joyce took me around the house. She was now fully clothed. I was struck by the size of the bedrooms. Most impressive was Joyce's bathroom. Not only did it have magenta carpeting, wall-to-wall, but the fixtures were all similarly colored as well. There was a huge circular bathtub in the center of the room. I was astounded to see a magenta telephone on the wall next to the toilet.

"I have never seen a telephone in a bathroom before," I commented, unable to help myself. "You find them more and more here as new homes are built," she said, taking my incredulity in stride. "It's actually very convenient. My friends call me all hours of the day and night. Let's go to the pool this way." She led me through a narrow corridor that ran from her bathroom directly out to the swimming pool.

Outside, she told me that she preferred not to wear anything around the house because her skin needed to breathe fresh air. Also, she wanted her children to be brought up seeing adults naked and natural. Jim, of course, did not agree with her on this. It was not only Jim, though. The neighbor behind them was very weird, she told me. He kept looking at her through the fence when she sunbathed or swam. He had come from Italy not too long ago, she said, adding that he must be some sort of pervert.

"So, feel free to take your clothes off around here. No one will mind." "Thanks. I feel quite comfortable with my clothes on. Besides, it's a bit chilly for me. I had no idea that September in California could be so cool." "It is in the shade. Wait till you're in the sun."

We spent most of the day running errands and picking up information. We learned a lot about both on-campus and off-campus housing. I had a feeling that I should move as soon as possible, preferably to a small studio of my own. Adjusting to Joyce's unconventional ways might not be that easy, no matter how much I admire her, I thought.

In the car Joyce began to talk about her marriage. I knew something like that would come, because she obviously lacked a sense of discretion – and made no distinction between private and public matters. She told me how Jim's values and hers were worlds apart. He didn't care a bit about natural living, nutrition and friendship. He was set in his ideas and was interested only in his career and making money. Sure, he had provided Joyce and the kids with all the comforts imaginable. But she would have liked to share her life with him a bit more.

"What do you think, Manisha? Do you think he respects my ideas? What's your impression?"

"Joyce, I saw him barely a couple of minutes. It's hard to have an impression in such a short time." I didn't know how to handle the subject.

"You saw how he totally ignored me," she persisted. "Not even a goodbye."

"How do you think he feels about your inviting a total stranger into the house?

Is he also part of the organization that welcomes foreign students?" It was a question that had been on my mind since morning.

"Oh, that's no problem," countered Joyce. "He gives me full freedom about the way I want to live. He is very supportive that way. Or, maybe indifferent is the word. I can invite anyone anytime, as long as

Jim doesn't have to be involved. Sometimes I wonder if he isn't having an affair." She paused a moment. "Even with the kids, he is not really there. He just buys things." Joyce stopped, looking rather emotional and upset.

Despite my sympathy I began to feel uncomfortable. I had no idea that being a guest for a week meant being a confidante. My natural curiosity about people made it easier for me to be pulled into such conversations. But with Joyce, I had no way of telling how far this involvement might take me. Later, I came to realize that sharing such personal matters with a stranger was not unusual for a Californian.

It was part of the ethos of "open communication," and not necessarily a sharing of confidence.

The thought of finding my own place as soon as possible became firmer in my mind. In the afternoon, after a lunch of wild rice, bean sprouts, tofu and yogurt, I took a nap. My jet-lag had not entirely lifted yet. I felt better after the nap and unpacked a few things. I gave Joyce the silk piece I had bought for her. She was visibly pleased.

For the next few days I looked for an apartment. Joyce was very helpful. Along with her usual chauffeuring of the children to their various activities, Joyce drove me around a lot to various places: Jennifer to school every other day, John to after-school basketball games, clarinet practice and math tutorials. I was impressed by the amount of driving a typical housewife in America did. Joyce seemed to do it all with grace and without complaint. She seemed infinitely patient with the children.

They were almost never disciplined. I saw Jim Wallace rarely, since I did not get up early enough to have breakfast with them, and in the evenings I would eat early, then go to bed to be alone and read a bit. Since I was hearing so much about his marriage, I felt uncomfortable facing him. Even when we ran into each other he did not initiate any conversation. In his eyes I must have been another of Joyce's passing whims.

That week I answered an ad placed by a chemistry student who wanted to share a cottage close to the ocean. I liked her open and relaxed approach to things. She said I could move in as soon as I was ready. I liked the place so much that I put a deposit down immediately, promising to move in that Sunday. My classes would start a week later. That would give me just enough time to settle in. I was happy with the location and the view. The cottage was large enough for me to have some privacy. I already began to compose letters home, describing

my room overlooking the wild rose bushes and only a few steps from the Pacific Ocean. The best part was the rent – only seventy-five dollars a month.

Joyce planned a party for me that Saturday. "It's nice of you to go to all this trouble," I told her. "But isn't it too much bother – and in such a short time?"

"No problem," she said with animation. "I'd like to introduce you to some of my friends. They're hip – you'll love them. It will be no sweat, really – a pool-side, potluck party. We'll do some neat things, you'll see."

I was so grateful that I volunteered to make an Indian dish. The idea of a pool party with "hip" friends of Joyce scared me slightly. I did not dare ask about the dress-code. I was in such a good mood that I could accept whatever might happen. When in California ….

On the night before the party, Joyce told me that Jim would be away for the weekend on a business trip to Palm Springs. "It's for the better. He doesn't enjoy my friends anyway. May I ask you a favor, Manisha?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Would you wear a sari tomorrow? Not many people here have seen real Indian women in real Indian costume. It would be a treat."

"I was thinking of doing just that," I told her, which was the truth.

On Saturday, Joyce helped me shop for ingredients for the dish I planned to make. I insisted on paying for them. The dish was to be raita, a salad of yogurt and raw cucumbers laced with spices. Joyce stood by in the kitchen that afternoon, helping me put it together. Then she took John and Jennifer to a neighbor's house, where they would spend the night. When she returned, it was time to dress for the party, and Joyce asked if she could watch me drape the sari.

"Wow!" she said, amazed, as I showed her how it was done.

"How do you ever keep it from slipping off? I could never keep it on." She herself wore a denim jumper. "I suppose it's a matter of practice. After a while it becomes second nature." I assured her that there were no special tricks involved.

"We'll see," she said, and winked slightly, hurrying to answer the front door. The guests had begun to arrive.

By four most of Joyce's friends had come. They had gone immediately to the pool. Some sat on the edge, drinking iced tea. Others took off their clothes and jumped in. I thought I detected a pair of eyes through the fence. Joyce kept warning me that there would be a great surprise for me later in the evening. One of the rooms in the house had been readied for that purpose. I was asked not to go there yet.

About twenty people, mostly couples, gathered around the buffet table with its assortment of food: many kinds of salads including salads with seeds and even flowers. I had a hard time recognizing the people I had seen at the pool now that they were dressed. Though I was not drinking, I felt dizzy in this loose and vague atmosphere. No one seemed interested in conversation. Few introductions were made. After a "Hi, how're you doin'?" they scattered in different directions.

We served ourselves on paper plates and ate with plastic forks and spoons, sitting wherever we found places to sit. One man stuffed spoonfuls of raita into his mouth. He was still in his swimming trunks, dripping all over the furniture. It seemed incongruous. "Gee, Joyce, it's good stuff." That was the extent of compliments on the raita, given by Steven who sat among a group of the nameless women. Some of the women stood around me, asking how I draped the sari. "Is it tailored like that?" they asked. No one seemed interested in the new dish they were served – or in much else, for that matter. I had to keep convincing myself that this must be a very special crowd – at the university I would meet serious and interesting people.

After dinner, all the plastic plates and plastic ware and other waste were quickly dumped into a large garbage bag. "Now is the time for the surprise," whispered Joyce into my ear, and disappeared in the direction of her bedroom.

"Friends, please come to the room with the sign 'Wonderland' on it," came Joyce's voice over the intercom, a few minutes later.

In the week I had been there I had not heard anyone use the intercom. Nor had I explored the other rooms of the house. I had kept away from the area of Joyce's bedroom since the day she told me about her marital problems. Once she asked me to help with Jennifer's hair. On the way to Jennifer's room I had passed John's. It was cluttered with sports equipment, comic books, sneakers and musical instruments. There were large posters of rock musicians. Jennifer's room was a lot neater, with a double bed covered with stuffed animals in various sizes: teddy bears, monkeys, dogs, cats, even a snake. One wall had a built-in stereo system. Another wall had a walk-in closet full of clothes. I could not believe my eyes. So many clothes for a six-year-old!

Now we all walked down the hall, passing the children's rooms, entering still another part of the house. A door on our left bore a sign reading WONDER-LAND. A faint smell of incense emerged from the room. Joyce stood inside the half-open door, wearing the silk piece I had given her. She wore it in a wrapped-towel fashion – held by her left shoulder – exposing her right breast and quite a bit of her left thigh. The material was only a yard wide and three yards long, not enough to wear as an Indian sari – or as a Roman toga. So, I wondered, is this the surprise?

"How about it, eh?" said Joyce, giving me a hug. This movement loosened the silk from her shoulder and it dropped in a sleek pile at her feet. Men clapped in enthusiasm. The women smiled knowingly.

"Give me a belt or a string," I said, picking up the silk and trying to tie it around her bare body. "I can help you."

"Thanks, Manisha. I don't know how you keep that thing on yourself so long." A young man took off his own belt and handed it to me. I managed to hoist the silk on her shoulder again. A breast remained uncovered. The dim blue light of Wonderland made it less noticeable.

Why was I so squeamish? I had seen plenty of bare-breasted women in tribal India. What was the big fuss, anyway? After all, I had been seeing Joyce's naked body every morning for a week. The words of a famous Bengali author flashed through my mind: A savage is beautiful in the wild just as a baby is in its mother's arms.

Now fairly secure in her silk sarong, Joyce settled on a bean-bag chair in the middle of the carpeted room, which had no other furniture but large pillows. "Hello, everyone," she said. "Welcome to Wonderland. I have a great surprise for all of you wonderful people. Tonight we'll show my new friend from India how we Californians are free to enjoy ourselves. I suggest we pair off with the person next to us and touch each other everywhere, nicely and gently, with love and affection. I also suggest that that it would be easier if we take off our clothes. Feel free. It's a wonderful feeling to be able to touch another human being with freedom and love. Right?"

"Right." Voices resonated in unison through the room. I saw trouble.

"Come on, Manisha," said Joyce. You can begin with me, if you're shy." The young man who sacrificed his belt earlier was still at my side. He took my wrist.

"Oh no, she's mine," he said. "I've never touched a saried woman before. Sorry, Joyce." He laughed at his own pun. Now I saw big trouble.

"Let me just go to my room for a second," I said. "I'll change into something simpler so that I am more exposed. I'll be back in a minute." Before they could object, I went out and closed the door. In my room I did change – into a pair of blue jeans and a sweater. I went back and quietly peeped in the door of Wonderland. I saw that everyone was touching someone else. Joyce had lost her silk piece again and the young man without the belt had lost his pants. They were doing more than touching. The room looked like a tub of seething white and tanned flesh. I closed the door before my undigested salad had a chance to come up.

I left the house and walked out into the cool evening. After about an hour I turned back. It was getting cold. All the cars were still in the driveway. I tiptoed into the house, went to the kitchen, and took out some leftover raita. I sat on a stool in the pantry to eat. Thomas came and rubbed his jaw against my ankle. Tonight I might even let him sleep in my bed above the quilt, I thought. It would be easier to do this than to participate in the Wonderland party. Thank God it was far enough from my room. I can sleep without any

disturbance. Thank God I leave tomorrow. I reminded myself to apologize to Joyce in the morning.

I saw Joyce again in November. We had lunch and she told me that she was having an affair with a Mexican-American construction worker. Jim had asked her for a divorce. The news did not surprise me.

I have mixed feelings for Joyce. I admire her natural friendliness and lack of inhibition – as long as I don't have to live that way. But then, Joyce never pushed me to conform to her ways. I cannot help feeling sympathetic toward someone whose totally unselfconscious behavior made her unique even among the free-spirited Californians. I find it hard to judge her.

Welcome to California - Part 2 The Traffic Police: Encounter 1

Within a few months of my first year's study, the chairman of the department of anthropology of UCSD asked me if I would be interested in teaching an undergraduate course at Long Beach University near Los Angeles. I was chosen partly because I already had a few years of teaching experience both in Kolkata and Rochester and I was also older than a typical graduate student because I lost five years when I was in India. I accepted the offer and began the job which involved driving over 90 miles each way every Thursday evening. Being brought up in a family headed by a father who was a stickler for punctuality (he worked for a British company) I was always nervous about not making it on time and always ended up rushing to places. So I drove faster than the legal speed limit often and that became a habit. Of course I kept my eyes open for the traffic police and was fairly successful in escaping the speeding tickets.

One Thursday, as usual I was already late starting my trip and within forty miles on the highway I realized that I and my car were at the mercy of the notorious Santa Anna wind. I had not encountered this particular phenomenon in my decade long driving experience in this country, so I had to slow down. To make the problem worse and even dangerous, my car was a used Corvair, a production of Chevrolet Co. and the car that Ralph Nader wanted out of the market to save the environment. I was always pro-left in issues political and social and would have not bought such a car but my landlord a retired sea captain sold the car to me which, he swore was only two years old, in excellent condition and not a polluter. The car was owned by his daughter-in-law who was an air-attendant, therefore hardly needed a vehicle on the ground, he added. The car looked nice and the price was right. So, without consulting any one I bought it. Among other technical peculiarities the engine of this car sat in the back leaving the front as a trunk space.

Going back to that day on the highway in the clasp of Santa Anna, I could feel the problem of keeping the car on road because the light weight front of the car was no match to the force of Santa Anna wind. After a few minutes of futile efforts of driving safely I became nervous and stopped the car near a hill slope off the right lane. I got off the car looked around to see if I could put something heavy inside the trunk space to increase the weight to stabilize it. I saw some

boulders along the edge of the break-down lane but none of them were small enough for me to carry to the trunk. That day I was formally dressed in a silk sari because there was a students' party after my class and I was invited to attend. The clock, in the meantime, kept ticking. I had to solve the problem of stabilizing the car otherwise I'd never make it to my class still another good fifty miles away. I chose a smaller rock and began to roll it toward the car.

I barely made it a couple of feet or so, when I saw a pair of large boots in my path of vision followed by a thunderous voice, "What do you think you're doing?" I looked up from my low and bent posture to see a six-foot- uniformed man looking down at me. Two side holsters with hand guns at his hips did not escape my quick scrutiny. As I raised myself from the road somehow holding back my flying sari and hair, I saw the large Buick police cruiser behind my car. Before I allowed myself to be alarmed I told the truth,

"Hello officer, I was trying to move a rock to put in my car to stabilize it to drive safely in this wind. You see, I have to teach a class at Long Beach in less than thirty minutes and I'm afraid I won't be able to make it. I'm so glad you arrived just on time. These rocks are so heavy! Could you help me out here, please?" Whether it was my exotic appearance in a flying sari or my embolden but polite request or both, his voice changed somewhat and said,

"You cannot remove these rocks, these are state property. I see you have a Corvair, a risky car to drive, period. I shall pretend I haven't noticed your illegal behavior. What do you teach?" He picked up a couple of boulders with ease and dropped them in the open trunk of the Corvair and even arranged them securely so they won't rattle. "There you go. Drive carefully. Anthropology? What is it anyway?" He brushed his hands off and pulled the hood down.

"Thanks so much for all your help and for not giving me a ticket. You're a perfect gentleman and I shall not forget you." I said with my most seductive smile and started the car. The six-foot-tall traffic police with two handguns on his hips stood a bit puzzled by what just happened. I was sure it was not his run-of-the mill traffic incident. I did make it to the class fifteen minutes late and when I told the story to the students to apologize for the delay, they too looked a bit puzzled.

The State Police : Encounter 2

My second police encounter did not go so well. About a year later – by that time I had got rid of the Corvair and owned a third-hand two-door Ford something. I even got an inspection done to make sure this was not a polluting vehicle and the engine was in the front.

As usual I was driving fast on the same highway going to Long Beach to teach one day. At some point a couple of police cars passed me with deafening siren and high speed. Relieved by the words 'State Police' on the cars I concluded they were after some big fish – perhaps an escaped prisoner or a murderer on the run. I also slowed down just in case. Within a few minutes another State

police car approached and drove in front of me stopping the car signaling me to stop. I had no choice but to pull off to the break-down lane, stopped and rolled my window down. A Hispanic-looking officer with an accent, different uniform and hat asked for my license. Assuming it was a speeding ticket I kept my mouth shut and took out the license from the glove compartment and showed him. After looking at it for a few minutes he kept it and ordered me to open the trunk. Now I got annoyed. I was getting late and I had no idea why I had to open my trunk. I opened my mouth and said the wrong thing.

"Why do you want to see my trunk? I'm already late for my class." "OPEN THE TRUNK!" A thunderous order boomed this time. I missed a heart beat and turned off the car, took the same key bunch and handed that over to him through the open window. Instead of taking the key he ordered me again to open the trunk. Now I realized that at this point any argument was not only futile, he might even arrest me on charges of insubordination. I got off the car and opened the trunk with one of the keys. The officer bent his opulent frame with difficulty to look inside the trunk which had a tire and a few bags of old clothes to be donated to the Salvation Army and a bag of old books if I recall correctly. He asked me to empty the bags of their contents. Again I bit my tongue to stop myself from asking any questions. As soon as I scattered all the contents of one bag on the floor of the trunk he shouted at me to empty the bags on the road. By this time my anger had vanished. I felt like crying. The officer moved toward his cruiser and opened the back door and a leashed dog jumped out and began to sniff my old clothes and books. Now I got the drift. These state police cars with their drug-sniffing dogs were looking for drugs. But, why me?

After a few minutes of the dog's inspection, the officer ordered me again saying, "You can go" and handed back my license. He and his dog went back to his car. No explanation, no apology – nothing! I put back my things in the trunk quickly and went back to the driver's seat. I looked at my wristwatch to see I was already one hour late. But I dared not speed. I did not want another encounter with any police – traffic or otherwise. I was reminded of the gentleman officer I'd met a year ago. My California story could end here. But without a brief epilogue my fateful adventures with the California highway police force will remain incomplete.

Epilogue:

Three years and seven months later the day before I was leaving La Jolla I had a spin in my car for the last time. I had already finished my last exam defending my doctoral thesis followed by a big party on the Pacific beach with everyone I knew and sold the car along with other household staff. I kept the car for one extra day to finish my errands like returning the library books etc. There was a valley on the road between my studio apartment and the university library and I always loved that patch of the drive as the car speeded from the natural gradient. This time I may have pushed my accelerator a bit more to match my light-hearted mood as the car radio blasted my favorite Beatles' song "Let

me hold your hand…" When the traffic police stopped and accused me of going thirty miles over the legal speed limit, I blurted out, "But officer, I am in a good mood and may have speeded a bit. You see officer I just finished my studies here…" He cut me short and wrote a ticket and without any niceties left. I did not mind the ticket as much as I minded his ruining my good mood. Again I could not help thinking of the first and perhaps the last gentleman traffic police I'd met and would ever meet.

Chapter 16

California Stories - Welcome to California (Part 2) by Manisha Roy

[I studied at the Universities of Rochester and Chicago between 1960 and 1963 and obtained my second Master's in Anthropology. In 1964 I went back to India hoping to live there a few years to finish the fieldwork toward my doctoral research. I was lucky to land a cushy job at the Anthropological Survey, Gov. of India as a research scholar which would offer me ample opportunity to do the fieldwork. Within a couple of months I discovered the dark side of this lucky break. I was 28 years old at the time and invited a lot of jealousy and animosity since I believe that I was offered the position due to my foreign degree over many senior and perhaps deserving candidates. I have written about this extremely painful time elsewhere (see My Four Homes, a memoir, 2015) but this article is not about my sojourn in India. I want to write about my re-location back to the US in 1969. The events below are experiences of my initiation to the next three years of graduate school at the Univ. of California, San Diego.]

Welcome to California - Part 2 The Traffic Police: Encounter 1

Within a few months of my first year's study, the chairman of the department of anthropology of UCSD asked me if I would be interested in teaching an undergraduate course at Long Beach University near Los Angeles. I was chosen partly because I already had a few years of teaching experience both in Kolkata and Rochester and I was also older than a typical graduate student because I lost five years when I was in India. I accepted the offer and began the job which involved driving over 90 miles each way every Thursday evening. Being brought up in a family headed by a father who was a stickler for punctuality (he worked for a British company) I was always nervous about not making it on time and

always ended up rushing to places. So I drove faster than the legal speed limit often and that became a habit. Of course I kept my eyes open for the traffic police and was fairly successful in escaping the speeding tickets.

One Thursday, as usual I was already late starting my trip and within forty miles on the highway I realized that I and my car were at the mercy of the notorious Santa Anna wind. I had not encountered this particular phenomenon in my decade long driving experience in this country, so I had to slow down. To make the problem worse and even dangerous, my car was a used Corvair, a production of Chevrolet Co. and the car that Ralph Nader wanted out of the market to save the environment. I was always pro-left in issues political and social and would have not bought such a car but my landlord a retired sea captain sold the car to me which, he swore was only two years old, in excellent condition and not a polluter. The car was owned by his daughter-in-law who was an air-attendant, therefore hardly needed a vehicle on the ground, he added. The car looked nice and the price was right. So, without consulting any one I bought it. Among other technical peculiarities the engine of this car sat in the back leaving the front as a trunk space.

Going back to that day on the highway in the clasp of Santa Anna, I could feel the problem of keeping the car on road because the light weight front of the car was no match to the force of Santa Anna wind. After a few minutes of futile efforts of driving safely I became nervous and stopped the car near a hill slope off the right lane. I got off the car looked around to see if I could put something heavy inside the trunk space to increase the weight to stabilize it. I saw some boulders along the edge of the break-down lane but none of them were small enough for me to carry to the trunk. That day I was formally dressed in a silk sari because there was a students' party after my class and I was invited to attend. The clock, in the meantime, kept ticking. I had to solve the problem of stabilizing the car otherwise I'd never make it to my class still another good fifty miles away. I chose a smaller rock and began to roll it toward the car.

I barely made it a couple of feet or so, when I saw a pair of large boots in my path of vision followed by a thunderous voice, "What do you think you're doing?" I looked up from my low and bent posture to see a six-foot- uniformed man looking down at me. Two side holsters with hand guns at his hips did not escape my quick scrutiny. As I raised myself from the road somehow holding back my flying sari and hair, I saw the large Buick police cruiser behind my car. Before I allowed myself to be alarmed I told the truth,

"Hello officer, I was trying to move a rock to put in my car to stabilize it to drive safely in this wind. You see, I have to teach a class at Long Beach in less than thirty minutes and I'm afraid I won't be able to make it. I'm so glad you arrived just on time. These rocks are so heavy! Could you help me out here, please?" Whether it was my exotic appearance in a flying sari or my embolden but polite request or both, his voice changed somewhat and said,

"You cannot remove these rocks, these are state property. I see you have a

Corvair, a risky car to drive, period. I shall pretend I haven't noticed your illegal behavior. What do you teach?" He picked up a couple of boulders with ease and dropped them in the open trunk of the Corvair and even arranged them securely so they won't rattle. "There you go. Drive carefully. Anthropology? What is it anyway?" He brushed his hands off and pulled the hood down.

"Thanks so much for all your help and for not giving me a ticket. You're a perfect gentleman and I shall not forget you." I said with my most seductive smile and started the car. The six-foot-tall traffic police with two handguns on his hips stood a bit puzzled by what just happened. I was sure it was not his run-of-the mill traffic incident. I did make it to the class fifteen minutes late and when I told the story to the students to apologize for the delay, they too looked a bit puzzled.

The State Police : Encounter 2

My second police encounter did not go so well. About a year later – by that time I had got rid of the Corvair and owned a third-hand two-door Ford something. I even got an inspection done to make sure this was not a polluting vehicle and the engine was in the front.

As usual I was driving fast on the same highway going to Long Beach to teach one day. At some point a couple of police cars passed me with deafening siren and high speed. Relieved by the words 'State Police' on the cars I concluded they were after some big fish – perhaps an escaped prisoner or a murderer on the run. I also slowed down just in case. Within a few minutes another State police car approached and drove in front of me stopping the car signaling me to stop. I had no choice but to pull off to the break-down lane, stopped and rolled my window down. A Hispanic-looking officer with an accent, different uniform and hat asked for my license. Assuming it was a speeding ticket I kept my mouth shut and took out the license from the glove compartment and showed him. After looking at it for a few minutes he kept it and ordered me to open the trunk. Now I got annoyed. I was getting late and I had no idea why I had to open my trunk. I opened my mouth and said the wrong thing.

"Why do you want to see my trunk? I'm already late for my class." "OPEN THE TRUNK!" A thunderous order boomed this time. I missed a heart beat and turned off the car, took the same key bunch and handed that over to him through the open window. Instead of taking the key he ordered me again to open the trunk. Now I realized that at this point any argument was not only futile, he might even arrest me on charges of insubordination. I got off the car and opened the trunk with one of the keys. The officer bent his opulent frame with difficulty to look inside the trunk which had a tire and a few bags of old clothes to be donated to the Salvation Army and a bag of old books if I recall correctly. He asked me to empty the bags of their contents. Again I bit my tongue to stop myself from asking any questions. As soon as I scattered all the contents of one bag on the floor of the trunk he shouted at me to empty the bags on the road. By this time my anger had vanished. I felt like crying. The

officer moved toward his cruiser and opened the back door and a leashed dog jumped out and began to sniff my old clothes and books. Now I got the drift. These state police cars with their drug-sniffing dogs were looking for drugs. But, why me?

After a few minutes of the dog's inspection, the officer ordered me again saying, "You can go" and handed back my license. He and his dog went back to his car. No explanation, no apology – nothing! I put back my things in the trunk quickly and went back to the driver's seat. I looked at my wristwatch to see I was already one hour late. But I dared not speed. I did not want another encounter with any police – traffic or otherwise. I was reminded of the gentleman officer I'd met a year ago. My California story could end here. But without a brief epilogue my fateful adventures with the California highway police force will remain incomplete.

Epilogue:

Three years and seven months later the day before I was leaving La Jolla I had a spin in my car for the last time. I had already finished my last exam defending my doctoral thesis followed by a big party on the Pacific beach with everyone I knew and sold the car along with other household staff. I kept the car for one extra day to finish my errands like returning the library books etc. There was a valley on the road between my studio apartment and the university library and I always loved that patch of the drive as the car speeded from the natural gradient. This time I may have pushed my accelerator a bit more to match my light-hearted mood as the car radio blasted my favorite Beatles' song "Let me hold your hand…" When the traffic police stopped and accused me of going thirty miles over the legal speed limit, I blurted out, "But officer, I am in a good mood and may have speeded a bit. You see officer I just finished my studies here…" He cut me short and wrote a ticket and without any niceties left. I did not mind the ticket as much as I minded his ruining my good mood. Again I could not help thinking of the first and perhaps the last gentleman traffic police I'd met and would ever meet.

Chapter 17

And then there was Amsterdam by Nilay Mukherjee (Feb 6, 2012)

The phone buzzed in Ronodeep's cubicle. The caller id showed it was Neil Baxter. Neil was Ronodeep's boss.

"Can you come into my office for a second?" Neil's voice sounded tense and Ronodeep instinctively knew that this was not a good sign. Ronodeep was working furiously to finish his presentation before he and Neil left to catch their flight from Boston to Lyon. Neil knew about the hard deadline and the interruption could only mean one thing: there was a problem.

Ronodeep traversed the twenty steps between his cubicle and Neil's office trying not to guess what could have happened. For the past month, he and Neil had been planning their way out of extinction. A series of corporate reorganizations had left them without a home. As part of the last move, they had been attached to the Hernia Group in France, simply because there was no place else to put them. The company "valued their diverse skillset" and their "expertise in biologics" but did not know how to use them to further the newly redefined corporate vision. Laying them off would have made business sense, but upper management was trying not to initiate another disheartening round of reductions unless they had to. Neil and Ronodeep were given an option: they had to define their own value proposition in the new setup. "Make yourself useful or be gone" was the unmistakable message.

Undaunted, Ronodeep and Neil had worked hard to find something useful to do. The Gurley machine was their savior. Neil had discovered this little known apparatus used to measure the bending stiffness of paper and had rigged it to be able to do the same thing in hernia meshes. Why was this important? It

turns out that hernia meshes are used by physicians to keep vagrant bowels from exiting the abdominal cavity through weak spots. They look like woven pieces of netting material: some third world docs have even fashioned hernia meshes out of mosquito nets. A drawback is that the meshes are too stiff compared to the abdominal musculature on which they are sewn and this mismatch in stiffness causes pain in patients. There was a clear mandate from surgeons: They wanted meshes that did their job of keeping bowels from herniating, but they had to be less stiff. The issue that plagued the Hernia Group in France was that there was no cheap and reliable way to measure the stiffness of these meshes. Thus, there was no way to know if the various "fixes" the group thought of to try to change the hernia meshes was actually pushing the stiffness of the meshes in the right direction. That was until Neil thought of the Gurley machine. The Gurley could be their ticket to becoming useful to the Hernia Group, but Ronodeep and Neil first had to show that the concept would work.

Ronodeep had used his Six Sigma Black Belt experience to validate Neil's proposal of using the Gurley machines to measure the stiffness of hernia meshes. Despite skepticism from the manufacturers of the Gurley machine, he was able to demonstrate differences in stiffness between various types of hernia meshes. It looked like the machine possessed enough discrimination for the job. But was it reliable? Ronodeep got four different operators to try it and had shown that variation in results between different operators was small. A batch of new samples had arrived from France and were tested.

Ronodeep's statistical analysis showed encouraging trends and his French colleagues were excited. At last it seemed that Neil and Ronodeep could do something that was going to be highly valued. They were summoned to the French headquarters near Lyon to present their data and Ronodeep had an hour to finish his presentation before he and Neil were due to leave for the airport.

"What could have gone wrong?" Ronodeep thought as he knocked on Neil's door and poked his head inside. Neil was sitting with his feet up on the desk, phone in one ear and looking at his blackberry at the same time. Ronodeep's years of association with Neil had prepared him for this extravagant display of multitasking. He was not offended when Neil did not look up to acknowledge him: Ronodeep knew that his boss had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and this was how he managed his life. After 30 seconds, Neil hung up the phone and immediately launched into a series of expletives drawn from his hunting experiences while growing up in rural Tennessee.

"These French bastards are ambushing us", he finished with a flourish. Ronodeep waited patiently for Neil to come to the point, which he eventually did.

"They bought themselves a Gurley." he exclaimed. "Can you believe this mess? They are trying to pull the rug from underneath our two feet¡'

Neil continued addressing his invisible adversaries: "Son, I ask you where you were when I came up with the damned idea." He waved his hand compulsively. "Sheeet!" he grimaced, drawing out the syllable for maximum effect.

A silence ensued while Ronodeep mulled over the implications of this latest bit of news and what the best way to react to it would be. They were being scooped, no doubt about that. Would it be better to play nice and teach the French everything they knew and at least get credit for being a team player? Of course, that meant the search for being useful would have to start all over again. Or should they stonewall the French until they gave up on trying to figure out the machine and returned the testing duties to them? It could work, but it carried the significant risk of alienating the French. Also, what if they were able to figure it out: it was not such a hard thing to do once you knew a few tricks.

"Your Taxi is here" Martha's voice sounded over the intercom. Ronodeep was in the process of shutting down his computer, so he was out of his cubicle in less than a minute. Neil joined him and together they took the two flights of stairs to the front of the building, Neil playing with his blackberry all the time. "Some day that man will fall down the stairs and break his neck" Ronodeep thought. The Taxi turned out to be a SUV: nice and spacious with enough room in the back to hold their bags. Martha obviously knew her job and Ronodeep made a mental note to thank her when he came back: you can never be appreciative enough as far as the "admins" were concerned. The driver was a middle-eastern-looking, young man who informed them that there was internet access in the taxi if they wanted to surf.

"What terminal is your flight going out of?" he asked. When neither Neil or Ronodeep could remember rightaway, the man opened an app on his I Phone: "Terminal E for international flights" he announced after a short while. "Your password for internet access is CABONTHEGO." He smirked a little as he spelt it out.

While the taxi speeded down I 93, Ronodeep surfed the net, not because he had to but because he could. He had never surfed while riding a taxi and the novelty of the G3 router next to the dashboard that connected him to the rest of the world was too much for him to pass up. He decided to check what it could do: No, it would not run Netflix: streaming video was too much data to handle. YouTube was also very slow: Ronodeep was starting to despair, when he thought of Facebook. He opened his page to see that 8 new notifications were pending: the closed group of his high school graduating class had been active. After he read accounts of one of his buddies bragging about the single malt scotch he used to dull the post surgical pain of a tooth reconstruction and a rather spirited argument over who was more sexy: Suchitra Sen or Aparna Sen, Ronodeep felt the need to post something. Skillfully handling the slight bumps in the road, his fingers raced over the keyboard as he wrote: "Posting from the back of a cab as I glide on I93 towards Logan. My boss thinks I am hard at work! This is glorious!" He quickly changed the page, half glancing towards Neil to see if he had been caught in the act. Luckily, Neil was still glued to his Blackberry, typing out messages with two thumbs.

The engine showed signs of overheating and for a while it looked like the taxi driver was going to pull over and call for help. Neil spotted it even as he

continued his online communications and deftly handled the situation. Using expert vocabulary aimed at establishing his credibility as an automobile expert, he convinced the driver that he could "make it" to the airport without breaking down. In reality, they would have missed their flight, if the driver had to pull over and wait for a replacement. Things got tense for a while as the driver kept checking the temperature gauge and swearing under his breath in Arabic. Fortunately for Neil and Ronodeep, he decided to keep going and they arrived in Terminal E without incident. An hour later, they were aboard the 747 to Amsterdam.

"I am going to order me some Gin and Tonic, so I can get some sleep on the flight. We are going to need our strength in Amsterdam." Neil winked at Ronodeep as he pushed the attendant button over his seat as soon as the plane reached cruising altitude. Ronodeep had just begun to look at his travel plans in some detail (he had only scanned them before) and was slightly puzzled. They were going to arrive in Amsterdam in the early hours of the morning. However, instead of catching a connector to Lyon right away, they were spending a day in the city, staying at the Marriott and then go on to Lyon the next day. Five days in Villefrance, a small town near Lyon, then back to Amsterdam, spend another night there and then catch the plane to Boston: that was the plan. Neil's comment began to make sense to Ronodeep. Neil had built in some R&R (Rest and Relaxation) time in Amsterdam: that became obvious. Perhaps there was a shade of concern that showed itself on Ronodeeps' face, so Neil launched into an explanation: "The flight to Amsterdam is over 6 hours long. That entitles us to first class travel per company regulations. But we are busting our butts back here in coach to save the company some cash. No doubt, we are going to be stiff as a board when we land. I am going to need a day to get over my jet lag so I can be prepared for them French hogs!" Neil smiled conspiratorially. Ronodeep knew the numbers: Neil had a point. Business class fare was $5000, coach was only $600. It is easy to justify a couple of additional days of hotel and meals if they travelled coach. Of course, there was another reason why Neil had chosen Amsterdam as the place they would spend their recovery time: Ronodeep instantly guessed what it was and he conspiratorially winked back. He too, ordered a gin and tonic, moved his seat back and tried to make the best of his cramped situation. The more he slept on the plane, the more he would be awake in Amsterdam: that was incentive enough. Now if only, that child two rows behind him would stop wailing!

Schipol airport in Amsterdam was large and busy. Ronodeep had not used it in over 7 years and it seemed a little older and a little bit worn down from what he remembered it to be. They passed through customs without incident and made their way to the train station that would take them to Amsterdam Centraal, the center of the old city. As Neil and Ronodeep came out of the station dragging their bags behind them, they were accosted by overcast skies and a light breeze. Ronodeep looked up, noticing the old architecture: he had read that some of those buildings were over 300 years old. They were long, narrow structures with sloping roofs, stacked next to one another. Each one of them had a large

protruding hook constructed into the top floor. “These used to be warehouses” Neil said. “Those hooks were used to haul merchandise onto the top floors”. Ronodeep was also fascinated by the bicycle stand next to the train station. One of the few multi-level bicycle parking lots in the world, there were literally tens of thousands of bicycles parked there. Most of them were rusty, utilitarian bikes that got you around from point A to point B: it was apparent that their owners would not care too much if they got stolen. Neil had been to Amsterdam before and started pointing out various things to Ronodeep as they walked over the mossy, stone paved roads. “The old city has a ring of concentric canals. There is the Herengracht or Canal of the Lords, the Princengracht or Prince Canal and the Kaisengracht or Emperor Canal. Then there is the Singelgracht which serves as a moat.” Ronodeep tried to imagine what things would have looked like a few hundred years ago. He remembered some of the descriptions from Chevalier’s novel: Girl with a Pearl Earring and tried to imagine the scenario: the herring ships offloading their catch to be gutted, salted and barreled, the wind-powered sawmills churning out Baltic timber for shipbuilding, the Dutch fluyts setting out for the East Indies and the New World: this was where all of that was happening! It seemed so different and quiet now.

Ronodeep also tried to reconcile what he was seeing with the pictures of Holland he had seen peeking out behind the smiling faces of his friends on Facebook: that Holland was full of tulips. There was no sign of tulips on this cold winter morning. He remembered Dutch stories he read as a child where windmills figured prominently and the boy who bravely put his finger in the dyke. He looked around for these massive structures but all he saw was paved roads and small bridges over the canals staring at him in the depressing light of the overcast morning. They were somber in their ancient attire, blackened with age: Ronodeep realized he was going to have to fall in love with the old to appreciate Amsterdam. The houseboats on the canals were rather rickety as well, so it was a relief when they arrived at the Renaissance Marriott and found it to be thorough modern, albeit with a distinct European flavor. They checked into their rooms: Ronodeep stashed his passport, dollars and computer into the safe in his room, fished out what euros he had remaining from his last trip to Europe and took the elevator to the lobby to join Neil, who was pacing around, bursting with energy.

They set off, exploring the shops of the old city: boutiques, novelty item stores, cafes and coffee shops. A coffee shop in Amsterdam is a euphemism for a marijuana bar. Rondoeep had read somewhere that the Dutch, being primarily a nation of traders, quickly realized the immense tax-earning potential of legalizing marijuana and prostitution. In one fell swoop, they got around having to police their borders for illegal trafficking, building a large prison system to house offenders and deal with criminal gangs vying for territory. Instead they gained a steady stream of tourists and guaranteed tax income from the sales of some of the best regulated, quality controlled, marijuana in the world. The same could be said for the legalized sex trade: prostitutes are routinely screened for diseases and their incomes taxed. A few rowdy tourists and the occasional

vomit on the sidewalks: that was a small price to pay for all these benefits.

Neil entered a coffee shop with the calm assurance of an experienced customer. The man at the counter, more a boy than a man with a metallic lip piercing, greeted them in good English and pointed them to their choice of "weed". Neil began his educational tutorial as he looked over the menu that bragged of twenty different kinds of pot and hashish: "There are three ways of smoking pot" he declared authoritatively. "You can mix them with tobacco and smoke it like a joint, you can smoke it all by itself like a reefer or you can vaporize it".

They had taken a booth with their recently purchased gram of what the boy described as "this will make you relaxed in the morning" weed and another gram of Moroccan Hash when Neil pointed to a contraption that looked like the base of a Kitchen Aid mixer/grinder. "Tetrahydrocannabinol or THC is the psychoactive constituent of the cannabis plant and is excreted as a resin. It vaporizes at roughly 180 °C. At that temperature, the rest of the bud does not burn. So you get the entire buzz and none of the other harmful effects of smoking." said Neil, with a smile. He ground up the weed and carefully transferred it to a receptacle on top of the vaporizer. Next, he affixed a large, transparent plastic bag over it and turned on the "fan" inside the vaporizer. The bag filled up slowly, with what looked like faint smoke. Once it was full, Neil removed it carefully and put a valve-like device on the end. Exhaling deeply to expel air from his lungs, he put the valve to his lips and began a long, slow inhalation process. When he could go no more, he held his breath for what seemed like an eternity to Ronodeep, and then slowly exhaled. Only a few wisps of smoke escaped: most of the THC was absorbed into his lungs and was now speedily finding its way to his brain. He handed the bag to Ronodeep. "It's all good" he said with an air of satisfaction.

Ronodeep had not smoked pot before. Sure, in college he would hang around the potheads: they were the creative types and had the best insights to share with him. It was a relief from his more grounded, engineering friends. For some reason, his lungs could not handle smoke. Every time Ronodeep tried to puff at a cigarette, he would double over coughing and gagging. This peculiar disability had saved him from cigarettes and ganja in college and probably ensured he stayed on the straight and narrow path of academic success. Now, with a job and family, visiting a country where smoking pot was legal, and with the aid of enhanced vaporizer technology, he would finally get a taste of what it meant to be "high". He had been drunk before, more times than he cared to remember, but he had never been "high". "Byom Shankar", he muttered under his breath and inhaled.

The first few hits did not seem to affect him. "Large body mass", Ronodeep thought of his 6 ft 2 in, 260 pound frame, "Give it time". And then, it started happening slowly. As he looked around in the dimly lit coffee shop draped in red wallpaper, he noticed the other inhabitants of his den. They were mostly younger couples cozying up to each other, smoking, laughing. Ronodeep realized that the girl behind the counter seemed so much sweeter than just a few moments

ago. This was not the lustful rush that he normally feels when he spots a young nubile saunter down the street as if she was a model walking down the ramp. This was a more mellow feeling: he just wanted to look at the girl and felt a kind of affection for her. As he felt his face warm up and his throat began to dry, Ronodeep thought “I am officially in lalaland!” He smiled at Neil. “It’s all good”, Neil said, his eyes glazed over and red. Ronodeep could feel the music more intensely as his buzz ripened. He recognized an old Pink Floyd favorite: Brain Damage. He had heard the song many times before, but the lyrics made more sense now: “There is someone in my head but it’s not me.” Yes, he was definitely feeling the beats. He could hear the clouds burst, there was thunder in his ear. He suddenly knew what the dark side of the moon was like. “Yes man! I feel you.” he chuckled under his breath as laughter rolled out from the speakers “I can’t think of anything to say except I think it is marvelous!”

“Come on man! We gotta roll!” Ronodeep jerked up with a start as he felt Neil’s hand on his shoulder. He had dozed off and now, as he slowly came back to his senses and stumbled out of the coffee shop, he experienced for the first time, the other side of THC. His throat was parched. “Cotton Mouth” Neil explained as he handed Ronodeep a bottle of water: the experienced partner had thought of this eventuality. Ronodeep realized with some alarm that his sense of balance was not all there. The sweet buzz from before was gone but the sense of imbalance remained as an inconvenient aftereffect. As he walked carefully along the narrow sidewalks of Amsterdam, avoiding cyclists at every crossing and occasionally holding onto something for support, Ronodeep desperately wished for his light-headedness to go away but it would plague him for a few more hours. “We gotta eat”, he said, hoping that sitting down will help him work it off. “We need some chow before we go see the museums”.

They settled for a middle-eastern restaurant and ordered a large meat platter: ganja makes you hungry. As they dug into their lamb chops and shawarma and washed it down with cold Amstel, they watched a football game on the big screen. Over the next few days, Ronodeep would note that football was everywhere: there were games every day and when there were no live games, there would be full length replays of the more important ones.

His blackberry buzzed and Ronodeep whipped it out, a habit ingrained in him from his years of corporate experience. One of his Bengali buddies, a provocative poet and a business consultant rolled into one, had sent out a mass e mail wishing everyone Happy Bengali New Year. He had ended with ”I hope everyone is having good Bengali food wherever you are!”

Ronodeep chuckled and started typing away on his blackberry “Having good food. Unfortunately, not Bengali. Amsterdam is good for many things but if you want Muger Daal with Begun Bhaja you are out of luck”.

Ronodeep had hardly taken another bite when the blackberry buzzed again: His considerate, if slightly bored friend had taken the time to Google Indian restaurants in Amsterdam and had sent him a list. He had recommended the

Maurya, based on user ratings.

Ronodeep replied: "Google Zindabad! However, I doubt even the Maurya will have what I am craving for. I guess I will have to drown my sorrows with Amstel instead"

Within 90 seconds, he got the following message: "No muger daal or begun bhaja here in NJ, but there is payes, pati sapta, makha sondhesh, darbesh…. I am happy!"

Ronodeep felt a deep pang of emotion when he was reminded of these culinary delicacies, particularly the pati shapta. This was a wonderful Bengali creation: a crepe with coconut filling that was made only during winter festivals. Ronodeep remembered watching his mother make the coconut filling when he was a child: carefully grinding the coconut with a special tool he had not seen anywhere else in the world and then boiling it in molasses until it became a sticky, brown mass. He suddenly hungered for its rich, sweet taste tempered with the slightly salty, crispy crepe.

He typed back. "Food envy is weird. I am having a delicious apple strudel and all I can think of is pati shapta" Ronodeep thought for a moment and typed some more.

"This raises a philosophical question….. If…. Even in the land of weed and red lights I have to"make do" with apple strudel instead of pati shapta..can there ever be a heaven on earth?…If we always have to "make do"… why not "make do" with less and less? Can U drive it all the way to "ajagar protha" where you only eat what drops into your lap? The Buddha tried and gave up so that demotivates me a little from trying, but to the intellectually curious the question remains."

There were no deep, philosophical answers that floated back over the Atlantic. Instead, a few other people in that e mail chain jumped in and offered their condolences.

One of the more well-travelled members of the group, a Jungian psychoanalyst by profession commented: "I'm intrigued by the power of Bengali food-love: we Bengalis will order our individual comfort food even in heaven before our fate is decided by whoever decides these things." She probably sensed Ronodeep's despairing mood and tried to nudge him in the direction of what he could expect to enjoy. She wrote: "There is a delicious thing available in the duty free shops of Schipol. It's a liquor called Laka, which is made from an arctic berry called cloud berry because these berries are shaped like clouds. This poetic origin aside (or perhaps because of that) this liquor has the most exquisite taste."

After they had sated their surging appetites, it was time to feed appetites of another kind. Ronodeep and Neil spend the next several hours taking in the sights of Amsterdam. They went to the Van Gogh Museum, The Rijks Museum and the Anne Frank House. Ronodeep, used to the massive museums of New York and Chicago was less than impressed with the size of these museums, but

he was more than happy to view, in real life, a lot of the paintings that he had seen only in coffee table books of Art.

There is something suspenseful as you walk up to a masterpiece: a sense of anticipation and dread. Half of you is giddy with expectation and the other half mentally preparing to be disheartened. Part of your mind is determined to let in the feeling of awe that should come from viewing a masterpiece while the other half is rebelling against mindlessly accepting a masterpiece as magnificent. Regardless, many of the pieces managed to surprise Ronodeep in their own way. The Night Watch, by Rembrandt for example was enormous, filling up an entire wall and even though Ronodeep was anticipating a large painting, he was taken aback by its colossal size. Although he knew of Rembrand't clever use of light and shade or chiaroscuro, as it is called in the artistic lingo, he was mesmerized by how easily his eyes followed the light to the main characters. They almost seemed to be moving! Later, when he read the blurb beside the painting, he learnt of the chiaroscuro and the various tricks Rembrandt used to create a sense of motion. Ronodeep had read similar descriptions before, but now he understood what they meant. A parable he had read in his youth floated up to his consciousness: You can describe a rosogolla, you can show somebody a picture of a rosogolla but unless you let him eat it, he will never know what a rosogolla truly is".

Ronodeep decided to take an audio-tour guide at the Van Gogh Museum. He needed to cover it in less than two hours and the tour guide promised to take him to the most important pieces and provide commentaries as well. As he walked by hundreds of canvases, Ronodeep marveled at the portraits, was fascinated by the still life and wowed by the landscapes. However, taking a tour guide has its own unique advantages and disadvantages. You feel like you are being led by the hand through a maze but you are also being told what to think. Ronodeep appreciated the first aspect but he was slightly put off by the second. For example, he heard at least three or four times in the commentaries that Van Gogh was heavily influenced by Japanese woodcuts or ukiyo-e as well as their silk scroll paintings and prints. He noticed the Japonist influence right away when he heard the commentaries, but knowing that somehow diminished the experience for him. In his mind, Van Gogh had occupied the position of a visionary: whether by disease, madness or pure genius, the man had managed to see sunflowers like no other man before him. Now Ronodeep was being told that he was just like other people: influenced by what he saw, limited to the sphere of his experiences. He did not want to hear that Van Gogh had tried and failed to make the human figures look natural in the Potato Eaters: the painting spoke to Ronodeep as a caricature and he refused to give up that image. Then there was the depression of dealing with false expectations. Starry Night is perhaps one of Van Gogh's most famous paintings. However, it is not in the van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Ronodeep did not know it at the time and he was looking forward to seeing it at every turn. He would not get a chance until a few months later when he was at the MOMA in New York.

Anne Frank House was a revelation for Ronodeep. He had imagined a small hideout in a dark, damp corner where Anne and her family cowered for two years before an anonymous phone call tipped the Germans to their presence. Instead, it turned out to be rather spacious accommodations at the back of a spice factory and warehouse. Of course there were difficulties: they had to black out the windows and not flush the toilet after dark so as not to tip off anyone else that they were living there. Also, there was a rather ingenious bookcase and steep staircase that guarded the entrance to their secret apartment: boundaries they could never cross. Ronodeep was impressed by Anne's neat longhand: he had been struggling to improve the hideous scrawl that his 9 year old son called handwriting. He was also struck by a video recording in which Theo, Anne's father mentioned how surprised he was when he actually read Anne's diary. He thought he was close to her but he concluded that most people do not really know their children. Ronodeep wondered how closely he knew his son. But then again, did he really want to know what dark thoughts were ruminating inside that lovable head?

Neil had given up trying to keep up with Ronodeep's culture binge and had gone back to the Renaissance Marriott to take a nap. He now called and wanted to know if Ronodeep was ready to head to the other tourist attraction of Amsterdam: the famous Red Light district. Ronodeep had always been curious about this place. When Ronodeep was a teenager, his father had gone on the lecture circuit in Europe. He came back laden with delightful "foreign" gifts and stories. Ronodeep had heard his father mention the Red Light district in passing and his surging hormones had romanticized that place into a dreamland. He was looking forward to the place: curiosity, hope and passion coursing through his brain in equal measure. The layout of the Red Light district was pretty much what the brochures had described. In the streets and by alleys were hundreds of small apartments, mostly on the ground floor. The red fluorescent lights were on and girls stood behind glass doors displaying their wares. Ronodeep peeked into a few of the apartments and they seemed to be pretty basic: a bed with a thin mattress, a sofa, a bathroom, a washbasin and a thick wad of paper towels. A few had curtains drawn: presumably there was behind-the-scenes action. Hundreds of tourists milled around watching. Ronodeep was amazed at how many women tourists there were: they came in all ages and nationalities. This was no seedy place where men secretly ducked in and out of forbidden alleys: this was a celebration of sex: curious bystanders outnumbering potential clients ten to one. Ronodeep wandered why the women tourists were there: perhaps they wanted to see how they compared with the professionals?

The "women of the night" came in all nationalities, shapes and sizes. There were a lot of Asian women, but there was also the Scandinavian types and a few African girls. Many were middle aged and not all that desirable: Ronodeep was reminded of Fantine, the hopeless grisette in Les Miserables, who had sold her hair and two front teeth, prostituting herself on the streets of Digne while she slowly died from tuberculosis as she tried to pay for her daughter Cosette's upkeep. Ronodeep felt a small shiver down his spine, as he hoped none of the

women here were that desperate. They certainly did not look like that: some were blowing kisses at passerbys and looked like they were trying to generate some business, but most of the girls stood around looking bored or talking on their cell phones: Ronodeep figured there was a lot of downtime in the prostitution business.

There were other kinds of entertainment at hand. For 25 Euros you could go in for a demonstration of live sex, girls playing with phallic instruments, dances of various kinds: you take your pick. Ronodeep and Neil wandered the streets until their curiosities were satisfied. Both loved their money and were unwilling to pay 300 Euros for half an hour with a prostitute or even 25 Euros for a 3 minute dance. Plus there was the inconvenient fact that they both had wives back home who would not take too kindly to this behavior. And then, there was the specter of disease: despite the regulations and frequent checkups that the sex workers had to go through, sexually transmitted disease rates were pretty high in Amsterdam.

As the evening wore off into night, Ronodeep started to feel the limitations of his body. His feet were sore from walking a lot, his nerves on edge from the cornucopia of sensory input. They had repaired to a bar and were now sitting with large mugs of Amstel in front of them. It was crowded and the music was throbbing in Ronodeeps ears. The waitresses would sometimes get up on the table and dance for a few minutes to get the crowd roaring. Girls moved around with boys in chase. Couples were kissing in corners while at other corners, the unlucky man was being pushed off by some haughty girl. Ronodeep was too tired to actively pursue his voyeuristic instincts: mostly he just sat there and let it happen before his eyes. An Indian-looking girl tipped her drink at him and he barely nodded. She went off and a few minutes later he saw her dancing with an older man: a faint tinge of "what might have happened" shivered through him but his inertia was stronger. Ronodeep realized his party animal days were behind him. He now mostly longed for the comfort of his bed. It was time to retire for the night.

As he lay back in his bed at the Renaissance Marriott, Ronodeep's thoughts drifted to their trip ahead. The specter of the French problem resurfaced in his mind. He was too tired to think actively about it, so he just let it float around in his consciousness for a while before he drifted off. In his dreams he saw Uma Therman as Fantine, running the Gurley machine, smiling toothlessly at him under a starry night. The French were smiling too and Neil was saying: "It's all good!"

Chapter 18

The Marijuana Talk by Nilay Mukherjee

So, we were getting into my car: my son and I. We had just watched the Fantastic Four. It got 8% on Rotten Tomatoes, but my son wanted to see it anyway because he had read the book…. ahem… the comic book….ahem..the graphic novel (as he reminded me). He thought the movie was low on action, but remained faithful to the original storyline. Good! But that is not what this story is about. As we were getting in, a car pulled up next to us and four teenagers got out. As soon as they opened the door, my nostrils smelled a smell that I had not smelled in a long time. Ahh…. It was truly aromatic! "Pot", I said before I realized what I was saying. "Those kids are smoking pot." Now, there are various responses possible to this statement. My son could have ignored me, like he so often does. He could have said, "What's pot?" absentmindedly, as he changed the station on the car radio and then forgotten about it. But that was not what he said. Instead, beaming from behind his spectacles, he adopted this faintly mocking tone and asked: "How do you know that, hmmm?"

I backpedalled furiously. In my panic, I took refuge in chemistry: I explained how THC, the active ingredient, was an aromatic that evaporated around 180 degrees Centigrade, hence the smell bla bla bla. But it did no good. My son, simply waited me out and repeated the question: "How do YOU know that smell, hmmm?" The unspoken question hung in the air. I thought for a second if I should go the "I smoked, but I did not inhale" route and decided against it. Blurry visions of Amsterdam flashed by. Then I hit upon it: "Son", I said in my gravest tone. "Marijuana or Ganga is considered to be a holy thing in India. Many Sadhus smoke it. Everyone over there knows that smell". Phew! I had dodged a bullet…..or so I thought. I was hoping to move onto other topics, but his next comment gave me pause. "Don't worry" he told me. "It is legal in Massachusetts!" "Now, wait a minute," I said. "It is NOT legal" I said vehemently. "It is", he said, in a cool, confident voice. "OK", I thought. "It is

time to have the talk." "Look son," I said. "It has been partially decriminalized. That is not the same thing" "What?" said my son…. And that was all the opening I needed. "Son", I said. "The Federal government still considers it as an illegal substance. But many states changed the law because their jails were filling up with non-violent offenders who had just a little bit on them, for recreational use. Now, they decided to go for the dealers, so they only catch people who have a large amount on them, with intent to distribute. It is still illegal to buy and sell it." "But", my son interrupted " In Colorado……" "This is not Colorado", I said with some heat. "Now, let me tell you the various levels of laws that exist. First, scientific studies have found that marijuana, smoked safely…that means while NOT DRIVING A CAR…does offer pain relief and has lower addiction potential than many over the counter medicines. So, many states, including Mass, has allowed medicinal usage: that means you will need a doctor's prescription to get it. Colorado has gone a step beyond that and allowed recreational use: which means that it is no different than buying beer or wine. But the federal agents can still arrest anybody who possesses pot, don't forget that. And many people are still worried about how the law will be abused: so we just have to wait and see." My son maintained his smugness through my heated diatribe. Then he said: "I already know all that. They taught us this stuff in Health class, right before we studied about Sexual Assault." I decided to let it go.

Chapter 19

Niagra Falls by Nilay Mukherjee

She climbed the railing that separated us from a swift death

The dark, green waters of the Niagra Menacing

Only Six feet deep

Flowing faster than the proverbial “torrent”

Its Herculean force not yet unleashed

But it is all there

Very much there

If you looked closely, you can almost feel its power, drawing you in

A hundred feet away, the water poured over the edge into oblivion

You can hear the roar as it rushes by Hurricane Deck

The water smashed into a million particles of spray

Diamonds glistening in the sunlight next to the rainbow

She climbed the railing that separated us from a swift death

I, boxed in by the crowd, could reach over and grab her arms But I froze

Lest a small mistake caused her to loose her balance I, in my mind’s eye

Can see the newspaper headlines:

Teenager swept away by Niagra Falls Victim died trying to photograph herself while hanging on the wrong edge of the railing

I can see her drowned face

Pale, eyes slightly open

Under the dark green waters

I can see the grieving parents leaning over the crushed body

And then, the younger sister joins her on the other side

No! No!!

Not two dead

The little one, she does not deserve this

Bring her back!! Please bring her back!!

Interminable moments pass

Pictures are taken

Memories preserved

Then they climb back

Unharmed.

I can breathe again, but my head is reeling.

Chapter 20

Rishi comes home from Debate by Nilay Mukherjee

So my son came home after 4 weeks at debate camp. First, I thought he had become a stoic: because in response to my anxious questions about whether he missed home, he said: "No. But I don't miss camp either."

Next, I got all the bad news.

Someone had stolen a hundred dollars in cash from him, while he was in the shower. Ok. "How did it feel?" I ask. "I tried not to feel anything", he said. "But I was determined it would never happen again. I carried my stuff with me everywhere after that" Stoics are indifferent to the vicissitudes of fortune…… so not quite a stoic. Ok.

The glass front of his I-phone was shattered. It was in the backpack which was tossed around. But it still worked. I tried to hold on to my smile. I hadn't seen him in four weeks, I reminded myself. He had packed his passport next to the toothpaste tube and now it was swimming in a pool of toothpaste. Hmm. I cleaned every page with a paper towel. Stay calm!

"All teachable moments," I consoled myself. But the hundred dollars still stung! Ouch! Remain calm! "So what was the most important thing you learned at camp?" I asked. "That I should learn how to cook", he said in a deadpan voice."The food was horrible"

The boy is growing up, I thought. Good. Maybe he will learn the chicken tikka masala I have been wanting to teach him.

Next I got the details. There were two hours of lectures each morning: the basics of debating, philosophy, psychology, political ideology, policy etc. etc. Debate prep the rest of the time. They told him about the Stanford experiment (this is where they took volunteers, assigned half of them roles of prisoners and

half as guards and ran the experiment for a few weeks until they were forced to shut it down because of the horrors that transpired). He now believes that we are all the product of our environment. There is no such thing as free will. Hmm. This can be a source of conversation later. I make a mental note of it.

We went to his favorite Italian place and he mixed the baked Ziti with the Chicken Parm and wolfed it down: I guess the food at camp was pretty bad.

He smiled for the camera. That's a first.

And all this while, I am looking for differences. Four weeks. That's a long time. Did he meet a girl at camp? Summer romance? But I didn't ask him.

"Did you watch any movies? Music?" I asked. "They forced us to watch Beauty and the Beast. I prepped for debate all through it". Ok, so much for romance.

He yawned. I took the hint. No more probing.

The boy had grown up. In ways I can't imagine and in ways I can't control. My role now, is to stand aside and wish him well.

Good luck son!

Chapter 21

Give me Knowledge by Nilay Mukherjee

The buzzer rang harshly, splitting the early morning air in Ronodeep's bedroom. He was already in a semi- conscious state, his mind racing. Later, he could not remember exactly what he was thinking about but the sense of urgency was unmistakable. He had things to do, places to be. This was not going to be a typical Saturday morning.

He reached over to silence the buzzer and got up, involuntarily clenching his muscles as he removed his blanket and stepped out of its warmth. His wife's admonishment rang through his head as he brushed his teeth "I don't understand why you have to rush out on a Saturday morning to cook for a bunch of people that you don't even know¿' As usual, he had no intelligent answer, just an assurance in the depths of his gut that told him that this was a good thing to do.

Saraswati Pujo (Pujo means worship, Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of learning) brought back fond memories for Ronodeep. This was the only Pujo that he was involved in organizing when he was growing up half way across the world in Kolkata. Durga Pujo, the pride and joy of Bengali existence, was too big of an affair to be left to the kids, but Saraswati Pujo was different. It could be done in one of the empty garages of his cooperative housing society and it did not cost too much money. Ronodeep remembered the month of excitement before the event itself: there were donations to be collected from the residents, plays written and rehearsed, poems to be memorized for the cultural function, decorations, food….so many things. And there was the juggling between the Pujo his dad performed in their apartment and the affair at the cooperative society. Recently, a friend had posted photographs from one of those events on Facebook. Ronodeep looked at them as if in a dream. He looked at a scrawny version of himself from 25 years ago hoisting the idol of Saraswati onto the

van, posing proudly in front of the decorations he had helped put up. He saw younger versions of his friends. He remembered the fight he had had with the boy on the left who was now a professor at a respected university and the crush he had had on the girl on the right who was now into her third marriage (or so rumor had it: she was not on Facebook to confirm or deny it). Mostly Ronodeep remembered being giddy with a sense of purpose: he was involved in something greater than just himself, something that was somehow meaningful in a way he could not describe but the feeling was there and it felt good. Many years later, he wanted that feeling back and he hoped cooking Khichuri in Boston for 500 Bengali immigrants on a Saturday morning in January was going to do the trick.

He slipped out of the apartment quietly so as not to wake his wife and son. They were going to have a busy day and would try to make the Puja in the evening if they had time: he had a swim meet in the morning and then he was going to hook up with his buddy to play on the Wii. Not unlike many Bengali kids of his age, he had to get through an hour of math and half an hour of piano before he could have any contact with the Wii. Oh, and there was the essay he had to write on his recent trip to the Taj Mahal where he posed as a home grown Indian kid so he could skip the more expensive NRI (non- Resident Indian) lines. She was going to chauffer him around while fielding phone calls from the hospital: "Mr. Jones blood sugar is through the roof but he wants to leave AMA (against medical advice) because he wants to join his friends on a trip to Vegas." Or the nurse could say: "Should we call a psych consult on 98 year old Mrs. Pierce who was admitted last night because a neighbor called 911 after he saw her sprawled across her yard. She has a broken hip but she wants to talk to Mr. Pierce before she consents to surgery. The only problem: Mr. Pierce died 10 years ago."

Ronodeep punched in the address of the school where the Pujo was being held on his GPS as the CD in his car stereo kicked in: Vedic Chants that George Harrison and Ravi Shankar had put together. The evocation of Saraswati was track number 2: Ya kundendu tushar har dhabala Ya sweta vastambrita Ya veena vara danda mandita kara Ya sweta padmasana (Oh goddess, white as snow, dressed in white, veena in hand, seated on a white lotus: we bow down to thee)

As he turned into the parking lot of the school, he was surprised to see a lot of cars. It was eight o' clock in the morning and he was expecting to be the first to arrive. Then he noticed a large kid struggle out of his car and head towards the gym. He was wearing a T-shirt: 2006 Wrestling Champion, Suffolk County. "Great!" Ronodeep thought. "There is another event going on. People were going to have a tough time finding parking today."

As Ronodeep walked towards the entrance, he scanned the surroundings for Bengali faces. He was not expecting the average Bengali to show up this early: most people came just in time for Pushpanjali (flower offering) and lunch; but a couple of the organizers should be here unloading stuff from vans, carrying

things into the kitchen etc. As he entered the outer doors, he saw the welcome banner for the event stashed in a corner, waiting to be put up. “Good”, he thought, “Someone is here”. He followed the signs to the cafeteria and peeked in the kitchen.

The kitchen was already busy. Ronodeep recognized Feluda, one of the organizers and moved towards him. “Thank God you arrived!” Feluda said, clearly relieved. “You can start with the Khichuri. I am going to fry up the spices and mix the rice and the daal together. After that it is up to you. Please figure out how to get those pots going….. and talk to Rob” he said, as he rushed off munching compulsively on his paan and zarda.

Rob turned out to be a middle aged Caucasian man dressed in a green uniform with a matching cap covering his sandy blonde hair. He showed Ronodeep how the pots worked. It was a thrill for Ronodeep’s inquisitive mind and a chance to hark back to the principles he learnt in Thermodynamics 101 more than 20 years ago. First, there was the boiler that converted water into steam. Once the boiler pressure reached a certain level, you turned some valves to let the steam circle around two giant stainless steel pots. “Easily 100 gallons each” thought Ronodeep, staring into their depths in awe. He had never seen such large cooking vessels before. You could fill them up with water from a tap and there was a drain at the bottom as well. “Be careful with the filter that sits on the drain” warned Rob. ” I know you Indians like to stir things vigorously. That can dislodge the filter. Then the drain gets clogged and we will have a problem.” He handed Ronodeep a giant, stainless steel spatula that looked like an oar. “Your stirrer”, he said with a smile” Get ready to use those muscles”.

The plan was simple. Feluda would fry up the spices (cumene seeds, ginger, cumene powder and habanera paste) in oil in a separate pot and mix it with 30 pounds of Basmati rice and 30 pounds of preroasted Moong Daal. Meanwhile Ronodeep was going to boil water in the two giant pots. Then the mixture of rice, Daal and spices would be divided and dropped into the two pots. There, they would cook for two hours with occasional stirring using the giant spatula. Ronodeep’s job was to make sure the bottom did not char and the mixture retained the desired consistency: not too thick and not too runny. Twenty minutes before the end, he would throw in pre-fried cauliflowers, potatoes and peas. Salt and sugar would be stirred in as needed. Finally the yellow mush, the consistency of porridge, would be topped with two large tubs of clarified butter that someone had painstakingly made at home the day before and sprinkled with crushed cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. That concoction would feed 500 Bengalis that would assemble in a few hours, hoping for a taste of home-cooked Khichuri.

Rob turned out to be a talker. He chatted amiably with Ronodeep about his life. He was a cook for the county schools but he had leant his culinary skills in the Navy, which he joined right after high school. “You don’t really learn how to cook in the Navy”, he said. “You learn to follow orders. There is no room for creativity”. Being in the Navy had allowed him to travel the world

and sample different cuisines. “I liked the food in Hong Kong”, he said. “But those guys eat some crazy stuff. I once tried some of their street food… couldn’t keep it down” He ended his story with a flourish, his eyes glittering, “But I love Basmati, man…. And those Indian spices… uh, uh, uh”

Ronodeep had noticed her the moment he walked into the kitchen because she was the only one wearing a headscarf. As he talked with Rob, he noticed the quiet efficiency with which she went about cutting the eggplant into thin disks, each one roughly the same thickness. Ronodeep knew that was important because they would then be dipped in batter and deep fried a dozen at a time and it was important that they all be the same thickness so that they cook evenly. She noticed him looking at her and introduced herself. Her name was Farida Bibi. With typical disregard for the American reticence to inquire into the personal affairs of someone you have just met, she obtained details about Ronodeep’s family: how many years he has been married, how many kids he had etc. She was surprised that he had only one kid after being married for over ten years and expressed more surprise and perhaps a bit of disapproval when he told her that one was all he and his wife could manage to raise, given their hectic lifestyles. She was equally forthcoming about her own life: She was born in Faridpur but grew up in Khulna. She has been living in Cambridge for the last 20 years. Her husband was a cook’s helper at a Bangladeshi owned Indian restaurant and she had three kids. She helped the family finances by cooking for a few Indian families, catering a few parties and helping out at events like this. Her eldest son was on the verge of “standing on his own two feet”. “He will graduate next year with a chemical engineering degree”, she said with a smile that showed the kind of pride that only comes after a long, arduous but successful ordeal.

After Ronodeep had finished his duties in the kitchen, he took off his apron and walked out into the coolness of the cafeteria where the Puja was being held. The Purohit (priest) was a guy he had gone to school with in India. The Purohit announced on the microphone that it was time for the very last Pushpanjali, so Ronodeep joined the stragglers in a flower offering to the goddess of learning. “Bidyang dehi namastute (give me knowledge, I salute you)” he chanted with the group. He knew the invocation by heart: he had repeated the same verse every year since he was a child but each time he said it, he still got goose bumps. As a kid, he would excitedly throw the flowers at the feet of the deity but the rules were different in America: you patiently waited as a basket was passed around for you to put the flowers in.

After the Pushpanjali, Ronodeep sat near the deity, gazing at the Shola (papier mache) decorations behind the goddess Saraswati and inspecting the utensils of the Puja. The utensils were made from copper, just like the ones back home. He recalled how his mother would wash them with tamarind. The acid in the fruit removed the patina from the copper and they glowed in their warm, red, native color. He visualized his father teaching him the proper way to conduct a Puja after his Poite (sacred thread) ceremony when he was 14. He remembered

how kids would put books in front of the deity, hoping for extra blessings from the goddess of learning. He smiled, remembering how often Math books were proffered. Ronodeep was roused from his reverie by a young woman who asked him if he would take a picture of her family in front of the goddess. Ronodeep complied; making sure the frame included everyone and the goddess. They all perked up in fake, "say cheese" smiles for the three seconds it took for the camera to execute its routine: a series of red flashes to eliminate red eye followed by the big , final flash that coincided with the opening of the shutter. Ronodeep suddenly remembered that when he was a kid, no one smiled when their pictures were being taken. He had recently looked at some photos of his third grade class that his friends had posted on Facebook and was struck at how serious everyone looked. He now looked on as several families went through the same routine: the women dressed in their finest sarees and gold ornaments, the men in kurta-pyjamas. They all exhibited the same fake-smile mannerism, showing teeth, perpetuating their momentary exuberance in digital format. "How things change over time", Ronodeep thought as he looked with amusement at the procession of families.

The families all had their backs to him and the deity: so Ronodeep got a ringside tour the latest fashions in women's blouses from Kolkata. He marveled at the infinite variety. There was the conservative blouse: full sleeved and covering the entire back, that were generally favored by the older women. Then there were the more daring cuts that the younger women preferred: no sleeve, low cut to the back or open back tied with strings that crisscrossed in various patterns. Ronodeep wanted to stare at this unexpected display of skin and wrestled with himself to look away. His task was made easier when one woman showed up with a particularly exposed back that she had failed to apply any moisturizer to. "The danger of long, New England winters", Ronodeep thought as he headed towards the Prasad and Khichuri lines.

At the Khichuri line, Ronodeep had the pleasure of standing next to a very professorial looking, middle aged Bengali man. He seemed to have been around the block a few times, perhaps he was a Puja organizer himself that lived in another state and was here visiting friends. He waved his hands at his captive audience, which included a couple of Caucasian men and women in Indian costumes, and held a long discourse: "The Puja organizers face a very peculiar challenge with the Bengali diaspora," he said. "While the Puja is essentially a religious occasion, the real reason why most Bengalis gather at these occasions is to socialize, eat and watch the star attractions of the cultural program, usually professional artistes from Kolkata."

"Is this guy a sociologist?" thought Ronodeep.

The Professor continued. "The crowd materializes magically half an hour before the Pushpanjali followed by lunch. Then a lot of people leave and come back in the evening when the stars are performing. Then they proceed to eat dinner and leave. Meanwhile the organizers are desperate to hold on to the crowd in the intervening period between lunch and dinner because that is when the kids and

local artistes perform. Various tricks have been tried: sit and draw competitions for the kids, raffles etc. but the basic truths are undeniable: 1) If you or your kid is not performing, there is very little incentive to stick around. 2) There are simply far too many Bengali and Indian cultural opportunities available in America in the 21st century that the novelty of a home- grown Bengali program is passé."

Ronodeep saw the merit of that explanation despite his annoyance at having to listen to this pompous man. He himself always stuck around for these cultural programs because he viewed this as an opportunity for furthering his own amateur, anthropological explorations. He had his own theories and they were similar. In the dazed state that often beset him when he was stuck in a line that is not moving, Ronodeep found himself lecturing in his own mind to himself, drawing out the explanation, as if speaking to kids that needed more detailed explanations than the one that had just been given. Maybe he needed more convincing to firm up his own beliefs. "Back in the 70's, when the first wave of Bengali immigrants landed on the shores of New England, these gatherings were of tremendous value. At that time, there were no Bengali stores to shop in, no Bengali movies to watch, no 24 hour Tara Bangla or other Bengali channels on TV. Telephone calls to India were in excess of two dollars a minute. Thus, the Bengali diaspora desperately clung to any reminder of their parent culture and occasions like these were a welcome change. The whole affair was also much smaller: a few families would get together and everybody knew everybody else at the Pujas. Thus the intimacy and novelty of the event more than made up for the lack of talent. Fast forward to 2011 and the scene is entirely different. The Pujas are much larger now and apart from some of the old timers, most of the attendees don't know each other. There is simply no reason to watch some unknown kid fumble his way through Sukumar Ray's Abol Tabol in a mostly empty auditorium when you could be watching Sachin Tendulkar score another century against England." He was roused from his reverie by a sudden movement in the line: they had started serving lunch! "Why then", Ronodeep wondered as he viewed the bustle of activity in the front of the line," is there so much jockeying for power at the cultural committees for these programs? Who gives a damn? And yet, some of these people act like their entire self worth depended on it. What strange combination of incentives and utter delusion can propel these people to control something that has clearly become irrelevant to so many of the very people that they are hoping to serve?" Ronodeep resolved to watch the organizers closely and study their reactions to get a glimpse of their truth.

He felt a tap at his elbow: "Are Ronodeep je? Onekdeen bade". (After many moons, eh Ronodeep?) Ronodeep turned to face a bearded, smiling man, a man that was once much younger, had no beard and attended same college as Ronodeep. After the usual "blast from the past" reactions and enquiries about the fate of common friends that neither had bothered to keep in touch with, the conversation settled on the present. It turned out that Kishan, the now bearded, much older man than the one Ronodeep remembered, was settled

in the area with a steady job and a 30 year mortgage. More interestingly, having hit the glass ceiling on his climb up the corporate ladder, Kishan has turned his attention to a smoldering passion from his youth: theater. Back in the day, Kishan performed street dramas, mostly organized as part of a protest rally of some sort by left leaning, student-led political organizations. There were many things to protest against and dreams of a new world where oppression and corruption would be a thing of the past was a unifying theme under which Kishan honed his thespian and directorial skills. In post modern USA, jaded with excesses of every kind including revolutionary approaches to theater, Kishan has turned his attention to exploring globalization issues as they affect the middle class Bengali community. Ronodeep listened as Kishan animatedly explained his latest project. "I just want to start some meaningful conversations about who we are", Kishan exclaimed.

As the conversation progressed, Ronodeep became aware of Kishan's frustrations in marketing his productions. "I tried to stage a few shows at places like this", he grimaced as he waved his hand at the assembly of Bengalis, all hurrying to get a spot to sit and eat their lunch. "But the general public seems to only want the pulsating rhythms of Anyesha. Between that and the screaming, ill-behaved children running amuck, there is no place for serious theater here. To top it all, the organizers only want to produce hackneyed reruns of Tagore musicals, that too under their own direction using their age old notions of theater. While Tagore is always relevant, it is time we focused on other things." Kishan complained. Ronodeep learnt that Kishan now stages his shows to select, small audiences once or twice a year. Ronodeep promised to attend their next show and the two parted company after planning to sit next to each other at the cultural program that evening. "Jayga rakhis", Kishan said, referring to the peculiar, sometimes disgusting tradition of throwing a garment over a chair to reserve a spot for him in the auditorium.

After Ronodeep had eaten his lunch of Khichuri, begun bhaja, labra and chutney, he changed out of his cook's garb into the attire that his mother had gotten for him the last time she visited. It was a beautiful kameez: shining, black silk with delicate, white embroidery all along the edges with a matching churidaar and a very long dupatta with gold filigree work or "zari" as it is commonly known. Hritik Roshan had popularized this kind of dress and it was supposed to fit well on tall men. Ronodeep smiled to himself as he tied the knots of the churidaar string around his waist while holding up the long end of his kameez between his chin and chest, a maneuver he had learnt by watching an older cousin as a child. Was he really hoping that the long, sleek cut of the kameez was going to minimize the bulge in his middle? He looked in the mirror of the bathroom where he was changing, a hopeful glance. No, the gut was just as unflattering as before. "Exercise and portion control", thought Ronodeep, even as he knew that portion control was not a possibility tonight: There was Illish mach and goat curry on the dinner menu.

The phone rang and Ronodeep answered mechanically without first checking to

see who it was. It was Souren, who Ronodeep had known from a past life. Souren and Ronodeep had organized parties for the local Bengali population while they were together and had maintained contact over the years. “Are Ronodeepda”, Souren said even as Ronodeep could hear Souren’s one year old screaming in the background, ”I need your help with a quiz contest I am organizing for the Bengalis here”.

Quiz contests are a staple feature of the Bengali get together. Ronodeep had many fond memories of participating in these trivial pursuit/ jeopardy concoctions as a kid. The quiz master would pick the question out of a hat and read it aloud. Then teams would get a chance to answer. Meanwhile the audience was instructed not to shout out answers. Ronodeep remembered the many giddy moments when he knew the answer to a particular question and had to wait his turn, his excitement building while he combated the gnawing fear in his stomach that the previous team would answer it first. Later on, as an organizer of quiz contests, Ronodeep had quickly learnt that there were three types of questions. The first kind was the easy ones, the confidence builders: you had to ask them to get the crowd involved. Also, these included insider questions (like: Name the first president of our organization) that were highly favored by the organizers. Then there were the super hard, esoteric questions that nobody cared about (like: Name the structures that pass through the femoral triangle). If you had too many of those, the majority of people tuned you out very quickly. Every quiz master dreamed of the third kind of questions: the ones where most people go: “O my god...I should know the answer... it is on the tip of my tongue but I can’t think of it”. These generated the most excitement followed by “Ema, eta janeesh na!” (How come you don’t know this!) as soon as the answers were revealed.

Ronodeep promised to help Souren and fielded another call from his wife: she was under the weather and could not make it. “No big surprise there”, Ronodeep thought after he hung up. He knew that she did not care for these occasions as much as he did. The headache was probably real but if she wanted to come, she could have taken an aspirin. He found her unwillingness to participate in these occasions equally strange as his willingness to be involved. As he wandered through the hallways looking at the people, noting what they were doing, Ronodeep could not help feel that this was all a dream. What was he really doing here? What was he here for?

The professor sociologist that Ronodeep had seen before was holding court, lecturing to a few people that had gathered around him. Ronodeep’s curiosity was peeked. “What is he talking about now?” he thought as he joined the group. It turned out that the lecture was on identity. “There are two main theories on identity,” the professor claimed.” One says that you are who you are and you spend the rest of your life discovering yourself. You make one mental construct after another about who you are, only to find out that they need to be modified over time based on new experiences. Finally you realize that you are only the “awareness of self”. Everything else; your body, mind, intellect are just

constructs in themselves, constantly evolving in cause and effect relationships." "Oh no", thought Ronodeep, "a Vendantist!"

Ronodeep wondered what the other theory was. The professor got around to it finally" The other theory is also a mental construct theory, except that your cognitive mind is in control. You wear many hats: the Indian, the Bengali, the professional, the father, the son, the friend, the left handed spin bowler, the wearer of fancy kurtas and so on." he said, eyeing Ronodeep's kurta with a hint of envy. "At any given time, based on the circumstances, you choose to exhibit one or more of these identities. So, on some level, you are who you choose to be".

"What are these circumstances?" Ronodeep could not help interjecting.

"Well, that is a lecture in itself", smiled the professor causing Ronodeep's anxiety levels to go up. "It's like this", he said." Society as a whole or, at least, the influential groups in society has defined constructs for us, the so called bounds of normal behavior. It rewards those behaviors. It also punishes the behavior of smaller groups with identities that it considers threatening by calling them aberrant behaviors. Thus society punishes criminals by putting them in jail, lunatics by putting them in mad houses, gay people by not giving them marriage rights etc. Some people have even suggested that women are punished by society for being aberrant from male behavior. Notice however, society does not punish all minorities. For example, it is OK to be a red head, because they are not perceived as threatening in any way. As individuals living in society, we are aware of these boundaries. We then exhibit behavior within those boundaries that maximize our utility functions".

Ronodeep could only guess at what utility functions were but he did not ask for a clarification. Instead he pursued the circumstances issue.

"So you are saying that the same people will change their behavior depending on the circumstance based on what they feel is the best course of action for them?"

The professor beamed."Within limits, yes." he said.

The professor's lecture went on. "While a black man cannot obviously pass for a white man, a man or woman will change their behaviors based on what kind of scrutiny they are under. For example, if you are talking with your Indian or Bengali friends at home: even if you are conversing in English, you will drop in a few Indian words like arre and yaar, but you will change your accent and switch to corporate speak when you are talking to someone at work. You might be extolling the virtues of being an Indian to your son, but if a politician approaches you with the obvious intention of getting your vote, you might actually resent it if he tries to suck up to you by praising your Indian identity. At a company picnic you might be a Republican while you could be rooting for Jyoti Basu on Apriler Poddo Path (the annual gathering of Bengali poets in the New England area)."

The professor's lecture was cut short by the announcement that the cultural

program was beginning. Ronodeep trooped into the auditorium and found his seat beside Kishan. Not surprisingly, the agenda was heavy on Rabindranath, 2011 being Tagore's 150th birth anniversary. There were poems recited, songs sung. There was even a program on the effects of foreign musical traditions on Rabindranath's music. Ronodeep sat through the mostly amateurish performances and tried to look at the reactions of the audience. The organizers were up front cheering everything on, beating their own drums about how much effort it took to put everything together and how happy they were that everything was going so well. There were the rows of "ninduks" or those that were critical of the performances. Their complaints ranged from how good it used to be when they were in charge or how someone's kid was unfairly dropped from the performance or how one organizer had snubbed one of the kids' mothers and so on. There were some older people that just sat and watched, saying nothing. Ronodeep wondered what they were thinking. Then there were the people who ignored the whole program and chatted in loud voices wile they let their cell phones ring to tunes of the latest Bollywood hits. They were disturbing the proceedings but managed to remain completely oblivious about it. Finally there were the children, running around, getting on stage, being shooed off and returning again to claim some negative attention a few minutes later.

Ronodeep liked the program on the influence of foreign musical genres on Rabindranath's songs. The narrative was tight and a group of singers sang the original song and the Rabindrasangeet that it inspired, one after the other. When he was a kid, Ronodeep's mother had forced him to take music lessons and part of that training involved learning about how Rabindranath was inspired by different musical traditions. In the program he was watching now, he recognized some of the examples and hummed the tunes to himself. On an impulse, Ronodeep turned to Kishan and whispered in his ear. "These guys are doing a good job. It would have been nicer though, if they got the original song and played it back for us, instead of trying to sing it. The natural Bengali inflections of the singers make it sound like it was the Rabindrasangeet that inspired the foreign tune, not the other way around". Kishan nodded and mumbled something that Ronodeep didn't catch. Clearly, this was going to have to be a larger, more detailed conversation when they met again.

The final performance was from a visiting artiste from New Jersey who was also going to sing Rabindrasangeet. When she walked on stage, there was a collective gasp from the audience. Someone from behind commented: "Look at her dress. Is she singing Rabindrasangeet or is she Lady Gaga?" The comment was not out of place. The artiste wore knee length leather boots and had dyed her short hair in some unusual shade of brown with red highlights. Her singing was pretty good however. Ronodeep could not help comment to Kishan when she sang Shawana gogone ghoro ghanaghata: "I always picture Konika in a saree pumping a harmonium when I hear this song. It is slightly dizzying to hear Lady Gaga sing it, although she is doing a pretty good job at it." Kishan smiled. Ronodeep could see his mind churning: Kishan was thinking of a new angle, a provocative way of including this in his next theater production.

A couple of hours later, Ronodeep lightly undid the bolt on his front door as he crept into his sleeping household. As he undressed, his mind was full of the events of the day. As he slid into the covers and waited for them to warm up, his mind drifted through all that he had seen and heard. Was he happy that he had done this? Did it make him feel closer to his roots? Was the feeling he had hoped for when he was jumping out of bed in the morning there? Was he going to do it again next year? As he drifted off to sleep, he could not find answers to these questions. Maybe this is who he was? Maybe that is the behavior he chose to exhibit because it maximized his utility function? It didn't matter anymore. There were chores to be done tomorrow and he had better get some sleep.

Chapter 22

The World is what it is by Nilay Mukherjee

The world is what it is: but some days we see a more unpleasant side of it: perhaps our internal lens is disturbed to begin with, so we notice it more.

I woke up in my plush hotel bed with a start. It was only 4 am and as I stared across the pristine white sheets of my king size bed, I was hit with how lonely an experience it was.

As I tried to exercise, the TV only brought more bad news. Some teenage girl had committed suicide: victim to incessant bullying. Some famous golf commentator: his 29-year-old son had died from a drug overdose. The strain on their faces were visible, as they tried to put a positive spin on things: "Let's learn from this so that it never happens again", etc. etc. I just wanted to scream! People have no time for you. Everyone is busy, everyone is rushing. If you are blue: just figure it out and keep going. Right? You are rushing yourself…. you don't have time for anyone else. Quid pro quo. Right?

And then Facebook: normally a paragon of self-promotion and how good a time everyone is having, serves me this: A video of a hapless man and woman in rural India who have been caught cheating: they have been stripped naked and paraded: he is forced to carry her on his shoulders. He goes for a while, staggers, falls. They beat the fallen bodies with sticks. They get up, stagger, fall again, plead for mercy and finally go into a fetal position. I watch, fascinated and repelled by it all.

A group I belong to: their website has been violated by Turkish terrorists who have deleted all its contents and uploaded a banner: our administrator could not understand the language, but there was a gun being brandished and the tone was unmistakable. Damn! It never rains, but it pours.

"Will it ever get better?" I voice a silent prayer. "Is anyone listening?" And then this happens.

There is a childcare facility outside my hotel. As I check out and begin loading my car…. I hear a voice.

"Hi" it says. Its a baby voice, full of innocence and expectation.

It takes me a moment to figure it out. It is coming from the other side of the green fence my car is parked next to. It's owner is a little boy: barely two. I doubt if he can speak a full sentence. He just looks at me expectantly across the fence.

I look around and find a ball in the grass. In fact there were two. Somehow, the kid had managed to chuck it over the fence and wants it back. I remembered when my son would take everything to the balcony and toss it: watching with fascination as it crashed to the earth below.

"You want your ball back?" I asked.

"Umm hmm" said the kid, his face breaking into a smile. He had been waiting a while.

As I tossed the ball over the fence, he trotted off after it.

I could only imagine the happiness I have been lucky to distribute on this day. There is a God!… I want to say it before my natural cynicism takes over.

I hope everyone has a great day! Peace to all!

Chapter 23

Urinal Etiquette by Nilay Mukherjee

So, I have a question to pose: primarily to men, because it involves a matter of etiquette in a place where women are not allowed (oooh…. interesting… please, feminists don't get upset, there are such places still in existence even today for very good reasons), but women are free to pitch in with their comments.

So, let me set it up. I go into the men's room at work (ha ha…. got you…. go find somewhere else to vent about unequal pay for equal work and other REAL issues) and there is a co-worker: lets call him John: who is already standing at the urinal. As soon as I approach the urinal next to him, he looks up and goes: Hey!

I say: Hey!

and he goes "Too nice of a day not to be outside, huh?" and all this while I am hearing the steady stream hitting the ceramic. "Umm… it is nice" I say.

John finishes his business and saunters over to the basins (yes… we wash our hands… most of the time!) and he is talking: like really running his mouth.

"They are predicting it will cool down tomorrow…. holy cow! There are actually paper towels in here… did someone pay off the paper lady? Ha ha……" and he saunters out.

Meanwhile, almost like a ghost, another employee, let's call him Dick….no that is not appropriate here…. .Harry…. : so Harry has somehow managed to appear out of nowhere and has occupied the urinal John was in. And ladies… .just for your benefit…. these are spaced about 3 feet apart with partitions that go about nipple-high: so, if you wanted you could take a quick peek, although why you would want to do that is a tough question to answer.

But here is the thing. Harry is facing away from me: as far as it is possible to face away from me and still aim within the boundaries of the ceramic. His entire demeanor exudes focus, intensity and a desire to be private. He is doing something serious! No room for banter, no time to talk about the weather. No! This is a man communicating with his inner being, holding his most precious possession in his hand and his razor-sharp attention and his pinpoint concentration will not be breached for trivialities like the weather. No no, no!

So here is the question. Is it polite to start a conversation when you walk in and someone is in the middle of doing their business? Are you going to startle him so much that an accident could happen? Can you slap him on the shoulder and say, How about them Yankees?…. wait… I know that would definitely cause an accident…. but here is the conundrum: Can you start up a conversation? Is it polite? Is this the civilized thing to do?

Only well considered, articulate answers please!

Chapter 24

Friendship, A Tale of Two Immigrants by Nilanjana Rakhit

"That's a beautiful soro!" Aparna turned her head slightly to the left and saw a tall woman with long auburn hair and a big smile. "It's saree, not soro!" "I see, it's a saree!" "Hi, I am Gabrielle, Gabrielle Marie Long". "Hi, I am Aparna". "Upperna!" said Gabrielle. Aparna was waiting for the bus at Bishop's Corner in West Hartford, Connecticut. It was the summer of 1972; six months after Aparna came to New York City from Calcutta, after a long wait of two and a half years, to join her husband whom she had known for only two months before he left India for the U.S. on a visitor's visa for his internship, to find out that he had fallen for another woman. The bus to downtown made a gentle halt. Aparna embarked onto the bus and sat on the left seat and saw the woman who introduced herself as Gabrielle following her onto the bus and taking the seat right across from her. The bus started moving and picking up the speed. Gabrielle took out a bunch of greetings cards from her pocket book and tried to initiate a conversation with Aparna. "Look how pretty these cards are. These are made with water colors. Have you heard of Monet, the French impressionist painter?" "Indeed, they are painted with such beautiful colors! No, I haven't heard of Monet." Gabrielle got busy writing on the cards. Aparna wondered who she was writing the cards to! The bus moved at its regular speed through Farmington Avenue in West Hartford. Aparna looked out through the window to see the familiar street signs and the houses including the famous Mark Twain house go pass by. Soon the bus stopped at the corner of Farmington Avenue and Sigourney Street near the old church on one side and the big brick corporate house of Aetna on the other side of the street. Aparna was to cross the street and walk down Sigourney Street to walk to their apartment on Asylum

Street. Aparna got ready to get off the bus. Surprisingly, she saw Gabrielle also getting ready to get off at the same bus stop! Just as the bus stopped and they got down, Gabrielle asked, "would you like to join me for a cup of coffee? Aparna was a bit surprised at Gabrielle's friendliness, but accepted her offer and said,"yes, of course, that would be nice". Aparna was in no rush to reach home. There was no one waiting for her. They walked up the street. There was a Greek diner nearby. This was the first time Aparna had entered a place like this. It was a typical diner of the '70's-serving coffee, greasy ham, bacon, toasts and eggs. This being a Greek diner, it also offered stuffed green pepper with ground lamb and other Greek specialties and coin-up juke boxes for entertainment. They ordered coffee. Gabrielle initiated the conversation and asked Aparna,"where do you live?" "Asylum Avenue", said Aparna. "Oh, we also live close by, off Sigourney Street, right behind Aetna." "I live with my parents and seven brothers. They are all younger to me". "No wonder, we got off at the same bus stop", Aparna thought. Gabrielle asked Aparna what took her to Bishops Corner. Aparna told her that she wanted to learn typing. They had a Remington typewriter in their house from her father's textile marketing business he ran for few years, but never bothered to learn it seriously.

Aparna paused for a minute and saw Gabrielle listening to her curiously. "Please continue", said Gabrielle. "Let's save it for another day. May I ask you what brought you to Bishop's Corner"? "Oh yes, I teach French to a lady who lives around there". "Would you like to join me for lunch Saturday", asked Aparna. "Oh, that sounds good. I will see you Saturday". Aparna was desperately looking for a job. It had been only a few months since she moved to a new country with a completely different culture than the one she left behind. It was a restless time in America. Vietnam war had not yet ended, there were demonstrations at colleges and universities. People were experimenting on unprecedented life style like living together and having babies out-of-wedlock. To Aparna television was the mirror of the American society. Never realized there were many other human tales that never reached the media or the television screens. Aparna pondered, "is there any family life in America, like the one I left behind?" Life seemed meaningless as if she had been robbed off a few precious years of her youth and the opportunity of her life time of completing her master's degree at Calcutta University; as if the roof of her sheltered life had been blown away by a tornado rendering her shelter-less with no ways to turning back. She had no options but to look forward to an unknown future.

********* Aparna often ruminated over why and how did it all go so wrong! She was only 19 and was getting ready for her B.A. Honors final exams when an aunt's neighbor came with a marriage proposal to her parents for a groom who completed his internship having graduated from the R. G. Kar Medical College in Calcutta. Her parents were told that the prospect will be going to America for higher studies and after completing his training will be returning home to open a nursing home to practice medicine. A date was fixed for the groom and his family to see Aparna and meet her family. Aparna was just too busy with her forthcoming final exams in a month. She immersed herself in the studies of Chaucer, the chapters from his Canterbury Tales, being introduced to

his iambic pentameters. The studies of linguistics and the derivatives of many English words from German, French or Latin; of metaphysical poets like John Dunn; comparisons of Shelley's Skylark "the blithe spirit" and Wordsworth's Skylark; Wordsworth's visits and re-visits to the river Yarrow that were parts of her syllabus consumed much of her precious time. The narrative of Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner lamenting the Albatross hanging about his neck and its interpretation occupied many hours. Robert Browning's dramatic monologue in Porphyria's Lover consumed her focus. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" touched her tender young heart as she studied it and her other sonnets and learned about this future Mrs. Robert Browning. She was bemused by George Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man; saddened by J.M. Synge's Riders to the Sea; enchanted by the ghost and the witches and the famous soliloquies in her studies of Shakespeare's tragedies. That was Aparna's world! Reluctantly, Aparna took some time off her studies and met the groom and his family. She did not want anyone to interfere with her studies until her exams were over. But the groom and his family had a different plan unbeknownst to Aparna. While Aparna's elders struggled to agree to marry her into a caste lower than theirs, the groom's family would frequent Aparna's house anytime and was insisting on having her parents agree to this marriage, even telling them anecdotes like the groom and the family had received hundred proposals from the families of prospective brides! The groom's sister and mother told Aparna's parents that the groom wanted to marry Aparna, or else he would not marry before going to America. The groom's family must knew him well and was in a rush to marry him lest he fell in love with an American girl and forgot his family.
After much soul searching and discussions about the differences in cast, added by persistent eagerness shown by the groom and his family Aparna's parents and relatives agreed to the marriage. He was eligible, they thought. He was educated, an athlete, handsome, and was endowed with a melodious voice and above all eager to marry Aparna. But he was vain, as Aparna would later realize. Aparna's father was reluctant to have her married so young. He always had faith in Aparna and wanted her to pursue higher studies. In accordance with Indian calendar a date was set for the wedding to take place just one week before Aparna's final exams! Before she could fathom what was going on, Aparna was married away. The day after the wedding reception at the groom's house, Aparna returned to her parents to prepare and take her final B. A. exams. Two weeks later after the exams, Aparna's new husband visited her parents to take Aparna to their house. Within two months he left for America on visitor's visa for his internship leaving Aparna to live with her in-laws. Aparna was stuck in Calcutta living with her in-laws for two and a half years waiting for the approval of her husband's permanent resident status. The promise of her husband's returning to Calcutta to practice medicine never materialized.

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Aparna was happy to meet Gabrielle and was looking forward to the lunch

on Saturday. Trying to impress her new American friend, Aparna prepared Campbell's tomato soup with peas and hot dog with mustard and tomato sauce! Later on, Gabrielle teased Aparna over the lunch menu and they had good laughs! Gabrielle expected an Indian lunch. As they were having lunch, their conversation turned serious. Gabrielle asked, "can we pick up with your story, Aparna." "Are you sure you want to hear my story", asked Aparna. "Yes, of course." Aparna continued. "I had an undergraduate honors degree in English literature and Political Science and was admitted into the Calcutta University for the Master's degree program, but was not allowed to attend the classes because Calcutta University was a co-educational institution. I was living with my in-laws then". "You lived with your in-laws while your husband was away"? "Yes, I did". "They did not approve of my taking the public transportation, yet only wealthy people owned automobiles back then. My in-laws had a black Morris. It was either driven by my father-in-law or his driver to take him to places. My in-laws were living in South Calcutta and the University was located in North Calcutta. Public transportation was the only means of conveyance back then". Aparna pondered the daily life of a commuter in the city. It was long before the Calcutta Metro was built. It was the time when the streets of Calcutta were all dug up for the building of the underground metro! It was a miserable time for the commuters. But the residents of the city are known for their resilience! It did not bother Aparna to take public transportation. She was more excited about her admission into the Master's program at Calcutta University. "Aparna, would you like to hear my story," said Gabrielle. "I would be delighted to. Tell me about your life". Gabrielle told Aparna about her fiancé Bill, how she met him at a bar. At 17, she was in a car accident and while in the hospital the doctors diagnosed her with Hodgkin's disease. She had gone through radiation therapy that destroyed her reproductive system. Gabrielle told Aparna, how in spite of knowing all of Gabrielle's physical ailments, Bill stuck to her, and did not end their relationship.

Gabrielle was also fairly new in America. Her parents emigrated to America from New Brunswick, Canada and settled in Hartford, Connecticut only a few years ago after Gabrielle completed her undergraduate studies in Philosophy. She was fluent in French (she would say in Parisian French!) and spoke American English with a faint accent! In the French tradition, she was very friendly and could very easily start a conversation even with a stranger, whether a man or a woman, a child or an adult. Such was her passion for life! As if she had only that day to live, only that person to meet! Gabrielle was teaching school when Aparna met her. An extremely resourceful school teacher who was well-read in world literature and philosophy and was very well liked by her young students. Gabrielle had tons of books in their house, every one of them she had read, some more than once. One day she brought Radha Krishnan's Eastern Religions & Western Thought and another day Rabindranath Tagore's Geetanjali, and yet another day Ved Mehta's Portrait of India for Aparna to read. Gabrielle introduced Aparna to the writings of French philosopher Camus, German philosophers Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.

Aarana was familiar with the English, American and French literature for she had studied western literature in her undergraduate studies. Also through her mother who was an avid reader of foreign literature, and enjoyed watching foreign movies and she would discuss with her children how she enjoyed them, but not much with the Western philosophers.

Gabrielle wanted to learn Bengali and could say, "aami tomader shonge tomader bhashay kotha bolte chai (I want to speak with you in your language)". Sometimes she would say this to Aparna's Bengali friends. Surprised, they would eagerly wait to hear more from her. She would give a big smile and continue in English. She was such an enlightened soul and enriched herself with the wealth of knowledge! A few weeks later, Gabrielle called and said, "Apadna", I am getting married on October 13, and I would like you to meet my fiancé Billy." "Congratulations! I would be delighted to meet your fiancé." Gabrielle invited Aparna to her parent's home to meet her fiancé. Gabrielle's mother was of French decent and her father Mr. Long's family came from Scotland settling in New Brunswick, Canada. It had been only a few years since the Long family moved to America settling in Hartford, Connecticut. Bill was sitting in the living room when Aparna entered. "I am Bill, Bill Brezinski." "I am Aparna, nice meeting you, Bill". "Same here, Aparna. I heard a lot about you from Gabe". Aparna was delighted with the way Gabrielle's family including Bill welcomed her in their home. In all these months, since she came to America, for the first time Aparna felt assured that there was normal family life in America as well, just like the one she left behind in India. Bill Brezinsky was truly a gentleman. Bill's family was Polish-American. His grandfather came from Poland. They were middle class Americans with good family values. Bill was tall and handsome with blue eyes and slightly curly auburn hair and a beard. His father worked at the U.S. Post Office and so did he. Bill was a very mature and down to earth person. Like most American men, Bill liked to drink Budweiser and watch baseball and football. He also played baseball. Gabe and Bill were different in their attitude towards life and their differences attracted them towards each other and they became very good friends.

Gabrielle became busy preparing for her upcoming wedding. They were to be wedded at the old church in the corner of Sigourney St. and Farmington Avenue where Gabrielle and Aparna got off from the bus when they first met. Gabrielle wanted Aparna to be her maid of honor. So they went to G. Fox to try bride's maids dresses. Gabrielle chose brownish red. She chose a long gown with full sleeves and short neckline with multi-color embroideries of flowers and leaves around the neckline and the sleeves to go with a fall wedding in October. It was an expensive dress for Aparna just to wear it for one day, yet she did not mind. It became even more expensive when Aparna would not be able to attend the wedding ceremony and another friend of Gabrielle would wear the dress for the wedding. Suddenly, Aparna had to leave for India a few weeks before the wedding as her parents and in-laws came to know about her predicament and her family life in America was becoming increasingly unbearable. ********** When Aparna returned from India, Gabrielle and Bill were already married and

settled in an apartment in a two storied building south of the city of Hartford. Across from their apartment was a long stretch of reservation land with tall maple trees that looked barren in deep winter, then blossomed with green maple leaves for the spring and summer only to turn into vibrant colors of red, brown and yellow ushering the fall and then be naked again standing straight and tall. Gabrielle invited Aparna to see her new life with Bill and a new dog Hennessey, a golden retriever. Hennessey was a character! One day Aparna was sitting in Gabrielle's living room with her legs folded on the sofa reading, when suddenly she noticed that one of her brand new canvas summer shoes had been chewed by Hennessey and small pieces were lying on the wooden floor. Aparna jumped up and cried,

"Gabrielle, look what Hennessey has done to my shoes"!

Gabrielle was in the kitchen preparing vichyssoise, a French soup she used to make with pureed leaks, potatoes, cream and chicken broth. She would make a huge bowl of vichyssoise and serve it cold. It was out of the world! Gabrielle, screamed, "Billy, get Hennessey out". Billy was watching his favorite game in the other room. Both of them rushed to the living room, put Hennessey on the leash and dragged him to the porch. For a while Hennessey was nowhere to be found. Later that day, after we had lunch with vichyssoise, homemade garlic bread and wine, Gabrielle went to her bedroom and called Aparna there to see what Hennessey was up to. He was sitting near the bed with his head down and occasionally giving a mischievous glance at them! It was hilarious!

After returning from India, Aparna found a job with an insurance company, walked out of her lousy marriage with a single set of clothing and moved to a studio apartment near Mark Twain house. Aparna bought her first car and felt free for the first time. It was a year old Volkswagen Super Beetle, Aparna bought for $1,900 from an Indian family that was returning to India. She put $900 down payment and went to the bank for a loan of $1,000. A Bengali friend advised Aparna to take a loan from the bank so that she could establish a credit history. It was her first experience with borrowing money and learning to be financially responsible for paying off debt.

In course of time Aparna, Gabrielle and Bill became good friends. With her new life, new place to live and a new car, Aparna would frequently visit Gabrielle and Bill. For some reasons, Bill trusted Aparna a whole lot. He would fix Rusty Nails for Gabrielle and introduce Aparna to various American hard drinks. Aparna never developed any likings for any of these drinks. She liked wine. Being French, Gabrielle was a connoisseur of wine and cheese. She introduced Aparna to cognac, after dinner drinks like Cream de Mint, Cream de Violet. It was a completely new world for Aparna! In their household, her father never drank lest the children be influenced by it, never even played cards although her grandmother was fond of playing cards and would often play bridge with her nephews and nieces. Gabrielle and Bill's doors were always open for Aparna. She would visit them whenever she had free time, especially on weekends she and Gabrielle walking Hennessey and strolling down the long stretch of wooded area they had

across the street. Bill would be busy preparing barbeque steak or pork chops for himself and Gabrielle and chicken for Aparna.

Aparna imagined that the more people look around them and are mindful of what they see the more their outlook broadens. They see connections among people, among places, among cultures. In the Brezinski's and the Long's, Aparna saw and experienced events that never reached the media or the television, the real stories of real people, their sorrows and happiness, their strengths and frailties. The endearing relationship the three developed over time reminded Aparna of the days whenever Prabhamashi (aunt Prabha) came to visit them. Aparna's father would buy tickets for Prabhamashi and her mother to see their favorite plays at the theatres in Calcutta. Prabha Dasgupta was a pretty and a learned woman with discriminating taste. She treated Aparna and her siblings as her own children. Prabha Dasgupta was her mother's friend from college days. It was during those days that Aparna's parents met and fell in love. Her father Nikhil was tall and handsome, an idealist freedom fighter who was spared his life as a juvenile with the pleading of Mahatma Gandhi and served as a political prisoner earning him a Copper Plaque from Indira Gandhi for his valor. Her mother Lata was an ardent lover of world literature and imbued herself in Rabindra Sangeet with her melodious voice. Prabha was also in love with someone but her parents did not allow her to marry him. Prabha never married and joined government services as an officer while Aparna's mother went into teaching schools.

********** Soon came the Christmas time. That was Gabrielle and Bill's first Christmas as a married couple. They invited Aparna as their guest to the family Christmas party. All members from Bill's side of the family gathered at his aunt's house in Wethersfield. That was Aparna's first Christmas with an American family. She had attended Christmas parties at the Bengali households in America. But this was a different experience. They were Polish-Americans. So, the menu included ham baked in glazed pineapple juice, with cloves, mashed potatoes, baby corn, string beans, salad, garlic bread, and pierogi, cabbage filled savory dumplings boiled and pan fried. No Polish holiday party is complete without serving pierogi! There was a separate tableful of deserts: lemon meringue, essentially a lemon pie topped with a fluffy mixture of egg white and sugar tinted with a light brown texture on top from baking; apple pie, pecan pie, blue berry pie, chocolate cake and ice-cream. The whole family welcomed Aparna as one of them and showered her with gifts as they did to each other. Bill's mother Mrs. Brezinski handed three boxes, one to her daughter Nancy, one to Gabrielle and one to Aparna, whom she used to call her third daughter! Mrs. Brezinski would say, "I have three daughters, Nancy, Gabrielle and you, Aparna". They contained three beautiful night gowns-blue, pink and yellow. Mrs. Brezinski had her three daughters hold up the night gowns so that Mr. Brezinski could take their pictures in his Polaroid! Mrs. Brezinski also gave each of her three daughters a woolen scarf, a cap, and a pair of mittens so lovingly and carefully hand knitted by herself. Aparna was overwhelmed by the goodness and love this American family could shower her with! The scene from The Sound of Music flashed in her mind where Reverend Mother

was telling Maria, "when God closes the door, somewhere he opens the windows". Gabrielle's family was different from the Brezinski's. Aparna had the impression that all western families might have similar cultures. Having seen the two western families so closely she realized that that was not always the case. Gabrielle's parents had a good marriage, unlike the ones Aparna was so used to seeing on television. Mrs. Long was a dignified woman always maintaining her distinction as a French -Canadian lady. Mr. Long and Gabrielle's seven younger brothers were just the opposite. They were more Americanized, fun loving but always together and united as a family. One of the brothers Danny was married to very sweet French-Canadian girl named Michelle. They welcomed Aparna as another older sister like Gabrielle. The Long's enjoyed going out to dance with their friends, the Nadeau's. They were also French Canadians. They lived and owned a profitable swimming pool business outside the city of Hartford. The Nadeau's invited Aparna to visit them. There were two swimming pools near their house and a farmhouse in the back where they feasted on barbeque chicken and smoked marsh mellows. The more of these wholesome middle-class families that Aparna was meeting the more she became assured of normal family life in America just like the ones Aparna was so familiar with and was missing so much! Some ten years later Gabrielle would call Aparna to inform her that the Nadeau's older daughter Dianna killed herself with a gun shot inside the same farm house where her father kept his rifle. Dianna was studying at the Boston University where she met an Indian boy and fell deeply in love with him. They dated through their college years and beyond. Then the boy went to visit his family in India and came back with his new wife of his parent's choice. Dianna was devastated! She succumbed to deep depression. The Nadeau's tried hard spending a lot of money to bring Dianna to normalcy. But it was all in vain! One morning they were startled with gun shots coming from the farm house. Their darkest nightmare came true. Rushing to the farm house they found Dianna lying on the floor bleeding from the gun shot. The Nadeaue's had heard and seen enough of Indian men! Aparna never saw the Nadeau's again. ***** With a promotion at work, Aparna could afford a better place to live. So when her Bengali friends moved from their nearby apartment to a new house in Bloomfield, Aparna followed them and rented a one bedroom apartment in an apartment complex with tennis courts and a swimming pool. It was further away from where Gabrielle and Bill lived. But their friendship continued and got deeper. Occasionally the threesome will meet for a game of tennis at Aparna's apartment complex. One Saturday Bill was busy with his work and Gabrielle visited Aparna for a game of tennis and swimming. After the game they went to the only pub in their town. It was an upscale pub. Live music was playing and a woman singing the '70s popular songs. Gabrielle went to the restroom while Aparna sat at a table. No sooner than they took the seat than a bartender came to Aparna and whispered, "We do not allow tennis attire here." Aparna turned red and said, " I am just waiting for my friend." Soon Gabrielle returned. Aparna said to her, "we need to get out from here right away. I will tell you later why." They hopped in Aparna's car. On the way back to Aparna's apartment, Gabrielle said, "I have got an idea, Aparna.

Why don't I wear one of your sarees and go back to the pub". "Are you serious? exclaimed Aparna". "Yes, I am". Indeed, Gabrielle chose an ink blue Benarasi with gold border and motifs to wear and laid her long auburn hair down. The two returned to the pub and asked to see the manager. The manager was sitting in the back room. Gabrielle walked straight into the manager's room. Like a model, bowed down, and stretching her left arm and displaying the saree took a round like a dancer and bowed down again in front of the manager and with a big smile said, "Is this proper, now?" The pub manager was taken aback! Smiling and nodding his head he said, "yes". Aparna and Gabrielle returned to where the music was still playing and the singer was singing and sat at one of the round tables, called the waiter and ordered a Rusty Nail for Gabrielle and a wine for Aparna. Within a few minutes, the waiter returned with two Rusty Nails and two glasses of wine. Perplexed, Gabrielle said, "We did not order that many drinks"! Smiling, the waiter said, "our manager ordered them for you and they are on the house". Such was Gabrielle's love of people and life, a truly engagingly endearing person Aparna had ever met! Whenever they came to visit Aparna, Gabrielle would always look into the refrigerator to see whether there were any leftovers. She liked Indian food so much, especially the vegetarian dishes. Bill, on the contrary was a quintessential steak and mashed potato man. Aparna could never get him to like Indian food, except once for an Indian style pork chops dinner. Such was their love and hate relationship with Indian food! ***** Soon Aparna's divorce was finalized and she never looked back. Just before he completed his residency and about to begin his medical practice at an upscale neighborhood, Aparna's estranged husband very conveniently filed for a divorce. Aparna's idealist father who fought to free his own country from the bondage of the British Raj , and reluctantly agreed to the marriage, could do nothing for the humiliation Aparna's husband had caused his daughter being so far away and met with an early death.

Aparna came to the realization that in order to be self-sufficient she needed an American degree. But where would the money come from? She talked to her boss and found out that her employer had a 100% education reimbursement program provided it was work-related. Aparna made an appointment and met with the Dean of the Business School at the University of Hartford. The Dean was impressed and admitted her into the MBA program; ordered her to take a certain number of pre-requisites as she did not have these subjects in her undergraduate studies. Within a couple of years Aparna earned her MBA. ***** One day Gabrielle called Aparna and said, "Aparna, we are buying a house. It's a two family house". "I am very happy to hear the news". "Billy's father is making the down payment and Billy will take the mortgage on the house". "That sounds great!" "Billy's father cannot get a mortgage, because he will be retiring in a few years. That's why he will make the down payment and Billy will carry the mortgage". Soon they moved to their new house. It was a two storied building. The senior Brezinski's occupying the first floor and Billy and Gabrielle living on the second floor. No sooner than the Brezinki's moved to their new home, than problems began to surface. Personality clashes between

Gabrielle and Mrs. Brezinki ensued. Gabrielle was not very happy about the arrangement. Mrs. Brezinski would come upstairs often to check on what her son had for lunch or dinner which Gabrielle thought was intrusive. It bothered her. She would often complain to Aparna. "You are being too critical about Mrs. Brezinski, Gabrielle. They are just simple, traditional and honest people", Aparna would say, thinking how common it is in Indian culture for a mother-in-law to live under the same roof with her son and daughter-in-law. At least Bill's parents had separate living quarters, even though they lived in the same building.

Gabrielle was also becoming increasingly impatient with Bill's bear drinking and being glued to television watching baseball games. She would want him to go to movies or concerts or even read a book together. But Bill would not change.

Gabrielle decided to go for her Masters degree in Philosophy at Boston University on a scholarship and soon moved to Boston.

One day, Aparna received a phone call from Bill. He was crying over the phone. Aparna was stunned. Bill was torn between his mother and his wife. "Aparna, Gabrielle moved to Boston to do her Masters in Philosophy at Boston University. My mother is not liking it". Aparna sensed something was not right and was awfully sorry for Bill. His parents all their lives lived in an apartment. Sending two children to college they exhausted all their earnings. Only at retirement that they had enough savings for the down payment for a place which they could call their own but no regular income to be eligible for a loan. Bill provided that support by assuming the mortgage for the purchase of a two storied building each occupying a floor.

Two years went by. Gabrielle would come home on weekends and be busy in Boston the rest of the week with her studies. Bill and his parents grew closer and his relationship to Gabrielle gradually reached the brink of separation. After graduation, Gabrielle returned home and resumed teaching. By then they became strangers to each other and within a short time they divorced. Gabrielle moved back to live with her parents. ***** Aparna lost all connections with Bill after his divorce from Gabrielle. She heard from Gabrielle that within a year or so of their divorce, Bill remarried the widow of his high school friend Jim. Jim had just met a terrible death in a motor cycle accident on Rt. 84 leaving behind his young wife Linda and two young children. With his new wife and the ready-made young family Bill rented out his apartment and moved to a house in Simsbury, an upscale town near Hartford. When Aparna heard the news she was happy for Bill and thought he would be a good father to Linda's two young children. Gabrielle continued with her teaching at a school. Life did not become any easier after her divorce from Bill. In a couple of years she met Peter. He was the head of information technology at a college in Hartford. Peter, in many ways, resembled Bill, soft spoken and gentle mannered. Gabrielle and Peter grew closer and eventually moved to an apartment in West Hartford. They never married. But Peter was more than a husband. In due course, Aparna would realize that even many husbands would not be so committed and do what Peter did for Gabrielle till the end and beyond.

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One summer, Aparna's Guruji came for a visit at her Bengali friend Trina's house. Trina and her husband Arijit were God sent! Aparna met them before she met Gabrielle. They knew her situation and protected Aparna like her own family. It was at their house that Aparna saw Guruji for the first time.

Gabrielle also knew Trina. She wanted to meet Guruji and become His disciple. Aparna took her to meet her Guruji. He blessed her and prayed for her recovery and made her His disciple by giving her a secret mantra to chant. Gabrielle would take it by heart and even introduced yoga to her students and continued to have them practice yoga in school for half-hour every day. She convinced the principal about the benefits of yoga and managed her to authorize Gabrielle to practice yoga with her students in school.

Gabrielle's Hodgkin's disease was in remission all these years. Within a few years after she started living with Peter, the disease resurfaced. Her condition started deteriorating. Gabrielle was hospitalized as her internal organs began to fail. Every time Gabrielle was hospitalized, Aparna thought this would the last time she will see her friend. Aparna would cook Gabrielle's favorite dish and take it to the hospital. Gabrielle would only take a small piece, put in her mouth, and close her eyes with a smile on her face.

Gabrielle was lucky to be returning home from that ordeal. Peter steadfastly nursed her, timely giving her medication and helping her walk from one room to another carrying inter-venous tubes. Gabrielle's condition further deteriorated and she was hospitalized again. She wanted Guruji to visit her at the hospital. Guruji fulfilled her wishes and visited her at the hospital and blessed her. Gabrielle was able to return home again. ******** Soon it was Christmas time. The Long's since moved back to New Brunswick after retirement. They wanted to spend that Christmas with Gabrielle. Aparna was also invited to the Christmas party. The apartment was nicely decorated with a large real Christmas tree, just like the ones that Gabrielle and Bill used to have in their apartment. Gabrielle had a large dining table. She decorated it with a red table cloth, lit a cluster of large white candles on a tray, and set the dining table with her Lenox china and Oneida cutlery. Then she uncorked the wine bottles and poured some red wine into the wine glasses, played Strauss and invited everyone to take their seats at the table. Gabrielle's father Mr. Long was so happy to see Aparna after a long time. He knelt down in front of her, took her hand and kissed it with tears trickling down his cheeks and said, "Aparna, thank you for being a true friend to Gabi, and also to the Long family." Aparna was overwhelmed with Mr. Long's gesture and pondered how the humanity is connected to each other how the same feelings permeate the whole world. Aparna found in Mr. Long her own father who wrote her a letter every ten days until his death. After Christmas, Gabriel's condition further deteriorated. She would continue to chant the mantras she heard from Guruji as she was becoming increasingly frail. "All my organs are gradually failing, Aparna", said Gabrielle gently, almost like a whisper.

"Go to the bedroom and bring me the small diary on the side table." Aparna went to the bedroom and brought the diary and gave it to Gabrielle. "Open it. There is a poem I wrote. Take it". That was her last poem. "The pain is telling me that I am moving through something and that I am moving things

I can take it because I am growing And the old shell is just too small

I am cramped inside feverishly preoccupied from everywhere building a larger space for myself

You will know when the project is finished I'll have more space for you too".

During the last few weeks of her life, Gabrielle would ask Aparna to read from Bhagavad Gita and explain its messages to her lying down on the couch with her eyes closed. Aparna sitting on a chair next to the couch would explain to her the three yoga's preached by Bhagavad Gita - karma yoga (work is worship), gyana yoga,(the wisdom or knowledge of Brahman) and bhakti yoga (devotion and ultimate surrender to God). Gabrielle would listen passively and then say, "Aparna, of all the three yoga's, gyana yoga is my most favorite".
No wonder. All her life, Gabrielle pursued an un-satiable quest for knowledge by surrounding herself with the works of great philosophers. In her final days, that quest for knowledge redeemed her by reaching a higher level of understanding of Life giving her the ultimate peace of mind. That was their last time together. Soon after that, Gabrielle was hospitalized again as all her organs began to fail one after the other and her abdomen was flooded with fluids. That was her last trip to the hospital. At Gabrielle's funeral, always calm and collected Peter read the eulogy: "Gabrielle had so much to offer the world where she traveled that it strikes me as a painfully unjust twist or almighty misunderstanding to remove her from this place where so few as worthy reside without question. For those here who did not really know her I assure you that Gabrielle was a very special person. She was unique in every way and I am certain that if you knew her that you would love her as her parents and brothers and friends did, and as I did, and still do, and always will'. Looking at Gabrielle lying in the casket covered with white flowers, Aparna remembered her smiling face when she first met Gabrielle at the bus stop. Aparna laid the bouquet of flowers she brought for her dear friend. The hearse was waiting outside. Gabrielle's seven brothers carried the casket outside and gently laid it into the hearse. Aparna followed everyone else to the hearse. It started moving and gradually disappeared from the sight.
That afternoon Aparna returned home with a heavy heart and wondered why did she have to lose her most engagingly endearing friend who defying all odds since the day she learned she had Hodgkin's disease lived and loved life so passionately! Aparna thought how could she ever erase the indelible marks Gabrielle, Bill and their families and friends made in enriching her, in shaping her and helping her adjust and assimilate in a new culture and a new country.
April-May, 2015 Boston

Chapter 25

The Angel of Tucson by Nilanjana Rakhit

She was born in terror,
defying all odds.
She died in terror,
in the hands of terror lords.
Life in death, death in life,
Nine eleven, January ten,
Two sides of the same coin,
the dualities of Life, still Life goes on.
Terror, terror everywhere,
Peace, peace, seems nowhere.
Is there something terribly wrong?
Or there is something to learn from.
Aren't you the humans,
Nature's best creatures?
Look at yourself,
for your mindless tortures.
Christine, the Angel of Tucson,
Let not your life be in vain.

When will there be peace,

On this earth again?

Chapter 26

A Moment in Time by Nilanjana Rakhit

It's America's election night,
Everything in the air just feels right.
From noble concession, to the celebration
Of one man's win, and
The victory of the human spirit.
It's about a dream coming true,
A historic moment in time,
A long struggle in pursuit of recognition,
Overcoming the hurdles, reaching
Closer to its destination.
It's about humanity's cry for
Equality, harmony and space.
It's about the dream of a race,
A nation reaching at last,
A historic new place.
It's about a white mother in awe,
Saying on television what she saw,
How she woke up her children at dawn,

Telling them of the coming true,
Of Dr. King's dream.
It's about a nation's journey,
From denial to the higher truth,
Lifting the flickering light,
Of human spirit,
To shine like the sun.

Chapter 27

Debdas, Romanticism and Sex Workers by Rahul Ray

First Nishi-Padma in Bengali was released in 1970, and then came Amar Prem in Hindi in 1972. Both movies, based on a short story, Hinger Kachuri by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay were instant sensations. Uttam Kumar, the veteran Bengali matinee idol was flawless as a Bangalee babu rejoining his childhood love Pushpa, who had taken up the world's oldest profession due to failing family circumstances. In the Hindi version Rajesh Khanna, with his flawless and chiseled face donning a charming smile stole the heart of every cinema-goer who saw the movie. But, the real show-stoppers were the songs in both movies. Manna De received a national award for the song 'Jaa khushi ora bolay boluk'. I saw Amar Prem when I was a mere adolescent. But closing my eyes I still can see Rajesh Khanna, in a drunken stupor singing 'Kuch tow log kohenge'. Even today, when these kinds of movies are no longer in vogue and considered soggy by most discriminating movie-goers, both songs are sure to drench their hearts and minds with sadness. Yet there will be a palpable sense of romanticism.

Image of Amar Prem Debdas, by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay is another such classic. This novel, again about a well-to-do man falling in love with a prostitute has been made and re-made in movies in several Indian languages. Last year I was in a literary conference in a suburb of Boston where a non-Bengali speaking person spoke in glowing terms about this novel. His voice trembled in emotion, his eyes welled-up in tears. Such is the draw of the story in this novel! Actually, numerous stories, novels have been written, scores of movies have been made on this theme – the storyline is almost inevitably the same – a boy and a girl, childhood lovers get separated by twist of events. The boy becomes a man when he finds his old flame raped by a relative had become a prostitute. The man would almost inevitably belong to a very well-to-do family, and in particular with movies he should have a fine taste for music. This

has been a staple for Indian readers and movie-goers, particularly the latter for generations. However, a gritty and down-to-earth treatment of these women has also evolved, although with significantly less frequency. In the early 1940s, during the infamous 'famine of Bengal' millions of people lost their livelihood and innumerable families were shattered. Villages were drained of people who poured into big cities like Kolkata begging for food, and ultimately died like flies in streets and back alley of the city. A similar situation arose after the independence of India in 1947 that resulted in the partition of Bengal. People, after losing everything they possessed in the then East Bengal streamed into Kolkata for shelter and livelihood. In both occasions there were no jobs in the city to provide for families that survived the famine or partition. Thus, it became a question of survival by any means.
Under such dire conditions when men in the family could not provide food and shelter for their families many women took up prostitution as a mean to provide for their families. Plight of these women have been depicted in many literary works of that period. In the celluloid medium, Satyajit Ray portrayed the predicament of Chhutki, one such girl in a famine-stricken village in his movie depiction of Ashani Sanket by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay.

Image of Ashani Sanket On the other hand, Ritwik Ghatak sketched the character of Sita, a victim of post-partitioned Bengal who turned to prostitution in his epic film, Subarnarekha. In all these novels and films sympathy for these out of luck women is palpable. But, in stark contrast, the Indian society in general has been outright hostile towards these hapless females. The general feeling is, it is OK to have fun with them, but it is absolutely out of question to bring them into normal family surroundings and give them a decent life.

Throughout the nineteenth till early twentieth century it was a common customary among the wealthy Bengali Babus in Kolkata to 'keep' multiple concubines, in addition to their legally married wives. But, none of those women, dubbed 'Baranganas' were ever given a chance to have a normal life of a woman. The life of Binodini Dasi, commonly known as Nati Binodini, the famous actress and consort of Girish Chandra Ghosh, the most famous Bengali theater personality of the twentieth century is a typical case about the treatment of 'women in the outskirts of the society'. It should come as no surprise that Nati Binodini, despite her unwavering devotion for Girish Ghosh was ultimately 'sold' to a merchant in the name of establishing Bengal Theater Company.

Image of Devdas The women's rights groups in India have long advocated against the mistreatment of these women, but the double-standard has continued. Even today these women, who are often victims of rape and incest cannot return to normal family life due to strict moral codes imposed on them by male-dominant Indian society. But, strangely enough movie-making about prostitutes and romanticism continues. The last movie-version of Debdas (Devdas) was made in the year 2002 with the biggest stars of Bollywood including Shah Rukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit and Aisharya Rai. It instantly became a national and international super-hit and one of the top-grossing Indian movies ever made! Then

there are scores of others on the same theme, like Umrao Jaan, Pakeezah, Dev D etc.

Recently attempts have been made to 'de-romanticize prostitution' by categorizing these out-of-luck women as 'sex workers'. It was felt that the idea of calling these women 'workers' in a trade may have dual effects of reducing social stigma as well as recognizing prostitution as a profession, much like any other job. Such categorization may even give them access to benefits common to other trades such as paid leave, health care, collective bargaining etc. It is appropriate to say that these expectations have largely remained unfulfilled. But such a scenario can potentially change.

The attempt to classify prostitutes as 'sex workers' is similar to the effort by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to categorize 'untouchables' as 'harijans' (people of god). During and prior to Gandhi's period India had a very rudimentary system of sanitation. People responded to nature's calls in the most primitive way possible. For generations, Harijans, residing at the very bottom rung of the much-dreaded Indian caste system have maintained cleanliness and hygiene for the entire population. The other Harijans, dubbed as Doms have cremated bodies of deceased as a profession for time immemorial, and prevented spread of diseases. But, in the process these people have become 'untouchables' to the society at large.

The Indian social history for the past half a century demonstrates that Gandhi's attempt has produced mixed results. Constitutional changes have been made to improve the lot of the Harijans by bringing them into the fold of Scheduled Caste and Tribe category, thus providing them with quotas in getting education and jobs. Such efforts are bearing fruit by lifting many of them out of dire poverty and darkness of illiteracy. Yet majority of harijans are still reviled and segregated in the caste-bound Indian society.

Categorization of prostitutes as sex-workers has produced some positive results also. Sonagachi, arguably the largest brothel in the world situated in the outskirt of Kolkata and a leftover of the Babu culture in British India used to be the breeding ground for sexually transmitted diseases (STD). A concerted effort by several non-governmental organizations and a few individuals who have stayed above the stigma has significantly reduced the number of incidence of STDs. Children of many inhabitants of Sonagachi, including female children have started going to school on a regular basis with the hope of breaking the bondage of generational prostitution. (Reference: Born into brothels – Oscar-winning documentary by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman; 2004)

Going back to our original theme, a question can be asked - will categorization of prostitutes as sex-workers produce the desired effect of de-romanticizing the flesh-trade as seen through the eyes of Indian men, and may even bring these women in the fold of mainstream Indian society? The answer is complex and uncertain because it requires a change in the mindset and double-standard of men that was generated thousands of years ago. But limited success with Hari-

jans, and some positive developments with sex workers specified above suggest that more success may be forthcoming. Time will only tell.

Chapter 28

Satiating the Mind: National Public Radio (NPR) by Rahul Ray

We moved to Massachusetts in February in the middle of a dreadful winter with frigid temperatures

I remember the very first day I was driving to work and flipping through the channels in the car

The die was cast, and soon it became my habit to listen to Bob Edwards in the morning, and Susan Stamberg in the evening driving back home. The real kicker came one day when I heard one of the NPR personalities interviewing someone in Kolkata, asking why Kolkatans have such a love-affair with a city that appears moribund to most others. In replying, this person started playing his harmonium and soon the airwave was filled with Rabindrasangeet! I was sold, and this experience made me a slave of the NPR. Many days I would sit in the car, even after reaching home or work to catch the tail-end of an interesting report.

I grew up in Kolkata at a time when there was no television, and radio ran supreme. On Sunday mo
"Naa, hochhey naa, abar korun" (No, you are not getting it, do it over). In 'Sishu Mahal' (The w
"Kumro-r khosa phele na diye, chhoto koray katun aar valo koray gawa ghiye mooch-mooche koray vay

On cricket days we were glued to the radio listening to ball-to-ball description by Aajy Bose, Ka
"Kamal-da, aapni key bawlen (Kamal-da, what do you say)?" Kamal-da would immediately pick up th

On Sunday afternoons I enjoyed listening to audio-plays by legendary theater personalities. The grave yet mellifluous voice of Shambhu Mitra in 'Raja' (The king) or 'Raja Oydipous' (King Oedipus) still rings in my ear, so does Nilima Das's superb audio-acting in the Bengali rendition of Glass Menagerie, the memorable play by Tennessee Williams. Then there was this annual event of

'Mahishasuromardini' (The slayer of the buffalo demon). On the day of 'Mahalaya' (a holy day for Hindus) everyone in Kolkata would dutifully turn on their radio at 4 o'clock in the morning to listen to the oratory of Birendrakrishna Bhadra in his snuff -laden nasal voice. At times his voice would hit the ceiling, and in the next moment he would whisper in his inimitable rendition of Chandi (a mythological holy scripture for Hindus). Sometimes his voice would choke in emotion. I could clearly hear him sobbing under his breath. Those were the days! In short I was in love with radio.

I came to the Unites States as a graduate student to Pullman, a very small college town

In those days TV was a novelty to me, but I didn't have much time to watch it. But soon I learned that it is an absolute necessity if you have your spouse at home. Before Swapna started taking courses in the same school she spent her days and afternoons watching TV till I came home in the evening. After dinner we would sit down together to watch TV. Soon I got hooked on to watching the evening news followed by whatever was on. We also watched TV after dinner. In many cold winter nights we would cuddle up in a warm blanket and watch Archie Bunker snicker at his wife with racist jokes in All in the family, or Hawkeye Pierce and his team of miscreants running amok in the field camp with ever-present leg- pulling of 'Hot Lips Houlahan' in MASH. Then there was Taxi where we met Alex Rieger and his team of NY city cabbies, and most incredibly Latka Gravas who walked in goose steps and spoke in an invented language. We laughed and cried together, and went to sleep with a smile on our face. Radio was completely forgotten.

However, after our move to Massachusetts radio came back in a very big way, particularl

That lady is long gone, Bob Edwards has bid farewell, but many other familiar voices ha
"You sound like a space-alien". After a short laugh the man replied -
"I am actually calling from a shuttle". How often does one get to hear an astronaut li

Soon I learned that having fun, even listening to NPR was not free. Coming from India

Listening to NPR had a longstanding effect on our psyche. Several years ago, when we w

Fast forward many years. We have grown old in our adopted country, picking up a lot o
as soon as I turn the key of my car NPR comes alive like an old trusted friend.

A few days ago, I was driving to my work in Boston. It was a miserable morning. The s
For heaven's sake why can't we move to Florida or better yet to Kolkata where things ma
I contemplated and dutifully turned the radio on. Immediately a soothing and warm voic

The topic was Women in the military. First voice was that of Kate Olson who joined the
interviewer asked in bewilderment. "Yes, indeed - how to be attractive to men-soldiers
"My child, you have such a gentle personality you can be an academic, but never a milit

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Last weekend my son took my car without informing me.  It was quite annoying because my wife took
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*Recently Tom Magliozzi passed away. The airwave, TV, newspapers, internet were filled with articles, anecdotes, remembrances about this wise-cracking person with an ear-splitting laughter.