

The Mustard Flower

C.K.Mathew

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Author :

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For

Geeta
and
Divya,
the two women
in my life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have been a bureaucrat for more than twenty-five years now. The constant dilemma that we bureaucrats face is how to keep the iron from entering our souls. The everyday routine of files and papers and endless meetings kills gentle emotions and finer sensibilities. Until one day, even the most horrific event becomes just another report to be filed away, to be placed in the earmarked pigeonhole. To retain humanity, it is essential that the skin of the heart does not grow callused. Amongst the many reasons I wrote this book, is also an attempt to do just that.

But this book is more. It is the completion of a dream that I have had for years now. I come from a family with a background in civil administration. My father retired from the Indian Administrative Service about twenty-two years ago and my elder brother is one of the senior most bureaucrats in a neighbouring State. It was more or less expected from me, by the family, that I too would enter the Civil Services. And I did, in the year 1977. It was one of the most memorable days of my life when the results were announced. I remember getting choked with emotion at having finally achieved what everybody wanted of me.

But, sometimes, in the quiet of the evenings, I wonder as to what I would have really liked to be if, without the family's pressure of great expectations, I did indeed have the strength of mind to decide on my own destiny. What would I have desired to transform myself into? Maybe a Professor of English, sitting amidst my precious books, puffing a pipe, with eager wide-eyed students sitting all around, hanging on to every one of my wise words! Perhaps a longhaired poet, gazing at the sky and pondering over the mysteries of the universe. An author of books on philosophy, unraveling age-old secrets of the mind? That dream did not materialize. But it remained a dream all these years somewhere in the recesses of my mind. I guess, in the writing of this book, I have tried to grasp that dream in an indirect, tangential sort of way.

The germ, or shall I say, the gene, of the idea for this book came to me when I was reading an article on the interminable debate of heredity versus environment. Are we all just DNA, or are we the result of our environment, or is it a heady mixture of both that determines who we really are. As new scientific findings tend to establish, the table is perhaps loaded in favour of our genes. But, can we, on the literary front, so far removed from pipettes and retorts, put this premise to the test? If a young infant were to be removed from its native land, its own milieu and sent to a foreign destination, what magic concoction would bubble up in the psyche of our experimental child? That was the initial kernel of my story. However, what emerged is nothing at all like that original gene. In course of time, the idea grew, spread branches and became a tree much bigger than the mustard plant. And the initial task of testing a theory was reinforced, if not replaced, by the demands of the unfolding story line. And thus Saraswati and the yellow mustard flowers of Surpura; thus her foster parents in Brighton; thus her journey back to the green paddy lands and waterways of Kerala, and thus too, finally, to her old home.

Many influences were working away inside me somewhere as I wrote this novel. There are mainly three locales in this book: Rajasthan, Kerala (both Trivandrum and Mavelikara) and Brighton. Rajasthan is an obvious choice. I have spent the best part of my life here and have admired its people while often despairing at the harshness of life in the villages. In fact, I know Rajasthan better than I know my own home state. I have seen the cracked earth of its parched fields and the slow drip of life-giving water transforming brown to green. I have seen the boundless hospitality of its people and their hardy courage in facing odds, both from a hostile nature as also a menacing neighbour on its borders. What better locale for the story born in my wandering mind?

Kerala too is obvious, because I spent the early dozen-and-a-half years of my life there. There was chaos and tribulations in the second half of the seventies in the country, as a beleaguered government at Delhi tried to stem the tide of rising protest. Protest became fashionable, just as in a very different way, a decade earlier, in the wondrous, magical sixties, protest as a form of social expression had captured the minds and lives of the people in the West. While there it had meant a renaissance of freethinking, of restless creative spirits pushing back the boundaries of human expression in word and song and all forms of articulation, here it had led to the clamping down of the shutters for a brief spell. In the University College in Trivandrum, which stands prominent in my memory and in this book, the great import of the times was reflected by the melting away of student rabbles, whose leaders, once so strident and loud, now displayed astonishing meekness when the chips were down. Nevertheless, for those who wished to apply themselves industriously to the task of learning, there were no impediments. An important part of this story is placed against this University backdrop when reading, poetry, music and great works of art and literature filled our minds to distraction. There are obvious references throughout the text to those heady influences, which I do not need to acknowledge for they are so obvious. Mavelikara, the other locale in Kerala, is a small village where my maternal grandparents used to live and where I sometimes used to go to for my summer holidays. The memories of the children, Sara and Bhaiyya, are very much my own memories.

And Brighton? While serving the Government, I had the occasion to participate in a training programme in the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, very close to the bright lights of Brighton, an hour's train ride south of London. I was there for about two months. When I started to write this book, I had no real idea as to where, or even which country, to place Sarasu in, when her uncle takes her away from her Surpura village. The only little I know about life abroad was from my brief stay there. That is the reason why Brighton was chosen as the foreign locale for a few chapters in this book.

While it is not essential for every book to have a central thesis, this one does. My theme arises from the four incomparable lines of T.S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding' which were written with eternity in mind. They are engraved on granite, and on being recited, sound like a clear trumpet note on a chill winter morn, like the great sound of a bell cast in old, true iron.

*And we shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

The lines carry the weight of a permanent, self-evident fact and shall be as immortal henceforth, as it is today. They proclaim a truth as obvious as the statement that the sun rises in the east. I have no hesitation in saying that my story of Sarasu's exploration, in the span of the days allotted to her life, stands on the solid foundation of these lines.

This book owes much to only a few people: most importantly Geeta, my heart, my love, who, though exasperated at my exclusive, single minded devotion to the writing of this book was, nevertheless, patient in reading through the drafts and pointing out errors, perhaps not so much in language and diction, but in matters of emotional constancy, mood and temper of personality and character consistency. She had much to argue about the denouement, when Sarasu makes her final decision. Despite disagreement, however, she permitted me to have my way in the end. Divya, my daughter, who refuses to acknowledge it, but is, nevertheless, proud of me and my efforts and, I am sure, thumbed her nose at her friends, daughters of other fathers, who may not have been so literarily inclined.

Many thanks to Mrs. Angel Dowman, from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, whom I had briefly met on the training programme in 1996 and who supplied me with information about that town by the sea, and helped me get some necessary details to anchor my characters to. I cannot forget some outstanding, brilliant professors of English Literature from my college days, who imbibed in me a love for the English language that refuses to be quelled, despite the current odds against it. I hope they forgive me for fictionalizing them. Their names appear in the first paragraph of Chapter V. Dharmendra Bhandari for his invaluable advice in matters of printing and publishing; O.P. Saharan for providing insight into wedding practices and rituals in Jat marriages; Joginder Singh, computer operator, who helped me print out the many drafts of this book; Sanjay Jain for the wonderful cover design and Ashok Jhalani for his skills in desktop publishing.

I don't have a clue as to how this book will read, or even if it ever sees the light of day by way of publication. But I only hope that it is the first of a few more that I shall write in my days to come. As one advances in age, it becomes important to leave behind something that will, hopefully, stay alive after one is gone. The piquant ripening of wisdom comes only with gray hair. As someone once said, grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.

CKM
Jaipur
August 2003

List of Important characters

Saraswati, a.k.a. Sarasu, a.k.a. Sara, *the main protagonist*

Ram Chander, Moneylender and agriculturist, *Sarasu's father*

Gauri Devi, *Sarasu's mother*

Draupadi Mausi, *neighbour and childless widow*

Jagannath, a.k.a. Jaggu, *Sara's college friend*

Babu, *friend*

Thomas, *friend*

Chandran, *friend*

Fatima, *friend*

Srikumaran Nair, *forest contractor and Jaggu's father*

Indira, *his wife and Jaggu's mother*

Giridhar, *Sarasu's child husband*

Chatter Singh, *Giridhar's father*

Bhanukumari, *Giridhar's mother*

Lakshmi, *their daughter*

Sanjay, *her husband*

Harish, *doctor and Ram Chander's brother*

Choti Maa, *his wife*

Bhaiyya, *their son*

In the beginning, a word

It is good to have the earth beneath one's feet; not merely to feel it move in times of great passion, but also to know that it is there, that it holds you up and that if you should trip, you will have its goodness to cushion your fall. If you follow the circumference of the globe, either along the warm climes of the equator, or through the cold desolation of its poles, you will, except where the salt seas should foil you, come across an infinite variety in the quality and texture of that which covers the ground beneath your feet : from soft sandy loam to hard granite, from clay and quagmire to the pristine beauty of frozen ice. But for each one of us, somewhere there is a patch of earth that so uniquely reflects, represents and mirrors us, where we are in essence our true selves, where neither pretence nor pride, conceit nor disguise can stand in the way of a complete union of body, mind and soul, with that patch of land we truly belong to.

While it is not necessary that this heaven on earth should be the place where one is born, more often than not, it is. It is the place where the breath comes easy and the heart beats slow and calm. Where the eyes behind the closed lids lie peaceful and quiet. What greater bliss in life is there than searching for, and finding, that utopia, that small paradise, where you are you, where the raucous cries within you are stilled and you feel at one with the vastness of the universe. Where there is but a single unified voice that quietly says, this is me, this is where I belong, this is where I will stand with my feet firmly on the earth, this is the arena of my work and my life, this is where I shall strive to justify my presence in my allotted time and space, this is where I should like to die.

Undeniably, this is Sarasu's tale. This is the tale of her travails, of the tragedy that repeatedly strikes at her and, more than anything else, of the fine courage with which she rises each time to find her true self. It was only later, much later, that she would look back on her life and discover that the path she had walked on was inevitable, as predestined as the sun that rose each day, in fact, even predictable, if only she had had the wisdom to see. It was only then she knew that she was being led on by a providence that could not, would not, be denied. This is the tale of her endless exploration until, at the end, she arrived where she started and she knew the place for the first time. This is the story of her search for her patch of earth where she would belong, where she would live and work, where she would justify her presence and where, on some appointed day when her heart stilled, she would be blessed to die. And when that time neared, she would yearn for what remained of her, to be mingled, blended and made an indivisible part of the earth that she had trod beneath her feet. So complete is her love for this land that is hers, the land of which she absolute mistress and slave, friend and lover.

This is, too, in passing, the tale of the times she lives in, as also of the ones whom she loves, who came to know her and who were changed by her and with her. More than anything else, this is a tale of change, of transient images flickering under bright lights, the kind of which only the pitiless sun can give, performed on a permanent stage, the kind of which only the stolid, all-knowing earth can provide.

Meeting Sara again

Twenty-five years after I had bid her a bitter, desperate farewell on a hot and dusty day from the Trivandrum railway station, in fact, twenty-five years and seven months later, I saw Sara again. She was striding along the Marine Drive, the sea breeze strong enough to ruffle the ends of her pallu. She still had that same swaying, hesitant, uncertain walk she once used to display with such panache in the college grounds a quarter of a century ago. As one who had felt, and felt so intensely, the heart-thudding footfall of that saunter, it was as if she were walking across my yearning, blistered heart once again. There was no power on earth that could stop me from succumbing to an irresistible urge to shout across the busy road, notwithstanding my staid office conventions and my middle-aged paunch.

“Sara”, I yelled, “Sara, here, its me.”

Curious pedestrians stared but moved on. Mumbai streets have seen more drama than this small street-play I was acting in now. I saw her look over her shoulder, with no hint of recognition in her face. With a quizzical glance, the words came out, “Sorry?” Then she turned towards me, curious, appraising. Then she stared. Then she did a double take. Her eyes widened, her breath was caught in her throat and she raised her hand in stunned greeting. As the clouds pass from the face of the moon, as the curtains are drawn and the sun comes streaming in, so also did I see her face light up. I saw again those entrancing lips part and those white, white teeth. The radiance of the smile that had enchanted an entire generation of students in the University College, lit the Mumbai streets ablaze and lifted me up from the very depths into which I, in the dread of her apparent indifference, was so perilously close to falling.

She gave a whoop of laughter and then, in the sight of all those nameless, joyless people walking by, out there in the middle of Mumbai’s business quarters, she ran up to me, hugged me and very nearly lifted me off my feet. There was a joy in her face that was exciting to behold, as wonderful as the ecstasy that ran through me like a drug, lifting me high on a wave of delight. She smiled at me and said: “Jaggu, its been ages, hasn’t it, and where have you been all these days?”

The words very nearly destroyed me, just as twenty-five years earlier she had destroyed me, when she left me on that dusty, unswept railway platform and had disappeared from my life. Here she was once again, devastating me with her naiveté, her honesty and the tremor in her voice.

“I should be asking you that question, Sara. You know that as well as I do and don’t go putting me off with that damned British accent of yours!”

There were smiles again and for a long blissful, wondrous moment, I stared at her face, so close to me, and breathed in the warmth of that body. I ran my eyes over her, wondering as to what form of heaven or hell she had been through these past years. The fact that she was in a sari was the most obvious change immediately noticeable. Sara who had sworn never to wear a sari, now appearing as if she had been born in that apparel, gliding over the pavement, unmoved by her own indescribable beauty. And more important, wearing the fact of her Indianness, as never before.

I was pleasantly surprised to see that the passage of the years had not been cruel on her face or her body. There were the same uplifted eyebrows, the high cheekbones, the big, limpid eyes, the sharp flaring nose, and the lips, as if torn across her face. Those enigmatic lips that had promised so much but had delivered little; in fact, just twice, during the tenure of her days within the perimeter of my life. The passing of the years had softened her. There was a roundness, a blurring of sharp lines. The angles of her face had been smudged, a gentle haziness of the contours of her facial bones brought on by the transient seasons.

The obvious change apparent to my questioning eyes was, however, her hair. The luxuriant cloud of lush darkness had thinned and there were clearly discernible streaks of gray whitening the black in a distinguished pattern. The Princess of the Showers had indubitably grown older. There was a criss-cross of tiny lines near the corners of her eyes, enhancing the maturity and the grace that were always there. The waist was a little thicker —just a little— but I couldn’t stare too long. It was already a little awkward, this gaping and bemused ogling in the middle of the road.

“But you have changed, Jaggu! Changed more than I have changed perhaps, over all the centuries that separate us.”

“Let me take a look at you! Where have you been all these years? And not a word to me, not a letter, not a phone call...”

”My God! Its wonderful, I can’t believe it...Can you imagine... this chance meeting after all these years, I was here for just a day... And it’s amazing...”

Suddenly she turned to me and said: “Coffee, tea or me?” At the same moment, I felt her drawing away a little, as if she were shocked at herself for uttering what she just had. I was amazed that she could still say those words, and I could see the sheen of a moistness springing into the corners of her eyes. The years, the long and wasted years, did not seem to have made her any different. That naughty eye-winking question was the normal prelude to our slow walk to the college canteen all those many years ago. You could guess what my answer was... invariably, always, the same wacky words.

“You know what I used to say to that, don’t you?” I smiled. And then I caught myself before I went on. And how the hell could I play along as if the years gone by had never been. How could I even think I could pick up the threads from where she had left it so many years ago? Who knew what she had grown into? Was she married? Did she have children? What was she doing now? And why did she appear so much more confident and assured now as if she had found her place in life? As for me, how could I restart so casually once again, what had been a fine relationship in those days gone by, much as I may have wanted to do so? My life had gone on in its own meandering direction, just as hers had. ‘You go your way, I go mine’. But the breathless excitement of the moment brushed aside all caution.

“Then come along, let me treat you, as I used to, those many years ago in the College canteen. Used to be fifty paise then for the coffee.”

“Sure, I was always a sucker for that ‘ispecial’ cup all those years ago.”

I took her elbow and led her across the street to the inviting door of hotel cafe at the corner. Even as I walked her along, I let a stray thought cross my mind. What was I doing here, escorting her for coffee, as I had done some two-and-a-half decades ago? Had those twenty-five years really gone by? Had they gone by fast or slowly? Had they gone by well or badly? Who knows these things? Who writes the judgment? Who passes the verdict on the lives we have lived?

“We need to talk and catch up on the years...do you have time? Or are you about to fly away like a migratory bird again...?”

“Of course, I have the time. And I am sorry I took time to recognize you. I should have been able to see through that suit and that tie and find underneath the old kurta and the bell-bottoms that you once sported... imagine, this world has been able to make a gentleman out of you, after all. And you have put on weight, you know. I guess life must be suiting you. I am dying to know what has been happening in all these many years.”

“As if I am not keen on that same account, Sara. Curiosity afflicts both the sexes, you know!” She laughed then, wide mouthed and excited and I looked at her carefully, trying to peer through the curtain of the years, wondering what lives she had lived through in the time flown by. And what had brought on those little lines near her eyes, the tiny wrinkles on the neck as it dipped into the still delectable swell under her blouse.

By then we were in the hotel foyer and walking into the restaurant, beckoning the steward. He escorted us to a quiet corner where we pulled up chairs for ourselves and ordered espresso coffee and biscuits. There was much to be talked about today.

The Mustard Fields

In the month of January of the year 1955, a week or so before the fifth anniversary of the new Constitution that the fledgling country had given to itself, in a small village named Surpura, off the beaten track very close to Alwar district headquarters, in the erstwhile land of Rajputana, an infant girl was born to Ram Chander Chaudhary and Gouri Devi, fairly well-to-do cultivators and local moneylenders. They named her Saraswati, after the goddess of learning.

In those early days, as perhaps it is now too, custom did not grant equality of opportunity to the female as much as it did to the male. The laws that would enforce equality were yet to be written. A girl child then was neither a person nor a person to be. And though she was fair-skinned and beautiful and the apple of her mother's eye, it was clear that she was nothing more than a very personable predicament.

To be born a girl to a family of her community meant that from the very moment of her birth, she would face the sighs and pitying glances of neighbors and friends and the gleeful rubbing of hands of those who did not wish to see the family prosper. She would be forced to grow up in the confines of her home and there was nothing that would prompt her father to send her to the local school. Hence, she would grow up largely unlettered, uneducated and ill trained to meet the needs of a modern and fast growing independent India that was slowly finding its feet in the rest of the country outside her village limits.

And when she was married off, at a very, very young age, the hapless father would have to spend large amounts of money to pay off the dowry and to make the arrangements for the guests and the family of the groom who would descend on them like a plague of locusts. The financial transactions that would have to be made would very nearly turn the family bankrupt.

Ram Chander knew this. He was a big, burly man who took pride in the monstrous mustache that he so carefully groomed in the morning before he set out for his work. The hirsute magnificence of his upper lip was his one vanity, for otherwise he was quite a modest and simple soul. He was basically a loner, but respected in the village for his integrity and his stolid upholding of community values.

His determination to do well by himself and to give his wife and family the best that he could in the days ahead, very nearly consumed all the waking moments of his days. It was due to his single-handed herculean efforts that he was able to acquire the necessary finances to send off his younger brother, first to New Delhi for a medical college education, and then to England for his further studies and finally for a job as a doctor out there.

There was no reasonable explanation as to why a man such as Ram Chander would desire to see his younger brother fly off to a vilayathi country to get a high sounding degree. Perhaps the only explanation was that when he was a young boy and had gone to a hospital at Jaipur in connection with the illness of an elderly uncle, he had seen, and had been impressed by, a doctor just back from the US, who was able to save the life of this ailing relative, who had otherwise been written off.

The triumphant victory of life over death had left a lasting impression on Ram Chander's mind. He wished to contribute to a similar achievement and who else could he think of promoting than his own brother. The two of them were very unlike each other, but the elder had kept the family together after the early demise of their father and Ram Chander had ever since been a surrogate parent to Harish.

Harish Bhai's thanks were brusquely brushed away. Ram Chander did not believe in formal expressions of gratitude. He was a man who consciously practiced the tenets of duty and honour and was firmly opposed to any words of thanksgiving. He lived by Lord Krishna's exhortations to Arjun, to do one's work and to forget about rewards. That is why he kept refusing the offers of money and gifts that Harish made from his comfortable home in the UK. Ram Chander's greatest desire was to see Harish married and settled down and starting a family. It was already dreadfully late to contemplate marriage at the age of twenty-eight, but the saving grace was that Harish was abroad and the normal rules of matrimony did not apply so rigorously on him as it had on the older brother.

Ram Chander usually did not take time off to lie back and relax in the evenings. Nor did it come naturally to him to spend a few hours doing nothing but casually spending lazy time with his wife. But now a great change was coming on to him. A couple of weeks after the little girl was born and had settled nicely into the arms of his wife, he found to his great surprise, and even consternation, that the baby was slyly stealing her way into his heart. She had a nice bubbly smile that turned his normally serious countenance into a broad grin.

After his work, he would start to hurry back home from the fields so as to relieve his wife of the onerous duties thrust on her by the lustily bawling and permanently hungry infant. He would settle down into his arm chair holding the fragile bundle close to him and relax into a mood of indulgent happiness that seemed to melt away his daily worries and his bodily aches and pains after a hard day's work in his fields. Or he would sigh deeply, contentedly, and lean back on his bed with the little

bundle on his chest, as she lay sound asleep with open and drooling lips. Sometimes she would look around her with wide-open eyes at the unfolding mystery of the world around her. Gauri Devi, realising quickly the simple pleasure that these moments gave her husband, would have fed the baby and washed her before sunset and made her as contented as possible so that the two could spend some delicious moments together.

Gauri Devi's family lived far away, in a village from the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh. Her people too had been fairly well-to-do landowners and when common friends and acquaintances had arranged her marriage with Ram Chander, when both were terribly young and immature children, she, like the innumerable brides before her, had not questioned the gross cruelty of the practice, nor the wisdom of their respective families.

Gauri: the name itself means fair of face, and that she certainly was. She had been the envy of the children in her own village, and when she did come finally to settle down in Surpura, she became the envy of the other young brides of the little village. Her fair complexion stood out in exciting contrast to her dark coloured gaghra and her cholis. She was a lovely wife for a man to possess and Ram Chander was only too aware of this. As they grew up together, the bountiful nature of their good fortune in having each other became more and more apparent with each passing day.

Normally a serious man, Ram Chander had no time for the little things of life. His thoughts and his attention were completely taken up by the big everyday questions of existence. To make his fields yield the finest produce, to get the best prices from the nearest mandi, to acquire some more land, to renovate the family house, to get his wife some of the fine saris that she had coveted when she saw the village Thakurani at the annual mela some months ago; these were the enormous questions that worked in his mind and around which his every day activities revolved.

But in the midst of all these contemplations and planning for the years ahead, for the first time in his adult life, he found that holding his little daughter close to him gave him a sense of security and well-being that had never been his before. His wife joked with him saying he had become a slave to his infant daughter. The neighbors around the house had started to comment that Ram Chander had been tamed by a little wisp of a girl. Ram Chander protested but not too much. He knew that there was a grain of truth in there somewhere. It surely did not hurt his masculine Jat image to be so captivated by the tiny girl, and if anyone dared to make any smart wisecracks, he was sure he and his big, bold moustache would scare them away.

Those were the heady days of socialistic democracy and the Nehruvian economic models of growth and development. All across the country, the foundation stones of huge steel mills and hydro-electric projects were being laid by the Prime Minister himself and other senior dignitaries. Nehru ji had himself come down to Rajasthan to inaugurate a process of decentralization of administrative powers to village level Panchayat and block level institutions. These were the milestones being laid for a country striving to find its rightful place in the sun. There was a conviction that they were going down the right path, the only path for a new democracy that would bring about justice and equity for the teeming millions.

Astute and visionary patriots wearing khadhi and Gandhi topis talked at length to the illiterate and the ignorant about the great sacrifices and tribulations suffered by nameless freedom fighters in the struggle to be free from the white skinned foreigners. There was idealism and forthrightness everywhere. The word politician had not yet acquired its pejorative sense and an average man could hope to go to his elected representative and place his grievance before him and find some redressal. He could be reasonably sure that public money would not find itself in the pockets of corrupt engineers and contractors to be siphoned back to the very same khadhi cloaked politician whom he had voted into power. It was a heady time and the new nation struggled to find its feet as it grappled with mighty issues that had to be resolved if it really sought to give its people a great cloudless future.

Rajasthan had just about gone through the birth pangs of being born. The princely states had been forced to coalesce into each other by the redoubtable, the unstoppable Sardar Patel, who used every trick in the trade to browbeat, to cajole, to blackmail and finally to enforce obedience to the fiat of uniting the country. Though these cataclysmic changes were taking place, in the village of Surpura, however, there was no indication of the great strategies being wrought outside its boundaries. Here, life was flowing steadily as usual. The seasons waxed and waned. Sometimes there were good years when the crops blossomed in an orgy of green; sometimes there were bad years when the rains failed and the mustard leaves were burnt under the relentless sun.

It was a blessing that a part of Ram Chander's land was irrigated by a well his grandfather had constructed so very long ago that yielded good sweet water through winter and summer. Hence the mustard crop that he grew so assiduously and determinedly was protected from the blaze overhead that would have otherwise turned the tendrils to cinders in the mid summer solar fires. At sowing time he would dip his fingers into the wet land and feel its sensuous touch and it would fill his heart with joy. Against the backdrop of the dark brown earth, the mustard flowers blazed in a yellow blur. It soothed the eyes and gladdened Ram Chander's heart.

The village Sarpanch used to drop in for his cup of tea in the late evenings when they would talk about the momentous changes that were sure to transform their lives. With him would come at times some of the deeply concerned and informed

citizens of the village and they would sit and talk for long about their village and the country and the political developments around them. But they were, by far, things that seemed remote and distant and would take its time to flow in through the village gates. In the meanwhile, in the village that was home, there was slow recognition growing about gross social evils and severe injustices abounding everywhere, evils that would take time to be even recognized, let alone remedied. There was untouchability, there were caste prejudices, and there were vile superstitious practices.

Social justice was unknown at the moment, despite the clarion call of the Constitution. In fact, there were places in the State where the mere sight of a landlord's son would send poorer people scurrying for cover or for refuge in the brush land around the villages. Daughters of untouchables found that they were not really untouchable, if it were a matter of the lust concerning their more worthy masters.

Electricity was not heard of in most parts of rural Rajasthan. Roads and transport systems would take years to develop. A serious illness was likely to result in the death of the poor fellow or submission to the village witch doctor who would huff and puff and most probably blow the patient away. Harish's letters from abroad spoke about science and development and a world outside the confines of their village boundaries where modern thought and hard work had transformed lives and made fortunes. Through these exciting letters and the long talks he had with his friends, Ram Chander felt the first stirring of understanding in his mind, of how dreams could come true, of what could be achieved and made real, if all people worked together.

For instance, he pondered, could one think about changing the rigid laws drawn by custom and social convention that drew inflexible lines between the castes. In those days, there was none who could ever think that the untouchables would one day be able to own land or stand for elections and finally be even able to challenge the higher castes or the martial classes that had ruled their destinies for so many centuries. That would all come true many years down the line. After reading Harish's letters about the state of hospitals abroad, he was forced to ponder, why is it we don't have even tolerably good medical facilities here in the village? And why are our roads and pathways in such disrepair? The minute stirrings of the small resentment he felt would soon, in the years to come, gather strength in the village and indeed throughout the country as the nation sought to find its right priorities in the great and enormous task of development. Admittedly life was difficult and to make it better, Ram Chander vowed, was the task allotted to each one of us.

And so life went on. Luxuries were not known and hence not missed. Within the overall deprivation everywhere, there was too, caring and laughter and, in families such as the one we are now talking of, even happiness and joy. Saraswati thus grew up, deeply loved and fondled by her parents and the care and affection of the good people who lived around her.

Her neighbour, the widow Draupadi Mausi ji had virtually adopted her as her own daughter and spoilt her terribly with all kinds of sweet meats and savouries. Mausi ji was a child bride who had lost her husband many years ago and was now living out her life in childless distress. That she had land was indeed of great comfort, for it earned her some money from the crops grown. Ram Chander and Gauri Devi had, in a sweet kind of way, sort of adopted her too and would look after her small day-to-day problems. The only joy of her bleak life was the presence of Saraswati, the little Saraswati who had conquered her heart as no one else had, in the presence of whom, she herself became a child once again.

Saraswati never had to even step down from the arms of her mother before she was scooped up by the waiting Draupadi Mausi ji, who would tell her tales from the Ramayan and sing to her songs of warriors and festivals and beautiful princesses and the hard lives led by the peasants in the heart of the desert. Some of them were lullabies that she crooned to her in her soft voice, inevitably making Saraswati drowsy as she slipped off into a deep sleep. She never knew when she was taken back to her home, but when she woke up, it was already morning and she was back on her bed and her mother was waking her up for breakfast and her glass of milk.

One of the earliest memories she had was of waking up in the dawn of a cold November morning and hearing the lowing of village cattle as they were led to the pasture land for their grazing. The cowbells, more clang than tinkle, had brought her out of a deep sleep and she walked out to the aangan to see the herd on its way. There was dew on the ground sparkling like diamonds in the grass and a thin mist hung in the cold air around. The morning was still dark and the sun rising in the east was slowly filling up the dawn sky with a golden hue. In the distance, the dark hills of the Aravallis reared up their heads in breathtaking contrast to the lightening sky. The cows moved past her as she stood entranced in the cold yard outside her home. She saw the sunlight reflected in the eyes of the animals. The little calves trotting under the cows held her attention for long. With her finger in her mouth, she stared fascinated at the herd and wondered where they went each day and what they were thinking of. Gauri Devi, her Maa called out to her to get back into the house before she caught a chill. She went in reluctantly, but the cows and their bells would forever remain in her mind, engraved in her memory.

She remembered too the times when her Pita ji would take her to their mustard fields when the flowers were in bloom. She would run among the saplings and slip away from her father's eyes in a simple game of hide-and-seek. She too felt the damp earth under her feet and in the palm of her hands and would remember the unique aroma of the flowers as if they were

imprinted in her gray cells. These became the bookmarks in her mind, the olfactory spoors, the sensory sign boards, reference points that would help her, if the need arose, to find her way back to the village.

One winter, the village pond had some unexpected visitors, huge Sarus cranes on their way to the warmer south of Rajasthan or Gujarat. They stayed for two enchanted days on the edge of the pond and the excited children gathered in the mornings to see the birds dip their huge beaks into the water and feed off the small fish and the slugs. Their parents warned them not to go too near the edge of the water, for they saw that it was a family of birds, a male and a female with two young ones, smaller in size and scurrying after their parents or trying to hide in their shadow. From the edge of the water, Saraswati and the other children called out to the birds in their little childish voices. O Sarus, they called out. When the imperious birds paid no attention, they started a singsong chant: O Sarus, o sarus, osarusosarusosarus... Once, when one of the huge birds raised its head and looked menacingly straight at them, it was enough to silence them and send them scurrying for the shelter for their homes.

That evening, Saraswati recollected the story in her excited voice and imitated how the birds had moved along the edge of the village pool. It was Ram Chander ji who then remarked that instead of the long name of Saraswati, she could be called Sarus, as it was very similar to her name. Gauri Devi then said, "I think it is a good idea, she was singing out 'saraso, saraso' half the day and so Saraso she shall be. And thus it was that Saraswati became Saraso, and soon enough Sarasu. The name was prophetic, for the Sarus cranes are intrepid birds, which travel miles for food, searching for the right temperature, the perfect season. Within their tiny brains inside those beautiful long heads are engraved, imprinted, encrypted the complicated directions to get back to their homes. Saraswati, the migratory bird.

As she grew up, she turned tyrant. She knew instinctively when her father was in the right mood and she would use her childish smiles and her lisped syllables to extract unheard of concessions. Her mother would sometimes fret and fume and complain that if he were not careful with the favours he lavished on her, one day she would turn out to be an abominably spoilt mischief-maker. But Ram Chander just laughed her worries away. "She belongs to the paraya ghar and how long do you think she will be with us? Here today, flown tomorrow, that is a girl's fate. So let us enjoy her as long as we can, rather than deny her the boundless love that we feel."

"Is it you who talks in this manner", Gauri Devi asked, "the fearless Jat with the long moustache?" Gauri was a little apprehensive if she had spoken a bit too shrewishly to her lord and master, but was gratified to know that the gibe brought only a wry smile to Ram Chander's face.

"You must thank the gods that I am not like some Jat husbands, who beat their wives black and blue when they are annoyed," was all that he said in reply.

Indeed Gauri Devi was thankful and did daily praise the Lord for the bountiful blessings that He had showered on her. On Karva Chauth, when married women gave thanks for the blessed life they lead as wives, she was particularly expressive of the goodness of her husband in her prayers. She would stand in silent prayer in the temple, her mind immersed in an inexpressible joy that brought tears to her eyes. And she would bring back the prasad from the temple and feed him the sweetmeats with her own hands. She would then go over to the little cot that Sarasu slept on and hand over the pieces of delectable sweets that the child would gorge on until she almost fell sick.

The house always radiated calm and peace. Visitors coming in from the village would wonder at the perceptible serenity that the home generated. Inquisitive women wondered why, despite the fact that Sarasu was about three or four, there was no indication of the coming of the second child. When Gauri Devi bashfully confided about this to her husband she was told to advise the other women that they should worry about their own families and not about their neighbours', and that Ram Chander and Gauri will decide the size of their family on their own, with no help from outsiders. This was a decision that would have a long reaching impact on the life of Saraswati, as our story would reveal in due course. A sibling would have changed the course of Sarasu's life, but for better or worse, it is, as for most things in life, not possible to tell.

And thus the little girl grew up and the days passed and the house sang to her laughter and the three of them made a pretty picture as they rode on their old jeep to the market or to visit their neighbours in the evenings of summer days. Momentous events were in store for them and it would be of such dramatic consequences that the very heavens would weep for the child as she struggled to find her feet and reach some level of equanimity in the big wide world outside the village. Years down, she would remember those golden, warm and beautiful years of her life and find solace in the comfort those memories would anoint her with.

3

College Days

Jagannath joined University College, Trivandrum in 1973. He was fresh from his village in the backwaters of the mid-Travancore region of Kerala. The one permanent memory of his younger days was the presence of the Pamba River and of its perfumed wind fanning him through all the days of his young uncomplicated life. It was just about a mile from his home, flowing past the edge of green paddy and sugar cane fields. The river ran through his memories, ever present and ever glowing, ever constant in its very inconsistencies. Through the placid flow of its summer days or its turbulent rage during the monsoons, through the clear limpid quietude of its peaceful waters to the turgid, boiling explosion in its frightful wrath.

He was an only son and was subject to all the ills that that particular predicament engenders in the minds of young children. He grew up spoilt and pampered and demanding attention at every moment of the day. He had a surfeit of rice, fish and tapioca and immense quantities of unquenchable, undying maternal love. His father was a wealthy forest contractor who was more absent than around, and his bringing up was largely left to an almost -single mother who doted on her only son with all the selfless love that a woman in her circumstances could lavish.

There were servants to order about, to shout at, to tease and to make fun of. There was enough food to get fat and roly-poly on. The neighbours used to call him “vayaran” meaning the one with the stomach. His tubby countenance continued to shine and glow till he was about twelve, when the natural inherited genes took over and reduced his weight to a level which made him normal, and soon the jibes of his classmates were forgotten.

His mother, most unexpectedly, had a love for books and that too, the English classics. Indira had come by marriage into the family from an aristocratic plantation magnate’s kutumbam where the children were compulsorily subjected to the reading of English literature, especially of the Victorian age. She thanked her father for this particular trait. He had had a stint in Oxford so many years ago, at a time when going out of the country for higher education was almost unheard of. It was also proof positive of the incontrovertible fact that her family was wealthy beyond belief. How she had married Srikumaran was a question that was pondered over and debated by families across the district for many years after the event.

But the fact of the matter was that there was nothing extraordinary about the alliance. In those days, Srikumaran Nair was a fine lad who was rising up the social and financial ladder. At the time of his marriage, he already possessed sufficient resources to have a house of his own on the banks of the Pamba, as manager to the forest baron to whom he had been apprenticed. It took just another three years for him to set himself up independently in business. He was honest and hardworking and always kept up his side of the bargain. The quality of the wood he supplied, especially for government contracts, soon earned him a reputation for fair play and ethics. The business just kept coming in.

They lived in a fine double-storied house in that small village, the only concrete structure for miles around. His summer holidays were spent lolling in the river waters where he could swim even better than the bold muscular fishes that frolicked in its depths. The silver light, refracted through the Pamba waters, flapped and sprang about like slivers of mirrors among the pebbles and rocks at the bottom of the river. The water was clear enough to see for several yards ahead and Jagannath played his stupid tricks on other young swimmers, creeping up on them from the rear and ducking them under the water in a splashing flurry of panic and laughter.

The memory of his school days in a thatched hall in his village now seemed to him to be swathed in a glow of pleasant warmth that even now had the power to quieten his troubled soul and soothe him like a gentle massage as he grew into the worries and turmoil of this vast and largely inexplicable world.

At school, though his not-so-fortunate classmates and almost respectful teachers regarded him with envious eyes, he was largely left at peace and, all things considered, got on well with almost everyone. His better circumstances were somehow connected with his better grades in class, though he did sometimes worry as to whether his family’s financial status tended to make his teachers evaluate him in the class exams a trifle more generously than they did the others.

But, it was fated, and indeed quite inevitable, that when he passed out from school he would go off to some bigger city for his higher education. He spent two unsatisfactory years in a neighboring town for his Pre-Degree course then did exactly what he wanted to do. He landed up at University College, Trivandrum in what was then the summer of 1973.

Trivandrum, the leafy, stately capital of Kerala, wrested out of the axe of Parasuraman, mythical warrior of yore. God’s own country where godlessness is trendy. Kerala State was a unique research product in development economics, with social indicators of health and education comparable to the best of European countries. Nevertheless it was among the poorest states in the country. A melting pot of religious and ethnic groups, having learnt by mutual shared knowledge that it is better to hang together than to hang separately. Where Moplabs and Nazranis learnt to live in peace with the Hindu castes. Washed by a coast-line that made magic out of sun and sand and coconut, and hemmed in by the ghats in the east, this long pencil-thin

stretch of land was an arboreal paradise of foliage and water, filled with unique dark-skinned people who thought much and thought differently. Where Marx lived, when he had died in most places elsewhere in the world, where women inherited instead of men, where white was standard wear, where financial status could not be discerned from attire, where towns and villages flowed into each other with no demarcated boundaries. Kerala the odd man out, the crucible for never-ending experiments that regularly threw up surprises for the rest of the astonished country to emulate.

The sixties that had gone by were fabulous years for the resurgent West, a kind of second renaissance where the arts competed with scientific development, where poetry and music held center stage in the minds of the beautiful spaced out people. A determined United States put a man on the moon, finally establishing its superiority over the otherwise implacable Russians and the rest of the largely unconcerned world. It was a famous victory for the capitalistic West over the communist East.

It was a time of freedom and the storm blowing from the liberal democracies brought with it a worldview that was flavoured with easy nonchalance and a casual indifference to the concept of material success. It was moved by an anti-war flower power and the Beatles phenomenon and drugs and its wacky view of life would change the perspective of a generation of young spirits all over the world.

It was only much later that he realized that it was in the magical West that the original free-thinker lived and that what Jaggu and his friends received in this country were but pale imitations of the real thing, transported through the pages of Life and Time magazines or by wandering world trotters who passed through the city in the course of their peripatetic travels.

On the other hand, and perhaps logically, there were contradictory winds also blowing over Kerala. The Leftist doctrine was a popular ideological stance for the youth to adopt. Marxist dialectics were spouted and bandied about in the college corridors and the canteens and was the mainstay of debates prior to the college elections. The Students' Federation of India became the compelling force of college politics and grabbed the attention of the young and the unemployed youth of this small State.

The stately terra cotta building of the University College, which had been established more than a century ago in 1866, was torn apart by politics, sometimes petty, sometimes comical and often grim and deathly. The professors and the teachers took to a lackadaisical, carefree attitude and either smiled indulgently or bitterly bemoaned the passing away of ideals from the psyche of the youth of the day.

There were incidents of fisticuffs and group violence. There was even a knifing once when a dark stranger, definitely not a student, chased a terrified and screaming college boy through the campus, finally bringing him down in the tennis courts, where in the horrified view of hundreds of students, he was stabbed, almost to death. In the week thereafter, uniformed cops, who terrorized everyone in the same way as the student leaders did, almost overran the entire college, spreading terror and confusion.

Thankfully, it was for only a few days. The young girls who came to the college to study were the most affected. They feared for their well being, their future, their person. But life went on, for those who really wished to study could do so with no hindrance at all. There was the spacious library next door, the huge lawns to relax on and the assurance that come what may, if one was determined to do well in college, there was no one who could stop you.

Life at the moment was all that it promised to be; wonderful, chaotic, splendid in parts, mystifying at times, but all in all, a grand experience. The amazing wonder of it was, to use a phrase that was becoming more and more popular, completely mind-blowing. And it was into this confused and energetic cacophony of Life (the real thing, not the magazine!) that Jagannath fell, head over heels and ecstatic, thrilled beyond words and gushing at the sight and sounds of a city modernity that promised everything to the young and the bold.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven. Jaggu knew his Wordsworth better than his trigonometry, thanks to his mother. To veer to the Arts was a natural movement at a time when mouthing poetry and Leftist terminology at the drop of a hat was de rigueur. The only payment required was a cup of coffee at the canteen or a cigarette from the corner stall.

Thus it was that Jagannath found himself a first year B.A. student in English Literature in a class full of young spirits wearing bell bottoms and coloured, flashy shirts or kurtas and hawai slippers. The female of the species had still not risen up above their traditional attire. Long skirts and blouses with a string of flowers twined into the hair was the uniform they wore. They walked in a herd, a nameless, almost faceless crowd, a kind of collective identity with the swish of skirts and the odour of stale coconut oil to announce their presence. Life settled itself down to irregular classes and regular coffee breaks with long conversations about the meaning of Life interspersed in between.

In the hostel, Jaggu had three very close friends: one from Madras and the other two from Bombay. The three of them would mock him mercilessly about his rural background and his traditional upbringing and sometimes make him feel as if he were an anachronistic clown trapped in a futuristic world. But, at other times, he would enchant them with his real life experiences of rural Kerala and the sylvan beauty of the backwaters he had grown up in. Then it was his turn to tell them a thing or two about the dangers of city life and the risks of breathing polluted air!

They were a good group, one that was formed right in the very first week of college and which was destined to last for a long time. It was the kind of bonding that comes but rarely and never quite leaves you though the rest of your life, though you may hardly ever meet each other in the years ahead when Life had you in its clenched teeth and would not let you go in peace despite your frantic struggles.

There was the Madrasi Babu: really, his name was Srinivasa Babu, a stocky, dark brown, curly haired pot smoker who would often lounge about the room in his lungi and was generally in, what had come to be known even then as, a blue funk, allowing the smoke to seep out of his ears. He stayed immersed in books written by Ionesco or Teilhard or other erudite and intellectual writers and was always subject to the gentle gibes from Jaggu as to whether he really read them or just carried them about to display their titles to the more gullible of his classmates.

Thomas and Chandran, the elite Bombayites, who obviously did not have the necessary marks or the cash to get admitted into the posh colleges of Bombay, were the other two. Thomas with his patrician Syrian Christian looks and his six-foot height led the pack as they walked to college each day. His hooked nose and his high cheekbones indicated an ancient gene pool that, he said, he had inherited from his ancestors who had converted to Christianity right in the first century when St. Thomas came to Kerala preaching the gospel of the Christ. This lineage, of course, gave him a passport to heaven, as he was always fond of boasting. He practiced weight lifting as his hobby and ate immense quantities of meat and other protein diets to strengthen his muscles. His biceps scared the wits out of the college goons who normally had no qualms in terrifying a new student the moment he stepped into college. But Thomas was the exception. They kept out of his path.

And then there was Chandran, the stroller, the languisher, the cynical introvert who used to smile and say little except when provoked. And then it was something so sarcastic that it would leave his victim crest fallen and in dismay. He had dark, brooding eyes that attracted quite a few female admirers. But he made it clear by his indifference that he was not interested. His very looks silently shouted, hands off.

Jaggu used to say that they were the rose and the three thorns, leaving no doubt as to who the flower was. The others preferred to say they were the Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo with Malvolio thrown in for comic relief. They too had no doubt whatsoever as to who the said comic was. As a compromise and to soothe bruised egos, they agreed to refer to themselves as the Fantastic Four.

Their foursome became a familiar sight on the college campus. They were ready to stand by each other through thick and thin, ready to take offence at the slightest pretext against anyone who had the temerity to challenge them on any issue whatsoever. They were, consequently, left to their own devices as far as possible. It made their club exclusive and restricted. It was 'buzz off' to the rest of the crowd. It seemed destined that they would all pass out in a few years to follow their respective careers, the civil services or some job in a bank or maybe to pursue doctoral studies on a scholarship in the United States.

It was into this self-contained, self-indulgent world of collegiate diversity that Sara flew in like a colourful butterfly, an exotic creature from a strange and distant land. She had come in two weeks after the college opened, seeking special permission from the college authorities to join late because, it was rumoured, of an unavoidable trip to attend to something unexpected abroad. This in itself was something to talk about: going abroad, when even the most adventurous of them had not been farther than Delhi.

News had already spread even before her arrival about the impending entry of a spectacular and unusual student. Someone who had seen her earlier reported that she was really something special. So they waited with bated breath for the moment. And what a moment it was. Roughly two weeks after everybody had settled down to college life, she breezed into class in the third period of the day.

There was a stunned silence for a long moment that stretched into something like a small eternity. She stood at the entrance of the classroom and said: "May I come in, sir?" Time stood shocked and still. Sara with her cloud of luxuriant hair around her face, her baggy blue faded jeans, her tight shirt that provoked the imagination, her slim body with her small breasts, her arresting figure, the exposed navel, the dream of a sculptured waist, the look of an Arabian princess caught with her veil off, the perfect outline to taunt and entice the senses endlessly.

The poor professor was caught completely off guard, taken aback with the audacity of her timed and timeless entry and could only mutter some words as to why she was late or something to that effect. By which time Sara was floating in on a cloud of whispers, ogle, baited breaths and suppressed sexual excitement.

Of course, she wafted to the last bench –where else would she sit? The Fantastic Four always occupied the last seats and they were blessed by the aerie presence of an ethereal angel sitting at the end of the bench with such an overpowering presence that they were silenced into a numb and nervous trance. Her scent she wore like a badge. Her perfume, distinctive and unusual would always be associated with her, and Jaggu, the young novice from rural Kerala, would fall forever into the endless enticement of the fragrance that would last in his consciousness for ever and ever and ever, through joblessness and career, through the ups and downs of life, through the simple sorrows and joys that he, as well as the rest of the world—except, of course, the pristine, ethereal Sara —was subject to.

That she was a cut above the rest was undoubted from the very first moment. That she was miles above the normal South Indian college girl was also not contested. Some of the other girls tried at first to bask in reflected glory, boasting of how Sara was their best friend, and how they had spent a great evening with her and how she used to crack jokes at the lesser more unfortunate girls, not privileged to be her friends.

Totally untrue, as Jaggu came to know later, for Sara couldn't care less about the little conspiracies and plots played out in the classroom. Some of the other girls who had certain vain opinions about themselves attempted to copy her walk, her clothes, the way she talked. Some tried hard to ascertain the name of the elusive perfume she flaunted and even wrote to relatives and friends living abroad to send them by parcel the very same scent. A few furiously jealous ones spread some vicious stories about her past and the broken hearts she had strewn around her feet in the course of the last few years.

These tales affected Sara like so many drops of water off an oily duck's back. She was not the least perturbed by any of them. Her total unconcern and her dismissive glance at those who tried to provoke her, were more than sufficient to, at first, discourage them, and then, to ensure that they never returned for another attempt. The class room broke up into little groups, some in awe of her, a few openly praising her, some silently fuming and envious, and some hostile to the point of being rude. Sara's unperturbed visage and her superior smile taunted them for their petty politics and inane resentment. Of course, within a couple of weeks it had all boiled down to this formula, so aptly put down by Madras Babu: There is Sara and then there is the rest of the world!

From the very first day, Sara's response to the Fantastic Four was quite different from the rest of the crowd. When she sat on that first day on the last bench, the Fantastic Four collectively gazed at her profile in dazed wonderment. Madras Babu said nothing but exhaled deep breaths of air. It was the highest compliment he could pay. Thomas pretended indifference. Syrian Christians assumed a superior level of existence and mere mortals – even one as special as Sara— could not stand in the way of their progress towards an exalted state of being. Of course, the others saw through him right at the first moment. Chandran stopped being languid and cynical, but only for a moment, for he then muttered something inexplicable about hybrid genes and exotic flowers.

To Jaggu, she was the perfect Greek goddess, some Athena or Helen, beyond the scope of words to describe. Indeed, how does one describe Sara? To an English Literature student, it should not have been a difficult task. The precise use of words was an essential requirement for any student of the subject. So, briefly stated, she was fair, she was taller than usual, she was slim, she was thin-waisted. Her black hair was like a cloud around her face. Her eyes large, the white tinged with blue, the iris not black, but somewhere between darkest brown and twilight. Her nose sharp and straight, her cheek bones high, but soft.

There was something fractionally asymmetrical with her lips, as if they had torn when the mould was pulled off, leaving them just short of being perfect. At times there was a smile, which lasted long, hidden as it were just under the skin. It made the eyes crinkle, glisten and infectiously prompted the rest of them to smile too. At other times, they were almost grim and watchful. Her profile posed dangers to the ones who watched her, not only because they were in constant fear of falling off from the firm foundation under their feet, but also because it left them forever wondering who the person behind the face really was.

By a mystical, magical coincidence Jaggu sat nearest to her and he received the full flare of her luminous presence. He needed to only look sideways to capture a glimpse of that profile, to catch his breath at that faultless complexion. He would not, could not, through the rest of his days on this wondrous, complex and unfair world, ever deny that he had fallen in love with her that very instant, like a fond and foolish devotee of a goddess in a temple. His sane self knew that this was a ridiculous fantasy, an infatuation that would not last for more than a week, an impossible desire that would fade when the light of common sense transformed the magic of that mystical moment into clear-eyed reason.

At that moment, however, he could only say “hi, welcome to the College, I am Jagannath” in a rough and guttural voice which surprisingly came out in a manner conveying the impression that he was the ultimate macho man, cool and collected with not a care in the world. Later, he used to wonder how the words would have appeared to Sara. And later she would indeed tell him her reaction to those words.

In a class of thirty, attention was riveted on the poor girl like a pitiless searchlight and Sara must have been hard put to appear nonchalant. It was, therefore, with some relief that she turned to Jagannath and said “Thank you, nice of you to say that”. The voice was cultured and there was the ambiguous presence of an accent that was definitely not native to the Indian soil, but had the mixed flavour of something both western and Asian. It would take some unraveling, but in the meantime, the bell had rung for the afternoon break and it was time for the Fantastic Four to go to the canteen for the afternoon snack.

“Would you care to join us for tea at the canteen?” Jagannath’s heart was in his throat. He felt his face flush and the forehead turn moist with perspiration in the sudden tension of those casual words. His heart was thudding in him. He felt a little faint. He would never be able to fathom the reason why he spoke to her. Normally he was deliberate and not subject to sudden impulses. This time, however, he did not know what he was doing, nor had he thought about the consequences of such an abrupt introduction to a total stranger. He had taken the plunge in a manner strange to his very self.

The impulse that had made him say his first words to her had carried him forward in a momentum, a headlong rush that would have made him slip and stumble had it been a physical movement forward. In his mind he was tripping forward and unable to find his feet. Thomas noticed, and stared, but then turned away. He had the unmistakable inkling that some momentous beginning had been made, some great story was about to start.

Any other girl of his class would have pretended not to hear or would have moved ahead a little faster than usual. She would have assumed that the guy was making a pass at her. In the repressed social mores of Kerala, where even polite conversation between classmates of the opposite sex was regarded with salacious looks and treated as scandalous, if Sara had turned away or even muttered a brusque “no”, it would have meant the end of any further conversation. In fact, there would have been no story to write about. Who knows, this book may never have been written.

But destiny had larger and more complicated designs on the characters herein. Sara did not say no, neither did she say yes. In a clear, completely natural and unhurried manner she said, “well, maybe later, I’ve got to go up to the office and pay in my fees now. And clear up admission formalities. Maybe another day?”

Jagannath felt the calming of the pulse beating at his throat and the thudding core of his chest quieten. And a simple joy sprang up within him. “Sure, that will be fine”. It would be more than fine, it would be great, it would be fantastic, it would be unbelievable! Sara was already out of the room and moving on to the office on the first floor as Jagannath felt the muscled arms of Thomas around his shoulders and his wry comment: “Now, what was that all about?” Babu and Chandran smiled at him, rather mischievously and added, “the poor guy’s fallen for her, one look from her and he’s down and out!”

This kind of ribbing was common in those good old college days and he took it in his stride. But later that evening, before he dropped off to sleep in a little glow of happiness, he wondered at his own strange behaviour in welcoming her to class (as if he were class spokesman) and then inviting her for tea at the canteen. What ever did he do that for, he wondered.

Slowly, but surely, with the endless patience that Love demands for the great prize that it will finally gift away to those it favours, Jagannath pursued Sara with an assiduousness that was impossible to comprehend. On the very next day, he found himself arriving early in class to grab the particular seat he had been sitting on when Sara had sauntered into class on her first day. It was an obvious stratagem for he hoped that she would continue to sit in the very same place thenceforth.

His gamble paid off as Sara, oblivious of the plot planned behind her back, did indeed occupy the very seat she had sat on the previous day. He smiled, not knowing whether she would smile back at him. She did. That did mean something, he thought. Actually, it didn’t, because for Sara to be friendly was but the natural extension of her personality. He leaned back and asked her if she had completed her tasks in the office. She said yes, and he replied that that was good.

As the days passed, the first fascination gave way to the deep attraction that grips the besotted soul and leaves it completely a slave of the emotion. This was equivalent to the taking over of a battleground by a victorious army, as the face and soul of Sara occupied the very being of Jagannath. In the course of the next few weeks, he would turn to her as if it were the most natural thing to do and ask for her text book or her notes and then venture a few intelligent questions about the meaning of some words or literary phrases, which he knew perfectly well, but pretended that he did not, so that Sara would answer and he would be able to look at her as she spoke and she would look at him.

He saw the first recognition of him as a person in her eyes, and truly, she found him an easy soul to talk to. He noticed she did smile at him when she moved to her seat each morning. He said the usual good mornings and was happy that she

responded in kind. He looked into those dark, dark eyes a little hesitantly. He did not wish to fall in or drown in its depths; at least not right then. Maybe later, maybe later.

In the murmur of the attentive class when the rest of the students were taking notes and concentrating on their textbooks, Jaggu was watching Sara from the corner of his eyes. He saw the small fingers, the slender wrist, the smooth and fair skin disappearing into the blouse at the elbow or into the shirtsleeve. He observed the long eyebrows and the fluttering of the eyelashes as she moved or shifted position. He watched in hushed silence as he saw her lips and their involuntary movements when she took notes or looked up at what the professor was saying or writing on the blackboard.

He felt a sudden thrill as once she bit at the end of her pen and the small teeth appeared from within her lips. He observed closely the way she held her body, and the vast difference between her and the other ridiculously normal girls that would have been apparent to a blind man: differences in her gait and her walk and the way she talked and swung her body with the movements that took her from the door of the classroom to her seat. With much embarrassment and some degree of frustration he stared at her neck and then down to the swell of her breasts and the shirt that concealed all. He saw too the exposed skin just above the waist and the way her body flowed into her jeans. He was confused by the intensity of the thoughts that possessed him and he realized that if he went on in this way he would turn himself into some kind of insane freak. This definitely had to be brought down to a manageable level.

He had to take control of himself and he had to do it now, before things went out of hand. So some days later, he decided to pluck up courage once again and ask her over to the college canteen for the once promised cup of tea. He had warned Thomas in advance about it that day, saying that he would expect all of them to be with him as they went to the canteen. After a listless class of literary criticism, when the college bell announced the afternoon break, Jaggu turned casually to Sara and said: "Well, how about a cuppa?" Sara smiled and replied, "why not" and that was that.

It was the beginning of a long story of innumerable cups of coffee and tea at the canteen. The five of them would spend hours there, when the noon break was on, when the professors were absent, or when classes were disrupted by restive student politics, which, it seemed, sought every opportunity to ensure that colleges did not fulfill their purpose for which they were set up. The days were a succession of endless desultory classes, interspersed by bright, fascinating, brilliant flashes of light as some of the old and experienced professors ignited their imagination and made them relive the magic of the of the classics, of the great poets, or the magnificent bard of Avon. In between, there was discussion and debate and endless cups of tea, coffee and soggy biscuits.

Child Bride

There can be no sin committed, if there is no knowledge of the enormity of the crime. For without the law, sin was dead. Ram Chander did not even think it was wrong. It was the practice, it was the custom, it was age-old. There was no way in which he could have ever comprehended the scale of the transgression he was about to commit. And so too did Gauri Devi feel about it, though she cried her heart out on the day it was settled that on the next Akha Teej, her five-year-old daughter would be married off. If she knew better, she would have wondered why it is the fate of womankind to suffer the agonies of seeing one's daughter leave home before it was even time for her to leave for school.

The only consolation was that this marriage was more symbolic than physical, tradition having ordained that the consummation of marriage could only be possible after the little girl had attained puberty. However, societal pressure demanded that the girl should be spoken for and betrothed before she was old enough to have thoughts of her own. Having arranged the inevitable, and solemnized the crime, there was only a normal time schedule to be completed, determined by the physical changes in her body, before she would be off to her husband's home.

While the date and time for all marriages are determined by the pundit after studying the almanac and forecasting the position of planets, the marriages which, however, take place on Akshya Tritiya, or Akha Teej, the third day of the bright fortnight of Baishakh, the month of the Hindu calendar generally falling in May every year, do not require the priest's nod.

Hence that particular date sees a profusion of marriages between babies and infants, such a sight as would make one smile and cry at the same time. Such weddings are common in the State, with its dusty landscape, palaces and maharajahs' forts, as well as its dogged insistence in adhering to feudal traditions, traditions that have tied down Rajasthani women and made them some of the most socially backward in the country.

Wise social analysts would argue that the practice gained ground especially after the Mughal attacks on India where the marauding soldiers, running amok in the villages that the victorious armies passed through, would cast their lecherous eyes on the young women of the habitations. Moslem law, however, made the offence of rape of a married woman punishable by a hideous death and, in course of time, the terrified families of young girls, ensured that they were married off safely and well in time.

The mangal sutra or the red vermilion in the parting of the hair was the unambiguous signal that the girl in question was already spoken for and any attempt to despoil the goods thereafter, would receive the wrath of the Mughal Emperor or his generals, were the offence to be reported to them. And thus, to counter one evil, another was begun. The Mughals had come and gone, but the perfidious custom of marriage of girls in their childhood continued unabated for the centuries thereafter.

Saraswati, the little girl child, a cherub victim, a giggling quarry, was being readied for marriage. Not that she was an unwilling participant in the ceremony. For her it was a game that she was playing in, in which she was the chief protagonist and the others would run all around her to give her what she wanted, to attend to her slightest bidding.

When later day sociologists analyzed the practice of child marriage many years in the future, they would talk of the torture that the little girl goes through and the inhuman agony that children barely out of the nursery have to face. But the fact was that Sarasu was a happy child and for one such as her who did not understand what marriage means, what it entails, it was but a great game to play and enjoy. She was dressed in shiny red and yellow clothes, with sequins and mirror work flashing in the light of the oil lamps in the room where her mother and Draupadi Mausi ji helped her in the preparations.

The alliance had been some time in the making. At another social occasion, some months earlier, when a birthday party for an old village patriarch who had achieved the distinguished age of sixty was being celebrated, an interfering, busybody, in fact a distant uncle, had suggested the possibility of the two families coming together. Ram Chander was thrilled for he had heard of Chatter Singh and knew that the family was honorable and of acceptable lineage. He had given his nod after he had consulted Gauri Devi who, though full of trepidation, could not find any reason to say no.

It was ensured that the families did not belong to the prohibited gothras, so that there would be no danger of any consanguineous union. At a simple engagement function some two months later, after the village astrologer had confirmed that the planetary combination of the two children did not bode ill to either of them or their families, Ram Chander had ceremoniously handed over the silver coin and the symbolic coconut to Chatter Singh in the presence of close family members.

Chatter Singh Chaudhary and his wife Bhanukumari, were fairly well to do and had sufficient property to look after their own selves and live in some measure of comfort. They lived not far off, in the neighboring village of Chanderpur. They were quite contented in the arrangements that had been worked out with Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi. The girl was pretty and fair and would soon grow up to be a lovely wife for their Giridhar. And then they would only have Lakshmi, their young daughter to look after till she was in turn betrothed. With Saraswati, standing for the goddess of education and learning and Lakshmi meaning wealth, both in their house, what more was required?

A few days before the stipulated date, the yellow rice ceremony was completed and the formal marriage invitations were sent to the members of the family and close friends. The home of Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi in Surpura was looking all spruced up and decorated with a new coat of paint and rangoli designs and drawings on the wall and the courtyard behind the house.

One morning just before the big day, Saraswati was brought out into the courtyard at the rear of the house. She had no clue as to the import of the sentence that was being read out to her, but was excited and all giggly when the women called out her name and made her sit on their laps and fondled her with gentle words and smiles.

In the presence of the women relatives and neighbors, she was covered with a paste of haldi and oils that turned her yellow and slimy and made her feel all irritable and messy. She called out to her Maa, but she was only greeted with smiles and loud laughter from all the assembled guests. Gauri Devi worried that the poor girl would start crying, but she didn't and the ordeal was soon over. The cold water drawn from the well made her gasp, but she bore it with equanimity and soon enough the ceremony was over. She was brought back into the house, wet and cold and was quickly dried off and given some hot milk to keep her warm and happy till the real marriage ceremonies began. It was a poignant moment for the others, especially so for Gauri Devi, who concealed her tears behind her odni and tried to look brave.

Draupadi Mausi ji was always around and helped the poor girl face the ordeal with courage and good humour. There were some comments made by a few uncharitable neighbours that Draupadi ji was a widow and, therefore, should not be associated with the marriage ceremonies. It would be inauspicious and would bring bad luck to the little girl. Gauri Devi waved away these petty objections. She knew that her Saraswati was happy with Mausi ji around. She was determined that she would be the last person to forbid the old woman in anything she wished to do although Draupadi ji managed to be a dear old bother to all who stood around. What Gauri Devi wanted was whatever made her little girl happy.

Harish Chacha had come down from Delhi where he was studying in his final year medicine and he joined in the festivities with joy and abandon. As his only niece, Saraswati had a special place in his affections. He took it upon himself to look after all the ceremonies that were mandatory to make the occasion a grand success. It was he who had arranged for the haldi required for the customary bath of the little girl, the harmonium and the dhol for the ladies sangeet sessions, the cook and his helpers, the groceries and the ghee and the spices and condiments, the immense quantities of food required to feed the guests who were descending on them in droves.

He sprang to obey the slightest command of Ram Chander ji, for he was determined that his elder brother should not feel any inconvenience whatsoever during these busy and worrying days. Some of the neighbors and the distant relatives chipped in to help the family during the ceremonies and they were all invited for the lunches and dinners at home. For Saraswati, it was unalloyed fun. She had never been so much the center of attention and she reveled in it like a spoilt kid.

The May evening was hot and sultry as she was brought out into the mandap where the smoke from the sacred fire began to further heat up the slight breeze. The baraat reached in the late evening, its arrival announced by the chants and songs and the wild dance of accompanying young men hurling themselves around in abandon. Giridhar was on the mandatory white horse. He was the little prince in his large red turban and his shiny scabbard and sword, his white suit with a buttoned up collar.

He was hot and bothered at the fuss that he was forced to endure. On command, he lifted his sword and touched the little toran at the entrance to the door of the house. There was loud applause as he did so, for it was the symbolic conquest of the bride's house by the bridegroom. The ceremonies themselves would be held in the community ground and the entire party was then received and escorted into the large open space in front of the Panchayat Ghar, which had been suitably decked up for the occasion. Saraswati was brought out into the pavilion by the ladies, relatives and friends and was ceremoniously seated in the wedding mandap.

By this time Giridhar was already sitting cross-legged near the mandap. Saraswati's parents welcomed him, this shy boy trying his best to be unafraid and strong. He was the eldest son of the family and apart from Lakshmi, his younger sister, there was no other children in the household. His sibling was about a year or so younger than Saraswati and Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi knew she would be an excellent friend and companion to the young child bride. Giridhar was a little confused with all that was happening, but found nothing odd in the fact that he was a bridegroom today at the age of nine. These were old traditions and he was too young to question the rationale or validity of these customs.

The sprinkling of holy water had sanctified the wedding offerings and the pavilion while the priest chanted old Vedic scriptures. With the young children, the tiny bride and the serious faced boy-groom, sitting at the wedding pavilion, the village priest guided them through a prayer to Lord Ganesha, Remover of all Obstacles, to ensure the marriage ceremony takes place without impediments, and that they share a blissful life. In a touching, moving gesture, the little boy and the girl tied a thread around each other's wrists vowing they will protect and take care of each other. A child to care for a child.

The holy flames from the fire, which stood as witness to the marriage being performed, were hot and stung the little girl's eyes. She was distressed and a little weepy for a moment, but was calmed down by the watchful Draupadi Mausi ji who gave her a quick hug and brushed away her tears. The chants and the rituals continued with Saraswati offering the nervous Giridhar a mixture of yogurt and honey. Although totally unnecessary for children of this tender age - and who could deny the sweetness shining from Sarasu's face - this tradition was essential to indicate that the bride was a symbol of purity and sweetness.

The formal kanyadaan followed. No gift is greater than the gift of a daughter. There were tears in Gauri Devi's eyes; the little girl was now to be somebody else's and how could she ever tolerate the loss of her girl to another family. She momentarily forgot that one day some years ago, she had herself come into Ram Chander ji's family following the same rituals and formalities, sanctified by Time and the many generations gone by. The rituals would continue till late in the evening and while the two young children went through the long chanting of sacred hymns and muttered mantras, the rest of the wedding guests had already started to gorge on the feast.

After about a couple of hours of relentless chanting and inexplicable rituals, the priest made them stand up and led them through the final steps involving the seven sacred circuits of the burning fire. Each step symbolized a certain aspect of marriage, of matrimonial duties and rights. Each circuit involved the chanting of age old vows and the two young children, not knowing the solemnity of the occasion, with the end of Saraswati's chunri tied to Giridhar's waist, went around the fire, smiling at the people gathered around them and indeed glancing shyly at each other.

The words were sung like a magic mantra and the attending family members listened as the old priest lifted his head and chanted
the
words :

Ekamisa visnustva nayatu

Dve urije vishnustva nayatu

Trini rayasposaya vishnustva nayatu

Catvari mayabhavaya vishnustava nayatu

Panca pasubhya vishnustava nayatu

Sad rtubhyo vishnustva nayatu

Sakhe saptapada bhava sa mamananvrata bhava visnustva nayatu

The torrent of words had no meaning for the children, nor indeed for any of the guests. It was gibberish and incomprehensible, this string of Sanskrit expressions that had been repeated at every marriage for ages. But there was indeed logic in them. It symbolised the relationship of the groom as protector and guide to the marriage between the two bodies and souls. It was followed by the exchange of vows and promises that they gave to each other, the solemn spoken commitment to their lives together.

With God as our guide, let us take:

The first step for togetherness, respect and honor;

The second step to develop physical and emotional health;

The third step to increase spiritual health;

The fourth step to acquire knowledge, happiness, and harmony;

The fifth step to be blessed with a healthy family;

The sixth step to develop mutual restraint and longevity;

The seventh step to symbolize mutual love, friendship and companionship.

The children held hands and declared their acceptance of each other and took their vows in the presence of God and all assembled, with a pledge to live happily as long as they both shall live. Giridhar took the sacred thread in his clammy, nervous fingers and with the help of his father strung it around Sarasu's neck in three knots. It was the final acknowledgement of the fact that the marriage had been solemnized : a gold pendant, the wedding amulet, strung on thread around the neck of the bride. The three knots were supposed to represent the Holy Trinity, though the real reason may have been to ensure that the knot is not loosened thus endangering the marriage itself. Then with loud cheers and the blowing of the conch shell, the two children showered rice on each other, the perfect insurance for a long life, prosperity, and happiness.

*We shall both live together with mutual understanding, support and trust.
We will accept our happiness, sorrows, and difficulties together with cooperation and understanding.
We will try to lead a life as one soul and as one being.
We shall share all of our fortunes.
We will consult each other on all major decisions.
We shall be husband and wife, lovers, and partners, and pray to God for healthy children.
We shall promise to live with each other for the rest of our lives.*

'The rest of our lives' was the phrase that committed them to a lifelong steadfastness and devotion. For now was the moment when Ram Chander ji went up to Giridhar and then to his parents to entrust their daughter to their care. It was a moment filled with poignancy, the formal handing over of a precious treasure to the care of someone who was virtually a stranger. The proud Jat was felled by an emotion so strong that he felt his knees weakening, his eyes blurring with unaccustomed tears. But he could not and would not show emotion. How could he, with his fierce moustache and his grim face; he would not allow himself to become a laughing stock of the family and friends that stood around him.

Giridhar and Saraswati stood up to receive blessings from their parents and family and all assembled guests. There were many who would give them envelopes containing the token silver coin or maybe eleven rupees (always the amount was a round number added by one for the odd number was considered auspicious). There were some senior members of the family, whose feet they were required to touch as their blessings were mandatory for any marriage to succeed. And then the children were given something to eat as the rituals came to an end.

Sarasu would normally have left in the morning of the next day to join her husband's family. But Chatter Singh had pleaded for their indulgence and had requested that they be permitted to leave in the night itself. After all it was just an hour's ride away and they would be able to get back to their home soon enough. In her case, this meant traveling for about an hour in a taxi to Giridhar's village of Chanderpur some miles away. After a day's stay there, tradition required that she return to her family in Surpura and await the onset of puberty and the Gauna ceremony, which would signal her fitness to join her husband. It was understood that girls married before reaching menarche are not physically mature to consummate the marriage.

But Gauri Devi knew that whether Gauna was performed or not, just the mere fact of being married would completely change Sarasu's life. From now on, she would be wearing a bindi on her forehead, perhaps covering her head in the presence of others. She would be advised to be discreet and reserved with her friends, all signs marking her out as at a stage of life different from her non-married friends.

When the time came to leave there were long hugs and unchecked tears from Gauri Devi. Draupadi Mausi ji, while trying her best to console her neighbour, found it herself hard to resist the tears threatening to engulf her. She knew that Sarasu would be back in a day and that she would still be able to mother her and spoil her and make her feel as if she were the most important girl on the face of the planet. But the facts were that the ceremony was done and Sarasu was already in a different category. She was labeled differently now; she was not a baby any more.

So at the moment all that the old woman could do was to stand by Gauri Devi and hush her and wipe away her own tears. She prayed with all her heart that Sarasu would find true domestic and marital happiness as she stood by Giridhar for the rest of her life. She prayed that she would not have to face the tragedy of death and sorrow that she had herself faced when, in her prime, her husband had been swept away from her peaceful and blissful home and from the boundaries of her life by a virulent attack of small pox in the course of one single week. She prayed that Sarasu would live a long and fruitful life and be the crowning glory of her home with the hundred sons that she would bear in the years to come.

As the car with his precious Sarasu moved away from the doors of the house, Ram Chander turned his face away. It would not do to have the guests see his wet, glistening eyes. Gauri Devi clung to Draupadi Mausi and cried her heart out for her daughter for she had passed out from the shelter of her home and would now be resident in another's abode. And though she knew that the little girl would be back soon enough, she also knew that her Sarasu had been touched by the relentless rites of passage. She was spoken for now, now she would be different, and when she came back she would be merely on loan to her.

The wooing of Sara : Part A

In college, the academic outpouring from the teachers was largely indifferent, but brilliant in some exceptional cases. In many classes, one just sat and forced oneself to listen to the same old standard litany of explanations and boring discourses. But there were others: Mrs. Hridayakumari, erudite, gentle and poised, as she enlightened them about the intellectual complexities of Hamlet; Mr. Sreedharan, humorous and disorganized, but who recreated the glorious wonder of the Tudor court of Henry VIII and his six wives, the splendor of Renaissance Europe; Mr. Kumara Pillai, an idealistic dreamy-eyed scholar who undertook to explain the intricacies of pure literary criticism. Misty ancient figures such as Beowulf came alive through Mr. Kochaniyan Muthuthu (what a wonderful name: in Malayalam it meant 'the senior younger brother'!) in the Old English classes followed by Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales to enliven the evenings. Kublai Khan's Xanadu rose in splendour before our very eyes, shimmering in the simple eloquence of Mr. Vishnu Narayanan Namboodiri.

The departmental library had old long-playing records and on some evenings we listened in awe to the reproductions of T.S. Eliot reciting *The Waste Land* in his own rambling voice. We read out Ben Jonson and heard in wonder the ranting of Faust. The melodious call of the Romantic greats, Shelley and Keats and the ponderous voice of Wordsworth, the suave and masterly Matthew Arnold, these geniuses filled us with the sense of great human accomplishments.

It was a time of wonder and learning and the widening of mental horizons and a sounder comprehension of the enormous power of the English language as we came to learn about the lives and works of poets and dramatists, how they wrested with emotions and reason, with the heart and the mind, with the crushing weight of the hand of God pressing down on the insignificant but brave hearted soul of Man.

The class absorbed as best as it could. For some it was a mere mental exercise to take in as much as was necessary to pass the exams. For others, including Sara and I and the three of our group, it was as much as we could do to suppress our excitement and keep still in our seats as the professors unraveled the magnificent literary classics to us. Much of our coffee house discussions did, in fact, center on the great literary figures and their magnum opuses.

In the three months that followed my first introduction to Sara, the hypnotic hold that she had over me came to be complete. My every day was replete with the presence of Sara as she appeared in the classroom and sat next to me on the same bench. Her nearness was enchanting, was even overpowering, although I tried to make our conversations appear normal and everyday. She had found in me, I liked to think, a friend who did not look askance at her or treat her as an odd ball, who accepted her as she was, strange clothes and foreign accent and all, and who never asked her why she behaved in a certain fashion, or spoke in a certain way, so different from the conduct and behaviour of the other girls around her.

When college was over and she had left, I found my thoughts were ever hovering around the mental picture that I had of her. My retina retained her reflections like a movie camera in replay. My every night was filled with the images of the day just passed: Sara as she moved into the class, as she smiled at me, as she walked with me to the canteen, as she laughed over my little jokes, as she waved to me when she left for her hostel. I was filled with astonishment, thankfulness, and a special gratitude for the blessing that had been bestowed on me in my friendship with this strange and magical girl.

Sometimes the wonder of it would overcome me completely and I would go up to the terrace of the University College hostel and gaze up at the night skies, wondering what unimaginable cosmic coincidence it was that brought me into close proximity with this girl from across the seas. There were times when I would pull out a chair onto the cemented terrace or take a sheet with me and lie down on it with my face turned upto the skies. On clear nights when the moon was not so bright, the heavens would reveal all its splendour to me. My favourite constellation, the Orion was blazing in the night sky. I loved to see the stellar belt with its three points of light and the sword hanging down from it, as if challenging the whole universe.

I let my gaze swivel all around the magnificent glittering vault and started my exercise of throwing myself into the depth of the heavens. I imagined myself falling face down into the solar system and saw in my mind's eye the planets and their moons swing past as I kept falling. It was an exhilarating experience and one I often indulged in, in moments of idleness. Only sometimes, it became quite serious business. Once, I remember, I could not stop the wanderings of my mind. I kept falling and falling past unfamiliar constellations and gigantic solar systems far out into the cold and strange parts of the universe. I would have been terrified had I not been overwhelmed by the glory of the galaxies swirling around me, the great and wonderful sweeping arms of misty clouds of whirling stars, each one a world of exquisite beauty and who knows, peopled with mysterious beings, sentient creatures. It took me over an hour of wide-eyed wonder and wonderful ecstasy to come out of the trance. It was an experience I was not likely to forget.

Today, however, my mind was quiet and watchful and glided over the events of the day in a fine serenity. There was a time when I was puzzled and even terrified of the great uncertainties of Life. Death more than anything else had the power to paralyze me completely. There were times when I pictured the moment of death as it hovered around me. In my mind, I saw myself as a great house, well lit and radiant, but slowly darkening, as lamp by lamp, room by room, night fell over it. My body was the house and when Death approached, it would be as if my systems were closing down gradually until the last switch would be pulled down and the whole breathing, sentient living body that was me would come to a halt.

There was nothing thereafter. No thought, no sight, no feeling; as good as if I were but a piece of driftwood or some discarded clothes. The dreadful images would send me into a paralysis of thought. At times, I could feel the cold clutch of fear around my heart. At other times, I would start awake at night, my heart beating loud, with some horrible nightmare fading from my mind.

I knew it would take me years to get over it. Even now I was not in a position to see things in abstract clear sightedness. One day I may reach a certain stage in the growth of my mind, when I would be able to accept many things with gentle equanimity. I saw myself as part of a great, complex and unending weave of patterns, of careful designs that had begun somewhere in the distant past of this planet and would end somewhere in the distant future. I was a small little speck in the stardust or a turn in the weave of that endless fabric that stretched out into infinity.

Through it all I could dimly discern the great cycles of time repeating the basic attributes of my frail human world, of birth, growth, decline and death only to be born again to keep the wheel moving. I would then be able to look at life and death with some more quietude and peace as I faintly discerned my place in the mysterious and immense wheel of life. Of course I would die, but I, and a part of all that I was, would go on and on, living, growing and dying, but undergoing birth again and again.

Into all this fantastic wanderings of my mind there was a now a new factor, a new star in the firmament, Sara. Where would all this lead to, this strange fascination, this allure, and this voluntary entrapment of myself by another? I could sense myself falling, as if from a great height into a willing imprisonment, wanting to be held in thrall by the luminous presence of this half woman, half-child, half fairytale pixie, but with all the promise of woman waiting to appear from out of the cocoon.

In the first few days after she agreed to go along to the canteen, after the classes were over or during a free period, the five of us would stroll along together. The coffee was strong, the sugar in excess, the biscuits mediocre, but the air was electric as we asked her, and she asked back, the preliminary questions of introduction: where are you from, where did you study, where are you staying in town, what are your parents doing?

I told her of my village on the banks of the Pamba and of my parents. Thomas and the others talked about Madras and Bombay and their families out there. Sara spoke about her father who was a doctor abroad and who had recently retired and come over to Kerala where she was presently staying at her mother's house. She herself was in a women's hostel not too far from the college. Preliminary exchanges over, our talk veered to other subjects and topics.

Over the course of the next two weeks or so, the conversation, at first halting and staccato, later flowed into the easy rhythm of unstructured banter and repartee. But it also became clear that the focal point of the group was Sara at the center, with me as a moth fluttering around her. The other three were at a different orbit altogether, farther away in terms of the growing closeness between the two of us. And as time passed, Thomas and Babu and Chandran found excuses to stay away or suddenly remembered that they had to go to the Library to prepare for the mid-term tests. It gradually turned from a quintet when we were all together in the class for our studies, to a duo outside the class.

There used to be some sniggers and a few whispered snide remarks when we moved within the campus, not so much from the students of our own class, but from some others, in other classes in the college. Sara and I largely ignored the comments as being too trite and foolish to pay any heed to.

Once, however, Thomas overheard some remarks, which he found distasteful and improper. He was walking several feet behind the smirking students when he heard them whisper amongst themselves. He swooped down on them, lifted two of them off their feet by their collars and held them dangling, their feet kicking air and growled into their faces, "keep off; they are my friends" and let them fall to the ground. He stalked off in a different direction altogether and left the trembling fools all confused and terrified. That was the end of any further comments and remarks about the two of us. And as news of the incident spread, there was respect for the bulging biceps of Thomas and a tacit understanding that Sara and I had better be left alone. The surprising thing was that we did not even know such an incident had taken place just a few feet behind us, until Chandran happened to mention it during a casual conversation.

To Sara too, the life at the University College was a beginning of sorts. For the first time she found friends who treated her as if she were an equal and with whom she could talk about Life in general, friends who were articulate enough themselves to know and express their opinion about the great changes taking place all around them. Her intimate knowledge about the West

and about books and music and social mores and the growing liberalism there in accepting the rights of those who are not so fortunate as the ones living in developed countries, these were most appealing and interesting to us who listened to her. My quiet interest, the strong, silent and immediate presence of the huge Thomas, the cryptic humour of Chandran and the fantasy world that Babu seemed to live in, these were now a part of her daily existence and she found them comforting enough to absorb into her consciousness.

And as for me, I liked to think that she would see who I really was, I hoped that my quiet infectious smile (really, I am modest, you know!) and my learning and knowledge (just more modesty!), my awareness of the issues involved in the matters they discussed, my world view and my obvious intellectual honesty (one's got to be truthful, you know!), were characteristics that she could accept in someone with whom she could have a close relationship.

It was obvious even to her that I regarded her with respect and admiration too, but that I was wary and careful about saying anything about it. And she, with all that could have possibly attracted her to me, she too would not say a word: that was the part that hurt. If only she were able to articulate better what she felt inside her and be free to remove the curtains that hung over the recesses of her mind, if only she could be frank and honest about herself and her past, then maybe she would be able to open herself up to me. But those were issues that she would have to fight with and resolve and settle on her own, while I waited.

In the meanwhile, I would watch and enjoy the moments she spent with me, under the benign supervision of Thomas and Chandran and Babu. Their mild and gentle shield around us was restful and soothing. Like birds in an aviary or exotic flowers in the green house, the story of Sara and I was growing like a carefully tended plant. Her conversations with us, with me, became lively and sometimes hilarious, sometimes sarcastic and at times solemn and full of philosophical meaning. I guess she was glad of our company and the fact that we could talk of any subject under the sun with each other.

On one occasion, sitting on the lawns of the college quadrangle, we were turning over the pages of the Time magazine to see the photographs of the Beatles on one of their performances somewhere in the US. When Sara casually mentioned that she had been to one of their shows in the Wembley stadium in London a few years ago, we very nearly jumped out our chairs. Especially Thomas, who had a fascination with their music and had loads of recorded music at his home in Bombay. He made a sound as if he were gargling and said something to the effect that he didn't believe her. Not that he didn't, but it was just his way of stating that he would have given his left arm to have been there.

"And what did they sing", he asked, "which songs?"

"All the famous ones and some of the not-so-famous", she smiled back, "the most memorable was 'Yellow Submarine' when the entire audience sang with them. You could have heard it on the moon."

"Amazing, how lucky you are!"

"Well, lucky my left foot", she snorted, "to stand at the back of the crowd when everybody's shoving each other and pushing and pulling and stamping on each other's feet, that's not lucky at all."

"These are merely momentary hazards that you have to suffer for the pleasure of hearing them" said Thomas angrily, "If you love music, you have got to make sacrifices!"

"Well, you make the sacrifices, you can give me your second biscuit" she replied as she made a grab for it.

"No", Thomas yelled and flicked the plate out of her reach.

"Well, you can buy me a second cup of coffee, she said, "even if you can't buy me love"

"I'll buy you diamond rings, my friend if it makes you feel all right", Thomas sang, "but I won't buy you coffee. Now tell me, what were they wearing".

He was all agog but Sara agreed to give him the details only as payment for the coffee, which he promptly ordered.

I was amazed sometimes at the frivolous nature of Sara when she would joke and play with the rest of us. At times, she was serious and contemplative and philosophical and was able to discuss at length the complicated issues that life presented to teenagers. She normally did that only with me, though she was not shy of discussing serious matters when the others were present.

There was reference once to the dress worn by most of the Kerala girls, and the kind of attire worn by the ones in the University College was a moot example. They wore what were called half-sarees, long skirts, which swished as they walked along, with a long sash tucked in at the waist, going around the hips and across the front and over the shoulder. Long hair wet after a bath, dripped on to their blouses as they came to the College in the morning.

The sharp contrast between Sara's jeans and the attire worn by the rest of the girls always drew the attention of the students. Inevitable remarks were made, sometimes sharp and rude, but mostly harmlessly sly. There was some discussion as to why girls have to be always modest and shy and slink around the corners of the rooms whenever they are in public. Why can't they walk with their heads held high and with a decent measure of confidence? Surely they possess the world as much as the men folk? This question came from me and I asked it as if seeking an answer from the rest, but especially from Sara whom I did indeed consider as a liberated specimen of the female species.

Sara was not particularly forthright or immediate with her response. She seemed to think for a while and then she replied somewhat hesitantly that women are sometimes weighed down by the custom of the centuries behind them. It is not easy for them to break out of their social shackles so easily. And even if they try to do so, there are consequences that they may not even be aware of.

The answer was not satisfactory to me and I tried my best to probe her further and get her responses so that a fuller picture of what she wanted to say was known. But she seemed to have gone into a jocular mood with Chandran on the subject of mutations and genetic variation, a subject that he was particularly fond of and on which she had done some special project in school abroad. She maintained that the male of the Indian species in peninsular India was definitely mutated, resulting in a variant inferior to the female. Babu huffed and puffed and Sara pointed him out as an example of her proposition. Chandran protested loudly and made some comment about how transmigration of an individual female of one species to foreign soil and air may not necessarily mean that the female of the species as a whole all across the globe had been improved.

Later, when Sara and I were alone, sitting on the steps of the University Library in the evening, the mood had changed and out of sheer curiosity I enquired from her about what she really did feel about Germaine Greer and the question of Women's Liberation in a country like India. She seemed a little out of sorts but answered that the rights of women are definitely to be protected, but the ideal of a free and independent woman who could take decisions on her own, on the same terms and conditions as a man, is an ideal that could only be achieved here after many years of strife and struggle.

Woman as a victim of fate, as a Tess of the D'Urberville, was a favourite topic in class in our group discussions and I found that Sara had a special fascination for the subject. She talked at length of circumstances over which the individual had no control at all, where there was no option but to submit to the inevitable. But she kept veering around to the theory that with a more intelligent and perspicacious approach to their problems, women would find it possible to find solutions to salvage a desperate situation and help them in maintaining their dignity.

I had but a theoretical knowledge of such issues from books and other readings. From seeing rural life in Kerala, I could not possibly have known the extreme deprivation and torture that women elsewhere in the country face on a regular basis. It was part of their daily life and a part that they had internalized wholly and unintelligently, without any consciousness that they do have the right and the justification to challenge the age-old injustice. And challenge they can, only if they have organization and strength and entitlement and empowerment. These are concepts that have been partially accepted in the West, although their more powerful male counterparts have ways and ways to ensure that these rights are not extended to them by using one device or the other.

Sara spoke often about the desperation of a woman who knows that she can be simply dragged away by the sheer strength of a man physically stronger than her and be subjected to the worst atrocity that can be perpetrated, which will condemn her in body and spirit to a life time of shame and despair: this is a truth that only a woman can know.

"And Jaggu, don't ever tell me that you will be able to understand. Even if you don't, you can take it from me that such horrors do take place on a regular basis in India, maybe to a lesser degree in this green paradise of Kerala, where in any case women have more legal rights and awareness than in the rest of the country. But promise me this, Jaggu, if at any time you have the authority or the power to do anything that can improve the lot of women and their singular problems, promise me that you will do your darneest best to set things right."

"Me, me with the authority to set things right? Do you think that I am the President of India and do you think that such things can be set right by fiat or command?" The tone was jocular and mocking but it received a fierce glance from the long eyes of Sara which suddenly turned impish as she replied: "Do you realize that it is the men in India who perpetrate the crimes and then plead that they do not have the authority to set things right? That is why it is necessary to re-educate the men before women turn violent and possess the planet!"

The evening was cool and it was time for us to walk to the bus stop. Sara took the bus to the Zenana Hostel while I walked the short distance to the Men's University Hostel. I saw her off, a ritual I practiced every day, and then sauntered down the road past the rearing cathedral at the center of the town along the old terra cotta buildings and on to the hostel campus. I was in a somber mood and the conversation, lighthearted as it had ended, had not been about trivial matters. I had not yet met a girl who could express herself so well as Sara did and who knew her own mind so well. But one associated such freethinking women with cocksureness and a defiant attitude, those who go out positively to taunt and challenge. Within her I found a

reticence that revealed unplumbed depths, which while refusing to be discovered, indicated volumes of experience about matters that at the moment were beyond my comprehension.

Flying to a new home

Heathrow airport was cold and crowded in the early morning as they walked up from the tarmac to the immigration desk. Harish had just two pieces of hand baggage and did not need to wait for the baggage trolley to be unloaded from the plane. Holding the little girl's hand, he walked into the hallway of the airport building and then to the Immigration counter. They were one of the many who were coming into the country and should have normally got the same desultory official treatment as the others received. However, Harish observed the suddenly kindhearted glances of the staff as, from the letter attached to the passport issued under the signatures of a senior diplomat from the British High Commission, they read the story of the sad looking little girl clutching the hand of the serious faced Indian doctor.

The small, pale, black haired, dark-eyed beauty from India was quickly the center of attention and the women staff at the airport surrounded her and held her up and offered her chocolates which she hesitatingly accepted. Saraswati, for the first time in her life, saw white skinned people around her, such beautiful women and such handsome men, apparitions descended from the heavens. They were all around and making much ado about her. Harish completed the formalities required of him and then took Saraswati by the hand — which hand was tightly clutching chocolates — and lead her out of the airport. The immigration staff with sympathetic glances smiled at her and waved to her as they moved on to the exit to catch the taxi to the railway station and then the train from London to Brighton.

Now what's happening here, you may well ask; for the last time we saw Saraswati, she was getting ready to leave for her boy-husband's home, the marriage ceremonies having been solemnized. She was five years old then, a giggling, shy, girl-child with no comprehension at all of the seriousness of the game she had been forced to play. And now, just four years later, what is she doing at the Heathrow airport, in another time zone, in another continent. What had happened to Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi, what about Giridhar and his parents?

It was in the middle of the night that she and Harish Chacha had taken the flight from Palam airport to wing their way all across the oceans and continents to England. She hardly comprehended the events that had swept her away from Surpura. She saw, as if in a blur, the somber faces of the people who had gathered to see her off, the angry murmur of some of the neighbours and friends at what was almost an abduction, the unchecked tears and sobs of Draupadi Mausi ji, the sad acceptance of Giridhar and his family of what could not be changed, the futility of arguing with a stone wall. She had been scooped up and clutched in a tight embrace by Harish Chacha as he got into the taxi that had taken her yelling and gasping for breath all the way from Surpura to Delhi.

The sight of the huge plane waiting at the airport had set off a fresh bout of tears and protests. Saraswati's heart was in her mouth, her pulse was beating wildly and she cried and wept and tried to struggle out of the seat belts as Harish hushed her and calmed her down and told her stories of the place she was going to and the wonderful people there and the great time she was going to have. Harish Chacha had talked to her at length and tried to calm her down and tell her interesting things about the place she was bound for.

For the first time, with some reluctance and embarrassment in his face, he mentioned the Choti Maa who would be waiting for her across the seas and who would be like, almost like, her own Maa and would lavish on her all the affection and care that she was already missing, who would look after her as if she were her own daughter. He excited her by telling her of a young Bhaiyya who would be like a brother and a friend for her to talk to and to play with. She was just about five years old and she would have a great time with him as companion.

The airhostess brought her some coloured tiles and crayons to play with, but they soon bored her and she kept them aside. She slept for a while and then toyed with the headphones that Chacha placed over her head that played such wonderful music into her ears. Chacha's words and the music playing in her head comforted her and quietened her down as the plane swung across the blackness of the oceans below. She stared down from the window with fascinated eyes and saw the intermittently twinkling lights of the great cities rushing past below her as they flew on into the black night.

And now out of the airport and at the railway station, sitting at the station café, Harish Chacha paused for a few moments to give the poor girl something to fill her stomach with. In the plane, he had insisted that she take a couple of sandwiches and enough fruit juice to keep her strength up for the long journey ahead. She had been tearful and awed both at the same time, as the sights and sounds of the journey attracted her attention and made her nervous and on edge. So far from home, in an environment that was utterly strange to her, she was, nevertheless, both curious about the things she saw and wary of things she did not understand.

Now, sitting together at the café in the railway station, they looked oddly like a mismatched parent and child. Saraswati was wearing a ghagra, a kind of long skirt with bright colours and glass beads worked into the stitching. A small shawl to protect

her from the cold covered her blouse. Harish Chacha was in a bulky overcoat and looked like a bear of a man with his dour face and his stooped over figure. They attracted a few curious glances from others in the café, but in the anonymity of Waterloo, no one could have even bothered to ask them who they were or if they needed any assistance.

The crowds at the station distracted her and made her weepy while she held on to her Chacha's hand with all her strength. Harish only wanted to get her to the safety of his home where she would finally have some quiet and comfort to recover from the trauma she had gone through these past few days. So he gave her a big hug and held the little girl up in his strong arms until the fluttering of her heart slowed and steadied and she quietened down. From Waterloo, the journey would take more than an hour. When the train drew in and paused for a few moments, Harish threw in the luggage and found seats for both of them. Within moments, it was on its way. For the first few minutes, Sarasu, as Harish Chacha called her, kept awake and watched the moving landscape with all the beauty of its rolling meadows and fields of green.

The journey across the world had been tiring and the exhaustion that came with it finally took its toll on the little girl. The inevitable jetlag caught up with her and soon enough her eyes closed and she was sleeping soundly, leaning back in her seat as the rolling hills and grass plains swept by, rushing her on to her new destiny. The chocolates were still in her hands. As the train passed them in their fields, the cows with their swollen udders chewed the cud and stared back with sleepy hauteur. The dumb animals were unaware of the momentous events that had been set in motion by the passing of a tiny girl from one continent to another, from one family to another, from one element to another.

She had indeed been tossed between the elements, the elements within whose grasp our momentary lives are bound. From the dark brown earth of her native village, with its green crops and yellow mustard flowers, she had fled, riding the wind, the inconstant, ever shifting wind, belted down in the belly of the steel bird, and then across the dark depths of the expansive, dark, dreary waters, and finally back to land on foreign soil. Fire, the other element, would be her constant companion in her growth to adulthood. She had already been singed in the events just behind her that had blown away her parents, and in the years ahead she would be ceaselessly baptized by the fury of the flames that would have, but for the constant and steady beat of her heart, consumed her and burnt her to cinders.

She had no strength left, no tears, no feelings, except the hope that all this would end soon and that she would have her new Choti Maa to console her and the young Bhaiyya to play with. She was apprehensive whether they would like her or would turn out to be unfriendly strangers who did not care. She knew that she would have to stay at her new home for some years now, before even thinking about returning to her beloved Surpura. Much as she had clung to Draupadi Mausi ji and screamed with bitter, heart rending tears that she would not leave her, it was clearly understood that she would have to have someone who would bring her up, see to her daily needs and also be in charge of her till she was old enough to be sent back to Giridhar's family. She had no option but to bow her head and accept the inevitable; in any case no one had asked for her opinion or consent.

Arriving at her new home, a flat overlooking the beach, with its little porch over the sloping walkway leading to the edge of the road running along the beach, she shook herself awake. She clung to Harish Chacha's hands and walked into her new life in the vastly different world of differently coloured people speaking a language she could not understand. A little boy stood at the door, smaller than her but bolder and more pugnacious and he stretched out his hand to touch her. Harish Chacha immediately reprimanded him for trying to scare her.

But Saraswati smiled and "Koi baat nahi; yeh teek hai", wishing to convey to the little lad that everything was ok, it's all right. And then she asked "Yeh mera Bhaiyya hai?" She was eager to make new allies in a land of strangers. She instinctively realized that she needed friends who would help her understand the strangeness of the new world and unravel its mysteries for her. Bhaiyya nodded and pulled at her hair awkwardly, but it was not to hurt her. It was only to say that he was indeed her brother and that she'd better realize that before she assumed superiority just because of her age.

They sparked off an instant friendship, as children are likely to do. It was a defining moment for Saraswati, the start of a new page in the volume of her life and one that she would be thankful for in the many years to come. Bhaiyya would be her pal, would understand her better than any other person, except Choti Maa, would stand by her through thick and thin, would lend a shoulder for her to cry on and would, in the end, be the best friend she had ever had in the life that it was her destiny to live.

Standing behind him, leaning against the doorjamb was a dark and stocky woman with kind eyes and curly black hair surrounding her head like a small thick dark cloud. She was small, but well built, and had an aura of energy and dedication that was apparent from her movements, her speech, the motions of her hand. She knelt down, stretched out her arms and invited Saraswati into the safety that they offered, enfolding her slight, slim, uncertain body into her own. There was a scent of starch in the dress she wore and of talcum powder in the recesses of her neck and shoulders.

Memories are evoked more by smell rather than vision and this is a lesson Saraswati learnt early. The memories hidden in her nose would remain with her forever and whenever she caught the whiff of some scent or fragrance or odour that had some connection with any event of the past, she would be instantly transported into the long-ago world and she would vividly

recollect the details just as if they had happened the day before. Choti Maa's talcum and starch would always evoke in her consciousness a feeling of security, of a safe haven where she could take a deep breath after the turmoil of the extreme pressures and crises that her small life was wont to see.

Of course, as time went on, and in the years to come, when Saraswati grew older, there would be occasions when Choti Maa herself would require the younger woman's strength and support, times when they both had to console each other, to stand as an iron shield, the buttress against which the rude and rough shocks of fate would hammer and exhaust themselves. It would turn out to be a unique relationship between these two. With nothing hitherto in common, no bloodline or previous family relationship to bind them together, yet there grew between them a relationship that would be tested sorely by the vagaries of fate and one that would emerge strong and victorious in the end.

She had a small room all to herself overlooking the beach and the sights and sounds of the sea would be with her in the many days to come. From the window ledge, she could see out into the road winding by below her. Ahead was the beach with its shale and rocks edging the wide-open sea, endlessly flowing to the edge of sight, the end of the horizon. Saraswati had seen long stretches of sand and desert not far from her home in Surapura, which sometimes looked so similar to this sight from her bedroom window. But here, the changes in the water were ever present, continuously flickering, shimmering, gleaming, and glistening. In the early days, the roar of the sea often frightened her, especially when the nights were stormy and the clouds blocked the moon.

In nightmares that sometimes shook her up badly before she was pulled back to tearful awakenings, the roar of the sea would get transformed to the bellow of some monster that was circling over her head like a great flying bird. But whenever she did wake up in such terror, she would always see Choti Maa next to her, with a cool hand over her forehead and calm and gentle words that would drive the fright away from her. Sometimes she dreamt of her mustard fields and of scampering after her Pita ji along the rough and rutted roads near Surapura. On such days she woke up with a feeling of such contentment and serenity, but the strange room and the patterns of the wall paper confused and disoriented her and she turned her face to the wall and curled herself up and waited for Choti Maa to come and make things all right again. And she always did.

For nine years of her life she had lived in a world that had suddenly been pulled away from under her feet. No more the brown earth and the mustard flowers of Surapura, no more the lullabies of Maa, the prickling of the rough moustache of Pita ji, the little bed she had at the corner of the bed room. Now she was in a different universe altogether, the circle bounding her had changed, the loved ones had fled, and the coordinates of her existence had been irrevocably altered. For the next nine years, she would live with distant relatives who became friends, outsiders who would be integral parts of her life, and strangers who would become dearer than life itself. This was her home now, the little flat overlooking the Brighton Sea, the salt, estranging sea.

When Saraswati was old enough to appreciate the nature of the events that had swept like a hurricane through her life, she would realize the significance of fate and destiny and the consequences of one's actions on others, on the task of living. She would understand the true meaning of being a Ruth among the alien corn; of the imperative of accepting the daunting truth that there are things beyond one's control best left as such, not to be cursed at or condemned, but to be welcomed and accepted with unflinching stoicism. She would start to believe that events take place with no logic or reason; things happen randomly, joy and sorrow intermingle, gross tragedies lying cheek by jowl with absurd situations. And if they happen to you, you learn to live with it, with the circumstances imposed on your life, because all your ranting and railing against an unfair world are to no avail.

But wisdom grows and like leavened bread, it spreads a wholesome fragrance amongst those who, with humility, strive to find it. Later, much later, Saraswati, in the fullness of her years, saw the wheel turning full circle once more. When she had learnt the meaning of exploration and that the end of all exploring is to arrive where you had started and to know the place for the first time, then she would once again start to doubt her assumptions of a random universe. She would begin to see, at first dimly and later with sharp acuity, the startling truth that life is not as simple, as mindless, as a series of random events, and that somewhere there was a design, a plan, a map that lay like a giant shadowy template over the contours of her life. She had learnt that while the way ahead is always clouded in mists, if you look behind you, the road traversed lies clear and unmistakable under the sun, its twists and turns now so magically revealed, so obvious, so predestined. So very planned. Then she would shake her head ruefully and say, Fool, you took the road less traveled, not by your choice; surely, you were led to it by a power utterly beyond your comprehension.

The wooing of Sara: Part B

I do believe there comes a time in the relationship of two people when the level and intensity of their bond undergoes a radical change and becomes more, or sometimes less, intense. This is especially so when the two persons are of the opposite sex and young and full of life. There will be either a falling off or an intensification. While any talk of the decline of love can be so depressing, it would be a pleasurable thing to dwell on the intensification of love that is so often the stuff of romances and poetry. The moment of critical mass when the tipping over begins and the urbane gentleman becomes a loose-limbed lad moving with the motion of the music within him.

It can happen at any time, maybe in the course of conversation, during a walk, at the college canteen, in the classroom, in the midst of earthquakes, on a bus journey. It may appear to the uninitiated that love walks with slow saunter and gait in so many meandering pathways and diversions over the days and the months of one's contact with the other, taking its own time to travel and perhaps to arrive. Still, there is no specific moment designated when love should suddenly bloom.

However, it is my considered opinion that when it does bloom, it may be possible to identify the exact time of its occurrence. In fact, one can almost always identify the precise instant, should one put one's mind to it, when the emotion of love starts to tremble and comes to life. All other feelings prior to this moment may be defined as affection, liking, fondness, warmth, care and so on. But not Love: you can sense it in a flash. One moment it is not there and then, it is. When Love retreats, as it often does, the falling off is not so swift or sudden. It lingers, it wears off, then it returns and stays awhile before slowly vanishing like a mist, which leaves the dew behind to be trampled under your feet.

To me, the moment of falling in love with Sara came while chatting with her on the steps of the University Library, next door to the College. In the distance was the clock tower of the administrative buildings, behind her the entrance to the Library. Far away, but towering over the skyline, was the statue of Christ perched high on the cathedral at the center of the city, as with His outstretched arms, He invited one and all into the embrace and warmth of His Love, admittedly a Love different from the kind I now talk of.

The evening sun was golden but harsh and was falling directly into my eyes. She was talking about the girls at her school in Brighton and the fun way of life that they enjoyed, no fetters, boys galore and dance parties in the evenings. She mentioned how, under the watchful eye of her mother, she stayed a part of the group and was still not a part of it. How she enjoyed the fun moments with them at school and how the truly Indian part of her stopped her from going out with the boys and having a ball.

She paused for a moment, wet her lips with a pink tongue and said, "but you would understand that, Jaggu, wouldn't you? The reticence of the Indian female, all smoldering embers in the eyes; but they just will not catch fire!" It was a typical Sara statement, but embellished with the tantalizing glimpse of the mouth and the lips and the tongue. That was the moment when I finally knew that here is the girl-woman with whom I had fallen in love. Here was the discovery of a lifetime, an enormous revelation of gigantic proportions that for a moment made me slip and scramble as my heart teetered at the edge of the abyss before it fell. As I answered her rhetorical question, I was falling and I was breathless inside, though I was at my coolest, poised self on the exterior.

"What does Jaggu know about the reticence of a woman, when all that he knows about womankind can be written on the back of his hand!"

It was a flip and simple statement, but Sara being Sara, she paused and said, "You don't have to *know* a woman to know a woman".

"And what does that mean?" I asked, in some confusion at this conundrum, but then immediately got an inkling of what she meant. Too difficult to put into words, I said, "Okay, okay, I get it".

"That must be a big hand you have out there", she smiled.

"Sorry, what hand?" She puts me off now and then, not getting the drift of what she meant.

"That hand where you have got written all that you know about womankind!"

What could I say to that: never was too good at repartee, anyway.

That was indeed a moment destined to survive the ravages of Time, through its drifts and banks, through the eddies and the tidal waves that submerge or buoy up the human creature in his march through the allotted three score and ten. That moment would stand like an etching on brass, the moment I fell in love with Sara.

About a week later, when a tin pot dictator of a small country in South America was ousted with the, allegedly, active support of the CIA, the members of the Students' Federation of India in the University College in Trivandrum swept in a ragged huddle through its corridors and lawns shouting slogans against the imperialistic Yankee regime. It was anybody's guess as to what the coup could possibly have to do with the disruption of normal activities on a sunny October afternoon, in a college in a different continent and a different time zone altogether.

However, there was no alternative for the Principal but to declare that the classes would not be held, news received with wild cheers by all of the rabble and by groans from those who really wished to apply themselves to the nobler task of education. The famous five, who belonged to the latter group, decided on an ad hoc plan to take the day off for a visit to the Trivandrum Museum.

We strolled through the busy Palayam market towards the cooler area of the Botanical gardens and the imposing structure of the Museum. The lawns were lush and cooling and spread over acres of prime city land permanently kept green under the watchful eyes of the gardeners. We bought our tickets and walked into the hushed silence of the Museum. Everybody was suddenly talking in whispers. The press and weight of Time, clinging like a cloud around the artifacts, instilled reverential respect in our admiring eyes.

We moved as a single entity, a five headed animal, with Chandran and Babu at the leading edges, Sara and I in the middle and the huge Thomas bringing up in the rear. We looked at the paintings, the swords, the statues of the inevitable dancing girls and the stones and bricks, the inscribed blocks and tablets. Under a spot light shone a black stone statue, the buxom form of a woman with engraved jewellery, anklets, necklaces and heavy pendants. Chandran made a comment about the ephemeral character of glory and narrated the story of Roman emperors returning with the booty of war in a victory parade back to their city, who had paid slaves to whisper into their ears that all glory is fleeting.

"Who paid them to say that", queried Sara.

"The generals themselves".

"Maybe they only needed to look into the mirror. Each passing day leaves its mark on the face, in terms of lines and wrinkles and silver hair. If you need someone to tell you that in your ear, then you are a fool. Poor general: couldn't even get himself to enjoy the applause."

Sara immediately hushed up, though. She probably realised that the immensity of the silence in a museum does not lend itself easily to trite humor. We tiptoed through the halls and the chambers and stared at the works of art and relics that seemed to have nothing in common with the present day. It was the normally quiet Babu who reminded us that Time is a continuum and what we are today cannot be separated from what we were centuries ago. Or what we would be centuries later. It gave us all a perspective that irrespective of the smallness of our individual lives, our likes and prejudices, we are truly immortal in a certain sense of the word. We walked out from the dull lights of the cavernous halls inside, into the bright sunlight, dazzled a little by the glare of the open sky.

There is a reptile house in the campus and Chandran insisted he would like to take a look at the snakes kept locked in the glass cages. Sara was a little hesitant, but agreed to accompany us as we walked up to the building at the corner of the spacious lawns of the campus. We entered the small circular room with its round foyer filled with large rows of wooden edged boxes lined with viewing glass through which we watched in fascination the slimy diamond headed slithering reptiles, moving in torpid sluggishness in their small spaces.

Some were thin and deadly, especially one that was completely green and, shade for shade, matched the foliage of the potted shrub around which it had wound itself in motionless artistry. One huge viper moved torpid and slow seemingly replete with a meal it may have just had, its belly bulging tight and shiny, its eyes closed in the meditation of its full stomach. Another had a cobra with eyes like death itself, staring at a terrified rat running around the edges of the glass box. The crazed rodent scrambled around the cage and even jumped over the snake in its efforts to escape.

Suddenly, I saw Sara turning pale, her forehead damp with sweat, her hand trembling. It was clear that the sight of the trapped animal was disturbing her terribly though she didn't say a word to any of us. She seemed to totter for a moment and I feared that she might be about to sink down in a faint.

"Sara, what's the matter, do you want to go out?" I asked. She nodded without a word. I took her hand and helped her walk out and she was glad to be escorted quickly to a small patch of grass on the lawns outside where under the shade of a

sprawling tree she sat down and rested her head on her knees. She was cold and enervated and had lost all the colour of her cheeks. Her hair lay in an unruly mass over her head and her shoulders, hiding her eyes and her heaving chest. Babu rushed to get her something to drink from the restaurant nearby and I wet a handkerchief from the faucet in the lawns for her to wipe her face with. She recovered soon enough and smiled a little wanly to say, "Sorry guys, the little rat in the cage upset me a bit. Sorry to be such a fool!"

We protested saying it was no problem and insisted that she drink down the lemon soda that a panting Babu had by now brought from the restaurant. She did so with a wry face while we watched her with deep alarm and concern.

"That's it: that's the end of it", said Thomas, "let me fetch you an auto. You need to go back to the hostel and rest for some time." He was off in a moment to the iron railing gates of the museum where a row of autos was parked and waiting. He was back in a trice and Sara did not protest. There was no question as to who should accompany her to Zenana Hostel. The others assumed that I would do it and frankly speaking I was only too glad to do so. It finally established the fact that I was the one who would take care of her. In a quiet proud way, I was contented. I led her to the auto and then we were off in a trice.

Sitting in the auto with the quiet Sara by my side, I puzzled a bit over my thoughts as we drove the short distance to the Zenana hostel gates. When Sara had appeared a little weak at the knees back at the reptile house, I could feel the concern and the distress that she would have been feeling, very much as if it were my own. But what surprised me more was to realize that through the misery of the moment, I was busy watching Sara's face and her cheeks and her eyes and her nose and her damp forehead and the gentle fuzz below her ears.

I was holding her hand as I escorted her out, and I was wondering at the fact that her hand was in mine and that she had the confidence to trust me when she was out of sorts and not so strong, as she usually seemed to be when in class or when at her conversational best. She trusted me to take care of her. Now that was something worth thinking about. It buoyed me up and made me feel a king. Not to mention the fact that I loved the touch of her warm skin with her hand against mine, as we were walking out from that death-room with the snakes and the pitiful rat and the smell of reptilian moult. It was all a little mixed up and confusing.

The auto brought us to the turning of the Zenana Hostel and we got out and moved to the gates, after I had paid off the driver. The rules of the women's hostel were clear and rigid: no males allowed inside. So there was no question of me taking her to her room. I was about to say goodbye and move off with an admonition that she should rest it out for a couple of hours, when she stopped me and held my hand for a moment at the wrist and said,

"Thank you, Jaggu, that was very kind of you. You realized my predicament and took care of me. I'll remember that for a long time. Thanks for being a friend."

"Oh, that's ok: as the cowboy says in all the best westerns: 'ferget it' ". She smiled sweetly, let go of my hand and walked in through the gates with a quick backward look. And then she had disappeared from view. I was left a little jumbled up by the whole thing, happy to have been of help and delighted that she acknowledged it. Also a little nonplussed that many of my thoughts at the moment of the crisis were not all really of concern and care, rather they were a mite more sensual than that. There is much to think about tonight, pal: got to sort out things in my head.

Growing up in Brighton

It was difficult at first, this business of growing up in a strange land. Initially, the enormity of the changes that she saw around her seemed as if it would distort her view of life and make her morose and silent. The shock was of seeing a new world, a new way of life, so very cataclysmically different from the gentle, quiet rural routine she was used to in her home so far away. Harish Chacha worried about this and often whispered to Choti Maa to ensure Sarasu did not feel alienated, that she was made a part of the normal family life in every way.

Choti Maa in her quiet and sure way was always around with a pat on her back or a pleasant smile and a quick hug that eased Sarasu into the new way of life. She stood as a stable foundation, a rock on which Sarasu could lay her worries and her fears and where she would invariably find solace. Years later, she used to wonder as to how Choti Maa would have herself faced up to the question of a stranger suddenly pushed into her house and whom she was asked to take on as a daughter. But Choti Maa had not demurred, had not protested. She had shown equanimity, an understanding of Harish's predicament and had accepted her in with welcoming arms and an open heart.

Sarasu found everything out of the ordinary and different, so very different from her far away Surpura. The bed was soft and she could sink into it as if she were lying on a bed of feathers. The room was warm though she could see the weather outside was cold and chilly. In the corner behind the cupboard, she noticed the pipes that brought in heat from somewhere and turned the room cozy and nice. Her room was bright and colourful and protected her from the cold outside.

Back in Surpura, the temperature inside the house was not much different from the outside and the cold of the winter nights would creep into the bedroom and she would have to be covered up with extra sheets or blankets. Here, the house was so different from the one she was used to. There were carpets on the floor and curtains on the windows and the tables and chairs were polished and shining. There was a staircase leading from the ground floor that curved and twisted itself up to the higher level. She was so fascinated by the stairs that she spent several hours climbing up and sliding down the banister until she was tired out and weary.

The view from her room in the flat at Marine Parade was fascinating. The bountiful, endless waters of the sea stretched to the horizon. She was amazed at the sight of the waves beating against the rocks on the shores. Once she had sat down to count them, one by one in her childish sing-song fashion in the Hindi vernacular. Harish was beaming like a child himself while Choti Maa was truly surprised to hear her count well beyond the normal limits that children of her age would have known. Sarasu did not know that there could be so much water in one place, when all she had seen was the boundless stretches of sand in the desert. From her window, she kept gazing at the sea, fascinated, knowing herself blessed to see such wonder.

One day, Harish took up an atlas from the shelf and showed her on the maps the place from where she had come and how she had flown over the oceans and had finally arrived at the place where she was now. She tried and finally comprehended the colossal import of her journey and its meaning on herself.

She had to be trained in the use of the bathroom. Choti Maa took her in and showed her how to use the toilet seat and what pipes to turn on and what knobs to press to let the water flow into the closet. The sound of the water gurgling down was so nice that she kept finding a reason to go to the bathroom and flushing the tank throughout the evening so she would hear the rush of the water.

She was a little wary about being alone in her room at night and in the first few days indeed said so to Choti Maa, that she was afraid of the dark night and the strange sounds outside the house, which were in fact only the sounds of the cars on the road or the crash of the waves of the sea. Choti Maa comforted her and said that she would soon get used to it. And true to say, within a week she was, and immensely proud of the fact that she had her own room where she could do what she wanted.

And then there was television. She was thrilled beyond words to see the moving pictures and could not understand how Bhaiyya was pretty nonchalant about it. Bhaiyya on his part was incredulous at her obvious glee and her limitless joy in watching the moving pictures for hours on end. When Harish Chacha was certain that she had been more or less acclimatized and well on her way to adjustment in this world across the seas, he took them all out one evening for a ride in the car.

This was Sarasu first real contact with the bright city lights and the excitement of the sights and sounds of a glowing, happy town. Silently she drank it all in, the well-lit displays at the shop-fronts, the dresses in the windows, the abundance of goods in the department stores, the white glowing skins of the people. Once near the clock tower in the city center, she saw a young infant in its pram, looking so like a cherub, and she insisted that she would hold the baby and pressed Choti Maa so much that

she had to ask its alarmed mother for her indulgence. When the strange woman saw Sarasu, she grinned and allowed the small dark haired girl to pick up the baby and hold her for a couple of minutes: Sarasu's joy knew no bounds.

Food was a thrilling experience. Of course, she missed her bajra-ki-roti and saag: those were things that she would not taste for many years to come. But never mind, there were so many other things that she could try here. Morning breakfast was usually eggs and toast with jam and fruit juice. Sometimes there were sausages and bacon. It was only after several weeks of eating it that she realised what exactly she was consuming. She had a moment of aversion when she knew what the sausages were made of, but when she saw that the rest of the family had no problem with them, she put aside her distaste and began to enjoy her food. Lunch on holidays was a light affair, sandwiches and fruit and maybe a salad.

Some days when Choti Maa was in a relaxed mood, she would make some typical South Indian dishes, the kind of which she had grown on in Kerala. Then she would pull out her old recipe books and turn out her fish crumb fried and her sambaar and her mixed vegetable curry and some extraordinary lamb meat with coconut flavoring, the like of which she had never seen or heard of or tasted. As a special treat for Sunday brunch, she would make her dosas and her idlis and Sarasu would go crazy gorging on them and competing with Bhaiyya who would soon be left behind. As for dinner, it was serious business. On working days, normally Harish Chacha ate little for breakfast and lunch and preferred to have dinner as his main meal. So Choti Maa would go all out and, especially on Saturday nights, would bring up her meats and her baked dishes and her fragrant rice pulao and her sweet concoctions as dessert.

The children would sit at the table and wait for the aroma of the food to arise from the plate and then fall headlong into the experience of enjoying the pleasures of Choti Maa's culinary expertise. She used to say that her mother had taught her some old tricks in the kitchen when she was growing up, family secrets that she would in turn teach Sarasu when she grew a little older. Sarasu felt proud and happy that she was now a full-fledged daughter of Choti Maa, worthy enough to be taught the family secrets of good cooking. When they went out for a quick snack or a meal, she was thrilled to see that every shop and store held confectionary magic within its glass boxes and bottles. The toffees and the chocolates that melted in her mouth, the buns and the breads, the ice creams, the sundaes: all wonderful, tasty, scrumptious, juicy flavors that tickled and tormented the palate in a delicious stream of endless delight.

Clothes were a magical world in themselves. In Surpura, she would wear her skirts or her ghagra on special occasions. But when Choti Maa took her to the local super market, she was amazed at the variety and the colour of the clothes on display there. For some moments she just stared at the dresses and the jeans and the shirts, holding her breath and not knowing which dresses she should chose and how many and what they could cost and how she could tell her Choti Maa what she wanted.

Choti Maa only smiled and watched Sarasu's eyes carefully as stared at the attractive dresses. She observed the clothes where the child's eyes lingered for some time and made a note of them. When the little girl refused to say what exactly she wanted, Choti Maa pulled out the list that she had made and asked the shop assistant to bring them all out. Sarasu's joy knew no bounds and she screamed with delight and jumped up and down as the shop girl laughed and the Choti Maa too broke out in laughter. Slippers, shoes, socks, ribbons: things unheard of in Surpura, not ever seen there, now here in so much abundance, in such variety and colour.

Yes, there were communication problems. Sarasu knew only Hindi, and she had no problems at all with Harish Chacha with whom she was able to continue in detailed conversation for hours on end. Harish realised that he would have to expand her knowledge of language, and that too very quickly, so that she did not become isolated and estranged from Bhaiyya, as also the others in the school she would have to attend soon enough.

So the first task was to get her on to the English alphabets at a very rudimentary level. Harish went over to Bhaiyya's school to consult with the teachers there as to what he should do to motivate Sarasu into studying the language. From there he brought back some basic books on the alphabets and grouping of letters into words. A kind school teacher agreed to come over for a couple of weeks in the evenings so that Sarasu could acquire some basic knowledge of the language and the three R's by the time she entered school as a regular student. Sarasu struggled hard for the first couple of weeks to learn the language. It was as if she now understood that she would be able to become a part of the beautiful wide world outside the house only if she could master English and be on familiar terms with it.

Of numbers, she already had some idea. Her Pita ji at Surpura had made her learn the numerals when she was just about six years old and had taught her the basic functions of addition, multiplication, subtraction and division. Although his main profession had been that of a farmer growing the mustard crop, he was also a small moneylender and used to keep accounts of the various loans he had extended and the moneys to be recovered. And so, in the evenings when he would sit at home and go over the various accounts, he would sometimes find Sarasu peeping over his shoulder, trying to puzzle out what the scratch marks on the paper were all about.

One day he had sat down and told her about the world of numbers and the way they added up and the things that you could do with them, if you had sufficient knowledge of the basic concepts. With his rough and callused hands wrapped around her

little fingers, he taught her to write the numbers with the pencil. Sarasu was quick on the uptake and within a few weeks was asking her father for more details on the way the three digit numbers added up and what she should do to multiply fractions. By the time she was about eight, she was quite able to fill up her father's account books on her own. Pita ji would, of course, insist on seeing the figures before they were penciled into the account books so that there would be no mistakes. He soon found out that Sarasu was quite clear about basic concepts and rarely made mistakes while calculating resultant totals and balances.

So it was that the teacher from Whitehawk School who came over in the evenings found she had no need to teach Sarasu the numbers. She was already in possession of as much knowledge as was required for her to do well in class. But the English Language was another kettle of fish altogether. Sarasu worked hard and diligently. Even Bhaiyya chipped in the afternoons and subjected her to quick tests on spelling and meaning. In the evenings, Choti Maa used to place Sarasu on her lap and help her fold her fingers around the pen and write out the English alphabets one by one, as they sat at the table.

Sarasu remembered another time, another place, another world, where another pair of hands, rough and coarse, had clasped her little fingers and helped her learn to write. Pita ji's face flashed into her mind and then her thoughts flickered to her own Maa, her Maa of Surpura, who did not know any letters, and hardly knew how to write numbers. Her Maa, her sweet gentle Maa who had now so suddenly flown away to the dark skies above her head, and had forgotten to come back, who could not come back, since her life on this fair earth had been short, the days of whose life had been counted in small numbers, her own sweet Maa had gone, gone, gone. And in her place had come this quiet, fine, understanding woman, full of patience and sympathy and a gentle slow smile, in whose dark big hands were held the slender fair fingers of the child, in a warm clasp which brought peace and quiet confidence to her.

There was a sudden springing of tears in the little girl's eyes and she paused and let out a slow sigh and quietly bowed her head, shoulders shaking. Choti Maa felt her own eyes flow over but she shushed the lonely girl and rocked her in her arms and said she was very, very sorry indeed that her Pita ji and her Maa had passed away so suddenly. She whispered to her of how she could imagine the terror that Sarasu would have felt when she had been suddenly brought to this distant place across the ocean. And even though she knew that she may fail, she would try her best to be her Choti Maa as well as her friend and companion. Then the two of them clung to each other and wiped away each other's tears and smiled at each other and became the best of friends, the most wonderful mother and daughter that there could ever be on the face of the planet.

When Sarasu was enrolled in the Whitehawk co-ed school, Harish requested that she be placed in a special class where students who had problems with the English language were admitted. There were a few others like her, children of immigrants, who found it difficult to learn this odd new language, but without which they could not survive. Three months she slaved and struggled and then suddenly the letters started making sense, the words were now getting to be easily recognizable, she could now find meaning of what was being said around her.

She quietly absorbed as much as she could and in the nights, before she went to sleep, recited the words and the letters and the spelling and the nursery rhymes and the tongue twisters until she became quite adept and fluent in the language of children in school. Within six months she could speak like any other child and while it did take a few more months of intensive learning to get her written expression right, Sarasu was soon well on the way to a manageable integration with this brave new world that was becoming more and more familiar each day.

Classes in school were full of challenges and they tested her wits and her sharpness. She was by nature a quick witted and intelligent girl and once she had got over the strangeness of the language and was able to express herself well, she could hold her own in almost any situation. In Class, the teachers found the pronunciation of her name, Saraswati or Sarasu, a little difficult and asked for permission to call her Sara. Harish had no problems with this and soon she was Sara to the class and all her friends. At home she would be called both Sara and Sarasu, depending on the mood of the one who addressed her. But by and large, she was now re-christened as Sara and Sara she would remain for a long, long time.

There were some other girls in her class who were not white skinned, children not native to England and whose parents were working there. There were also some black children who seem to hang out together in a group most of the time. Sara who was quite fair skinned, though not white, found that she could blend into any group in the class. In fact, when the children knew the particular circumstances of her past, there was a special concern for her, both among the children and the teachers. There was a point of time in the initial days when the class bully tried to make her life miserable by singling her out for special treatment. The rest of the students, as also some of the teachers, had to take the big burly girl aside and set her right. After that there was no more trouble for Sara.

Harish Chacha was the center of the world around which life in that flat on the shore of the Brighton Sea revolved. He was usually very busy with his work in the hospital. While Choti Maa would normally get back in time for the evening tea, except

when there were hospital emergencies or when it was her turn to do her night duties, Harish Chacha had odd timings which often kept him out in the operating rooms late in the night or brought him back home exhausted in the early mornings. But without him, there would have been no domestic life as she had come to enjoy it.

It was clear that Choti Maa's universe was filled with Harish and there was no life if Harish were not there. Whenever she used to sit with him in the dining room or the bedroom, the children used to observe that she had eyes only for him. For his every movement, his little gestures, his expressions, his smiles and sometimes his sudden guffaws. There came a time when Bhaiyya and Sara would say, of course, in a nice, teasing kind of way, that Choti Maa ignored them completely if the doctor were in the house. Choti Maa only smiled and looked embarrassed, while the doctor would beam and look pleased with himself.

Sara could not but think of Bhaiyya at this moment. She knew with all the certainty in her troubled heart that if he had not been there, she would never have been able to get through these past many months. With the natural friendship between children, he had accepted her and embraced her into his own life. For him, to get a close partner in school, at home and at play, this was something that thrilled him and made him ecstatic and overjoyed. Imagine, having a friend who would be staying at home with you and with whom you can play the whole day through, whom you did not have to wave goodbye to at the end of each day, with whom you could share your jokes, to whom you could confess your worries.

Sometimes she wondered if it were an unequal relationship. Even though she was older, it was she who used to lean on the young boy. Through the severe adjustment problems she had in the first year at school where even the language was an insurmountable burden hanging over her head, through the petty rivalries with the other girls at school during with each passing year, through the obvious differences in colour and cultural background, through all this Sara started to do better and better in class, and indeed, it was Bhaiyya who helped her out, wiped the tears from her eyes and stood like a quiet helpful shadow at moments when the stress were high. It took her more than a year to reach a certain sense of equilibrium and stability and indeed she was even starting to make good friends in her class.

Some cold winter nights, sitting alone at the darkened window of her bedroom and looking out at the distant sea, the old memories would come back to haunt her. Suddenly it would seem that Surpura was all around her, invading the peace of her refuge in this far away land, intruding like strangers into her private thoughts, hurting her, bringing her close to tears, making her draw her breath in sorrow. With glistening eyes she would remember the warm body of Maa as she hugged her close to her in the bed, the tickle of Pita ji's moustache on her cheek, the smell of hot chapathies on the tawa, the feel of the wet earth of the mustard fields on her fingers, the lowing of the cattle on their way to the pasture land. Somewhere a jeep was overturning and her universe was tumbling over and over and she would feel her head spinning and a sweat break out on her forehead.

Always, magically, there would be Choti Maa watching out for her. She would appear as if from nowhere and soothe her hair and massage her temples until the black moments would fade away. Mercifully, these spells were short, and increasingly rare and she found the strength to put away those fears into the farthest recesses of her mind. And then she was happy again as she folded herself into the joy, the ecstasy, the togetherness of the family that she was now so much a part of.

As she grew up, and her body changed, it was Choti Maa who helped her through the difficult transition. She knew more than the average girl about these matters as in the village where she had grown, such things were not kept secretive and forbidden. Nevertheless, when she was about twelve years old, she did need help when for the first time she experienced how the body of a young girl changed as she grew up. Choti Maa had prepared her for this and there was no shock or surprise, but she was glad to have her around in the initial few days.

There were too, the inevitable mating games in class as the raging hormones in the young and growing children made them attractive to each other. There were parties and games and nights out and the rest of the usual school drama. Sara was extremely cautious and refused to join in the horseplay that sometimes became serious business. She was aghast at the crude strutting of hormone filled young men, the mods and rockers, who used to come in large numbers to Brighton on Bank Holiday in August and sometimes fight with each other on the seafront near the Palace Pier. She used to ask Choti Maa what she should do in such circumstances. Choti Maa only smiled and said that knowing Sara, she was sure she would do the right thing. After all, she had some unfinished business back home and she would know instinctively what had to be done.

It set her thinking and as she grew she started to wonder what it all meant. Here in this joyous town by the sea, it was easy to forget that she had been committed some years ago to some young lad whom she hardly knew. As she grew in knowledge and understanding about individual growth and personal choice and the freedom to make that choice, she had a better picture of what she had to do when the years slipped away and she would have to go back. Harish Chacha had asked for a few years

in which she would be educated and would then be mature enough to start domestic life with Giridhar. But now, as she grew on that sea board town in the midst of a land of plenty, where each person made choices affecting his or her own life, she knew that she would soon be moving to a confrontation some time in the future. Sure she would not force the issue and she knew indeed that Harish Chacha and Choti Maa themselves would stand by her side if it did come to a difficult situation. And thus the transplanted sapling grew on foreign soil waiting for the next great stroke of fate that would once more change her life, once more turn her days and nights upside down and hurl her to the cruel vagaries of destiny.

Holiday in Kerala

When Saraswati was ten, the Harish family came home to India to spend their summer holidays. Mariamma, Saraswati's Choti Maa, lived in a small village of Mavelikara in Alleppy District, not far from the fabled inland waterways of the state. The journey from the seaside town of Brighton to the distant land of India (which Harish Chacha had seemed to assiduously avoid for so long) was like a dream in itself. For the two children, it was a period of great excitement in their young lives. But for Choti Maa, the flight from London to Bombay, and thereafter to Cochin, was tiring and enervating and the constant chatter of the children were making her a nervous wreck. The change from the Bombay airport through immigration and then into the small Indian Airlines aircraft that brought them to Cochin, the hassles with the luggage, the task of bundling them all together into the taxi at the airport and the long hot ride through Kerala culminating in the final moments of tension as the car stopped before the small house at Mavelikara: these were enough to set her nerves on edge.

Harish helped her with the heavy baggage and in shepherding the children through queues and keeping them together in the waiting rooms. The closer he reached the destination, the more he seemed to be withdrawing into himself. Indeed there was sufficient cause to do so. Harish had cut off virtually all relations with his own village, ever since he had brought back Saraswati from there. Probably he could not contemplate the prospect of his old neighbours and friends gasping in horror at the crime he had committed in marrying the woman of his choice. A choice that was so very alien to all that village ethics had taught.

And now he was coming back, completely avoiding his own home and landing up in his wife's village where he would be neither known nor understood. How things would go off was anybody's guess. Although Mariamma had informed her family about her marriage to Harish, she had had not the courage to take her new husband to visit them in all the years so far. True, she had indeed come home twice before, but she had made the journey all on her own. She argued to herself that she needed to soften up her folks and especially her Ammachy and get them used to the idea that the marriage was a fait accompli, before she did bring them face to face with Harish. Now, with an adopted child in addition to the one she had borne, and her husband in tow, she felt strong enough to face the critical glances and whispers around her.

Ammachi, was standing at the doorway when the taxi pulled up. She rushed down the steps and embraced Mariamma, her self-willed rarely-seen daughter in a tight hold and the tears were springing from her eyes. She asked the usual frantic desperate questions as to why she had not come home for so long, why she had not written more frequently, how she could leave her old mother alone and ailing without a thought for her, and what would she do if she had a sudden emergency and required help in the hospital and so on. Mariamma had expected the questions all the while in her long journey to Mavelikara and had steeled herself up to decide to make no answer at all. It was better to ride out the guilt and smoothen the resentment as early as possible than to argue and make a fuss and talk about her own responsibility to her husband and her children and finally end up in a pique.

She pushed Bhaiyya ahead : he was her best card, the grandchild whom Ammachy had seen as a baby when she had brought him home last time, now a strapping fine lad of six. He was clinging on to Mariamma's little finger and was pushed forward by his exasperated mother who snapped at him, "come out, Mon, why are you hiding behind me?"

Bhaiyya was reluctant, but he had been coached on the need to be polite to older people, to be courteous and loving to his old grandmother. He moved forward and was swamped by a gush of grandmotherly love, which left him panting for breath. For the old lady, the sight of this child was enough to start a fresh bout of tears and Bhaiyya was hard put to understand why a person should cry when she was meeting someone she loved. He struggled and shrank away and was, to his great relief, finally released.

Then with Ammachy having been sufficiently softened, she pulled Harish forward and said "This is Harish, Ammachy, and I am sorry that you have not met him all these years. I thought that..."

"What did you think? That I would turn away your husband? That I would close the door on him? My daughter's choice? He is my son-in-law and he is all the son that I will ever have." It was a great relief for Mariamma to hear those words and she hugged her Ammachy and Harish came forward and touched the feet of his new found mother-in-law in a very typical north Indian fashion, somewhat confusing the old lady. She pulled him up and gave him a hurried hug, leaving him blushing and embarrassed.

Then it was Saraswati's turn. She realized in her own way, that this was going to be a piquant moment. She had no blood relationship whatsoever with this quaint lady who seemed to be all tears and loud voices. She realised too, that in the marriage of Harish Chacha and Choti Maa, where the two partners had decided their common fate without the blessings of

their respective families, there is little scope for any other to intervene. Neither Ammachy nor anybody else. And here she was, a total stranger to this old lady, with no claim to her love and affection, who yet had come to enjoy her hospitality and live under her roof for the two weeks they would be here. She was, therefore, surprised to see the weathered and wrinkled arms reach out to her and clasp her and pull her nearer and she was immersed in an olfactory cloud of soap and medicated coconut oil. The feel of the parchment skin on her cheek was cool and tender.

“Paavam penne,” she heard the quavering voice speak, and later she had to ask Choti Maa as to what she had meant. Choti Maa was embarrassed, but answered that it meant something like ‘poor child’ and that Ammachy knew about the circumstances of Saraswati’s childhood and the reasons why had come to travel so far from her home in Rajasthan all the way to England. Saraswati was glad; she was glad for she preferred the sympathy of the old woman any day to her rejection, for this was the main fear that had been eating into her these last many days.

She was crushed into the wrinkled bosom of the old lady and kept there for quite some time until she felt she was in a cocoon of peace and quietude, with no worries to bother her or keep her little heart worried and tense. She was relieved and now that the tense moment was finally over, she decided she could really come to love this sweet old woman and enjoy the holidays and savor the sights and sounds of this wonderful heaven of a place. She took a deep breath and ran out from the room into the fields surrounding the house where Bhaiyya and she had a million places to explore, a zillion things to discover.

The food in Ammachy’s house was something out of this world. There was vattayappam, which was a sort of hot rice cake smoothened with coconut gravy and sugar. Though it was quite late, for breakfast she had prepared something she called pootu, crushed rice powder steamed in a wooden pot with ghee and coconut gratings, which came out of the stove, fragrant and quite incomparable to anything she had eaten before. The fine powdery dish was mixed with bananas or wetted with the gravy of a curry, full of shredded meat and potatoes. She asked for more in a whisper to Choti Maa who pushed the dish towards her, asking her to help herself and not be shy.

Bhaiyya smirked and widened his eyes at the quantity she had heaped on to her plate, but he made no mention of the fact at the table where the conversation was all between Ammachy and Choti Maa and where every word had to be translated for the other three. Harish ate the strange food tentatively, for when Choti Maa at Brighton did try her hand at South Indian dishes, it was almost always dosas and idlis, and not this variety of strange unpronounceable dishes, which tickled the palate and excited the taste buds. Sara was glad to have this Ammachy within her family and to have her in her reckoning for the days ahead, for the love she had given her, and not least of all for the wonderful food she prepared.

One of the big moments of the vacation was the trip to Aranmula to witness the snake boat race held there annually. The tiny temple village was not too far from Mavelikara and could be made in an hour’s journey by the dilapidated car Ammachy maintained. The occasion was something of a grand high point in her two weeks there and, it appeared, that it was the one day the whole district was waiting for. She accompanied Harish Chacha and Bhaiyya, while Choti Maa backed out at the last moment saying she intended to use the time when they would be away to visit some old friends and classmates in the neighbourhood whom she had not seen for the past many years.

So, by the time the three of them reached Aranmula, the crowds were mammoth. There was not a place to sit and it was difficult to even get to the area from where the best view was available. So they had to move a little downstream from the finishing line where they finally did manage to get a flat piece of land to sit down on under the shade of the swaying coconut trees, from where they could dip their feet in the cool waters and wait for the boats to arrive.

Not far from where they sat, towards their left, there was another family too: a woman with a book to read, a serious looking mustachioed man who was lying back on his easy chair and a pompous looking tubby young boy, hardly much older than Saraswati, with a load of snacks and other eatables to help him get through the day. There were also a few hangers on who were plying them with soft drinks and arranging their chairs and making themselves useful for their master. Obviously a very wealthy and well-to-do family.

On their right, was a crowd of giggling young girls, with their long skirts and their oiled hair, most of them small boned with white crooked teeth sparkling in their dark faces, their shiny black hair, curly and slick with oil. They were staring at her, puzzled by her fair skin, her distinctly singular features and the fact that she was entirely different from the other girls around her. It made her feel suddenly shy and sitting on the dusty earthen ground, she felt her toes curling with embarrassment.

Very often in somber moments in her life she was left wondering at the series of circumstances, which made her distinctly different from the rest of the people around her. The only and much-loved daughter in a society where the men took all the decisions, who was spoiled silly by her parents, especially her father. To be adopted by an uncle whom she hardly knew and brought over to a strange and new land where she would have been an alienated stranger but for the presence of an undiluted and unconditional love.

And now to be singled out by her face and her colour and the angle of her bones and the way she walked and talked and moved because she was at odds with the physical circumstances of her surroundings, as also the emotional platform of her thoughts and feelings. And again, to come all the way over here to the southern tip of this country, to visit a grandmother whom she had never seen or known and indeed to have her sympathy and affection, if not her unalloyed love.

And of course, there was Bhaiyya, the new brother that she loved and cherished and who, despite his young and tender age, realized in a child's instinctive manner, the depth of the emotional turmoil that she was growing through and the intense need she had for the love and the acceptance that a true family offers so very unconditionally. She was thankful for the blessings that God did offer her, though he had been exceptionally harsh to one so young. She was too much of a child to grasp the meaning of all that these thoughts meant, but she was mature and grown up in a way that was beyond the character of children of her age as she dimly tried to grasp the significance of all that had happened to her in her small and befuddled life.

She shook her head to free the hair flying across her eyes as the breeze blew from the river onto her face. It was the very moment that the horns announced the arrival of the first batch of snake boats and the crowds went wild. There was the clapping of hands and the roar of voices raised in high spirits, and the water was being beaten to a froth by the rising and falling of the oars and the air was split with the sound of songs being sung in chorus by the singers on the boats. The last oarsman at the height of the snake boat rearing its tail several feet above the water level, was swaying his body to the music and the excitement swept through the crowds.

Some spectators jumped into the water and tried to swim along the boats while others waved coconut palm leaves and blew on trumpets and jumped up with their hands in the air. The five boats swept past the little group as they stood up and watched them fly by in a flurry of colour and sound and heady movement. Bhaiyya was dancing on his feet, infected with the magic of it all and clapped his hands to the beat of the song that rose into the fevered air.

"The gods of Aranmula are happy and bless the devotion of their subjects on this auspicious day... *Thaiy, thaiy, thikke thaiy thaiy tho.....*" Though Bhaiyya did not understand the meaning of the words, it was also clear that the words were not really meant to be understood, or rather, were not that important. What was more important was to enjoy the spectacle that he was witnessing and to remember every detail so that back in school in Brighton, he could astonish his friends, who lived ordinary mundane lives, and tell them that the world was a much bigger and brighter place than their sea-side town was, despite all the beauty it had.

He glanced to his side and watched Saraswati's face and saw the brightness in her eyes and the glow of excitement suffuse her cheeks. He wondered how, despite the fact that she was an Indian very much like him, she had a complexion that was fairer and almost close to the likes of the people at Brighton. But he was glad to have her, a playmate, and an elder sister whom one could be proud of, whom one could love and admire. These thoughts were very unlike a younger brother's because the normal sort would have been content to pull at the poor girl's hair and make her irritated and mad enough to sock him in the eye. But Saraswati was like a small princess and he would never have considered the mischievous delight of pulling at her hair or tripping her over her feet.

Harish too was amazed at the spectacle that he had been privileged to see. So much of water, so much of greenery wherever he looked. It was as if Kerala were on a different planet altogether when he compared it to his Surpura. The lush verdure all around, the spray of the water on his skin, the roar of the crowd: these were like snaps from a magic camera that kept reeling out its images in his mind. There was loud chatter and giggles at the back of the car as they traveled back to Mavelikara after the excitement of the boat race.

The fact that the children were talking in English was a constant surprise to their driver Josephettan. He marveled that children so young could talk so fluently when others twice their age in the village school could hardly make themselves understood in English or put together two sentences without mistakes. He wondered why Mariamma's children did not know Malayalam as well as the rest of the kids around. He had some inkling as to the stories that had been spreading around about Mariamma and Harish and the children. But he would remain steadfast in his loyalty to this family, which had sustained him and his wife and children by giving him some work or the other, including that of occasional driver as and when required.

So, sometimes he accompanied the two children as they roamed about the extensive fields attached to the house and ran after the hens and plucked at the mulberry plants and watched in fascination at the worms and the insects which seemed to abound in the leaves and in the ponds, or under the thick rotting foliage at the foot of the huge trees.

They were thrilled when the servants came to pluck the mangoes and watched in great delight as the long pole with a sharp hooked knife pulled at the branches. They screamed in mock fear, as the mangoes seemed to be falling straight onto their heads. Josephettan pulled them away from below the trees and towards the side from where they watched the baskets fill up. They cried for them and giggled in excitement as the yellow succulent flesh of the mangoes came up like the sun from under the knife and they gorged on the pieces until their bellies ached and Saraswati was on the point of gagging and puking.

Josephettan also showed them the magic of the pupae of colourful butterflies stuck under the leaves of the mulberry plant. He asked them to keep a close watch on the silver bulbs hanging under the leaves if they wished to see a small miracle. For the next few days, the two children did exactly that until one early morning, they saw to their astonishment the trembling butterfly emerge, wet with the fluids inside the pupa. It came out and sat gingerly on the edge of the leaves and dried itself in the morning breeze and the first rays of the early morning sun. They were breathing hard and staring so closely at the creature that Bhaiyya's eyes started to water. They oohed and aahed as it unfurled its long bright wings and stood poised for a brief moment before it flew away into the morning light. It was a wondrous experience for them and they would remember it for a long time to come.

Harish, it was clear, was not too comfortable here, in the home of his wife. His first visit made him realise how very different their backgrounds were. In Brighton it seemed as if everything was leveled out, there were no obvious differences. They were in a neutral zone where only the present had any relevance, where people were judged and respected on today's performance, not past lineage and tradition.

His ignorance of the language too alienated him and although Mariamma did her best to translate every word, it was tough to keep up with what was being discussed. On visits to the neighbours, where English was known and spoken, he had no problem at all. In such houses, after he had left, there would be grudging respect for him and his work with the comments that Mariamma's choice was not bad at all. But for most of the time, he felt lost as if he were a wandering stranger in a strange land.

Bhaiyya and Saraswati enjoyed their stay at the village: it was a magical and wonderful experience for the two. For Saraswati, life at Surpura had been a different experience altogether. The landscape had been dry and hot and the colours of nature around her had been brown and dun and sienna. The only green she saw was in the leaves of the mustard crop that her father so assiduously grew in the middle of that almost desert-like plain. It was a luxury that the lone tube well in the area bestowed on the family. There was also the yellow of the mustard flowers and with the green, it made a visually lovely combination. Of course, many folk songs — and Saraswati could recollect even a few lines from them — made much of this colour combination, such as the songs of Dhola and Maru, the romantic lovers of the folklore of the desert. And how could one forget the wonder of the colours of the skirts and ghagras and blouses of the women! The glorious turbans of the fierce looking men!

In Brighton, the colours were of the sea and the bright lights of the city and the cars and the sweaters and scarves of the girls and the trendy clothes of the boys. But here in Kerala, the colours ran riot, the natural colours of the trees and the earth and the grass and the blue sky reflected in still or moving waters. But mainly and predominantly green. To the children it seemed the world was covered in a hue of lush and leafy verdure, the kind that seemed spread over everything all around from the bushes and the leaves on the trees, to the distant fields on the horizon.

Ammachy, Choti Maa's mother, spent the whole day in endless recital of the stories of the people around here, tales of marriages and deaths and birthdays and juicy gossip of the neighbour's daughter and the estate manager's son and the quantities of money that the low caste labourers were bringing back from the Middle East and how they were buying up property from their erstwhile masters and changing the landscape of the little village. Just imagine, these people who used to live in the corner of our land, who literally used to be fed from Appachen's table, have now enough money to buy up our very own property, and construct their own houses on them which are bigger and better and more modern: what audacity! Just because they have so much money! And look at the price they are willing to pay for meat and fish! You know, we haggle and bargain, but they just pull out the notes and toss them down and move on. They have spoiled the entire economy of this place and now no one wants to save money. They just wish to make a bare and naked display of money power.

Choti Maa made the appropriate noises: Saraswati could only understand just a little bit of what was being said. Choti Maa had been insisting that she pick up a few words here and there so that she would not be put to too much trouble when she had to visit Kerala. She was now in the family of a Malayali expatriate and she had better learn at least to speak the language. So she had tried and had indeed picked up a few words.

She was fascinated with Ammachy and the aura of gentleness and beauty that she seemed to radiate around her. Her skin was like parchment, wrinkled and hanging loose in places and Sara loved to lay her face along the length of her arm. There was always the fragrance of fresh clean newly washed clothes around her. She examined in fascination the chunky earrings that Ammachy wore, so heavy that the pierced ear sagged under the weight and elongated the hole in the lobe.

She always seemed to have some savory or sweet hidden in her meat safe and she would call out to Sara and hand over sweetmeats and crunchy homemade biscuits that crumbled against her tongue and spread a taste so unique in her mouth that she would never forget it. It amazed her that Ammachy could embrace her to her old heart, although she was a complete stranger to her family and her bloodline. Though Saraswati was somewhat hesitant and reticent at first, the sheer love and

good will that seemed to overflow from Ammachy drew the little girl to her. She was now able to plumb that extra bit of affection that kind old people seem to have in such abundance within them.

When it was finally time to return to England, Saraswati was astonished to find she was genuinely sad to let go of this nice old woman who, without questions and without conditions, had given her such abundant love. She felt the tears prickling in her eyes and she turned her face away, so that none would see. This turning away, this hiding of the face, was to soon become a frequent trick employed by her for she never wished to expose her torn and lonely heart, her troubled worried mind, to the world outside.

But this once, she turned back again and clutched at the old woman and said something to the effect that she loved her and wished to come back as soon as possible. These were words that Choti Maa translated for her and which made the old woman smile tearfully and embrace her once again. Years later she would be always glad that she had done exactly that, for by the time she returned in entirely changed and different circumstances, Ammachy would have been gone; gone out of this placid part of Kerala and maybe winging her way to the distant constellations where one day she would wait for Saraswati and give her again her favourite sweets and dishes.

Giridhar calls, Harish falls

Two weeks after Sara celebrated her eighteenth birthday, Harish Chacha came home from his hospital in what could only be described as a mad fury. He was livid. He was sweating and kicked open the gate and walked straight into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him. To Sara, with whom he had always been kindly and avuncular and gentle, it was something of a shock to hear him yelling from behind the closed doors. He called in Choti Maa and shut the door again. There was a long silence: obviously some news of great import was being conveyed and the impact of the message was severe enough to warrant some further shouting and incoherent anger. Choti Maa was trying her best to calm him down. In a household where there were no secrets, it was uncommon to have a situation where the children were excluded from the discussions completely.

Bhaiyya was out of the house and Sara was alone in the drawing room overlooking the sea. She called it the room with a view. She was lying back on the sofa, her mind puzzled at the sudden change in the atmosphere of the house. There was an air of tension, a sudden chill and a closing of the blinds. From out of somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she felt the rising of a small lump of fear, of the start of an irreversible movement of events that would sweep her life away from the placidity that it had so far enjoyed. Inexplicably, she knew what was coming. It was clear and explicit as if a voice was calling out to her in her inner ear. It was a call from Surpura and there was a crisis in the offing.

It took about an hour for Harish Chacha and Choti Maa to come out. His face was pale and drawn and Choti Maa had been crying. Sara with her heart in her mouth looked at them and waited for them to say something.

“Baby, there is some news for you, and I don’t know how to break it to you. I hate to tell you this, but I guess you must know. It’s your life that we are talking about and I wouldn’t want to keep the truth from you, much as I would have liked you not to know about it at all.”

“But”, interjected Choti Maa, her face struggling with some emotion she wished to hide, “it’s for you to make a decision and we will stand by you, whatever you decide”

And then it came out, in fits and starts, in long stretches of conversation from Chacha with short explanatory bursts from Choti Maa. The drama that had been enacted more than a dozen years ago, the drama that refused to end and would drag her through the thick of it for many years more to come. She knew most of it and some parts she had gleaned from the conversations she had overheard from time to time. But now the tale was being told in its entirety, with no details censored. Now there was no room to maneuver, no time to stall and delay. She had been part of the first Act when she hardly knew the plot of the unfolding story. She had been gathering snippets from the past when her memory of the long ago days sometimes came back to her in snatches and flashes.

And now with the unfolding of the tale, with the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth falling like a hard rain all around her, she seemed to moving from a blizzard of diffused luminosity of things half understood, half comprehended into the blinding glare of memory in total recall. And now that she understood what was happening, she had no power to turn the script around the way she wanted it to be.

She had had dreams now and then of the little village of Surpura and the now shadowy, indistinct figures of her Pitaji and Maa, who had loved her with all their hearts and souls and who had simply stopped to be, one fine summer day so many years ago. Through the glass darkly she seemed to remember the sounds and excitement, the songs, the delicious food and the throng of the guests who had come for the ceremony that had bound her and a stranger, a young boy, during the course of a three hour ceremony, into a single bond that should have taken them through a shared life of blissful, blessed matrimony.

She had felt like a baby princess then, being borne on the shoulders of exuberant relatives and neighbours who had carried her along and danced with her and swung her into the air and made her feel all dizzy and sick. There had been a long drawn out interval then. The stage had been darkened all these years and the curtain was drawn down. And now after a decade, the play was restarting again. After the long recess, the curtain had once more been cranked up. The script was more or less the same, but in a wrong time zone altogether. The old play had lost its context, the players had all grown up, the heroine had shifted her location and her profession, but the Director insisted that she return, for the show must go on.

She used to ponder over, and sometimes with great distress, the sudden events that brought her over to England at the tender age of nine. Before Chacha had revealed to her the whole truth, she had been unsure of what had really happened and Harish Chacha was reluctant to talk about the series of momentous incidents that had led to this long and unexpected flight across the ocean. She was about nine then. She could just about remember how Ma and Pitaji had left from Surpura for the wedding ceremonies of a distant relative and family friend, after leaving her with Draupadi Mausai ji living next door.

They did this only rarely, when taking her along was not considered appropriate in the particular circumstances that the situation demanded. Hardly had two hours passed when there was a commotion and loud wailings of some of the women who lived around. She remembered, though she was not fully aware of the import of the event at that time, the horrific sight of the bodies of her parents being brought into the house by a hushed and visibly moved crowd of neighbours after the dreadful accident that had, in a flash, taken away from her the two most loved people she had ever had the privilege of knowing in the small contented life she had lived till then.

Apparently, the jeep taking them to Alwar city to attend the wedding had overturned in a bizarre accident involving a bullock cart and a speeding truck. The somnambulant bullock had moved into the main road from a village dirt track to the left of the highway. The bushes at the particular turning hid the trundling cart from the driver's eyes. The driver had swerved the jeep into the middle of the road to avoid the animal. He did not see, or rather saw too late, the speeding truck approaching from the opposite side. The jeep was struck square in the front and its impact made it fold into itself like an accordion. Then it was tossed off the road and sent spinning several times over before it came to a halt. The driver and her beloved father sitting in the front had been instantly killed, crushed in the twisted metal. Maa had been thrown off from the rear where she had been sitting and had suffered horrible pain and agony for a short time before the aghast bystanders and anxious local people rushed her to the hospital.

But all their efforts were to no avail and Gauri Devi passed away to her heavenly abode with a high wail of terror and pain at the gross injustice of the Death thrust onto her, so sudden and so abrupt, without even giving her a moment to call out the name of her husband or to see once again her Saraswati's dimpled face. During the post-mortem, the doctor whispered that there was another tiny life that had been extinguished too, growing within the broken body of the handsome, fair skinned woman. It was a secret that she would have revealed to her husband soon enough, perhaps on the same night after getting back from the marriage. The poignant secret remained untold, though it found place in the formal report filed in court. The doctor and the attendant nurse did not have the courage to mention it to the distraught friends and relatives.

The shrouded bodies were carried back to the house by the silent and deeply mourning crowd. A shattered and sobbing Draupadi Mausi ji had taken Saraswati under her wing and swept her away to her own home before she could see the horrible sight of the bodies being prepared for their consignment to the flames. Saraswati saw nothing else thereafter: the protection Draupadi gave her was iron clad. She would see neither the solemn procession of the people carrying away the bodies to the pyre nor hear the somber chant of "Ram naam sathya hai" of the mourners. Frantic relatives had telephoned the shocked Harish in Brighton to convey the paralyzing news. Harish had left immediately for India.

Giridhar accompanied his parents as they stood in attendance during the ceremony and once it was all over they had come into Draupadi's house to see her and to embrace her and shed hot tears over the unfortunate girl. Giridhar's younger sister, the small girl Lakshmi, sat in the corner of the room clutching a doll to her face. She was a normal, inquisitive child and full of beans most of the time. But the gravity of the situation and the muffled sobs of most of the adults around her had disturbed and confused her thoroughly. She had become withdrawn and silent and made no move at all and was left to watch the after effects of the tragedy being played out in the rooms of this house.

Chatter Singh and his wife were totally at a loss for words. The sudden turn of events had upset everything. What would happen to the child bride? Should they take her into their own house or should they wait till she was older and ready to accept the responsibilities of being a housewife. If she were not taken care of by them, then people would murmur and talk about how careless and irresponsible they were. Nor did they want to do anything without consulting Harish ji, who they knew was on his way from England.

Giridhar had stood shaken into a silent woodenness at the sight of all the sorrow around him. He was embarrassed and uncertain what to do. A young boy of thirteen did not have the social graces to handle such a moment of grief. Nor did anyone expect him to say or do anything.

From behind his mother's pallu he caught a glimpse of Saraswati and wondered as to when she would be accompanying him back to his own house. He did know that she and he were married and that he would be responsible for her at a time when he was old enough to do so, when he would have come into some sort of independence. He also knew that she and he were irrevocably tied to each other for the rest of their days together and something in him said that he should show some words of kindness and sympathy to her at this awful moment. He caught her eye and smiled sadly. He even put out his hand and gently tried to pat her on her shoulder; but his father pulled him away and then there was no further occasion to express his compassion.

The distance from England to this little village had prevented Harish from being the one to rightfully light the pyre. A distant cousin had been roped in to perform the necessary rituals. The moment of finality which marked the end of life and its passage to another world, when the skull was cracked open to let the entrapped soul out, was, therefore, not witnessed by Harish. At that particular moment, when Ram Chander ji had attained his moksh, Harish was winging his way over the dark

and deep oceans in the depth of the night sky, unable to sleep, caught in the terror of the confused welter of thoughts and worries tormenting his mind. There were so many things that he would have liked to tell his older brother, to confess to him, to thank him for. But the many occasions he had had were now lost and he would now never be able to tell him all he had wanted to. Ram Chander bhai had been the bulwark of his younger days, standing like a rock between him and the little everyday worries and petty tribulations all young boys are subject to.

So when Harish Chacha flew into the country and caught a taxi from Delhi to the village, and Saraswati was brought out from the cool room where she had been cloistered, all she could see were the tears flowing down his face and the sight of a heaving, sobbing, grown man in the throes of a racking, unchecked sorrow. He hugged her to himself and she could hear the painful drawing of his breath and huge cries that shocked the house once again and brought tears to the eyes of all who stood around awkwardly with averted faces.

Ram Chandarji was the one who had insisted that Harish gets himself a good education to become a doctor who would serve the land that had reared him. He had found the necessary finances to send him to New Delhi for his education in the medical sciences and pulled a few political strings to ensure that he got a scholarship to go abroad for his postgraduate studies. He had frowned when Harish had obtained for himself a job at the hospital in Brighton, because it was his wish that he come back to India, his native land and work in the local hospital, perhaps at Alwar about an hour away, or even in the nearby dispensary or health center. But Harish had convinced him to let him work there for just another three years. After that he would be back, perhaps with even enough money to set up his own clinic and diagnostic center dedicated to the health and well-being of the rural folk of his village. What he had done in these three years was another story altogether, an act so audacious and tradition breaking, that he had hidden it from his family so far, in shamefaced reluctance.

Harish was almost confident, almost, that he would be forgiven and taken back into the fold even though it would mean loss of face for his brother in the restrictive confines of rural social life. And now, with the terrible weight of this unrevealed secret hanging heavily on his soul, he could feel the overwhelming guilt eat up the insides of his soul. And thus it was that Harish Chacha pulled Saraswati into his arms and poured out his great sorrow and his remorse from the overflowing darkness of his heart.

He pleaded and cajoled and argued and shouted and tried every trick he knew to procure what he wanted: the custody of the little girl for a few years, to get her, as he said, educated at a good school so that she would have the advantage of being able to stand on her own two feet in the bad world outside the village. He argued that he had a debt to pay his elder brother who had sacrificed so much to have him sent abroad for a medical education and for a job, a debt that he would never be able to repay. The only way that he could ever come anywhere near to meeting that obligation was to do something for Saraswati. To do the same things that had been done for him by his Bhai ji, was the best way that he could seek recompense for his feelings of guilt in not even having expressed his gratitude to his brother, now so rudely taken away from him.

Giridhar's father tried to intervene and insist that as parents-in-law of the bride, it was their duty to look after the girl. He assured Harish that she would be looked after as a daughter, that she would be given all the love and affection that she had so far been receiving from Ram Chander ji and Gauri devi. He could not contemplate a situation where he would face the disapproval of his peers, that he had not taken care of his daughter-in-law at the time of the greatest crisis of her tragic life.

Harish countered that the true claim of the in-laws would arise only after she had grown up (a euphemism for puberty) and that at the age of nine she was too tender to take up domestic responsibilities in the house of Giridhar. He assured them that he would only borrow her for a few years until she had completed some kind of education of a primary level at Brighton and that then she would be returned to take up her due position as the loved daughter-in-law in her new house. A few years, just a few years, and she would have completed what is equivalent to eighth pass here. With a good education she would be able to fend for herself and help Giridhar in whatever activity or business that he may wish to enter into. This is the only way that he would be able to pay off, at least a small fraction of the great debt that he had taken from his Bhai ji. That was that, he said, and he would brook no objections. He then went into a paroxysm of lamentations and bitter tears, which finally silenced all protestations.

There was nothing further that anything could say or do to remedy the situation. Giridhar was lost and confused in all the arguments flying over his head. Saraswati had already been taken in to the house and probably been given her dinner and made to sleep. And thus it was settled. Harish would leave in a week and the time till then would be spent in arranging for her travel papers from a sympathetic British High Commission through the good offices of one of Harish's contacts in New Delhi.

And so it was that rude hands plucked her out by her roots from her traditional rural soil. This fragile flower was hurled into a foreign soil, not even having comprehended the nature of the tragedy that was too profound for her to absorb. She was exhausted by her ordeal, the shock of the appearance of the motionless and bloodied bodies of Ma and Pitaji, the hours of

crying and weeping her heart out despite the best efforts of Draupadi Mausi ji, the sudden appearance of Harish Chacha from out of nowhere and the long debates with the Giridhar's family and at the end, the final goodbyes.

The rush all the way from Surpura village to the Palam Airport at Delhi and then the roar of the engines of the plane as it rose from the ground like a massive magical bird carrying her within its belly and then finally, on the last lap of her journey to her new home: for the poor kid all this was too much to understand and absorb. It had taken her time to settle down but settle down she had, in the warmth and love that the new seaside home provided her, the strong support of her Harish Chacha, the unconditional and quiet love of Choti Maa and the strong and sometimes boisterous affection of Bhaiyya.

Sara now knew that there was this one dark secret that Harish Chacha had never divulged in the past years, one that was too terrible for him to even contemplate confiding in his elder brother, one that he would now never have to reveal ever. With the peculiar reticence of one who had overstepped the age-old social boundaries that had been drawn for him, he regretted that he had never had the strength and honesty to confess the awesome truth and thereafter, the courage to accept whatever punishment Ram Chander bhai would inflict on him.

Mariamamma was a nurse who was working in the Royal Sussex County Hospital much before he had been appointed as doctor there. In a land of white people, there was the natural kindness and sympathy that grew between the two of them from India. With their brown skin and their isolation and the distance that was inevitably maintained between them and the white hospital staff, they were, by the very requirements of their job, thrown into each other's company most of the day. And the rest of the staff did manage to arrange their duties particularly in such a manner that Harish and Mariamma were together.

Proximity led to propinquity and there was no reason to deny the attraction, and later, the love that grew between them. At a small civil marriage in the local Magistrate's office, they exchanged rings in the midst of a select band of doctors and other staff. The tea and pastries tasted sweet and sticky. But the ceremonies formalized a de facto relationship that had been established for quite some time and did not cause any surprise to those that knew them.

The problem was not in Brighton where marriages are made and broken without the seaside town even batting an eyelid. However, the storm that would have been raised in Surpura, would definitely drown their little nest in Brighton. And so for over five years now, the secret had remained sealed on their lips, a guilty weight on Harish's conscience that refused to lighten with the passing of Time. As for Mariamma, her family had not been so rigid: her old mother, whom she referred to as Ammachy, a wizened old darling, had with some murmuring accepted the inevitable. She had been thrilled to see her first and only grandson, when Mariamma had gone home on one of her rare holidays, the little infant who was just about six months old. He had been born in the very same hospital where Harish and she worked, under the special care and affection of the hospital staff.

The moral issues involved, the personal choices staring Sara in the face, the pressing weight of the truth that she must confront, these had dribbled out, gradually, now and then, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately, in the words that Chacha and Choti Maa had spoken to her from time to time. While they had filled in all the gaps in the memory of the life that she had lived during her childhood at Surpura in Rajasthan in India, discussion on the marriage she had entered into were muted, veiled. It was as if they were reluctant to let the burden of the matter fall on the frail shoulders of their child. Her confused silence and the need to think out things was the best response she could offer under the circumstances.

Through the days that she grew up in Brighton, as she moved up the classes in her school, she had felt a strange disquiet grow in her. It was initially confused thoughts and incoherent memories of the distant past of Surpura. She had been only nine when the terrible accident had taken her away from the little village in India. And she was grateful to her Chacha for the kindness that he and Choti Maa had shown her, a homeless orphan in the difficult days of her growing up. The care and concern that they had bestowed on her was an unparalleled expression of a selfless and bountiful love that knew no bounds.

But, finally it all came out in pieces, gradually leading to a pattern. How Harish Chacha had stonewalled the enquiries from back home of an increasingly agitated nature after the original five years demanded by him had elapsed; how he stated that a girl must be an adult first before she marries; how Sarasu is in school and must complete her education and be able to fend for herself, be ready to accept the domestic responsibilities before marriage obligations are accepted. He had asked for time till Sarasu became eighteen. The pressure had, therefore, been put off for some time and Harish had been hoping against hope that this persistent postponement would send a message to Giridhar's family: the clear unequivocal message that there was a problem in finally executing the agreement, in completing the formalities, that had been so rudely disturbed so many years ago.

But like an insistent pest, a mosquito that sings above the ear, the request was repeated and repeated and repeated yet again, till it turned into an ultimatum. Show up or be damned. And now with Sara having turned eighteen, Harish had run out of excuses. He had no option but to bring knowledge of the events to the main actress and place the cards before her and make her choose from the options available.

Sitting on the sofa in the bedroom, with Sara at his feet and Choti Maa caressing her hair as she sat on the chair behind her, Harish went on to indeed show her the choices she had. He had calmed down by now, now that the time for taking a decision had come. He took a deep breath and explained to her the meaning of child marriage, of how convention and practice was sometimes stronger than law and statutes; how the force of the centuries gone on was irresistible and crushing on those who wish to exercise options. And what are these options: he ticked them off on his fingers one by one.

One, on the little finger, to ignore the letter as if nothing had happened and go on in life pretending that the celebrations of Surpura village some thirteen years ago was only a figment of the imagination. To deny that anything had happened at all. In a situation where the law was not on the side of child marriage, a denial would be accepted by the court, that is, if matters should come to a boil and both parties had to face litigation.

Two, on the ring finger, while accepting that such a child marriage had indeed taken place, a stand could be taken to refuse to comply with its compulsions and to argue that the practice is against the law and, therefore, is not required to be followed through. It would be inhuman to ask a young independent woman to submit to such a medieval ignominy. Since Sara was now almost an adult and able to decide on the course she intended to follow, to make an informed decision about her own life, she could now decide that she did not wish to consummate the farce of a marriage that had taken place so many years ago.

Three, on the forefinger, she could of course, bow her head and submit to her destiny: a blind acceptance of the Fate written out for her so many years ago. Who could fight against the stars and chart out a new course all on one's own. The custom of the ages could not be denied. But that was the last thing that both Sara and her foster parents wanted to do.

Sara sat with creased forehead as the welter of information flowed around her like a fierce storm in a pool. She was confused but not entirely unprepared for the developing situation. Slowly, but surely, over the intervening years, her internal thought processes had been moving her along the lines she must now take. She had known all along that one day she would have to make a decision, one way or the other. And sure enough, the mental agonies she had gone through at that tender age, the vast import of the displacement that had sent her flying out of one continent to another, had also steeled her to take a decision when she had to.

She had, over the course of the years, as the problem sat like a tumour in her brain, realized that the easiest option, that is to deny and stonewall, was not the decision that she would take. And she would insist that when the decision was taken, it would be on her own. She would not burden her foster family with the consequences of her decision that would have so many implications.

The way she saw it, the decision to solemnize the child marriage had been taken with the best of intentions. It was the accepted practice of the time and the moral consequences of that decision had never been in the reckoning, was not taken into consideration, when it was indeed taken. From the memories of that little village which still clung to her whenever she sat in deep thought and contemplation, she knew that Surpura was a world apart, a different solar system, a vastly contradictory universe where the laws of the western world were not merely unknown, but were rejected outright as anarchic and unacceptable.

How could one condemn illiteracy when the world around you was largely illiterate, and you were as illiterate as the next person? How could one condemn caste when caste was the basis of the life around you? How could child marriage be regarded as untold tragedy when all people you know had gone through the same rituals with apparently no disastrous aftereffects? There had to be external influences, education, awareness, the growth of civilizing forces, social engineering and understanding of what development really stands for, to make you realise the grossness of the crime perpetrated, the enormity of the sin, before you comprehended that what you took to be accepted convention was indeed a transgression of the highest magnitude. In the process, how could one condemn the players in the story when they had no clue that the play they were performing in was outside the pale of law. Even if the script of the story is illegal, can you hang the actor who acted the part?

That is why, she argued to herself, Giridhar and his family required a better treatment than the mere condemnation of events, the negation of the facts that had happened between their two families. That is why there had to be a civilized end to the drama. It was not necessary to leave dead bodies on the stage as the curtain came down. It was not necessary to have the blood and the gore dripping from the blades of the swords that beheaded the main protagonists.

And it was in the search for the fine and balanced conclusion, a civilized denouement, that Sara had been unconsciously spending the last couple of years of her life. Of course, she could not talk about all this to her family. And Bhaiyya, she would not burden her dear Bhaiyya with problems that were so intensely personal and private. She knew that he would rush to her help at her slightest beckoning. It was, however, her concern for involving him at the tender age of fourteen that was keeping her from calling him in.

There was a pause when Harish Chacha had finished. Then she straightened her shoulders and said “Give me a couple of days, Chacha, and I will come to you and tell you what I am going to do. Allow me to sort out this puzzle in my head and trust me to take the right decision. For the moment, Chacha, I would suggest that you leave the letter unreplied, just for a couple of days or so, and then I will tell you what I have decided. I need some time to think things out”.

The voice and the tone were firm and unequivocal. It was an adult response and one that Chacha and Choti Maa did not expect, this deliberate delay of a decision and the determination to think out the problem before speaking out her mind on ways to resolve it. The crisis that Chacha and Choti Ma were working on suddenly seemed to halt in its stride and there was a kind of awkward pause that demanded some response. In a quiet way, it became clear to both her Chacha and Choti Ma, as well as to her herself, that a major step in her psychological growth had been crossed. She was not a child anymore. She was no longer the baby who had been forced to enter adulthood before she knew the meaning of the word. She was now not merely the orphaned daughter of unfortunate parents brought over across the seas by a concerned uncle who had his own secrets to hide. She was now an adult in her own right, fully endowed with the capabilities to decide on the course of her own future.

For a moment, both Chacha and Choti Ma were taken aback with the assurance and confidence with which she said these words and were indeed nonplussed that the options laid out before her were not being accepted as such, but were being filtered through the warp and the woof of the singular weave of her personality. It was Choti Maa who stepped into the awkward silence by saying, “I think that’s a good idea, Sara, we’ll all get time to reconsider our options more carefully, rather than replying to the letter all of a sudden and creating a situation that may be even more complicated than it already is.”

Thus it was that Sara walked over that evening to the edge of the sea, her mind full of intense introspection and reflection. The Palace Pier at Brighton is the main distinguishing landmark of that beautiful town by the sea. Poking into the mass of water like a pencil against the horizon, it could be seen from miles around and attracted the attention of all who passed through the harbour area. It was the focal point of life for the jovial, fun-filled, exuberant people of the place. Brighton had the reputation of being a place to let one’s hair down: to forget morals and conventions and to drink deep from the draught of Life. As one walked into the pier, one could see the cafes and game shows and the rush and throng of tourists and the smell of fish and chips and the high-pitched murmur of the pure enjoyment of the people.

Looking down from the high vantage point, Sara watched the waves crashing down onto the rock-strewn beach and leaving its froth amidst the weeds in a dance that played itself out amongst the eddies and currents before the next wave crashed down again. The relentless forward charge and the inevitable backward retreat of the waters enthralled and captivated her as she peered down at the constantly changing patterns of water and sand and rock and sunlight and shadow until she felt herself being mesmerized and drowsy and almost on the point of losing her grip on the rails and falling down onto the rocks below. She roused herself out of her blank reverie: she had much to think about.

The worry that was starting to eat into her was not on account of the intensity of the conundrum trust on to her so suddenly by the calling card Giridhar had sent her through his father’s letter. In short, it was duty and honour that were corroding her vitals, leaving that sickening feeling within her chest. All the liberal and humane education that she had imbibed in Brighton rebelled within her against the humiliation that she had so unwittingly suffered when she was but a child in Surpura. She had not told a soul, not even the best of her friends, that she was a child bride. They would have been repulsed and would have, in fact, reviled her and asked her to rebel, to forget the whole damned affair as a terrible mistake not to be suffered an instant longer.

However, mature thought made her realise that Giridhar was also as much a victim as she was. And though they may not have realized it, her departed parents, and indeed Giridhar parents, were all part of that same tragic theatrical production that had swept her around the world as though blown by the trade winds. That is why when the subject was mentioned in the Brighton home, the response she made to Chacha and Choti Maa was the best that she could have done in the circumstances: to ask for time to think, to cogitate and to take a course of action that would hurt the least, that would cause little damage to all the players in the drama.

Standing there on the Pier looking down at the troubled waves, she understood clearly that the victims of the age old drama need not necessarily submit themselves to the bitterness and the tragedy that circumstances force on them. It is possible, by concerned and informed intelligent responses, to deal with this in such a manner as to resolve mountainous problems and turn them into manageable situations.

Well, then she had to do what she had to do: she required time to think things out, she would not be forced to take a decision when she was not in a position to do so. It had to be the right decision for it was one that would affect her life and her future

and that of Giridhar and his family. She needed time, and time she would have. But she knew that a decision could not be postponed forever.

Sara had asked for two or three days to come to a decision, but the reprieve that she sought, stretched out into a week before she raised the matter again with Choti Maa first and then with her Chacha. She had spent these past days in a reflective and somber mood and the options before her were being internalized and assessed in a fashion that each individual has. It was an exercise that took time and energy and a mental equilibrium that would have been normally rare in a girl just turned eighteen.

But Sara had been baptized in fire and the burnished mettle of her character had the guts and the wisdom to make the right choice. She argued that a complete denial of the presumed, and indeed most probably justified, rights of Giridhar's family to pull her in by the long string to which she was tied, back into the family which regarded her as its own bahu, would be harsh and insulting, especially in a society which regarded child marriage as accepted practice, duly endorsed by convention and social pressure.

The real obstacle she realized was the turnaround in her own psychological makeup that the last nine years in Brighton had wrought, the result of a liberal urbane education in a western democracy. The extolling of the individual's right to choose, or to refuse to choose, to deny, to question, to verify, to judge; these were inviolable and undeniable. This much England had taught her. The freedom of expression, of conduct, of the right to express another and differing opinion, the upholding of that opinion by the community that fiercely protected the individual's right to do so: these were strictly western concepts that she had come to cherish and to value so much.

However, she was born Indian, born to a family that believed in custom and the strength of family and convention and practice and rituals and religious sanction and the approval or approbation of the society that nourished you. How could she, in a matter of minutes, deny and abuse the values that she had grown up with over the years in the little village community where she had been born and where she had spent the first nine wonderfully happy years of her life, basking in the love and affection of her Pitajji and Maa. Truly she was caught between two worlds, between two time frames, between two sets of values and principles.

To put off a decision was also a decision and in the course of the one week in which she mulled over what she had to do and what she would decide, she perfected the arguments that she would employ to justify her decision. She realized that while the reasons she would finally present would only gladden Choti Maa's and Chacha ji's heart, they should be framed in such a way that they do not cause any serious conflict in the minds of Giridhar's family and the social setup where they belong.

She wondered who Giridhar really was, how he viewed this story of his missing bride, and her surrogate parents living across the seas. Was he living the life of the son of a Jat landowner, looking forward to tilling the land and growing his crops and, like his father, living in such close communion with the soil, with the earth. How would he regard his foreign returned wife, who he would assume had become an alien to her own country? How could a woman who spoke fluent English and wore western clothes possibly live in the midst of her rural peers who rarely looked out of the purdah? What would they have in common?

Sara's memory of the Hindi language had not been lost, as Harish Chacha did often speak to her in Hindi, almost as if to remind her of her heritage and her roots. Was she prepared to leave aside the gifts of education and the values of an open society that encouraged diversity and freethinking? Was she prepared to forget the wondrous rewards she had been given to her in her acquisition of knowledge and go back to a narrow and closed society where she would be relegated to the kitchen or the rigours of a life of child rearing and backbreaking domestic labour. She realized, to put it briefly, that she was not.

And therefore, the solution was for her to convey, in the most polite terms possible, that she wished to continue her studies further and that once that was over, she would be able to come over personally and tell the Giridhar family about all that this whole episode of marriage and life in Surpura would mean. Then she would be able to finally take a view.

And now, therefore, the task before her was to write a letter that would express in so many words, in clear and unequivocal terms, her stated position without leaving things vague and unclear. She wished she had the skills to communicate in Hindi in such a manner that she would be able to write directly to Giridhar or his parents. But that she knew, would be frowned upon severely. So, it had to be her Chacha who would send the letter and she would insist that the very words and syntax be explained to her so that the meaning of her import came through clearly and without any scope for misinterpretation.

The morning breakfast at home was always a rushed matter. Chacha took a fairly heavy breakfast with cornflakes, eggs and bacon, a couple of slices of toast and a cup of coffee. Mariamma was more like a bird: some juice and a glass of milk, with fruits. Bhaiyya stuffed whatever he could into his mouth, while Sara was more lady like, berating him for being a pig at the table, while she herself took a boiled egg with jam and toast. Harish munched at his toast and spoke through a mouth filled with food.

Now that about a week had elapsed after the arrival of the fateful letter, it was time to broach the subject again. And Harish thought that this moment at the dinner table, when the family was together sharing a moment of domestic peace, would be an ideal time to do so. "Beti, we don't want to hustle you, but its perhaps time that you should say something now: we have to send a reply. You know..." And then the unexpected happened. The single moment that upturns life and leaves it strewn like a scattered pack of cards. When life would be hereafter divided forever into two halves: the days of one's existence before that moment and the days after.

There was suddenly a surprised expression on Harish's face, his voice gurgled, his face turned immobile and his right hand seemed to slip off his shoulder. The fork fell from his hands and clattered to the floor and his face turned and the body was keeling over to the right and the chair slowly toppling down. In the midst of the usual morning breakfast scene, there was a loud thud as the chair and Harish Chacha collapsed on to the floor.

An unusual event of colossal implications had suddenly and inexplicably occurred. Bhaiyya had a half eaten apple in his hand and he froze in his chair, shocked and horrified. Sara stood up and leaned over: she wondered for a moment if this was some form of a joke or a prank that Chacha was playing on her, but realized that this was impossible as Chacha was never prone to such tomfoolery. She turned to Choti Maa and was shaken to see her leaning back against the wall, with her hands over her mouth, her eyes deep and dark and the unbidden scream rising slowly from her throat, Stifled but coming out in a whimper.

There was a sudden flurry as she rushed to Chacha on the floor and then to Choti Maa and then once more to the telephone to call for the ambulance. Then Sara was back as she lifted her Chacha up and lay him across her lap, watching in a daze as his lips quivered and his eyes rolled upwards. She called for Bhaiyya to hand her the water. She wet the napkin and wiped his face and his neck and waited with a growing sense of dread about the finality of the terrible moment.

Does this mean the end of another chapter of happiness and the start of the torment and misery that would once again swamp her Life? Choti Maa was in a fit of worry and pacing up and down the room with her handkerchief clutched in her hand and biting the end of it in a desperation that had no description. Chacha seemed to twitch and tremble and jerk in her lap. She panicked and was about the rise and lay him on the floor, when mercifully the ambulance was at the door and the nurse and the emergency doctor had come in.

They knew Harish well enough as he worked in the same hospital and they were genuinely concerned and worried. She asked and asked again as to what could be the matter and whether he would be all right. All that the doctor and nurse did was to smile gently and tell them not to worry. The nurse gave Choti Maa a quick hug, said everything will be ok, honey, and took charge of the sagging body of her Chacha. Sara was glad to relinquish him to their expert care and moved back to watch them attach the oxygen mask and take his blood pressure and wheel him away to the ambulance. The doctor looked around and asked who would accompany Harish to the hospital. His eyes turned straight to Sara and he smiled sympathetically and said, "I think you should come along, love. I am sure that your Mom and your brother could follow in the car."

It was the start of a long vigil, the anxious moments waiting for the doctor to go through the tests and to watch his face for the any sign of hope and assurance, to wait in the room outside in the hospital lounge and keep watch for the approach of a doctor, a nurse, a technician, anybody who could help and answer their questions. The day turned to evening and then into night: finally, as the clock struck midnight, the doctor came out and said:

"I guess you must be all worrying so much for Harish, and I wish that I had something positive to tell you. The fact is that he has had a massive stroke, which has affected the left half of his brain. As a result, the right side of his body, from the head down through his neck and the chest and down to his leg has become affected and he has lost his motor ability. What is worse, he will be unable to respond to stimuli and talk to you. We'll watch for tonight and maybe I'll be able to tell you something positive after about twenty four hours."

Choti Maa had a million questions to ask, but it was Sara who summed it all up by asking: "Is he going to be all right?"

"I wish I could tell you that, Sara, we have so many cases where the patient comes out of the hospital and goes on to lead a happy and wonderful life as if nothing has ever happened. So lets pray and wait, ok?" He smiled compassionately and moved on and Choti Maa and Sara and Bhaiyya huddled together with their arms around each other with worried faces, with tears and hope struggling with each other and a dark, deathly weight in their poor, beleaguered hearts.

There was the immediate task of getting the house in order and Choti Maa knew that somebody would have to be around in case of any emergency. She ordered the children to go back home and get some rest and sleep and come back in the morning. Sara offered to stay but knew that what she wanted was the right thing to do. She dreaded the waiting in the night, wondering what the hours till dawn would bring. She brought a flask of coffee for Choti Maa and then turned around and clutching Bhaiyya's hand she moved out of the hospital premises.

Fortunately, their home was not too far off and they reached back within a few minutes. The Bakers, their kindly neighbours were up and waiting and wanting to know the current situation. Sara was exhausted and told them what she knew as they were taken in and Mrs. Baker gave them a bowl of hot soup and buns to sustain them after a long day of tension that had wrung their very spirits to the extreme. Bhaiyya was shaken and silent. They moved back to their house and tucked themselves in. Sleep did not come and the hours stretched by until the morning arrived, pale and weak through the windowpanes.

The next two months were the longest, physically and emotionally the most exhausting, draining days of their lives. Fortunately, the summer holidays were on and Sara had just completed her schooling and both she and Bhaiyya did not have to miss too many of their classes. They took turns to sit out the nights at the hospital. They waited anxiously for the slightest change in the laboured breathing of the motionless body, which but a few days earlier, was a vibrant and living person, who gave them love and care and concern; who had unexpectedly given Sara a home and the love of a parent. The slow dripping of the saline solution was the rhythmic beat to which their lives moved. The hours of waiting, the anxious moments when the doctor reported the daily progress, or the lack of it, the quiet moments of prayer and meditation, the whispered conversations amongst themselves, these small moments brought them all even closer together.

Some of their friends would drop in. The Patels being doctors themselves, had a clear idea of the medical issues involved. Mrs. Mathur offered to spend the night at the hospital so that Choti Maa could go home and rest for a while and freshen up. From the hospital, doctor colleagues and nurses would come over to cheer them up and fill the room with flowers and get well cards. But when all was said and done, the bottom line was that they were completely alone in a foreign land and had only themselves to fall back upon.

Bhaiyya displayed maturity beyond his years as he willingly threw himself into the task of looking after his father. He accepted more burdens than he was capable of and never complained if he had to stay awake in the nights or had to rush up and down between home and hospital with all kinds of minor errands.

Sara virtually took over the management of the kitchen at home preparing quick meals and slapping together sandwiches for their sustenance. She kept the house tidy and the clothes washed and the kitchen spic and span and looked after the mail and the normal everyday things of domestic management. The concerned visitors who dropped in to ask them about the progress of the patient were received with a quiet smile and even tea and coffee. They were surprised at the sudden growth and maturity of this slip of a girl who had normally remained behind her mother or within her room immersed in her books and her thoughts. The shy reserved girl had suddenly blossomed into a gracious almost-woman who remained reserved, but would make the guests comfortable and would attend to them with all the grace and hospitality that the situation demanded.

Sara wished to keep her Choti Maa completely free from the everyday routine things of the house so that she would be able to concentrate solely on the care of Harish Chacha. This was a huge task, which Sara knew little about. She knew too that Choti Maa should be left in peace to do exactly what she wanted to, that is looking after her Harish. And so she was left as free as possible. It was indeed a blessing that as a nurse, she knew full well the enormous implications of the traumatic medical crisis that her husband was going through. In the course of their life together in the hospital, they had come across many a difficult and complex case, which had wrung their hearts and almost made them cry. It had never occurred to her that one day she would herself be facing a situation as wife of the patient, as victim of circumstances.

So it was with a heavy heart and a solemn face and deep despair within, that Choti Maa counted the moments and the hours and the nights and the days and the endless sorrows that she now faced with no inkling of the future ahead. Something within her whispered to her that this was going to be a long and dreadful phase of her life. And as the days passed the little hope that she may have had, flickered and blew out. She had now to take a decision that would be awesome in its potential and its impact. By the time the second month was drawing to a close, she realized that she would not be able to sustain the expenses of the long haul that the treatment was taking. Although as a member of the hospital staff she was entitled to concessions and rebates, the expenses were mounting horribly. And there was no definite hope that Harish would come out all right.

Moreover, there was the dilemma that Sara herself presented. Now with the bulwark of Harish's obduracy and understanding having been effectively removed by his incapacitation, it was quite possible that Giridhar's family would make the final assault for Sara and, in the changed circumstances, succeed in taking her away forever. While it was correct that Harish had given Sara the freedom to make the choice, it was absolutely certain that if Sara took the decision not to go off with Giridhar and repudiate the marriage, he would have stood by Sara lock, stock and barrel, with all guns blazing. Now with Harish more helpless than a newborn child, she would be defenseless and without a hope in hell to deter a determined Giridhar and his parents. And she, as Choti Maa, would never allow that to happen.

The solution presented itself to her quietly one morning when she was waking up from a troubled sleep in the house with the sunlight streaming in from the window. Sara was at the hospital for the night, giving her the luxury of a night's sleep in the

comfort of her home. The motes were dancing in the rays of slanting light falling through the gap in the curtains and for a moment, for a single second, she forgot that Harish was in the hospital. She could almost feel him lying in bed next to her.

It was precisely at that moment that she came to the final realisation that despite her dogged fight against the cruel circumstances which had destroyed her peace and her equanimity and her home and her life, it was time to accept the fact that Harish may never be well again. And that he may live for years as the vegetable that he was now and that she may be confined to a life of tending for him all through the days ahead. And if so, Brighton was no place to go on with such an existence. While there were a few friends and some acquaintances around, there was none she could call her own. The children would and should grow up and sprout wings and fly away and she could not imagine living the rest of her days in the solitude of this house on the shores of a foreign sea, with only a sleeping, unconscious body to care for forever.

And so she decided to go back to the green fields and waterways of her Mavelikara, where surely, there would be judgmental cousins and fickle friends, but where there was too the sweet fragrance of the rain on the roof tops and the Onam songs to sing and the sourness of pickled mangoes and the stolid substance and foundation of hearth and home, where the heart sang like a reed in the wind. Choti Maa's patch of earth awaited her. The house there had been closed and locked up after Ammachy's death, but it was hers, she was its mistress and she would herself write the rules of the game that she would play for the rest of her life. She was finally going home, her own home, where her writ would run, where she would be mistress in her own right and where she would live out the rest of her life in undiluted devotion to the still, unconscious body of her husband.

And thus it was that one cold morning, after the hectic days of winding up and closing down and the turning of the pages and the signing of the signatures, that the ambulance carried the comatose body of Harish, at the head of which sat the somber-faced Choti Maa and a tearful Sara with a bewildered Bhaiyya, on to Heathrow and the long and dreadful journey across the oceans to their home land of India and the bustling Bombay airport and from there to the small aerodrome at Cochin and finally to the small village town of Mavelikara.

The crowd of curious onlookers saw the van unload them at the doors of the house and watched as the luggage was brought in and the three of them walked into the house and closed the door behind them. A new chapter in their lives had begun and Sara bemoaned the fact that she was once again the victim of cruel fortune, which persistently, perversely insisted she suffer and bear the blows of fortune, which at every moment of her life were beating her tired, weary body into the ground.

Sara's soliloquy

Who could have ever thought that I would end up an adopted child to a woman who, when she saw me for the first time, knew nothing of me, but then embraced me into her life and loved me as best as she could and stood by me in the worst of circumstances? That I would end up as sister to a hitherto unknown brother, who would love me more than any sibling ever could? Who could have predicted the paralytic stroke delivered by the hand of an implacable fate that would strike down the strength and robustness of a man who had taken the place of a departed father and gave me the adoration and comfort that my parents never could, by the simple incidental fact that they were dead. Who could have ever foreseen the desperate and mournful flight across the oceans back to the scenic, and now strangely empty, inland water routes of Kerala where Choti Maa would await the passing by of her life almost as a widow, as a mere witness to the never ending events that would affect, not so much her own life, but the lives of those around her: the Choti Maa who was destined to spend the rest of her days in the pitiful bondage of tending to an ailing and vegetable like husband, who had not the slightest comprehension whether he was even alive or not. Who could have ever prophesied the glances and the snide remarks that she would face as she struggled with a malignant fate that surely, a vengeful God had wreaked on her, for having had the temerity to marry, not merely outside the Orthodox Christian church, but a heathen, a North Indian pagan, and that too far from home shores in a foreign land on the other side of the ocean. The whispers kept murmuring like cicadas in the dry summer air outside our house. Was she even married to this man she had brought home once about a decade ago, perhaps merely to display him to the doubting cousins and other cynical relatives and to prove that he did really exist? And tell me, just who is this fair skinned girl who hangs by Mariamma, holding on to her pallu and never leaving her side and shielding her from the harsh sibilance of the rumors, by a protective arm thrown around her shoulders. Mark my words; she must be an illegitimate child from some foreign lover she must have picked up in that god forsaken abroad place.

Bhaiyya, Bhaiyya what would I have done if you had not been there for me through all those dark and terrible days and nights when I first met you, worrying and weeping when no one was around: through the first awkward days of learning to talk to you through the comic translations of Chacha, with your own clownish faces thrown at me to make me laugh. Through the days I walked to school with you by my side, no big sister to you, but a small frightened girl, holding tight to your arm, lost in the strangeness of the stately school buildings and all those white skinned gods and goddesses, most of whom looked kindly at me and made me feel reassured and contented. The fat school bully who made me squat and stand up countless number of times until you ran up and spat in her eyes and tore out a tuft of her hair and made her cry. I could have hugged you, but you looked as much of a terror then as she had been just a few moments earlier. And when I did realize that I was no real big sister to you, but that in fact you were my elder brother, despite my being almost four years your senior. The Bhaiyya who would wait for me on the school steps to finish my special classes in English language and grammar, who would pack an extra sandwich for me to chew on as we left for home walking on the road along the sea shore. The Bhaiyya who would defend my worst actions and my meanest lies when in the early years I struggled to be accepted by my classmates, until I realized with your help that I would always be different and that in my difference would be my salvation. The Bhaiyya who held my trembling hand in the harsh criticism of unfriendly neighbours who wondered in a bemused fashion at how different I looked when they came on uninvited visits to our little home at Mavelikara and to stare and gloat at the fate that Mariamma had to finally face when she came back home, an almost-widow. The Bhaiyya who waited with quiet confidence for me to take my decision in the darkest hours after Giridhar's father's letter came. The very Bhaiyya who told me that no matter which way I decided, he would always be around for me, forever and ever.

I was then a stranger in a house with which I had nothing in common: no blood line, no shared folk tales, no dialect, no common festival songs, no friends, no family facial features, no matching skin colour. Once more, a Ruth among the alien corn, I shuddered at the ruthlessness of a persistent spiteful fate that would buffet me, again and again and again. I would have found it difficult to even speak the language of my Choti Maa but for the fact that during the nine years I had spent in the blissful happiness of my foster home at Brighton, she had insisted that I learn to speak her tongue, if not to write and read, but definitely to speak. It was no soothsaying trick on her part that made her insist that I learn to do it: certainly she had no clue that she would one day have to return to the green rice fields and waterways that she had spurned for a stranger so many years ago, where I would have to perforce learn to use it to merely survive in this strange land. She had insisted only because it was yet another device to make me feel at home and to comfort me with new playthings and mental exercises to divert my mind from the ever present tragedy that had befallen me and my family, my real family, and which refused to leave my mind and would torture me with horrific images in my nightmares in the quiet of my room overlooking the sea. There were times when I used to rise terrified from my crumpled sheets, my tousled head in a whirl. The moon would be bright and big over the sea, and I was wondering if I am awake or still in the grip of those dreadful moments with the spinning of wheels and the

slow, slooow upturning of a jeep, in the unhurried motion and the noiseless artistry of perfect nightmares. I would lie back exhausted and in a shuddering panic, with my pulses beat, beat, beating while my heart slowed and climbed down to normal. Far away I could hear the waves beat, beat, beating against the stones. The endless noise of the surf brushing the sand would soothe me and bring my back to my senses. And though I had hoped against hope that with the change of scenery and the change of life patterns here at Mavelikara, I would have the good fortune to leave behind all my bad memories, in fact that was not to be. The nightmares continued without let or hindrance, with this difference that instead of the pounding of the waves of the Brighton Sea, here there was the quieter, but more insistent, whispering of the crickets and the hooting of the ghostly night owls flitting from tree to darkened tree. Once in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, I had wandered into the verandah and looked out of the window at the sleeping, moon-washed garden outside the house. I could hear the tortured breathing of Chacha from the next room and the cheeping and the purring of the mad restless crickets. Suddenly there, outside the window, in a glow of pinpricks of glorious lights, I could see an entire mulberry bush was ablaze with fire-flies, an impromptu Christmas tree that moved and brightened and faded and came back to luster again, like a living, breathing night animal soaking up the light of the moon and throwing it back at me, and for me alone. How different it was this time around. When last I had come here, there was Ammachy and her love unlimited, her lavish dinners, her endless snacks and savouries. The house was alive and breathing with servants to cook and to sweep and to keep themselves busy. Josephettan was there to drive us around to places we wished to visit. There were pupae turning to butterflies, and snake boats churning the river water to a white froth. The green fields, the sparkling ponds, the slow moving boats on inland water, the indolent cattle and the long deep breaths of life in the lungs. There was Harish Chacha, well and alive, able to walk and talk and smile and play games with us. And there was a Choti Ma who smiled with contentment for she knew that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world. But now it was all changed, utterly changed. The house was somber and dark and quiet. There was a just a couple of part time maids in the kitchen. Ammachy had disappeared as if a magician had waved a wand and some hidden wire had pulled her out of the brightly lit stage. The neighbours hardly ever visited. The invalid in the master bedroom cast a long, sad shadow over everything and everybody else in the house. The house lay watching and silent. Thus it was that Mariamma, my Choti Maa made the decision that would finally send me on the road to a life of independence, which would take me to Jagannath and the three years I spent in the company of him and his friends. Which would lead me to the final verdict in the matter of a marriage that I was once party to, perhaps more as child artiste rather than as main protagonist. "There is no way you could pursue an education in Mavelikara", Mariamma argued, "and I am not going to let you spend your life here being crucified every minute of the day by malicious neighbours and relatives. Here you will be cowed down and defeated in a matter of months, your spirit beaten into humility and submission by your mere presence in this place. That is why you must now be free to spread your wings and fly. That is why I refuse to have you tied to my fortune and fate, that is why you, whom I love as my own daughter, should be cut loose to find your own path in life. That is why I am arranging for your admission in the University College in Trivandrum, not too far from here, where you will be on your own terms, and where you will have the freedom to pursue your own convictions and take your own decisions." I knew she meant THE decision and I knew that I would have to, in the course of the few years ahead, confront the situation and come out with my head held high. She spoke briefly of the financial arrangements that she had made which were not merely adequate, but substantial; the British pound converted into the Indian rupee would make a poor man in England a wealthy one in India. I was not concerned about finances: it was the last thing on my mind. What was frightening was the prospect of life away from the comforting presence of Choti Maa and Bhaiyya and the despair of not having them around me in the days ahead. The waters were waiting, lapping at my feet until the moment I would have the strength to enter them and allow them to rise over my head and not let myself be drowned. "Bhaiyya will be here and will take care of me, just as you did these past few months. He will study in the school here and will write letters to you every week, or so he says. Though you will be away, we will be closer than ever, standing up for each other, as we have never done before. And, of course, for the holidays we will be a family again". I wondered what Bhaiyya thought of all this. At the age of fourteen one could be a little reticent to talk and pain and grief does not come so easily as it does when one is younger. He looked somber and smiled half-heartedly, but hugged me with a strangled sob stuck in his throat and walked away to his room. Thus it was that I found myself one morning waiting for the taxi that would take me all the way to Trivandrum. "All my bags are packed; I'm ready to go..." I was leaning against the door outside Chacha's room, fighting down my tears, knowing that he did not care a damn whether I was weeping or not, whether I was going far away or coming back home, whether I was alive or dead. He lay still, his mouth open, his breath rasping in his throat. There was the smell of medicines all around, but the room was clean and well arranged. Choti Maa insisted that it would be spick and span until the very last moment. Then, and only then, would she allow herself to lose her grip on her life and her situation. I touched his face and his feet and then I spun around on my heels and ran, past the verandah, past the bedrooms and out into the porch where Choti Maa and Bhaiyya waited. I pretended not to see them and pushed myself into the rear seat of the taxi, my eyes clouded with tears and I couldn't for the life of me find myself one reason why I had to say goodbye to these two; these two foolish, brave and deeply loved ones, who insisted that I should leave them because they loved me for whatever I was. And because I loved them from the bottom of my heart and the depths of my soul and they were the only ones I could call family, I acquiesced. And so I cursed myself and I cursed them bitterly

and I sped away to a new world and yet another chapter in my never-ending saga of misery, illuminated with too few and too brief moments of bright light and ecstasy.

The wooing of Jagannath: Part A

I was late, two weeks late, when I joined First Year BA in English Literature in the University College in Trivandrum in the summer of 1973. Class was on when I walked in. I was determined to be different, aggressively different, and so I chose my clothes in the fashion I would have dressed, had I still been in Brighton. Unwittingly it led to a dramatic entry that would be talked about for several weeks yet.

Later on of course, I did regret my decision to wear this foreign outfit, but at that moment I had no option but to walk on to the only available seat. I figured that less students would see me at the rear of the class. I was a completely lonely stranger with no kindred spirit around, with nothing in common with the students in my class. They stared at me aghast at my audacity in turning up so attired. Their hostile stare made insecure. I was nonplussed, my hands started to shiver, my heart beat faster and I felt as small and vulnerable as a deer in the midst of the hounds.

The four boys who sat on the last row in the class, almost against the wall, stared too and watched in astonishment as I walked up to them and planted myself in the space available at the edge of the bench. Heads were turning around to look back at me. There was a stunned silence until the professor, cleared his throat and proceeded with his lecture. I sat stone faced and staring straight ahead. I dared not assume a flip and casual attitude, not only because I was terrified almost to the point of going into fits, but because I did not wish to draw attention to myself any further. There was a throbbing behind my eyes and my fingernails were knifing into my palms. I leaned back a little against the wooden support of the bench. The last row offered sanctuary for there were fewer who could stare at me. I hardly noticed the rustle and a movement at my side when I heard his words, “hi, welcome to the College; I am Jagannath”.

The voice was suave, calm and its obvious friendliness caught my attention. For me, it was an enormous relief, a flooding of the first wave of peace in my small body coiled tight with nerves and tension. At least someone found me suitable enough to have a conversation with. “Hi”, I replied and rewarded him with a quick tiny smile. He was tall, bony and bespectacled with a complexion that made him seem darker than he really was. His hair was parted at the left. His eyes were a light brown and they seemed to look at you in a friendly sort of way. His forehead was broad and his chin strong and prominent. He had a cool, slow smile, which, later I realised, was really a front to cover a nervousness that he attempted to hide when he spoke to me for the first time.

I didn’t realize at that moment that this was the beginning of warm and wonderful relationship that would last for three years and then forever and a day. Jagannath muffed it when he invited me out for tea at the college canteen the minute the bell rang the class to an end. I hardly knew the guy and I declined. I guess it was but the false start to a great story: a tale that was fated to be, as my life entered into yet another phase altogether; into another orbit taking me away from familiar places and faces into uncharted territory and unplumbed emotions.

The next couple of weeks saw us together, a fivesome, a mixed bag of contradictions, of odds and ends that jelled in some strange way. The rest of the four had already become pals, all of them being in the same hostel close to the college. I realized I had soon become the center of the amorphous group, around which the others moved in some form of tandem, akin to the nucleus of an atom with the protons and neutrons moving and whirling and circling and yet staying together.

I realized too that it was some kind of an uncommon relationship in a place where contact between the sexes was taboo in many ways. In any college in these parts, the boys moved in circles very different from the girls, who themselves went around in exclusive slow moving herds of rustling skirts and wet hair and the smell of coconut oil rising like a cloud around them. I had hardly any contact with any of the other girls except for a few in the class with whom I had a nodding acquaintance. Apart from that, I hardly knew them; they were like so many dark moving clouds skimming along the horizon.

As for the five of us, we were something different all together. The cool collected well-read Jaggu whose introspection was as deep and penetrating as his utterances. We got on famously talking of this, that and everything under the sun. The giant Thomas, silent and friendly, passionately interested in his books, his music and his body building equipment and who knew more than he ever revealed. The ironic Chandran, with razor sharp wit and sardonic deep-set eyes. Babu, lost within himself, a brooding resident of some other shadowy planet. And so it was that we became an item, an inseparable group of young people who bonded together and formed a union, a rare and wonderful thing even amongst the friendships that at times bloom amongst young people in college.

During the days after we came to know each other, we would move to the Indian Coffee House, next door to the College gates, for the usual cuppa and biscuits and it was there that our friendship really took roots and caught on. A free period began with my now famous words, in my best cockney accent “coffee, tea or me?” Jaggu, of course, had his own inimitable answer. It became a ritual for us, whenever we opted to stroll to the ICH, to smile over the hackneyed question and the bright response.

We used to walk slowly across the college grounds and through the gates up to low-roofed white-washed tiled building that became the staging ground for the great hours of stimulating discussions and debates that we had. Within the campus too, there was the college canteen towards which we would sometimes meander because it was closer, though really not so conducive to the long hours of discussions and debates.

In a way it was strange, the kind of things that we used to talk about, especially because even amongst the rest of the little groups that did form in the college, it was clear that in our little assembly there was in more abundance the qualities of substance and fibre. We were serious, but not unduly so; we were fun, but also filled with an earnestness essential for the bonding of the permanent kind. And though we talked, as young people may never have had, we were silent too, as we jointly contemplated the great mysteries of Life.

In the first few days as we got to know each other and we made the initial introductions, I remember telling them that my parents were doctors who were hitherto living abroad and had now come back home after having retired from their professions. My assigned name was Sara Chacko, the surname being my mother’s maiden name, adopted after due deliberation in the course of the activities set into motion after Choti Maa had decided that I should move out from the little village and take up my higher education elsewhere, where I would be no different from the rest of the students who thronged the college.

I could have been Saraswati Chaudhary which was, of course, my real name, but that would have generated a lot of questions quite too difficult to answer. What was such an obviously North Indian girl doing in a Christian household and what mysteries were hidden in the metamorphosis of this child bride who flew from the brown earth of Surpura in Rajasthan to the green waterways of Kerala via the western city of Brighton lying on the seaboard between England and France.

The lie came not so easily to my lips, but it effectively hid the trauma and the complicated nature of my growing up. I hated this unnecessary deceit but realized that in the long run, it would be necessary to employ these stratagems to survive with equanimity in the rough and unpredictable world around. I instinctively divined that if the others came to know about the tragedies that had befallen me, the perspective they had about me, would undergo a substantial change.

From being friends, they would turn to being sympathetic busybodies: they would be curious to know the details of what had happened and, thereafter, they would no longer regard me as just one of the boys. I would be distanced, I would be different; I was touched by a malignant Fate and it would become necessary to treat me with a changed protocol. And I detested that. I realized acutely that I was completely different in the nature and quality of my life, and I hated that this difference should be revealed to anyone at all.

Life in the college was good, especially with the presence of outstanding teachers, though student politics sometimes disrupted classes. On such occasions, we used to go to the library and work on our notes and reference books for several hours on end, until it was time for me to leave for lunch to the Zenana Hostel. At times when study had extended over several hours, we would, of course, take a well-deserved break at the hostel canteen. Sometimes I would beg off to go to the hostel where I could sit down and write my long weekly letters to Choti Maa and Bhaiyya. My room mate Fatima would be there very often; she did not seem to bother too much about missing classes, though it was obvious that she was not a bad student. She was in a different college, quite far away from the city. We had a working relationship, though quite formal. And I found her too overbearing and only too willing to take over the command authority in matters pertaining to the sharing of our room!

One day, sitting in the Indian Coffee House, I recollect that the discussions turned to the cultural and social milieu of Kerala, as to what really made these people different from the rest of the country. We talked about the high literacy rates, the comparative freedom that the women seemed to enjoy and the political experiments that this narrow strip of land had tried out in its growth. We talked too of the possible direction that the State was going to. I was a little at sea during these talks, my knowledge of such matters being skimpy and inadequate. The discussion then turned to the necessity of a unique set of social and ethical values that define a people and brand them different from the rest and which really makes them what they are. Jagannath argued eloquently that a people’s everyday social and religious character gives them their own unique identity.

Why are Keralites what they are, he asked, if not for the tolerance and equanimity that they display: is it not well known that the adherents of the major religions of the country live cheek by jowl in happy coexistence? If not for the morning baths that

its citizens insist on and the almost fanatical hygiene and cleanliness that they practice that make them some of the tidiest people in the subcontinent. If not for the Onam festival when the offices close for a week and people from all over the world come to see the elephant processions and the snake boat races and partake of the gastronomical delights that are absolutely unique to this part of the world. If not for the pastel saris and the white dhotis adorning their dark brown bodies, the graceful dances that the women sway to, the small yellow bananas that hang in bunches outside tea shops everywhere, the fisherwomen with their seductive sway as they carried on their heads the flowers of the ocean and haggled with the mistress of the household. If not for the sinuous coconut trees, the long sea coast.

I sat listening as Jagannath forcefully argued that it was the everyday sights and sounds of Kerala and the simple religious and social practices, the unique language combining Aryan and Tamil tongues and the myriad little things we see around us everyday, and what we do not see elsewhere, that make the Keralite what he really is. He maintained that the matrilineal system of inheritance that his family, for instance, practiced was the necessary result of the desperate times that the State had passed through, as one royal kingdom wrested power from another in a long chain of internecine wars and feuds. Be that as it may, today it is a social characteristic that Kerala so uniquely displays and one of those characteristics, which gives it a special identity defying replication.

Thomas had his own theories about the admixture of the civilizations arising out of Moplah influx in the north and the Christian infusion in mid-Travancore, both coming from the sea. Along with the deep-rooted in situ Dravidian culture, this had produced from the retorts and test tubes and mixing bowls of this social laboratory, a product of much complexity that anthropologists studied with wonder and admiration. He spoke with some satisfaction about the contributions made by the Christian influence somewhere about the second half of the first century A.D. when St. Thomas and his followers had converted high caste Brahmins to the new religion and had embarked on a programme of social change which was even now seen in the efforts made by them in education and medicine. He spoke with pride about these efforts, which helped in making the State one of the most socially developed in the country.

Babu intervened and argued that the high level of education had led to also a high levels of resentment as the educated unemployed in large numbers contributed to the ire of the disenfranchised youth. Unemployment in recent times had led to resentment and dissatisfaction and the resultant political experimentation had seen Kerala produce the first Communist government in the country. He was angry that the capitalist bourgeoisie had not appreciated the necessity of instilling the concept of public property and why it was necessary for wealth to be shared so that fruitful development of the social structure could take place. It may be necessary to destroy and create again, if we were to get rid of the burden of the past and manufacture a new societal order. Had not the advocates of this grand theory terrorized the State with their brand of naxalism, which had seen the heads of landlords severed from their bodies and displayed on trees or gateposts? Was this not a lesson for the people at large to ensure that the rich do not live in ivory castles and ignore the concerns of the poor people?

Chandran listened carefully but spoke little except to add cynically that the Marxian dialecticism discussed by political parties was something very few understood and which countries in the west had long ago discarded as a failed ideology that had lost its relevance. To think that a fringe group could influence and redirect the course of the political history of the State was to think that the people had lost their commonsense. History teaches the lesson of the middle path and the precept of moderation in all things.

I listened in silence, partly because I was not really clued in to the political developments of this tiny State on the shores of the Arabian Sea. And also, partly because I was observing the ebb and tide of conversation as it flowed and spread around the table in the coffee house. It gave me a sense of peace and normalcy and an assurance that in my life too, like in those of these others, I could search for the normal, the ordinary, the common place and that I too, could one day hope to live the everyday life, where great tragedies and momentous events do not appear with regular frequency as they had in mine.

It was Jaggu who turned to me and asked: “ And what do you think, Sara? Do you think that a social tradition, in the likes of shared customs, religion, rituals, language and so on are necessary for an individual’s identity to be really established?”

In a way it was a question that had often disturbed me. Young though I was, I was keenly aware that the cataclysmic changes of my life would leave me with a queer admixture of social markers, would render me hopelessly mixed up, would leave me with no unique identification with my people and my social class. How could the deep brown earth of Rajasthan’s Surpura with its mustard fields possibly have anything in common with the seaboard of Brighton, where life was explosively lived and gaudy and full of high spirits? And what could Brighton’s values have anything to do with the paradise of Kerala and its green pastures and waterways where politics was as much a part of everyman’s life as breathing? And where did that leave me: confused and mixed up and deeply bewildered?

“That’s a difficult question for me to answer, Jaggu, since I have seen both Brighton and Kerala and the sets of values of both the places are imbibed in me.” I had consciously left out the early part of my life, my Surpura village, for I was determined that the tragedy that was mine would forever be unrevealed. No one knew about it and revealing it would only confuse the others terribly. They saw me only as a repatriate, the daughter of wealthy Christian parents who had come home to enjoy the benefits of a retired life blessed by earned foreign exchange from abroad.

“But I would love to have a set of social and community ideals and values that would stay by me through out my life and set the foundation for an identity that would be uniquely me and me alone, even while I continue to remain at peace and at one with the rest of the world around. I do agree with you that every person must be set in such a backdrop for his life to be meaningful. You cannot be adrift in a meaningless world; you must have some guiding lights to help you chart out your path. ‘No man is an island...’ and the more I see of this world, I am convinced about the ultimate necessity of this value background for your own mental, psychological well being. May be, if I am here for another couple of centuries, I would have learnt how to blend into the scenery.”

“But”, I added, “why are we all in such a serious intellectual mood today, don’t we have anything else to talk? We sit in a coffee house and pretend to be intellectual philosophers, while the fact is that we are all below twenty and don’t know anything about anything. So as the bishop said to the actress, let’s just enjoy Life!” That was the end of the conversation and it was time for the group to break up and move back at the end of the day to their respective hostels.

Jaganath wished to visit the British Council Library located not too far from the Coffee House and was moving on in that direction. He glanced back at me as I stood uncertain, whether to move back to the college campus or to get back to the Zenana hostel: “Sara, would you like to come and see the Library; maybe you’d like to become a member”.

“Ok,” I called out and walked alongside him as we covered the short distance to the Library. The streets were filled with people and traffic. The double-decker buses reminded me of Brighton as they moved in a stately fashion down the street. The cyclists and the pedestrians made the scene lively. Everybody seemed to be talking and there was the loud cacophony of voices and laughter and horns blowing and cycle bells tinkling and the roar of the buses spewing smoke.

At the State Secretariat gates, there was a crowd of protesters agitating for some unknown cause, some profound philosophical argument that was of no interest to the passers-by at all. They raised their clenched fists to the sky and shouted slogans against the government. I was amused to hear Jagannath say that this gate was specifically earmarked and reserved for the protesters: Satyagraha gate was the name given to it!

We moved along the walls of the imposing Secretariat building and then turned to the left and down the leafy walk to the British Council. As we entered its gates, we could immediately feel the difference that the ambience of the Library made to the people who entered it. It was a small library, but the walls were lined with countless books and I was glad to see that they represented some of the choicest authors and their works in British Literature. There were some chairs and tables for those who wished to study and write. The people were quiet or talking in whispers. Jaggu took me to the Librarian and introduced me to him and requested that I be made a member. Some forms were required to be filled up and countersigned from the college authorities. I found it surprising that a person who wished to read books would have to have his credentials verified. But so be it. Jaggu took out some books on Shakespearean criticism and then we were out of the building.

I recollect that this was the first time we were really on our own together, just both of us, without the rest of the group. It was a nice feeling; to instinctively know that here is a guy who had respect for you, who would not utter an improper word, who would display unimpeachable conduct. In Brighton I remember there was the usual crowd of boys who would hang around in school, strutting around with roving eyes. And though they were mostly ok, there were some who could not control the hormones raging within them. There were some unruly and unnecessary scenes at times that were usually put down firmly by the school authorities. I had kept away from any close friendships with the boys, though there were a couple of them, quite decent in fact, who would have been only too glad to be with me, had I given them the slightest signal.

Here, in Kerala, I understood in a strange perspicacious way that Indian morals were a different kettle of fish altogether. My early days in Surpura had ensured that the laws of rural society were firmly engraved as in stone in my mind. In the village, one was to suppress and control rather than to express and articulate. Men were men and the outside world, that is the world outside the doors of home, was theirs to govern, to work in, to make deals for, to fight about. Within the walls of the home, the women had some voice and the day-to-day domestic management was largely theirs to command. The expression of emotions and feelings was muted and kept under a tight leash.

That is why it was all the more interesting to know that Jagannath had an interest in me that was more than that of just a classmate. I had seen his reactions to my by-now-well-known entrance into the college. He was more taken in than taken

aback and to know that he was a pleasant enough guy, well read and with easy manners and a personable personality, made it easy for me to get to know him better. Maybe he would be a friend indeed. I yearned for someone with whom I could discuss my problems.

I liked the way he used to explain his thoughts and ideas to me. As young, concerned and thoughtful persons, we did talk of many philosophical matters such as destiny and fate and the existence of God, for example. Jagannath took time to explain how he regarded the concept of the Maker:

“You know, Sara, some people face up to acute crisis situations with prayer and meditation and find great peace and solace. There are others who consciously adopt a stoic and philosophical attitude and pretend that whatever is to happen will happen and there is nothing that one can do to avert the tragedy should it befall you. There are yet others who opt to be flippant and carefree and make light of even titanic catastrophes. And again, there are some who are too hard and inflexible to feel anything at all.”

“But as for me, I find that I am all of these people and all at the same time. Something like a will-o-the-wisp, I float among the sub-headings of these categories. I assume the shape and the colour of the passing moment; a true chameleon, which blushes with the same hue that it is surrounded with at the point of time in question. Poetically speaking, I am like the deep pool of water that reflects the fickleness of the sky overhead. Who knows what I am: not even I could hazard a guess, because I change and change and am never constant.”

“Recently, an elderly relative of mine, my mother’s eldest uncle actually, was ill and had to undertake surgery. The women of the family, of course, having no logic in their heads, (no need to shake your head, Sara!) went into paroxysms of grief even as he was wheeled into the operating room. They knew full well that the surgery, though a major one, had no real potential of danger to life. But weep they must.”

“I have serious objection to your biased opinion about women,” I said.

“Shut up and listen, Sara: at that that point of time I was at my philosophical best, a superior intellectual being with no faith in

petty and unreasonable sentiment. I knew that *que sera sera*. I was astonished, therefore, to realize that the mere sight of my mother with the tears rolling down her cheeks was enough to make me toss aside all stoicism and feel the sting of unwanted tears at the back of my eyes. I started to agonise at the thought of the dreadful potential of the moment and the dangers that the surgery could bring upon the frail human body.”

“A minute later I decided that enough was enough and I became a hard and rigid person, determined not to feel the slightest emotion. It is better to be callous than make a fool of myself in the public eye by displaying trivial sentiments. My mind then wandered over casual and flippant thoughts, perhaps in an attempt to ward off the possibility that I may indeed break out into an unwanted and uninvited pouring forth of unchecked emotions. Perish the thought!”

“By that time, the drugged and exhausted patient was wheeled out of the operating room and he was received by a fresh outburst of sobs and tears. Suddenly, I had to ask what the hell was happening to me, why was I feeling this heaving in my chest too: fool that I am... And horror of horrors, why was I mouthing prayers and invoking the names of myriad gods and pledging a dozen coconuts at the nearest temple, church or mosque! It was a most confusing moment in my life, Sara!”

I was in splits as he went on in this fashion and he was smiling too and I was enjoying myself, as I have never had for quite some time now.

“I was ashamed at myself for having neither the strength nor the disposition to be steadfast to at least one true characteristic. I had no faith in myself; nor did I have the true grit that fidelity of temperament should bring in a person of steady character. My character plays truant and runs hither and thither with each passing moment. Worse still, it joins the enemy when it can’t stand up and be counted. It cannot defend itself and thus offends the sense of uprightness of spirit that every member of the human race should proudly possess.”

“Sometimes, I pause and reflect about this sorry state of affairs. Am I the only one with this strange melee of conflicting thoughts and permanently confused state of varying emotions? Or is it that this is a common feature of the entire human race never revealed fully, though secretly acknowledged by each and every one... is this one of the great unexplained mysteries of the species called *homo sapiens*? Now tell me Sara, what am I to do? And where do I even begin to justify myself to myself when I have such a poor opinion of myself. And if I may ask, do you feel anything like this at all.”

It was hilarious, this monologue of his and it was all the more astonishing since I had never before heard him expound like this on any subject. But his sudden question to me on what I did really think about the concept of God and fatalism and the

like suddenly unsettled me. Not that I had never thought deeply on the subject; but I had my views and since he had been so forthright with me, I thought I might as well articulate what I really felt about the whole damned mystery.

“Jaggu, we women are not all of us dumb, you know. Some of us do think and really, for some reason or the other, I have thought about this great, unresolved issue quite a bit. I am more or less convinced that things just happen; they happen without rhyme or reason and they cause happiness or great sorrow and it matters little to Whoever or Whatever it is that is out there whether we are gladdened or put to sorrow. Remember Mrs Hridayakumari teaching us King Lear: ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport...’

“Well, Jaggu, I don’t know about the gods, but the Powers out there are just not bothered about us as individuals or as to whether an action we do should result in a return action as punishment or as reward. Cause and effect: I think the theory should be debunked. The secret of the universe is that there is no secret. The essence of the mystery is the occurrence of random events. Events take place with no logic or continuity or significance. We, as poor mortals seek for meaning and look for symbols and interpret these events as if they reflect the great purpose of the Almighty: acts of a benevolent fate, and sometimes of a malevolent evil that seeks to destroy. But that is not so, events just happen and they happen irrespective of the person’s goodness or badness.”

“But that is not to say that Life is completely without meaning. Even in the midst of all the chaos and unexplained nature of events, we can try to make sense by exercising our reason and our logic and trying to face up to difficult situations with genuine concern and empathy. Remember the famous analogy of the shipwrecked raft in the ocean. The people on the raft have to stick together if they have to survive as they float on the ocean. They have no clue as to the direction they are going, or what their ultimate destination will be, but on this apparently directionless journey they have to hammer out a compromise amongst themselves.”

“Tasks are to be identified and apportioned out, to determine how their food requirements are to be met, to have arrangements for a lookout to warn them of danger, to nominate a person to cater to their health needs, and find out a philosopher to guide them in their troubles and worries and so on. In effect, this is a mini society where order and regularity is brought in and imposed on a desperate and chaotic situation. I guess I am of that kind of a belief; that despite the absolute randomness of events in this universe, it is still possible to arrive at the reasonableness of Life and to impose the semblance of an ordered civilization on what is apparently a despondent state of affairs.”

“Hell, I must be the biggest bore on the planet: I wonder why you didn’t shut me up quite an hour or so ago. I talk like an unemployed philosopher who has no audience and is slowly going out of business. Now why are you staring at me like that?”

Jaggu was gaping at me with wide open eyes and he had a strange expression on his face that I really could not identify. I wondered whether I had put him off completely. It is difficult in the best of times to appreciate a woman who talks too much. And to think of someone who talks about God and fate and the like: it must be really intolerable to the typical Indian male.

“ Well, I guess... I think I was a little surprised to realize that you have been thinking about such matters and I must say that you do know how to express yourselves so well. I am really taken aback; you know... it is amazing to think that girls of your age get the time to ponder about such serious matters when they should be thinking of new dresses or how to comb the hair differently.”

“There you go again,” I hooted, “why do you insist on underestimating women kind, even if we do have a woman as our Prime Minister who can run rings around any man in the Cabinet!”

“I didn’t know Indira Gandhi was a woman” he said. The joke was stale and I knew he was being flippant. But I realized that Jaggu’s appreciation of me had changed that moment very radically and that he would never again think of me as just another college girl. It was a moment of transition that would have a very serious import on the course of our relationship in the future. In a way it was a little sad, but I guess there has to be growth and evolution as relationships change and mature.

Fatima

The time has come now to introduce more fully, yet another character in the unfolding tale, one who was seen briefly in the Zenana Hostel as Sara's roommate. The new entrant in this story is Fatima Ahmed, the estranged only daughter of a widower plantation owner, who had left her home in the hill station of Munnar and had come to pursue her studies in Trivandrum, much against the wishes of her father who wished, who ordered, that she enter into holy matrimony with the eldest son of his best friend, a business man himself. She is Sara's roommate in the Zenana hostel and is a hot headed and conceited girl. She is tall and lean and stern faced. She had much regard for Sara which was returned by her with some coolness, until now, that is...

The distance between the two was not obvious, but it was there all the same, partly because it offended Sara's senses to find Fatima flagrantly violating the rules of good conduct and etiquette with such nonchalance and carelessness. Sara, extremely polite and gentle with all those who came into contact with her, could never even think of raising her voice to anyone at all, even if she found the situation aggravating. So, she found in the manners and affectations of Fatima, a spirit that was too audacious and bold for her liking. Nevertheless, she had to admit that she was fun to be with, as Fatima was wont to curse and criticize those whom she knew and those whom she did not, both with equal fervour and spirit.

She had left her Abba and her home in defiance of her father's restrictions and had vowed never to return until Abba retracted his orders and gave her the freedom to choose the man of her choice. Not that she had anyone in mind at all at that time, but the principle of the thing was what mattered. It was an enthralling story, as such intransigence was hardly ever heard of in traditional Muslim families and Sara wondered how it was that Fatima had the courage, or perhaps the arrogance, to take such a stand. The reason was not very difficult to find.

Fatima was financially independent. Her Ami, before she passed away after a long ailment, had provided an endowment for her that virtually rendered her free from her family insofar as her financial requirements were concerned. About a year after her mother passed away, to the great sorrow of father and daughter (both of whom grieved for her in totally different ways), in fact on the very day she turned eighteen, the funds had been made over to her through a quiet bank transaction that Abba had no idea of. A week thereafter, she had left her beautiful estate home ensconced in the clouds that covered the Munnar hills and had arrived at the Mar Ivanios College in Trivandrum for her admission as a Science student in first year B.Sc.

There was no communication between father and daughter thereafter, although concerned relatives and friends interceded on each other's behalf, without their consent or request. Cold stone had replaced the vibrant, courageous heart of Fatima and her father had turned his face away, denying that he had ever had a daughter. He vowed to cut her off from his will and the substantial properties that he had accumulated in the course of his business. In turn, Fatima would growl and curse at him for the rigid and unreasonable stand he had taken and would deny the fact that she was ever a daughter to him.

It is the fate of the Zenana Hostel to only admit single female boarders who are either working women or students. Sara had followed the same route and so did Fatima and by a coincidence that was truly remarkable, considering how things did really turn out later and how the two girls leaned on each other's shoulders through the most difficult days of their separate lives, they found that they had been allotted the same double room.

It was also an unusual relationship as it was largely one sided, with Fatima talking, shouting, swearing, most of the time and taking charge of the management of their room and Sara being a patient listener and more or less a victim of the supercilious angry young woman. And to think that their relationship continued on the same fashion without any substantial change for the next two-and-a-half years is also remarkable when one considers how close the girls really became in the matter of one single traumatic week, when both of them were in the third year of their graduation studies.

The event that was to redefine their relationship came one early dawn in the form of a telegram addressed to Fatima. The sleepy-eyed Fatima grabbed it from the ayah, ripped open the telegram, scanned the bold typed letters pasted in strips therein and promptly collapsed on to the floor. She dribbled out a groan that was torn from the inner recesses of her stomach, keening out the anguish of a young lonely woman now suddenly left with no parent to stand by her. The telegram reported that her Abba had left his terrestrial abode at eight in the night and the last words he had uttered was to enquire about Fatima.

A startled Sara jumped out of her bed, and with the help of the ayah laid out the supine Fatima unconscious on the carpet. She quickly read the contents of the telegram and realized in a flash that she would now have to take charge. She dispatched the ayah to the warden and to the room of a lady doctor who, fortunately, was in residence in the Zenana hostel, awaiting the allotment of suitable accommodation from her hospital. By the time the doctor appeared, Sara had splashed a few drops of water on Fatima's face and was happy to realize that she was returning to consciousness. The doctor, now apprised of the

situation, only instructed that she may like to order tranquillizers to calm her down and that there was nothing else she could do except wait for Time to heal the sudden trauma.

It was, therefore, left to Sara take her in her arms and quieten her down and give her a glass of water and force her to take some tea. The tears would not stop and she cried from the deep bottomless well of agony, filled to the brim with her desperate sorrow. It seemed all of a sudden that the words of anger and resentment that she had been so casually mouthing all these past many months was nothing but a façade for the genuine unending love she had for her Abba. Despite the fact that he had disowned her and despite the fact that she had left her home in rage and antagonism, the love of the daughter for her father had not been quelled. It had survived through anger and estrangement like an adamant flower in a desert.

Fatima wanted to leave immediately for Munnar where the funeral was scheduled for the late evening. It was a long distance away but she would go immediately and Sara, of course, was in no position to dissuade her from it. And why should she: if the poor girl wanted to go, perhaps in an attempt to make up for the lost years of love and affection, then why should anyone stop her. She only worried how Fatima would go the long distance all on her own.

It was then that Fatima requested her for the one obligation she was really not prepared for. Fatima, with tears still flowing down her cheeks asked if Sara would go along with her to Munnar. She promised that they would be back by the day after the next. She only wanted to bid her last farewell to her Abba, to try and make up for the terrible wrong that she had done him and seek his forgiveness; then they would return back with no delay. The sudden request threw Sara into a predicament. How could she do that: how could she manage this task of accompanying and consoling Fatima all the way up to Munnar and then bring her back. What would she do in a strange place where she had no role to play, where she would be a complete outsider to everybody else? She even thought for a second, a little uncharitably perhaps, as to why she should be the one to take up this onerous task when there were others how could very well do the same thing, and more efficiently.

The long and the short of it was that Sara was left in no position to refuse. With some reluctance she packed her overnight bag and helped Fatima with her suitcase while somebody went for a taxi. Sara had to ask her warden to pass on the message to the College as she would not be able to make it for the next two days in view of this sudden crisis. And then, after a hurried bite of toast and coffee, they were in the taxi and on their way to the railway station for the train ride to Kottayam from where they would take a taxi to the hill station.

The journey was long and exhausting, not because the journey itself posed too many problems, but because throughout the train ride, in fits and starts, Fatima suddenly went into loud wails and sobbing and had to be held and consoled as best as Sara could manage. Sometimes she smashed the palm of her hand on her forehead and let out a mournful groan that was heartbreaking to see. Since they were traveling second class in a crowded carriage, this also meant that Sara had to whisper explanations to the curious passengers in her accented Malayalam, about the facts of the matter. Invariably everyone was very sympathetic and Fatima and Sara were offered water to drink and fruits and snacks all the way up to Kottayam, as if that would reduce the grief of the tragedy that had so suddenly struck the poor girl.

At Kottayam, they got out of the station and immediately found a taxi, which would take them all the way up to Munnar. The driver was an old man, avuncular and friendly and when he came to know of the news of the demise of Fatima's father, he suddenly braked the car and turned back to look at them and asked: "You mean Suleiman Ahmed Saar? He has passed away! Hai Bhagawan, when was this: I am sorry; I did not know; what a fine man he was, you mean you are his daughter, Fatima Mol? Hai Bhagawan, Hai Bhagawan, you have come back after all... Mol, do you know that I have carried Suleiman Saar in this very taxi so many times: he was always very generous to me. Whenever he went on his business trips and needed a taxi from here, he would always ask for me."

This started a fresh bout of weeping from Fatima and the driver quietened down so as to not distress her further. They drove in silence for the next many miles as the landscape changed and they started climbing into the higher ranges of the Western Ghats. Suddenly it was all cool and green and the hills in the distance had turned blue and there was a shimmer all around and the air was fresh and clean. There was the sound of running water everywhere and the hidden presence of birds and jungle creatures. The taxi was struggling its way up and the view from the car window was spectacular and brilliant. The road was not very wide and every few minutes they had to stop and allow the downward moving vehicles to pass by before they could move on. The temperature was distinctly cooler now and Sara was glad that she had remembered to bring along a pullover for the trip.

Suleiman Saar's estate was about five miles downhill from Munnar town and by the time they reached the gates of the vast country house, it was already late afternoon and they saw the huge crowds that had gathered in silent obeisance for the solemn occasion. Fatima paid off the taxi driver who said that he would wait for some time and attend the funeral himself before he left. It was clear to Sara that Fatima's father was a well-known and immensely respected person, dear to the labourers who worked on his plantation and loved by his friends and relatives.

It was almost time for the body to be lifted up and carried to the funeral site very close to the estate. There was the sound of women keening and their sighs and muted cries were piteous to hear. A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Fatima rushed in, helter-skelter, her dupata flying and her sandals clattering on the cemented gateway. She was immediately recognized and there was a long bout of whispered conversation amongst the lookers on. Sara felt odd and out of place but was happy that nobody even glanced at her.

Fatima was the center of all curious glances. There were some frowns and snide remarks too for the prodigal daughter had returned too late to bid her father goodbye. Nevertheless, most of the family members drew Fatima close to them, embraced her, hushed her up and took her into the house where she would be able to cry her heart out in sorrow and anguish, in regret and remorse, for having been the unrepentant child who could not forgive her Abba for having been unforgiving himself.

The question would haunt her all her life: should she have been the first to say that she was sorry or should the old man have melted first and invited her back again into his heart and indeed, into his home and hearth. It takes a life time to learn that forgiveness has no protocol, no rules, no schedule of powers or delegation of responsibilities. Blessed is the one who simply forgives and does not stand on formalities as to who should take the first step. Blessed is the one who has the simple strength to draw the other person into an embrace and allow the past to dissolve in the tears of contrition and repentance.

Sara was left all alone for a few moments on the verandah, before Fatima sent someone to bring her in. Under the high ceiling of the main sitting room lay the mortal remains of Suleiman Saar, Fatima's Abba. The rest of the family members, all in white, were seated scattered all over the room keeping a respectful distance between themselves and the bier. In the presence of the dead body, Sara felt herself suddenly weary and tired. Some distant memories were dredged up, like old negatives shuffled before her retina. They were not quite clear and distinct, but fell across the present moment like a brooding shadow.

For a moment, it seemed to her that the room was turning around; the colour of the walls was changing to green in a queer fashion; she found it difficult to breathe and the room was starting to spin around her. She quickly sat down on the floor in the corner of the room along with the other family members and took a deep breath to calm herself down. And then she waited in watchful silence. It seemed to her that she had performed the task that was demanded of her and that now she would only have to wait until it was time to take Fatima back to Trivandrum. She briefly worried about where she would stay for the night and how she would manage in a strange house in the midst of all the strange people.

But then it was time for the body to be lifted up and taken away. The mullah was uttering his prayers and the people were responding and the prayers were soon over. The women did not attend the actual funeral ceremonies: these were tasks best left to the men folk and so Sara found herself utterly without a friend in a house full of grieving women. Fatima was made much off and surrounded by her cousins and childhood friends who embraced her and kissed her and wept over her. There were some loud whispers now and then as word spread that Fatima had finally returned and that she could have very well come three years earlier rather than now, when there was no purpose being served with her Abba having gone to the home of his Maker. But the elderly women shushed these whispers down and made her feel as comfortable as was possible in the circumstances.

The long wait for the men to return had to be gone through and then it was soon night and the arrangements for sleep and food and the many domestic tasks to be performed were being gone through. It was clear that the management of the household had been temporarily taken over by Suleiman's sister who had come in from her home in North Kerala and was unobtrusively and efficiently ordering the servants about, achieving maximum efficiency with minimum fuss.

Gradually Fatima, now coming out of the trauma of the last few hours suddenly realized that she had virtually ignored Sara for these past few hours. She rushed over to her and apologized profusely for being so impolite and uncaring and took her up to her own room where she had spent the many years of her childhood growing up in that lovely country house in the clouds of Munnar.

In the midst of all that rush and bustle, in the agony of tears and mourning, someone whispered to her that Abba had left a will specifically leaving all his vast property and wealth to Fatima, his one and only daughter, whom he had truly and deeply loved and whom, despite his threats and admonitions, he had decided to name as heiress of his estates and his business. It was the last blow that would destroy whatever was left of Fatima's composure and peace of mind for a very long time. Once and for all she realized the healing power of forgiveness and the love and solace that it brought into minds that were soured by hate and resentment.

The view from Fatima's room was wonderful and the long bay windows were specifically meant for viewing, but Sara was grateful to lie down for a few minutes and rest her weary body and think about the day that had just passed. She suddenly felt the terrible grief that Fatima must have gone through in the past twelve hours and was overpowered by a great outpouring of concern and empathy. Fatima was no headstrong or arrogant woman: she was just a little lost girl who had covered up her

great sorrow under the garb of invective and swear words against those who had really loved her and whom she had really loved too, but was afraid to admit.

There, with the fading light of the day obscuring the view of the magnificent mountains in the distance, in a long uninterrupted spell of the outpouring of words, of guilt, of love, of admitted shame at her obduracy, Fatima spilled her heart out to Sara and cried till she felt she had voided herself of all that was in her until there was nothing but a cavernous vacuum within. She cursed herself for her stubbornness, her blindness, her immature lack of comprehension and wished that the earth would open up under her feet and swallow her up.

Sara, overwhelmed by the torrent of words and tears, the unchecked emotions that flowed over her, felt miserable and small and inadequate to deal with the situation. The memories of another day, another time, another village refused to lie low and they surged around her in a maelstrom of images and pictures in her mind. She quietly got up and hugged Fatima sitting bent over on the desk next to the bed and the two girls had a quiet cry together.

It was the start of a great friendship that would last a life time. It was too, for Sara, the start of a confession of sorts, an outpouring of the deep worries and questions that Sara had kept pent up within her all these many years. It would be the first time that she felt she had a friend who would understand her and would advise her and hold her hand in moments when she needed it the most.

And thus it was that in the quiet of the night, when the hurried and listless dinner was over and the men and the women had all retired for the night to mourn in the darkness in their own way for the gruff and generous man who had been the center of their lives for so many years, that Sara sat down with Fatima on the beds in the bedroom, with the cold seeping in through the glass windows and the sounds of many night creatures calling out in the middle of the forest, and, in her quiet and restrained manner, poured out the story of her own life.

The fragrance from the lime trees outside the window filled the room and it was in its pleasant ambience that Sara spoke at length on the sad and miserable life that it was her burden to live. The story of Surpura with its dark, brown fields and its yellow mustard flowers and the sad commonplace everyday event of little children entering into matrimony without a clue as to what it all meant. Then the sudden deaths of her parents, the flight across the oceans, the happy days of her life in Brighton, the quick collapse of the family on that one eventful day with the near death of Chacha, the flight in reverse across the ocean to Mavelikara and the singular circumstances in which Choti Maa and Bhaiyya and Sara lived in that little insular village with its narrow perceptions. She spoke too, for the first time, of her growing fondness for Jaggu, serving only to complicate matters further, knowing full well that the situation was now a great, complicated knot that refused to unwind by itself.

Later, she felt she had been foolish and selfish to have unburdened herself to Fatima at a time when the latter was herself in the throes of guilt, sorrow and self incrimination, when she was grappling with her own problems in causing untold grief to her poor old stubborn father with her own brand of conceit and arrogance. But somehow that didn't matter too much: the girls absorbed each other's grief and sorrow and dismay and in a small but noticeably strengthening way, they gained some modicum of courage and fortitude to help them both in ways that the future alone would be able to reveal.

The next day Fatima spent in receiving visitors who came to express their condolences. Throughout the day people came in droves. The men folk would sit in the main drawing room while the women would walk into the inner lounge and sit next to Fatima, and spend a few minutes with her before moving on. Fatima had much work to do, to set the house in order and arrange for the management of the property. Of course, there were many persons who would have liked to advise her on this matter. But Fatima wisely told them that she would be back after a month and then would take an informed decision as to what to do for the future. Until then, it was decided that Abba's quietly efficient sister would manage things for a while.

The night passed once more, with the two girls in deep reflective conversation and a gradual strengthening of confidence in each other. Sara did not know it then, but it would be Fatima who would stand by her in the moments of her greatest trial and hold her hand as she would take the decisions that would change her life once more; but this time in circumstances where she would have greater control.

The next morning they were off in the taxi down the mountainside with its fantastic view and then on to Kottayam where they caught the train back to Trivandrum.

The wooing of Jagannath: Part B

Classes in the University College in Trivandrum were something like the random occurrences that I had talked about with Jaggu. Sometimes for weeks on end there was no disturbance at all and our studies went on as smoothly as they possibly could. But at other times, depending on the mood and temperament of the Communist party cadres of the State, the Students' Federation of India would suddenly throw itself into a paroxysm of activity and then classes would be disrupted. There would be loud slogan shouting and strike calls as the enraged students moved from class to class, pulled out those who had no interest in the fortunes of the proletariat and demand that the college be closed down immediately.

On one occasion, the question in dispute would be police brutality on a peaceful demonstration somewhere in the state and the lathi charge executed on the poor participants. On another, the reason to close down the college would be the policy of the government vis-à-vis private sector industrialization. On the next, there may even be a bandh call in support of labour movements elsewhere in the country, most probably from West Bengal (a sister State which had much in common with Kerala, from deeply ingrained leftist ideology to rice and fish as staple diet).

On this particular day, when classes were disrupted once again by an unruly mob of hooting boys, we groaned to ourselves. The five of us were at a loose end without a clue as to what we should do on this fine summer's day. The prospect of hanging around in the college with nothing interesting to do was not a happy one. It was Thomas who suggested that we catch the next bus to Shanmugham to see the wonderful beach of Trivandrum. It would be not be too hot and the waves of the Arabian Sea would definitely be cool. It was a kind of lovely picnic that we could enjoy. We could have something to eat at the restaurant there and then we could come back in a leisurely manner by the time it was getting dark. It was a happy thought and we congratulated Thomas for his brilliant idea as we made our way to the bus stop.

The bus was not long in coming and it was not too full and we all got seats at the rear of the bus. We chattered away amongst ourselves and even the taciturn Babu had something to say as we moved along at a fast clip. We passed through the busy part of the old town and then along the cooler and quieter roads approaching the beach. The distant roar of the sea could be first heard before the magnificent sight appeared before our eyes: the white sands and the blue waters and the growl of the surf upon the sand. There was a fine watery mist all along the shore rising into the air and it was with some excitement that we climbed out of the bus and moved forward to the beach.

For me too, a person who had lived for a good nine years at Brighton beach, this beach was very different. There, on both sides of the Palace Pier, all along the shoreline were rocks and boulders and steep cliffs and it was well nigh impossible to attempt to walk along the shore. The best view of the sea was from the road running along the shore or from the pier jutting out into the sea. But here, at this new place at the tip of peninsular India, we could walk for quite some distance along the shore for miles on end, with just the sand under your feet and the waves lapping at your toes; now that was an experience beyond description.

With the sun falling to our right, we walked along the edge of the waters. It became pretty obvious that we could not keep our sandals on. The sand was loose and tricky under our feet and we soon had to remove our footwear and walk bare feet. We rolled up the bottoms of our pants as our legs became wet and covered with sand. The seawater lapped at our feet: it was surprisingly cool and tingly. Some errant waves suddenly leapt up at us and drenched us down from the waist. But it was all great fun. As we walked along, it seemed natural for Jaggu and I to lag behind as the others walked on, with little forays into the water and pushing and pulling, with Thomas at one point even tripping Babu into the water. Babu came up spouting water and yelling some of the choicest curses that he could think off at the top of his voice. Thomas was embarrassed and looked at me and hushed him up and pushed Babu out of earshot.

I was strolling along with Jaggu on my right between the water and me, and it seemed natural to laugh a lot and smile at him and think of God's in His heaven and all's right with the world. I was telling him of the fish and chips of Brighton pier when a sudden big wave seemed to sweep towards me and I felt the cold of the water rise up to my shins and the sand was sucked away beneath my feet and I was losing my balance and trying to hold on to Jaggu's arms as he fought to maintain his own equilibrium and hold me up at the same time. For a moment he had his arms around me and his head was near mine. With some expression of alarm on his face he swung me around and held on as the wicked wave receded and things floated back to normal again. Something happened then, and I wish I could define what that was. I could see that that something had struck him more than it affected me, and indeed I was puzzled and exasperated with myself and somewhere I was a little guilty and somewhere I was a little thrilled and all in all I was confused beyond the description of words.

I felt my heartbeat tense a little and wondered at the sudden impact of those few seconds on my own equanimity. The first thought that struck me was, No Jaggu, no; this is not to be, it cannot be. You are a pal and nothing more and I shall try my

best to see that the boundaries of friendship are not crossed. You be careful too, my friend or I shall rebuff you in such a manner that you will not know what has hit you, even though I may be hurting myself in the process.

But having continued with that thought process for a few moments, the second underlying chain of emotions that swept through me was that I could not punish Jaggu for the very natural thoughts that may have grown in his mind in the last couple of years or so of our acquaintance. I cannot deny that he had grown to be very dear to me, and that I regarded him with sweet emotions that I was struggling to keep in check.

How could I burden him with my untold problems, how could I spring on to him the sudden bolt of lightning that I was married to someone I didn't know at all and that I was unavailable to anyone else at present until that particular problem was sorted out to mine and everybody else's satisfaction. This was a conundrum that refused to go away. I knew with some amount of certainty that Jaggu enjoyed every minute of my company and if I had indeed displayed even a small part of my feelings, then he would have only been too glad to move a step forward by moving a step closer.

Jaggu was a little self-conscious and he cleared his throat and muttered some form of apology for the sudden little mishap, although there was no conviction of regret or guilt in his voice. But all at once he was somber and serious and a little shaken out of the placidity that he was normally his typical mien. His bony frame was a little stooped over and he was utterly self-conscious and embarrassed. From behind his glasses he looked away and he had nothing to say for a few minutes.

Over the waters, in the distance, the gulls were screaming raucously and the sun was dipping towards the horizon. The sky was turning red and magical. A black skinned young lad was executing a complex dance with the waves as he was swept up and down and swam like a fish in the turbulence of the waves. We watched in amazement at his antics; he seemed one with the water world, a creature of the waves swirling and foaming all around him. Some young boys pursued us with little conical paper bags of peanuts and they pleaded with us to buy their stuff. Jaggu bought a few for us, and shouted to the others who were already a little far away in the distance, to come and get theirs.

"And what do you think about Emily Dickinson?" he asked in a voice as normal as he could make it. I smiled, I know unfairly, because I had no reason to feel superior to him. In fact, my predicament was impossible enough as it was but I had no option but to grin and bear it, at least for the moment. If things became serious, I would have to reveal all the details before he, before we, got too involved.

"I think she is wonderful: hope is a thing with feathers and all that you know and her wonderful sense of timing and diction with a self deprecatory style is unbeatable..."

Ordinary mundane conversation and I wondered at how we conceal to deceive when both the players in the game know only too well the nature of the thoughts and emotions that were rushing through us as we pretended to talk of inconsequential everyday matters. Hope is indeed a thing with feathers. Even a doomed man at the gallows will hope for a miracle to save him from the noose. Could I hope for some glimmer of light in the future?

As we walked along and then turned and walked back, now with the setting sun touching the horizon, the mood was quiet and mellow and gentle and peaceful. I thought how some simple memories seem to last forever in the inner recesses of the memory, like the words of that wonderful song 'gentle on my mind' that was on the air these days. This walk with Jaggu along the Trivandrum beach would last for a long time, gentle on my mind and turning and turning like a quiet windmill to bring peace and restful contemplation in troubled times, of which I had seen many, knowing full well that there would be many more in the days of my yet unfolding life.

By the time we had reached back to where we had started out from, the others were also there. Babu's shirt was still wet and clinging and I worried if he would fall sick the next day with a cold and fever. He only shrugged his shoulders and said that there was nothing that a couple of pegs could not cure. It was a typical Babusian language that we had by then come to understand and appreciate and we smiled and waited for the bus to take us back to the town.

We had all had a quick sandwich and a fizzy drink at the beach side restaurant and we were now ready to get back. Jaggu sat quiet and thoughtful throughout the return trip as we passed through the town that was slowly starting to glow in the evening with the electric lights coming on in the houses and the shops. At the Central bus stop, the others moved on to the second bus that would take them back to the University Hostel. Jaggu had an important appointment with someone and had to go with the rest. So, it was Thomas who undertook the task of taking me back to the Zenana hostel.

It was a quick trip by three-wheeler to the gates of the hostel, but as we were on our way, Thomas turned to me and asked me in a significant manner, "Sara, do you know that Jaggu thinks a lot of you?" The sentence had a double meaning as I gathered immediately, though I was not sure if Thomas meant it that way. One, that he spent a lot of time thinking about me and, two, that he had a high impression about me as a person. I was a little taken aback and I could only mutter, "is that so? And why?"

“Well, you know he has been quite taken in by you. When he is in the University hostel with us, he talks of nothing but you. I guess you must be the first girl that this rural yokel has seen who can speak English in full sentences! Sara, the guy is a gem and a wonderful friend. It is not for me to recommend him to you, but the rest of us would be glad if your present friendship can continue with him with the prospect of better things coming up in future. He is as shy as a new bride, though that is not the right simile to be used at the moment, but please do be good to him. He is simple and gentle and a great guy.”

“Thomas, this is most unlike you! Of course Jaggu is a fine person and I know that too. Why do you think that I would not be good to him? He is a good friend and we do get along well with each other and I have only good thoughts about him. Really, I quite don’t know what you mean by this question?”

And then I had to go and spoil it all by saying; “do you mean that I should be friendlier to him; that I should take him on as a boyfriend? If you do mean that, then I am afraid that you are stepping out of line, for that is entirely my business.” Poor Thomas, I guess it was as good as if I had punched him on the nose. He went suddenly still and cold, the smile on his face was wiped off and he turned his face away and said, “I am sorry, I didn’t mean that, you know... I was just...”

I had to backtrack a little immediately, “its all right, Thomas, I guess I spoke a little too fast. I know you have only his best interests in mind. And that you were looking out for him as a good friend should. I am sorry I spoke that way; so just forget it, ok?”

He cheered up a little after that, but it was clear that the mood of the evening had been ruined. By then we were at the gates of the Zenana hostel and I was getting out and walking away with a backward glance and a wave of the hand. I cursed myself for being too precipitous and not considering the thoughts and feelings of others before speaking out of hand. As I walked up to my room, it also struck me that I was jumpy because there may have been some truth in all that Thomas had talked about. Maybe Jaggu had been smitten by me completely and Thomas feared that I may not return that love in similar measure or that I may just drop him like a hot brick, this foreign returned girl who had come to beguile and entrance and then jilt him like all those foreign girls we read about in books and magazines. Foreign morals and all that!

It also struck me that if I did have feelings for Jaggu, then with this horrendous story haunting my past, I would have no option but to do just that, to forget him and ditch him and leave him bleeding in the gutter. That I may one day soon have to forget my real feelings for him and run away to discover my own destiny and suppress my love for anyone whom I may have the misfortune to fall in love with. Of all the people in this wide, wide world, why is it that it is only Sara who has not the everyday privilege to love and be loved?

Fatima in her room looked up with a smile as I entered. She was slowly coming out of the terrible depression of the past few weeks, after our trip to Munnar and the funeral of her father. Her introspection was deep and she used to go all silent and moody on occasions. But I was around most of the time, to hold her hand and to lend her a shoulder to cry on. So too, at moments when the world was too much with me and I was thrown into the depths of gloom and worry at the bleakness of the future beckoning to me, the unresolved dilemma that I must face or perish, it was Fatima who gave me the strength to raise my head up again and smile at the world outside, despite the cruel games it played on me.

The dramatic change that the trip to the hill station had made, after the many months that we had spent as roomies with hardly any conversation between us, was incredible. Now we were friends, almost sisters, and we spent hours talking about our own set of problems, gaining strength from each other’s presence and the words of comfort we gave each other. What a change a friendly face can make. Surely, just as our joys our doubled when we have someone to share them with, so too our worries are halved when we pour them out to a sympathetic ear.

The very next day, I received thrilling news by letter from Mavelikara. Bhaiyya was coming to see me, not only that, he would stay for a couple of days. I was excited and very happy. I was longing to speak to him and though it was but three months since I had seen him in the summer holidays, I really wanted to touch base and catch up on what was happening at home. Both Choti Maa and Bhaiyya were not adept at letter writing and though I did manage to make up for their lapse, it was nothing like meeting him in person and letting fall all the masks and filters I normally had to put on. He was coming the next day by train at three in the evening and I would be there at the station to meet him. In the morning, when I met the boys at college, I announced the news and watched their varied reactions.

Though I had indeed mentioned Bhaiyya to the four of them in casual conversation, the reaction of Jaggu was different from the rest of them. While Thomas and Chandran and Babu were happy and promised to take him around, Jaggu smiled a little cautiously and said “imagine, after all this time, this is the first occasion we will be getting to see him”. He seemed to be at a loss and maybe wondering how Bhaiyya would be reacting to him. He seemed to want the approbation of Bhaiyya.

In an oblique way, I did understand what was bothering him. There were some long-range plans afoot in his mind. He wanted Bhaiyya to definitely approve of him. He was hoping to get close to my family and get to know me even better. Maybe he

saw grand things for both us together in future. It was obviously not quite clear in his mind, just as it was but a whisper to me. But I shrugged these thoughts away: they were too complex and involved for to spend too much time on at this moment.

The immediate problem was where Bhaiyya would stay. He had asked me to make some arrangements for him in the town. Obviously, the Zenana Hostel was out of bounds, even for brothers: if brothers were permitted within its precincts, then there would have been hordes of brothers arriving to spend the evenings with their sisters! I was not too happy with the idea of putting him into a hotel: after all he was just about fifteen years old. The only possibility was the YMCA hostel for young people passing through the town. It was quite a feasible idea and I had indeed gone to the YMCA and sounded out the warden of the hostel some time ago. He too seemed to think that this could be arranged. It was then that an idea struck me. Could it be possible for him to stay at the University Hotel where Jaggu and the others would be able to look after him? And even before the thought had settled down into my mind, I asked Jaggu, perhaps a little too hastily: "listen, would it be possible to put him up for a couple of days at your hostel?"

There was a surprised pause and then it was Chandran who really answered the question: "I am sure it would be possible", he said, "there are quite a few parents and relatives who come to call on their wards and there are a couple of rooms available. Usually it is full up and you have to book in advance to get the beds. However, I am sure we can persuade the warden. If not, I am sure that he will have no objection to putting in an extra mattress in one of our rooms. I am sure your brother could spend a couple of nights with us. Should be no problem at all. Leave that to me, will you?"

Surprisingly, it was no sooner said than done. Chandran rushed back to the hostel and wheedled the warden into agreeing to his proposal and by afternoon he had arrived back with a beaming smile and a loud voice to triumphantly announce that he had done it. What was interesting was that he had instinctively guessed I would like Bhaiyya to be with Jaggu, which was the truth really, and he had already brought out a mattress and a couple of sheets and a pillow and stacked it in Jaggu's room. So by the time Bhaiyya's train steamed in at Trivandrum Central in the late evening next day by about six, a few hours late in fact, everything was set.

Jaggu had kindly offered to come with me to the station. I introduced Jaggu to Bhaiyya and they appraised each other quickly. Bhaiyya's quick smile said that he approved of this classmate of mine. The three of us piled into the auto and rode back in noisy and excited confusion to the University Hostel. Bhaiyya was quite thrilled to see me again and we were talking nineteen to the dozen as Jaggu sat back quietly and watched us both with a smile. By the time it was dark and Jaggu suggested that I should be dropped back at the Zenana Hostel before bringing Bhaiyya to the University Hostel for the night.

So it was a quick meeting and a sudden goodnight for Bhaiyya and me as we fixed the schedule for the next day. The Indian Railways had certainly ensured that we get no time together at all. But I was determined that the next day would be better. It would be a free day for me; I would bunk classes and take Bhaiyya out to the Museum and the Zoo and the other tourist places in the city. I waved goodbye to him as the auto took Jaggu and him back to the University hostel and I walked in through the gates of the Zenana hostel.

Next day morning, I picked up Bhaiyya from the University Hostel gates as planned. He was ready in his sneakers and his jeans and in a mood to spend some real quality time with his elder sis. It was a joy to relax and be with him and not to wear any masks and talk about everything that had been in the back of my mind. He started out by describing how he spent the night at the hostel. Jaggu had arranged for the mattress to be laid out on a sheet on the floor and was a little embarrassed that he would have to lie down there while he and Thomas lay on proper beds in the room they shared. They did indeed offer to swap places with him, but Bhaiyya would have none of it. They had then gone down to the mess for their dinner that he said was hot and oily and quite a hot mouthful, but just about palatable. Jaggu had reminded him that it becomes positively inedible when you have to eat such stuff throughout the year. There had been some protests from the student to the hostel authorities after which things would improve for some time, but would then deteriorate soon enough.

They had then got back to their rooms and spent the next couple of hours simply chatting like old friends. Jaggu and Thomas had been curious to know about our life at Mavelikara and how rural Kerala appeared to us after having spent so many years abroad. Bhaiyya had, of course, been briefed on the particular set of fictitious circumstances that I had explained to the others. The truth that we were not really siblings had to be necessarily left unrevealed. So he had played along and talked about our ailing father and how mother had to spend most of her time in nursing him and caring for him. He talked briefly about life in Brighton and how education at the little school at Mavelikara was not what he had really wanted, but that there was no other available choice. Maybe when he passed out from school he would follow his sister to Trivandrum to pick up the threads of some quality education for his graduation and for thereafter. As the night advanced, they had all tucked in for the night and gone to sleep.

Morning was busy and hectic as the boys crowded around the bathrooms and got themselves ready for the day. Breakfast was toast and omelettes and a cup of tea, which was wolfed down, as they got ready to rush to the college. Jaggu had been

particularly careful to see that Bhaiyya had his plate full with an extra toast and then had escorted him to the gates of the hostel to hand him over to me, his eagerly awaiting sister.

As Bhaiyya and I walked along, the conversation turned to life at Mavelikara and about Chacha's general health and how Choti Maa was struggling in the task of nursing him and how the neighbours were faring and how some of them had turned vicious and how some of the others, in fact very few, whom we had never considered as friends, had gathered around with real concern and sympathy to help Choti Maa in her worries.

Bhaiyya himself was finding the local school quite tough going. The children didn't take too kindly to a foreign returned boy who spoke Malayalam with an English accent and English without a Malayalam accent. He was doing well in all the classes except, of course, his mother tongue. I knew he must be going through hell, having to cope with all sorts of every day tortures; but he was tightlipped about these problems of his. I realized this was typical Bhaiyya behaviour: to downplay his personal worries and to enquire about the uncertainties and problems of the ones who were close to him.

We walked up to the gates of the Botanical gardens within the Trivandrum Zoological Park and then into the shade of the huge towering trees, not far from the animal cages and sat down for a long chat. He talked in a heart breaking voice about Choti Maa's struggles and the deep, deep sorrow that was wrecking her health and her complacency. Her smile was now cracked and worn but she bashed on regardless, spending all her time with Chacha and calling in physicians from all over, including Ayurveda doctors with their oil massages and their herbs and weeds.

The room was filled with an aroma of medicines and voices were always hushed and reverential whenever anyone walked in. In the corridor outside, there was a watchful quietude, and an unspoken tension that was coiled like a spring in the heart of Choti Maa. Bhaiyya said she walked with a fixed smile on a wooden face that seemed on the outside to be peaceful and beatific. But her fingernails were bitten to the skin and she started at sudden loud noises or raised voices. To Bhaiyya she was always serene and peaceful, though her eyes sometimes darted here and there in suppressed panic when she did not find him for even a few moments within the periphery of her sight and hearing.

Bhaiyya said she longed for my letters and she read them over and over many, many times before she put them away in a small wooden box along with her Bible and her prayer beads. She lived on the edge of her nerves in a quiet terror of the soul that she would never, ever reveal to any one, not even to Bhaiyya. The servants lived in dread of her temper, which she expressed not in anger or with loud threats but in a deliberate and cutting sarcasm that tore through their sensitivities and made them feel wretched and small. Bhaiyya had to go over to them sometimes after such occurrences and console them, saying that his mother was under great mental tension and worry with all the problems that she was facing and that they should not mind her anger and that they should ignore her outbursts, please. But mercifully, these confrontations were rare and soon enough followed by a contrition that was generous in the form of extra food and clothes for the servants.

My eyes stung with tears as I heard these words and Bhaiyya was also near weeping. For a few moments we were both overcome and we looked at each other and tried to blink away our tears and calm ourselves down. The thoughts that rushed through our minds were painful and hurting and we wondered as to where this long prolonged agony that Chacha unknowingly bore would lead. I wept a little for Choti Maa and for Chacha and worried about Bhaiyya; I wept too for myself and the ugly mess that I was in and for all the unending miseries that followed in my attendance. Brother and sister, the two who were not siblings, we hugged and comforted each other with a love that was deeper and more real than the love that any brother and sister could ever have had for each other.

It was finally I who broke the mournful mood that we were in by pulling up my precious Bhaiyya from the ground where we were sitting. I told him that I had found his look-alike in Trivandrum and that whenever I was feeling lonely I used to come over to meet this stranger who reminded me so much of him. The fact that I took him over to the cage where the baboons were housed explained everything clearly to Bhaiyya. He picked up a broken branch of a tree lying on the ground and pretended to chase me across the lawns. We stopped in front of the simian Bhaiyya, while he made faces at the poor animal who, in turn snarled and grunted at us. We laughed and joked and played around and then moved on to the canteen located on the grounds for ice cream and sandwiches.

Here I told him about the incident some months ago when we had all come to the Reptile House and I had felt a little dizzy and how the rest of them had virtually rescued me from the snake house and cared for me. I talked about the other four of my pals and especially of Jaggu, in a tone of genuine friendship and affection. Bhaiyya had pricked up his ears in alert attention when Jaggu's name was mentioned.

"You do seem to like him a lot, right?" he asked and he smiled.

I was suddenly all in confusion, starting to blush and became a little hot behind the ears and in my throat. I had no words for a minute and didn't know where to look.

“Bhaiyya, what do you mean by that?” I stuttered and stumbled and then looked down and said, “You know that can never be, don’t you?”

“Why not, Sara, the decision is for you to take and I think it is high time you did take that decision. You can’t put your life on hold forever, and you know what I say is right!”

“Bhaiyya, I have to sort it out and you know I will.”

“You are going to be twenty years old in a few months. In Rajasthan, by now you would have been the mother of three children with snot running down their noses.” I threw the napkin at him.

“And here you are still pondering over the moral implications of child marriage and its promises. You know as well as I do that marriage is a life long commitment between adults and that the rituals performed before the fire by two children hardly out of their nappies have no significance or relevance whatsoever. So I don’t think you have any reason to be particularly conscientious or dutiful in the matter at all.”

“I just need to sort it out with them, Bhaiyya, that is Giridhar and his parents and then I would be free. I don’t want the promise or commitment made by my parents to be just discarded as yesterday’s newspapers, without having made my position clear to them. It has to be a civilized parting of ways, not a severance resulting in bloodshed. And you know as well as I do that that is my stated position”

Bhaiyya was suddenly quiet; he knew my views quite well by now and respected me for it, but he had his hidden worries for me, which showed in the expression on his face.

“I know, I know, but I can’t bear to see this endless uncertainty. You have got to decide soon, or else you would have wasted your life in indecision and hesitation. And before you know it, you would have become a bitter old spinster with nothing good and wonderful to show for in your life.”

“Bhaiyya, I know and I will, I promise you. My bloody education too is in the way. I have to get some kind of educational qualifications if I am to reach somewhere in life. I promise that after I finish my graduation, I will start my moves in the right direction and by that time, I would have decided in as best a manner as is possible. I promise.”

“That’s something positive at last, and I am going to hold you on to that promise. I insist that you adhere to that schedule.”

“I promise.”

We spent the rest of the day wandering over the city sights and going up to the Kanakakunnu Palace and the old city market at Chalai. We laughed over the Malayalam movies bill boards and its garish posters and the painted faces of the actors. Prem Nazir and Madhu were the evergreen heroes. Their faces had been enlarged across a thousand screens all across the fanatically, blissfully, charmed audiences of Kerala. The buxom Sheela and the cute Sharda were their female counterparts.

At Mavelikara, some months earlier, just for the heck of it, both of us had once gone to the local flea-ridden theatre and seen the larger than life historical romance which had left us all giggly and shaking with laughter. Some of the audience was shushing and glaring at us. We had walked out at the intermission. Here in Trivandrum, we did not want to waste time once more in the theatre. So in the late afternoon, after tiring ourselves out strolling all over the city, we walked into a local restaurant opposite the imposing Secretariat offices for some masala dosa and idlis.

The restaurant lights were quite dim and it took some time for our eyes to adjust to the muted ambience. As we waited, we talked about Bhaiyya’s future plans and my hopes for him that he would one day excel in whatever he wished to do. We had an evening appointment with the rest of my friends for an early dinner and while we realized that it was a lovely gesture on their part to invite us, we did feel that we would have preferred to spend it on their own, talking about family things and Choti Maa’s endless predicament as also the uncertain future that lay like a giant shadow across my life. Our conversation turned somber but then it has always been my job to pull us back from dark moods and depressing thoughts by making some light and foolish comment.

In the corners of the restaurant room there were at least two couples taking advantage of the dim lights to cozy up to each other. They were too young to be married but about the right age to be students who had bunked classes to come here for a romantic interlude. Bhaiyya smiled but he turned away, a little embarrassed. At Brighton, he was always the shy one. Truly traditional Indian mores had been drilled into him, even though Chacha and Choti Maa had themselves married on their own and against the wishes of their families.

In fact, now that I knew all the facts, I wondered whether Chacha regretted that he had not revealed the secret of his marriage to his beloved brother when he was alive. It would have rankled in his mind like a treasonable act, most of all when his brother and his Bhabhi had fled this world with undue haste and without prior notice to him. I could guess that that particular

thought may have been on his mind just before the clattering of the spoon on the floor of the dining room that fateful day when consciousness slipped away from him and he entered this twilight world where he was now a permanent resident.

The dosas were crisp and the potatoes spicy and just right. The idlis were soft and fragrant. We polished off the plates and paid the bill and came out into the bright sunlight outside. The walk past the Statue junction and along the shops lining the street and up to the gates of the University College was lovely and relaxing.

At the turning, I happened to see the cross of the church opposite the college. On an impulse, I asked Bhaiyya to come with me for a few minutes into the church. Choti Maa had once taught me the Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary and in a quaint way, I had come to accept the soothing peace brought by the simple litany of prayers and the doctrine of faith that the religion espoused. At Brighton, we were free to go, or not to go, to any place of worship, including the small religious gatherings in the houses of friends and acquaintances where some evenings were devoted to bhajans and prayers, especially on the eve of festive occasions. Deepavali and Holi were the favourite festivals organized out there.

The church was cool and quiet, the vespers had not yet begun. Bhaiyya and I sat at the rear of the church with bent heads and cloudy thoughts. I tried to close my mind to the sounds of the street outside, to clear it of all distracting thoughts. I focused on the picture of Chacha and Choti Maa and the new life that they had given me some twelve years or more ago. It was surprising but natural that my memories of the real life faces of Pitaji and Maa from Surpura were getting faded and obscured with each passing day. I tried to retain those images as best as I could for they were associated with only pleasant memories: whatever I could remember left a warm feeling in my mind. They both had loved me with a pure and tender love and for that I was grateful beyond expression. In the nights, the memories of the awfulness of their last moments came, and came often, like waves of stupefying paralysis. I was sure that these recurrent nightmares would last with me forever.

But the ones who had been there for me in the days when I was most helpless and when I needed some one desperately were Chacha and Choti Maa. They had pulled me out of the morass of unspeakable grief and shocked disbelief, had given me a new life and a new world that I could not have dreamt of. They had nourished my soul when I was wordless, a lost child beyond recovery. They had given me the meaning of family, they had given me Bhaiyya. They had given me a self that I was coming to know only now. They had made me find myself. They had given me the strength to find my own voice and the freedom to make my own choices.

Bhaiyya, sitting on the coir mat beside me was also steeped in his own contemplations. For a moment, I shut out all my thoughts, good and bad, negative and positive, and drained my mind of all arguments and judgments and criticisms and self-pity. I let my mind become empty first and then let it fill with a whiteness and a great peaceful void that was cleansing and cathartic. I felt the peace rise in me and fill me like the cloud of incense rising from the scented altar candles.

Contact

Ultimately it had to come, though that first kiss was a long time in coming; more than two years and six months: in fact in the third year of their classes at the College. Jaggu had by now become a close friend, and someone to talk to, someone to share secrets with, someone to giggle with. Sara had, of course, not revealed the horrific secrets of her pitiful life and the terrible quandary that she was in. To him, she was not just another Keralite girl: she was different, in fact, quite different. She dressed differently, she was articulate, she did not move in a herd, she did not reek of coconut oil, she had no qualms of being seen in the company of boys, she was not shy of talking to them. He had never ever seen the likes of her before. His attraction for her was obvious from the very first day of their meeting.

Initially, Sara took it to be the obvious reaction of a young boy when confronted with a bright, coloured, moving toy that was interesting and eye catching. She too was then full of defence mechanisms, guns drawn and ready to blast, iron-clad armour to protect her from her imagined and real enemies.

It took time for Sara to realize that Jaggu was also different; he was well read, with a high level of sensitivity, with kindness, warmth and compassion that made him stand out in a crowd. He had a keen appreciation of the fine, delicate, unspoken things of life and a deep understanding of emotions and feelings that ran through people. He had too, a quirky sense of humour. Very often he almost seemed to predict what Sara was about to say and to understand some of the emotions and sentiments that ran through her. Of course, he didn't have a clue as to what her problem really was and much as she would have liked to, she couldn't really tell him. She used to wonder how he would react if she could really sit down and unburden the vast and deep ocean of her intricate problems to him.

As time passed and the very closeness of their days together in class brought them together, they realized they shared many things in common. An unending fascination for reading, the quiet engrossed contemplation of books, for the truth that shone through the writing, the revelation of human passions and ambitions, love and sacrifice, duty and honour and indeed the baser passions of anger and jealousy and hate. They admired the vastness of the comprehension that the great writers had, their understanding of the motives that moved men and women and their compassion in forgiving them for the sins they committed. How they laid bare the soul of a man and went deep into the compelling reasons that made him act in a certain manner.

They both wondered at Thomas Hardy's bleak and dark view of Life, the quiet, wry humour and understanding of Dickens. Of Shakespeare they were in awe; as the lines of Hamlet or Othello were read out in class, they felt goose pimples rise on their skin and looked at each other with surprise as if to confirm that they were both feeling the same way. They had some doubts as to whether the others too felt the same way; most were dull and uninterested and merely noting down in their books what the professor had to say. The paintings of the Impressionist artists fascinated them. Van Gogh and Gaughin and Monet and Manet and Pissarro were special favorites. They used to borrow glossy art magazines from the libraries and stare with wonder at the passion that must have moved those artists as they drew their masterpieces.

Again, music also brought them together. Sara's tastes were a little bit more eclectic: although she was not very well versed in classical music, she did not mind listening to the light melodies of Tchaikovsky or Chopin. But Jaggu disliked Western classical music and condemned it as the unnecessary habit of the pseudo-intellectual. On the other hand, he did not mind small doses of Ravi Shanker or Bismillah Khan. Of course, they argued about that particular point at great length, but Sara had to admit that good popular music was indeed more pleasant to hear and indeed, really more entertaining.

They both enjoyed and tapped their feet together to Beatles and Trini Lopez and the Seekers and Peter, Paul and Mary. Joan Baez was a particular favourite, especially the old English ballads, songs adapted from Harold Childe. And what about the raw power of Woodstock and the magic of Carole King? Jaggu could not get over the fact that Sara had indeed seen the Beatles in one of their performances in London and he was truly envious about it. They could spend hours talking about the kind of music that they both loved. Radio Ceylon used to broadcast music virtually the whole day. Sundays had long programmes that featured the latest hits on request from avid listeners. Both of them, with small transistor radios glued to their ears, each in their separate hostels, used to listen to them through out the evening, enjoying every minute of it.

These were the little knots in the string, the small bonds that were bringing them together, binding them in a union of perfect understanding and affection. Jaggu knew from early days that he had fallen in love with this entrancing half woman, with her serious mien and her exquisite features. For Sara it was a different story altogether. She understood the compelling ties that were bringing them together and she realized that this kindred soul was balm to her bruised and desperately unhappy inner self she dared not reveal to any one around her here.

It would have been so easy to surrender to that pull, that tugging, drawing, attraction that brought him closer and ever closer to her with each passing day. A person who was in sympathy with her, who seemed to walk in step with her, who understood the need for conversation that would touch on the fine aspects of life, the necessity of a companion soul who could wash away the confusion and the worries and the pressing weight of the fate that waited for her like a monster demon, that would appear at a time of her choosing, but which she could not postpone forever.

Dare she reveal the truth to Jaggu and hope that he would stand by her as she went back to face the truth. Or would he be put off; would her revelation scare him away and leave them both hurt and irreconcilably alienated. Would he feel that he had no business to intervene in a situation that was neither comprehensible nor acceptable and which, much as he might like to help her, was essentially to be tackled by her on her own terms. Would he walk off never to come back to her? In fact this, more than anything else, made her hesitate and recoil from the task of telling him the truth, the whole unvarnished, unalloyed truth.

The prospect of recruiting him as an ally was indeed so alluring that she would sometimes see in her mind the image of both of them going forth together as a team, back to the village of Surpura where Jaggu, like the hero of a fairy tale, would take up the cudgels and rescue her from the clutches of the evil ravisher. Of course, she realized that this was mere simplification and that the issues involved were much more complicated. But the very fact that that he was there, ready to be called upon, should she pluck up the courage to do so, was in itself a matter of great solace.

She knew that he would always be there as a friend she could call in at any time to address her most intricate problems. She found him to be the one person in this whole wide world that she could count on. Of course, there was Bhaiyya, the tender, big-hearted lovable young brother, who was not a brother, but who would lay his soul on a platter for his sister, who was not a sister. But he was young and though he knew the details of all that she faced in her heart, she would never bear to burden his young shoulders with the grave problems that even adults would fear to shoulder.

One fine day in the evening as they sat on the bench on the side of the tennis court in college and watched Thomas play with a younger and slighter player, who was of course making mince meat of him, Jaggu turned to Sara and asked the question that he had so wanted to ask for the past several months but had not plucked up the courage to do.

“Sara”, he turned to her and asked, “you have been abroad for so many years and you have seen young people falling in love and getting married and leading their own lives without too much of parental interference. What are your views about love marriage as opposed to arranged marriage?”

Thomas was lunging across the court as the other player had executed a trick shot that seemed to be a smash. But he had at the last moment opened the face of the racquet and sliced the ball half an inch over the net to let it fall just within Thomas’ court. In the midst of this flurry of stylish movement and sly court craft, Sara had heard and her heart was stalling and fluttering in her chest and she turned pale and her cheeks blanched and she coughed and cleared her throat and she said: “That was quite a shot, eh? Wonder how he does it?”

Jaggu was looking at her curiously; he knew her well enough now to realize that he had said something that had upset her or that in her mind she had walked into some area of thought that had sent her into confusion and doubt. “I was saying....” He stopped and realizing that he had probably erred in some unknown fashion, or that he should not be mentioning the topic at all, that he should not pursue that same line of thought, changed the subject and made an unkind remark about Thomas’ bulk that made him the victim of a player half his size. He shouted, “Thomas, you mass of flesh, you are no good at this sport you know, you should take up golf!”

From out of the corner of his eyes, he looked at her and wondered at what was going on in her mind. Some sensitive raw nerve had been pinched and there was some piercing pain somewhere inside that little body of hers. Her breath had calmed and she appeared to have regained her colour and she seemed to be normal once again. She was quieter and no longer chatting with him as she had been till a moment ago. She was observant of what was going on all around her and was even thinking of whether Jaggu had noticed anything out of the ordinary in the past few seconds.

Sara was watching the game carefully now, no longer with the casual interest that she had shown until some minutes ago. The game was the only thing that mattered, it seemed, while until now it was but an interesting background to the conversation that she had been having with Jaggu. She had to bring things to a normal plane again and even if she had to put on a mask she would do it, she said to herself. And if it meant that she would have to tell him what she thought about love marriage as opposed to arranged marriage, then so be it. Of course she would not have to, did not need to, tell him anything about her particular circumstances. This would just be another conversation on a general subject, an exchange of views in a purely intellectual manner. Nothing personal about this at all. Just a usual topic that young people would talk about.

“Yes, Jaggu, you were asking me something about love marriage and my views on the subject. What would you like to know, do repeat that question, will you?”

Yet again, Jaggu was floored. Here he was a moment ago, wondering whether he had stepped on her toes or had caused some form of embarrassment or even had crossed over into forbidden territory. And here she was coming back at him and asking him to repeat the very question that had in fact caused her to lose so much of her composure. Or had he been mistaken? Was it something else? Or yet again, had he just imagined that she had been discomfited? Despite all the grace and charm she had, all the genuine concern and involvement that she displayed so often in her very many conversations with him, there was always an area of inscrutability and obscurity she sometimes slipped into. There was something haunting and mysterious in the dark and hidden side of her personality that she never, ever revealed to anyone at all.

“Well, it’s not very important, maybe at some other time”, he said and deftly changed the subject as Thomas was caught flat-footed once more by a wicked lob over his head which sailed high above him and fell just within the line at the rear of the court. Game, set and match to the puny little player from the visiting college and shame and humiliation on poor Thomas and the University College. There was some light hearted ribbing from them as they consoled and comforted the huge and sweating Thomas and they promised to treat him to coffee, not because he had lost, but because he had provided them with much entertainment.

Saturday morning was the usual time to visit the libraries, to return books and take out new ones or perhaps renew ones that required more study. Jaggu and Sara had arranged to meet each other outside the doors of the British Council Library at eleven in the morning. But by the time they had reached there, a gentle rain had already begun. The drizzle caught them both a hundred feet or so outside the gates and they had to run the last few steps as the rain started to fall in huge drops all around them. Panting and puffing they rushed onto the verandah and paused in dismay to find the library closed for stock taking and that they had indeed come in vain that day. There would be no library session today. They sat down on the steps outside the doors of the library and decided to wait it out until the rains subsided.

The rain had grown into a regular squall and the winds were blowing hard and the trees were bowing their heads while the strong gusts shook them wildly before they moved on down the street, causing old newspapers and the dust from the road to fly up in small storms of dirt and shreds of leaf and paper. Sometimes the wind stopped suddenly, and then began again. The erratic winds blew the rain this way and that in a ragged flurry and the shower suddenly brought the rain right into the verandah of the library where both of them were sitting on the steps and watching the furious melee of the storm.

The errant wind blew in a fine powdery spray of raindrops that had separated from the rest of the wild showers outside and in a magical kind of way it settled like twinkling wet drops on Sara’s hair and her forehead. She was sitting there in quiet admiration of the display of nature outside and suddenly it were as if she had been crowned a Princess of the Showers, with a tiara of priceless pearls and diamonds to crown her.

Sara, of course, did not realize how she looked but knew that she had felt the cool fountain of moisture on her face. She smiled at Jaggu for a moment and caught him staring at her with quite an unexplainable expression on her face. There was wonder and excitement and surprise and a kind of awe that had never expressed itself in quite so open and naked manner as this before.

This was a poetic moment, even Jaggu realized that, though not in such a clear headed and obvious manner as it may have been to any other. The accumulation of all his moments with her in the past two and a half years and the immediate presence of a goddess-like Sara-of-the-rains was of an import that was a little too much for him to handle with objectivity and calmness. It had been coming for some time now and he knew that he was no longer his own master, or the cool and detached observer that he had been all of his life until he had met this waif, this wanderer of the globe, this half woman who had surely, but slowly, swept him off his feet. Even years later, he would swear that he had had no control over the actions that in the next few seconds would redefine his relationship with Sara for the rest of his life. Even as she was smiling at him and he was staring at this new incarnation of the many splendored, diamond tiared Sara, he was leaning towards her, his face seeking the exquisite and unending wonder of her lips.

Sara felt his movement towards her. In her mind there was surprise and wonder; but there was too an acceptance of the inevitability of it as she closed her eyes and waited for Jaggu to reach her and her hitherto untouched and inviolate lips. Jaggu paused, but only for a second because he wanted Sara to know that though he was compelled to do what he was doing, it would be an act that would not be forced on her. He was thrilled to know that there was no remonstrance, no rejection, not even a moving away. There was only a quiet waiting, a small acceptance of the fact that he was now to be an even more integral part of her self, her inner self, an extension of the space that he had occupied within her mind and her consciousness for the past couple of years. A compartment wall had suddenly grown a door that was opening and Sara realised that yet another of the ramparts that she had constructed within her to keep prying strangers away had been breached, not forcefully and against her will, but with her full knowledge and indeed complete acceptance on her part.

The rain was still pouring outside and the winds were whistling through the trees and the roads were almost deserted and the world was in stasis, in waiting for the moment that after so many days of patient observing and trying to pull away, now seemed to Jaggu to be giving consent and permission and even joyful participation in the act that he was now to finally perform. His hands remained at his side, he could not think of moving them to embrace her and take her close to himself. That may come later, but not now. He only leaned forwards and closed his eyes as he moved his lips towards her and gently, ever so gently as one would handle precious porcelain china, touched his lips to hers.

She sighed. She felt the thrill of the sensation of sensitive skin meeting soft tissue and she invited and accepted the stranger, the other person, the one not her, through the curtained screen of her mind to within the inner portals of her consciousness. For those few moments, she was only herself, not Sara with the limitless miseries and insoluble, contentious discords burning within her, but just her feminine self, a woman seeking the fulfillment of the life purpose for which she had been fashioned by a relentless evolutionary process. She was just she now, and Jaggu was just he now and they were tied by the many bonds of friendship and affection and caring and concern that they had shown each other in the days they had been in each other's company.

Sara was a fair skinned girl and her lips were not as dark as those of the girls around. It was the one feature of her that immediately drew the attention of anyone who saw her for the first time. The lips were nothing extraordinary; they were just lips, specialised sensitive muscles that served their purpose as gate way to the mouth and acted as one of Nature's devices to attract the opposite sex in its task of procreation and growth. They moved when she talked in ways that seemed to Jaggu as if they had a life of their own. Sometimes, he would lose the thread of conversation as he watched their constant movement and minute changes, as they stretched and puckered and pulled in the continuous exercise of conversation. She used to chatter and giggle a lot, especially when she was alone with him and the multitudinous changes that these lips went through were like limitless variations of exquisite entrancing magic. Its changing expressions seemed to be a mirror of her feelings. In the canteen or the coffee house, he would watch her as she drank her coffee or ate her sandwiches and the way she would press her lips together as she chewed or swallowed were so enticing that he would have to turn his eyes away for fear the others would notice and make jocular comments about him that would be sure to irritate him, and embarrass her.

For Jaggu, to even imagine that he would have those lips near his and that she would not withdraw from him and that in a satisfied and contented way she would enjoy those few seconds, would always be a matter of wondrous excitement. He knew that he was no handsome Greek god or that his bony tall frame would ever evince any kind of sexual interest in any girl. But the fact that Sara and he had grown to know and respect each other and that Sara was no ordinary girl who would only look for sleek handsome looks and attractive demeanor gave him the added confidence that he wanted.

His eyes were closed and he was struck by the wonder of that small moment and he breathed in the fragrance of her breath and the moisture of the rain droplets on her face and the scent that arose from her skin as an essence of her true self that would not be clouded and obscured by perfume or grime. The peace that the few seconds generated in him was profound. The moment lasted forever and was gone in a flash. It would last an eternity in his mind though it was as fleeting as a flash of lightning. It had the briefness of a flutter of an eyelid, and the permanence of an immeasurable lifetime.

The kiss lasted, if one had a stop watch to measure it, for approximately five seconds. It was exquisite in its torture for there were boundaries within the parameters of the kiss that neither of them was ready to cross. It was charming and sweet and pure as one would have expected a first kiss to be and it was to be indelible in the memories of these two for the rest of their days on the face of the earth. In the years ahead, in quiet moments of solitude or contemplation, or when the rain was drumming on the roof top, this moment would recur and recur again to Jaggu as if on call, to soothe and to nourish and also to quieten moments of stress and confusion. It was thrilling, for it was their first physical contact with another, and for each it was with the one person in the entire world with whom one would have preferred to have it.

It was for Jaggu, the fulfillment of a desire that had grown over the months as his acquaintance had changed to friendship and that had changed to affection and then to love. For Sara it was the logical next step in a development of a close bond that had grown over the past few months and one that could not be denied. If only she had the courage to negate the burden of the past, she would have gained the freedom to embrace the future with the gusto and the willingness that she found so ready to accept. If only she had the strength to be a girl like any other.

And then it was over. The world outside now impinged on their consciousness as the sounds of the rain and the wind and the rustle of the leaves became apparent again. They realized that in the few seconds that had passed, the world had appeared to be soundless and they had been cocooned in a quiet and silent world where the auditory senses had been turned off. And now the world had appeared once more to bring them back to sentient consciousness and to impose boundaries and walls and obstacles and doors that would or would not open again.

There were after effects of this first contact, as it were, on both of them. For Sara it was the melting of a moment, the breaching of a boundary, the beginning of new areas of thought and contemplation that shook her beliefs and tortured her

with thoughts of her unresolved predicament. It raised questions that clashed with her past, while complicating her present problems and refusing to divulge what the future would bring. For Jaggu, it was clear that he would be deeply bound to her in a relationship that bordered on complete fascination and anguished yearning.

A kiss between a young man and a young woman could not, by definition, be asexual. There would, therefore, be a perpetual dance in his mind as he struggled with the achingly beautiful memories of that first physical contact and the promise of the future, which could be so unimaginably exquisite. Caught in its throes, for long, for very long, it would be his fate to be tortured between the past and the future, the mixing of memory and desire, the stirring of the tendrils of his sensuality with the rain that had sprung out from nowhere in the empty verandah of the library that day.

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Final year

The next six months were the run up to the Final Year BA examinations for the English literature classes. The year was 1975; in June, Emergency was declared. Vocal student leaders were suddenly transformed to meek puppies that slipped away unnoticed with their tails between their legs. Everywhere, there mushroomed posters and pamphlets and hoardings extolling the virtue of talking less and working more. It seemed that all over the country, people were only talking of sterilisation operations and the planting of trees.

Grudgingly too, there was appreciation of the fact that people were working and that the trains were running in time and that government officers and employees finally had the fear of God instilled in them. To the vast majority of the people, the abuse of freedom and democracy was not apparent, and many found the greater discipline and the law and order situation in the country vastly improved. But there was a simmering discontent that would, in due course of time, turn to revolt and rebellion. And, once and for all, 'we, the people' would teach a mighty lesson to ambitious politicians on the limits to the exercise of unbridled power. It was in these circumstances that the final exams for the third year students would be held.

For students who were uninterested in the politics of the time, the impact of these momentous political changes was, however, minimal. For them, the greater regularity in the classes meant more hours of study and preparation for the examinations. For Sara and Jaggu it was a time of excitement that their close relationship brought about. For a few days after the exquisite incident on the verandah of the library, there was some embarrassment between the two of them. It was as if they were a little discomfited by the incident.

But with time, the situation smoothed out and they were great pals again. There was an unusual closeness and warmth between the two of them and it soon became obvious that they were indeed an item in the college. There was a tenderness, a longing, a quiet yearning, but imbued with a delicate reticence. There were volumes to be told to each other but the words would not be spoken until some day when they would refuse to be quieted and would be revealed in words and actions that would then be irrevocable. Until then, whenever that was, there would only be this overriding gentleness, a melting of boundaries and fences, a nearness that blurred the perimeter each person builds up around oneself.

The college was gearing up for the annual events, which included sports and games and debates and other competitions. None of the five were great athletes. In fact they really had no aptitude for physical activities (with the exception of the giant Thomas who loved the solitary and esoteric art of body building) or for athletics. Sure, they did in fact watch their college teammates sweat it out in the field in real combat with other college teams. However, essay and other literary competitions passionately interested items.

Therefore, when the College English Literary society, announced a poetry competition, they were all hugely thrilled. The subject given for the contest was Inner Space. There were no rules or limitations on length, rhyme or metre: they just had to write. And they had about a day to ponder about it and write up their lines. There was much excitement amongst them though they did not worry too much about winning or doing their best: they just wanted to participate. So it was with some curiosity that they waited to see each other's poetic efforts. They worked in silence during their free periods and in the hostel rooms and wrote out their lines slowly, carefully. On the next morning, before submission of their efforts to the college authorities, they exchanged their work amongst themselves and oohed and aahed and waited with bated breath for each other's comments.

Thomas's effort was a rambling elegy in free verse and expressed any young man's doubts about the presence of God in our lives. They sat around him on the college lawns while the reserved and embarrassed Thomas read out the lines, the lines that seemed to be quietly meandering down the valley where it had originated in his mind. To them all, it was a clear indication of how he regarded the question of religion and the increasing absence of the divine in the ordinary days of our life.

THE CHAPEL IN THE HILLS

One grim steel cold evening

*Hiking alone in the gray gaunt hills
With only the hawks to wonder at me,
I half-glimpsed in the distance, dimly obscured,
A ruined, deserted chapel,*

*And its dark, rearing cross,
One hand broken.
The marauding mists, nonchalantly swallowed it up,
Then little by little, dribbled it out again.*

*God loves the mist and the cloud,
Scampers behind them like a prancing child,
And breathing hard, plays excitedly
At a clever hide-and-seek:
But rarely, so very rarely, lets himself be seen.*

*In the chapel, the rafters are broken;
The scurrying mice have gnawed out the stumps of the candles;
The wind panes lie shattered, the silent glass wet,
Slurped at by the seeping winds.
Only the eyes in the picture of a fading Christ,
Yearn wistfully for the chalice, steaming with his own blood.
And on a black rock outside,
The shrill osprey challenges the desolation.*

*As I watch, some vagrant swirl of wind gambols by,
And the mist strengthened by the chill,
Shrouds the ancient stones again:
Thus chapel, broken cross and lonely Christ disappear,
Outlines fraying into the cold.
And the night falls to the earth, as if forever.*

*I searched all next morning
For the elusive broken cross,
Ferreting through the wet boulders and the angry ravines,
But in vain. Yesterday's playful God
Had tired of his frolicking games
And had strolled back home,
Leaving no sign of his presence
And no message for the morrow.
Only the wild, wild birds screamed out their defiance,
The echoes stretching the moment to a small eternity.*

There were quiet murmurs and whispers amongst the rest of them as they appraised the poem. They all agreed that the imagery was haunting and beautiful, the theme representing the poignant search of a young person for religious meaning, who is not willing to rely entirely on tradition and religious faith passed down from one generation to another. On a scale of one to ten, they agreed to award it a seven.

Then it was Jaggu's turn. It was a surprisingly competent poem in terms of metre and rhyme, The allusions were a little complex and Jaggu had to explain that what he meant by the symbol of the shark was the presence of uncontrolled thoughts in the mind, below the obvious peace and calm, inevitably bound to wreck the serenity of the mind. The presence of the sibilant vowels made the words sound sinister and threatening and that is how he intended them to be. And true to speak, Jaggu was a little proud of his handiwork and he preened himself a little and stood up straight as he was asked to recite the lines. He was happy with his creation and did not make any attempt to hide it.

SHARK

*The island in the sultry sea
Dreams a dream of yore;
The shaft of sunlight strikes the waves
And blasts the shingled shore.*

*Sliding shark with soul of ice
Of sudden startling shape,
Swivels fast with savage swerve
Of muscled jaws that gape.*

*Cursed is the seaman lost at sea,
The sailors always tell:
For the shark will slash his flesh to shreds
And stain the ocean's swell.*

*The strongest, strangest, smooth-skinned shape
That ever sliced the sea
That ever smashed the waves to shards
And slaughtered silently.*

*The shark below the surface slides
Or skims the sparkling stream;
While the island in the sultry sea
Still dreams its ancient dream.*

Thomas was the first to applaud the effort as a truly good poem. He would grant it maybe eight marks, he said generously. The others too agreed with the assessment. Sara had been indeed quite keen to hear Jaggu's effort and was, therefore, quite joyous to note its professional competence and its ingenuity.

Now the rest of them turned towards her and demanded that she show them her contribution. She was a little shy at first, but then decided to be forthcoming and pulled it out from between the pages of her notebook and circulated it around. They insisted that it should be recited by her and not left to the individual to read. This did have some advantage, as Jaggu's poem had demonstrated. Not only did all the rest of them get their impression of the poem at the same time, and not staggered out as it would have been, had it been passed around for individual reading. The intonation and the aural presentation did bring it out exactly as the poet wanted it to be understood.

The boys gathered around and listened in rapt attention as Sara, a little shyly and too self consciously read out the lines, with her eyes cast down on the paper and not daring to raise them for fear of seeing the disapproval and scorn of her friends. Of course, they would not have done anything that would put her to discomfort, rather they would have gone out of their way to see she was praised and complimented for her work. And so, with a faltering voice and a sense of being caught in the limelight on an open stage, as if she were in front of the whole world, feeling vulnerable and shaky, she started to read the lines she had written the previous night. The rest them sat down and listened carefully to each word and absorbed the thoughts flowing out. In a sense, the poem made them understand more about Sara's mental frame of mind than much of whatever she had said or done in the past.

CHILD (a sonnet in half rhyme)

*once, as blissful child, i at the stars
had gazed, (from sleepless doze outside i stole),
and, as beasts below the sea in slumber stirs,
felt shapeless thoughts heave, subside and lie still.*

*for 'gainst the moon, the haunting owl paused,
silver-lined silhouette darkly turning;
scorning the child, he clawed the clouds and passed,
cold-eyed killer till the sky is dawning.*

*i clutch the sheets tighter, shivering little fool,
pulse-beat, heart beat a-drumming in my ear;
in the stare of the night, my daunted limbs fail,
i am a thrall of the stars, a nerveless prisoner.
what makes me cower, what makes me feel
some shadow at my back and the wings of terror.*

There was something quite painfully tender and sad about the poem: the presence of nameless, undefined fears and anxieties portrayed in Sara's poem seemed as if they were ready to haunt her, torment her, though they were unidentified and

anonymous. None knew the particular circumstances of her plight and were her story really revealed, it would have shocked them to silence. The construction of the poem, like that of Jaggu's, was also technically sound: the 14-line sonnet form and the clever half rhyme. Well, they were a bit unsure of how to rate the poem, but they did feel that it was a little better than Jaggu's and that they ended up finally awarding it eight-and-half. Maybe a little bit of chivalry towards the lady in question had led to the higher ranking. Sara protested, for she knew the boys were being more kind than was necessary.

And then it was Babu's turn. Amongst the five of them, he was the one who was always a little aloof and far away, living in world of his own. There was something a little odd and distant about him and his experiences with drugs and the darker somber side of the city, of which he said nothing, of course, may have made him lose the human, ordinary everyday aspects of his personality. He seemed to be living in a blurred indistinct world where clear vision was lost in a strange personal astigmatism, through which he saw the world. His poem was sad and touched with a poignancy that brought a sudden quiet over the rest of them. It reflected a mental flirtation with the thought of death and was probably inspired by some poems he had been recently reading of Wilfred Owen.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

*Through these long years I've waited for him,
When in dark nights my thoughts scattered like sheep
On the hillside, I called out loud and long for the shepherd.
And through the pain of long evenings he comes drifting in:
My quiet friend at the end of the night.*

*Across the room, under the whirring fan lies another,
He has flirted and slept with pain for these two years now:
He tells me that he too has seen that kind and gentle one
Hovering near in concern and stilling the great
And sudden fear bursting in the heart.*

*You are fools to fret and fume in these blistering days,
To fuss over me and stretch my days so long.
Somewhere in me, I smile: soon I shall cut the cord
And run down the hill to the cool and peaceful glade,
Where my good shepherd waits.*

Two things stood out: one, the gentle and quietly confident words, soothing like a balm, demonstrating that death is not the terror that it is made out to be; and two, the depth of thoughts that the poem demonstrated showed clearly that Babu was not the dumb, frozen, discontented misfit that he always appeared to be. And if his contemplation of death had made him willing to face its mystery with acceptance and courage, if not with nonchalance, then his attitude towards Life and death were really admirable.

Now it was Chandran's turn. They knew he was cynical and did not care much for the deeper sentiments and gentle thought. It certainly could not be expected from him that he would write some passionate, deeply felt lines about love and romance and the mysteries of death. But they knew that they would be certainly getting something out of the ordinary: something sarcastic or cutting or something outrageously funny and rib tickling. Or would it be a new trend altogether. They settled down on the grass to listen to him as he stood up, took a deep bow and began.

STROLLING DOWN THE STREET

*I've always loved to stroll down
A busy crowded street:
I've great delight in crushing
Match boxes 'neath my feet.*

*I love to watch the people
Each a different kind;
But secretly I smile and feel
Superior in my mind.*

*Boys on thundering motorbikes
Roar by in proud pretension,
While vacant headed foolish girls
Heave sighs of admiration.*

*At times I do forget myself
And often think aloud;
I wave my hands, I hum a tune,
Oblivious of the crowd.*

*I keep an eye on pretty girls
And watch if they watch me;
And when they do, I swagger by
Very nonchalantly.*

*Its true, I love the sights and sounds
Of a busy crowded street
But most of all I live to crush
Matchboxes 'neath my feet.*

There, he was done and he sat down with a flourish of his hand. There was a moment of silence and then they smiled and Thomas even began a handclap, which the others took up immediately. After all the serious and deeply introspective verses they had listened to, this was something that was light and frothy and simple and clever and with a nice rhythm in the reciting of it that was pleasing and foot tapping. It was a fitting end to the poetry recitation session and the group of them finally decided to submit them all to their Professor for consideration of a prize in the forthcoming competitions. And they were not too excited about the prizes on offer, because they had already won the approbation of each other.

When in due course the results were announced, they were not too surprised to see that none of them had won prizes. The first prize went to someone who wrote about the Red Salute and its stirring impact on human development. The second and third went to two students of the Post-graduate course who wrote about the moon and the rose and summer and romance and lovers separated and reunited. The five of them jeered out loud and unanimously voted to reject the results, condemning the committee itself, which had selected the prize-winning poems. And although their disapproval had no impact on the committee, who probably never even heard about their censure, the five of them felt better after having passed the vote of no confidence in the process of selection of the best poems.

And then there were the exams themselves: it was time to burn the midnight oil. They knew that they had to really get down to the hard grind of it and there was no more excuse to waste time. Not that the five of them were casual about their studies. In fact, they were good students and they had a genuine love for the subject. So they did get down to the extreme effort required for their studies. The days passed and the time for the closure of the colleges came near and it was announced that for the third year students there would be what was called study leave. They would get about three weeks when they could focus entirely on their studies.

As Thomas and Chandran and Babu lived too far away at Bombay and Madras, they decided to lock themselves into their hostel rooms and burn the midnight oil before the days of the examinations approached. It was only Jaggu and Sara, with their homes a few hours away from Trivandrum, who decided to spend these weeks before the exams, in their homes where the quiet and the peace were more conducive to study than their respective hostels. So it was that on the day they left Trivandrum, they bid goodbye to their friends before departing for their homes.

At the Zenana Hostel, Fatima hugged her hard before she left that day in the morning for college. She had had a series of conversations with her over the last few months that would have a great and significant bearing for her life ahead. Fatima had decided to take things into her own hands and had already started scheming and plotting on Sara's behalf. She wished to see her as happy as she could possibly be and she was determined to do her best to achieve this end. Her plans were in the making and she would reveal it all only after Sara had discussed the matter with Choti Maa and her Bhaiyya.

Sara had decided to leave with her bags right from the campus itself straight to the bus stand. In the evening, classes over and with a lot of shouting and good wishes for each other, the friends escorted Jaggu and Sara to the auto stand and saw them off for the bus stop. They had to catch separate buses from there, but the warm moments in the noisy three-wheeler were

soothing as they chatted about the coming exams and the peace and silence of their respective homes in the heartland of rural Kerala.

At the bus stand, it was Jaggu's bus that left first and Sara waved to him from the platform until it turned away into the main road. Her own bus was waiting to depart in a few minutes and for a moment she felt lost and alone. This was ridiculous, she knew, it was but three weeks to the examinations and in the meanwhile she would be back home with Choti Maa and Bhaiyya and they would get some wonderful time together again. Why the hell was she feeling diffident and flustered now? Instinctively she knew too the answer: no, it was not only that Jaggu had left on the last bus; it was now time to move on and face

her destiny. She had put it off for too long and with the exams over very soon, she would have to find a way to conclude an unfinished drama.

She knew she would soon have to make the final trip to her home among the mustard fields in Surpura, where Sara would revert to Saraswati and would be called Sarasu, so phonetically similar to the yellow flowers that grew in her father's fields. So the plans would have to be made now and in the next three weeks, officially study leave time, the strategy for the future would be perfected. The little house in Mavelikara would be abuzz with talks and discussions and debates as the three of them sat down to work out the plans. She could hardly wait to reach her Choti Maa's home where she would not have to pretend and where the truth was known and where she was loved and cherished despite the fact that she was a bride who had not fulfilled her pledge and was in peril of losing all that she had ever held precious.

The journey was uncomfortable and hot and the humidity in the atmosphere made her sweat all throughout the trip. By the time the bus stopped at Mavelikara she could feel her throat was raw and dusty. She needed something hot to drink before she came down with a cold or a mild fever. Her face brightened up as she saw Bhaiyya at the gates of the bus depot and he gave her a quick embrace in the midst of the milling crowds and took her bag and rushed her off to the waiting car and soon they were back in the well-loved home at Mavelikara.

The very first thing she did was to go to Harish Chacha's room and see the sleeping lifelike body of one who had been her father for so many years of his life. She could see that he had been neatly shaved and that his thin body had been dressed in freshly laundered clothes. The room was like a temple and full of peace and serenity, bright in the evening light streaming in from the window. But for the heartbreak and the agony that the sight of the body lying supine and still on the bed brought immediately to the mind, it would have been an ordinary quiet peaceful day. The cheek was sunken and the skin was thin parchment and the sheen on the face was like marble, polished and smooth. She stood with Choti Maa for a minute in silent prayer willing the stern God up in the heavens to show mercy on the poor victim who lay like an offering on the sacrificial altar.

Evening was pleasant: Choti Maa had made some of her special dishes and they sat as a family to dine beneath the framed picture of Christ with His open and blazing heart and a smile of beatific composure on His face. Choti Maa was glad to see Sara back home and Bhaiyya was chattering away about school and there was an easy flow of conversation that happy homes are accustomed to. Night fell soon and after Bhaiyya went to his room for his own studies, Sara and Choti Maa sat down to a long conversation.

She would long remember the concern and the maturity that Choti Maa showed her in that deeply significant couple of hours that they spent in the quiet of Sara's bedroom. It was abundantly clear that she understood Sara's plight and she knew fully her deep longing for the resolution of this stubborn and prickly issue that was crying out to be settled once and for all. Reluctantly she understood too that Sara had to find her own destiny. In a way she was nobody's child. Her parents had fled the world leaving her a mere kid in the custody of a man who was her uncle but whom she had hardly known till then. She had grown up in a strange land under the care and concern of a foster mother who had shown understanding beyond comprehension to love this strange child as much as her own son. Bhaiyya in turn too was closer to her than a brother could possibly be. Nevertheless, she had to find her own way in the noisy and crowded impersonal world it was her fate to struggle with; there was no one else who could do it for her.

And thus the bare bones of the plan she had evolved over the past couple of months were slowly revealed. She explained in detail her desire, though reluctant, to take up Fatima's offer of a job in Delhi where she would be closer to Surpura. From this base camp she would make her foray into the heartland of Rajasthan where she would come face to face with her fears and her future. She would do it alone, or perhaps with the help of Fatima as a companion to help her sort out her emotions with a cool and collected head. And then, she would have to play it by ear.

The prospect of suddenly landing up at the residence of Chatter Singh ji and announcing herself as the long absent bahu would send shock waves running through the household and the neighbourhood. And what would she do to explain her long absence, what would she say to Giridhar, who she was sure would be beset with a thousand questions and a million doubts. And in the quiet stillness of the night, she expressed to her Choti Maa her slowly developing feelings for Jaggu, her classmate and friend and the complications that the situation had on her predicament. She had already told her many times about her life at Surpura and the rural atmosphere that she had grown up in and how, after her education abroad and the deepening maturity of her mind, she was very wary of going back to the old village with its narrow views and its age-old customs.

Choti Maa listened as she narrated her woes and her plans for the future and smiled and said, “Sara, I know you as my own daughter and have seen you grow up into a young woman. I know only too well that you will do the right thing by everybody and that you will cause no grief to anyone around you. I trust your maturity and your understanding and love you all the more for the joy and happiness you brought into our lives. I know too that Harish would approve of your decision. My only regret is that he is in no position to comprehend what has happened in these last few years. If only he were here with me in body and spirit, how wonderful it would have been. We would have been overjoyed to see you grow in strength and wisdom.”

“But leave that aside; I cannot burden you with my problems. Be that as it may, I give you my prayers and my good wishes. You may be leaving us soon but be sure that Bhaiyya and I, and indeed your Harish Chacha, are here for you and will be always with you in your mind like guardian angels to shield you in times of distress and misfortune. We love you, Sara Mol and be sure of that whatever may happen in the days ahead.”

The rest of the three weeks she spent were some of the best days of her life: there was some certainty now in her plans ahead. She enjoyed her stay with Bhaiyya and her Choti Maa and she tried as best as she could to help in the caring of her Chacha. He had to be cleaned, his back rubbed with spirit to reduce the bedsores and the drip arranged for his saline feed. A tube was often inserted through his mouth to deliver a liquid diet of oats or juices so as to sustain the strength of his body. There was a feeling of participation in the task of the tending of her foster father and the daily routine of this procedure instilled in her a measure of calm and strength and deepened the love between this unlikely mother and the daughter. Bhaiyya and she had a running battle in their exchanges and repartees and they learnt once more the inexhaustible joys of growing up together as siblings.

Suddenly, it was time to leave. She had spent as much time as she could in learning for her exams, but suddenly her academic achievements were not so important. There were miles to go before she could sleep and she was now eager to get on with the task. As soon as the exams were over she would be on her way with Fatima to New Delhi. Soon enough, the day came when she had to catch the bus back to Trivandrum. She had an extra bag with her clothes and other things and as she was not coming back immediately, she carried with her some of her favourite possessions such as books and sweaters and so on.

This time there were no tears, no mournful emotional scenes. Bhaiyya would come to Trivandrum on the day the exams were over and would see her off for Delhi. Of course she would have to do some explanations to Jaggu, and she was not too sure what she would say. She only knew that she would reveal to Jaggu that she was leaving, only on the very day of her departure and then she would be leaving Jaggu completely mystified and desperate, baffled beyond comprehension.

Farewell, for now

Sara's eyes were clouded with tears as the train chugged out of the station. She looked out of the window at the dwindling figure of Jaggu, but didn't have the strength to meet the bewildered and hurt expression in his eyes, his disbelief and incomprehension as the truth suddenly hit him that Sara was going, going, gone. Bhaiyya behind him was waving his hand at her and she did not have the will to wave back. She was glad that Bhaiyya had been at the station since she could talk to him and not have to pay attention only to Jaggu. So she got only a few moments alone with Jaggu and she could give him no words of explanation other than that she had something to sort out before she came back, if she came back at all. And that if she did indeed manage to sort out things to her satisfaction, it would be Jaggu who would be the first to know about it. Until then it was goodbye.

Just like that, no detailed explanations, no justifications. How could she have told him that she was a child bride now out to search for her husband. And that she was not sure whether she would be able to come back at all. She could see that it made no sense whatsoever to him at all. And truth to say, it sounded awful to Sara too. Fatima put out a comforting hand over her shoulder and said, "Hush, Sara, don't cry we'll sort out things together. And you'll be back here, before you know it."

The events of the past month had unfolded swiftly. During the study leave before the exams, Sara had gone home, not so much to pore over her books, but to finally chalk out the strategy that would free her from the chains of the past and give her the freedom to make the choice that she so really wished to. The long talks with Choti Maa and Bhaiyya had lasted late into the night. Her study books and her learning from her notes had no priority in her mind now, but she knew that she would not do too badly. At the moment it seemed to her that there were more important things than doing well in exams.

The plan as it emerged was as follows: immediately after the exams, Fatima and she would leave for Delhi where the former was going to set up her new office. She had by now taken full charge of her father's estates and vast businesses and had decided that not only did they need to be run on a more professional basis, but would also have to be expanded. The single room office that some of her father's clerks occupied in New Delhi had been expanded and renovated in anticipation of Fatima's coming. Fatima had arrived and had arrived in style and she would let the world know that she really did mean business, with a capital B. Fatima ordered that Sara would go with her. And because there was now no more any reason to postpone the decision on her own future and the fate of the marriage that she had so unknowingly, unwittingly, entered into as an innocent child, Sara had considered all options and agreed.

Fatima's generosity in accepting Sara under her wing and resolving to help her sort out her problems was a great relief for her. She felt that she was no longer alone in the world and that she had a strong pair of hands to guide her, a sympathetic shoulder to cry on should the need arise. And in Fatima's heart- which had lost its way in the few years before it was found again after the death of her father - was now strong and caring and wished to make up for the grievous damage that it had caused to herself and to those who had loved her. She had found in Sara's quiet and timid self, a perfect foil for her own.

Sara was at first reluctant to accept Fatima's hospitality and her generous offer, with no certainty as to the length of time that she would have to be with her. Fatima was sensitive to the reluctance of Sara and offered, a little cautiously, that she is not in any way going to be a burden to her and that if she had some qualms about staying with her, then she could offer her a job as her General Manager in her new office and she could help out as best as she could in the administration of her export and business matters and get paid for it.

Sara was horrified and withdrew almost in a huff; but then sat down and thought about it with a clear head and a mature mind. It was she who needed to sort out things for herself and she should, therefore, be grateful to Fatima who was only trying to be of real help. The money that Sara would earn in the job was, to Fatima, an insignificant trifle. It would make no difference to her at all whether Sara used it or not. The question was that Sara should feel comfortable with the whole arrangement. After due consideration, and after consulting Choti Maa and Bhaiyya she had agreed to say yes. And thus these two women, one hurt and now recovered, the other still hurting, pulled themselves together and sought strength from each other as they went forth into the world to seek their own destiny.

From Delhi, Alwar was not far away and the mysteries of Surpura would have to be unraveled bit by bit. The path was thorny, the light was dim and the skies were overcast and one had no clue as to the bends and the turns in the pathway. But Sara would have a base camp from which to operate, a safe house to come back to in case of unexpected obstacles and difficulties, a haven to sit back in and take a deep breath. She was not sure if the knot would be unraveled in a single trip or whether she would have to go back several times before the whole messy affair was behind her. But all this will have to be sorted out in due course.

Long train running: the hurley-burley swaying of the massive carriages and the rhythmic pounding of the wheels over the fishplates. You could sing any song to its music, simple nursery rhymes to complex reggae music, even Chopin if one paid attention to the length of time between the beats. Sometimes, the steel shrieked when grazed by steel and the sparks flew off the wheels: it could be a spectacular burst of yellow and gold against the blackness of the night.

Fatima was lying spread eagled on the lower seat of the first class coupe and had wisely decided to leave Sara to her own thoughts. And Sara was in a dark cloud of contemplation, having herself no clue as to the tenor of her thoughts or the mood she was in. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, no silver lining in the black cloud and she was lost, rudderless, directionless, waiting as it were for the stroke of lightning, the blinding flash of revelation, the quiet moment of inspiration, the soft, still voice of some benign god to tell her what to do.

She closed her eyes and let her inner consciousness focus on a pattern of pastel coloured weaves that brought peace and quietude and she went into a mode of meditation, lulling herself in the music of the train and the repeated monotonous litany of the prayer of small children: "God, please make things all right for me. Make me not afraid and make me see the right path. And take my destiny in the palm of Your hand and lead me to green pastures."

Out of the mouths of babes are prayers perfected. What else could melt the heart of an implacable God than the prattling of infants and young girls in distress. Her prayers were all mixed up: Harish Chacha's pantheon of gods lived cheek by jowl with the beatifically smiling Messiah but she found no comfort in either. Her prayers were mouthed with passionate hope but she knew not how deep her faith lay.

Her fervent appeals sounded a little false to her, especially to her, as in her more logical moments, and so she had once explained to Jaggu, her dependence on the Divine was really not very strong. But as all helpless children of this vast and complex universe, at moments when the road ahead was darkly lit and full of lurking dragons, it was easy to be willing to believe; to reach out to the probability of the Being of the Annadatta, the giver of grain, the creator. And thus do the most cynical of philosophers fall supine in the altar of Uncertainty: the eternal question of whether He exists or not. Whether. If. Sara felt He exists for those who believe. This was not a facile statement, but really some form of magical creation. You believe and He appears and rules the vast Universe and decides your fate and fortune. You do not believe and He disappears; at least as far as you are concerned. Then, whatever happens to you, cannot be attributed to Him, neither the blessings nor the misfortunes.

So, from this profound confidence in the fact of uncertainty, Sara thought that it was now time to take a step forward, or maybe backward, and believe in the fact of certainty. The leap of faith. What if she now maintained that there is indeed a God and yes, by an adroit mental task of invention there suddenly sprang forth a God ready to bless or admonish, cause destruction or wreak miracles. And yes, if this God would help her find a solution to the conundrum that she was struggling with, how wonderful it would be. Like an electric switch, to turn on with her faith the benediction of divinity in the visible and invisible world around her. It would be the ideal solution to the eternal question. He exists if you believe. The final mantra to salvation.

And through it all, the face of Jaggu loomed large and painfully through her mind. The last expression she saw on his face as she had kissed him, hard, but briefly, desperately, before turning away and rushing into the compartment, haunted her like a persistent nightmare. Bhaiyya had a startled expression on his face. The crowds of people at the station, bemused and sniggering, had stared at her and at Jaggu left broken and shattered on the station.

Now, a good six hours after the parting, disoriented, lying wide-eyed and restless, with her lips still burning with the welter of emotions that the kiss had engendered, she was ashamed at herself for the nature of her sin, her crude conduct in the execution of her crime on him, and the abominable way in which she had deserted him with no saving grace for redemption in future. Her eyes filled again, but this time, she brushed them away and sat up with the determination that she would from now on set her mind and body to the sole task of setting things right for herself and for those around her and indeed for Jaggu too, that is, if he would wait for her. But, for the life of her, she couldn't fathom why the hell he should wait for her. There was no earthly reason that he should, fickle and fleeting as she had been.

The train thundered on relentlessly through the evening and into the night. At 9.30, the caterer brought the two thalis of food for them. Sara was famished: her agony at leaving the hapless Jaggu behind her and her intricate cogitations had inexplicably made her hungry. The aluminum casserole revealed cold rice and a tepid dal curry with some potatoes and sour curds all lying mixed up in the typical Railway catering fashion. But to Sara, it made no difference at all. She swallowed it and washed it down with a glass of water. Fatima, of course, screamed out: "what is this: you expect people to eat such stuff; can't they even maintain some hygiene? Where the hell is the bloody bearer?"

In due course of time the bearer ambled in, a dirty towel on his shoulder and a sling bag around his neck in which he was collecting money for the food just served. Wooden faced, he heard Fatima out. Then he wiped his hands on his stained shirt

and smirked. He couldn't have cared less for the insults Fatima showered on him and his kind. He laconically shrugged his shoulders and said that he was but a low paid bearer who had no part in the preparation of the meals and that his job was merely to serve the thalis and collect the money. And that if the good lady did not exactly enjoy the food, she could as well throw it out of the window; but he would definitely collect the money for the same, if you please. Fatima had no words in reply. Sara advised her to be silent and pay up or else face the wrath of the low paid Railway Catering Employees Union. She may rant and rave, but there was no point in crying herself hoarse against this stonewall, which remained not merely impassive but was also impudent.

The two of them were opposites in many ways. Fatima strong, bold and aggressive (except for the one incident pertaining to the Munnar hill station which revealed her in her weakest moment) and Sara, reticent, quiet and withdrawn, immersed in her own thoughts and worries. They complemented and supported each other in their own individual ways and as time passed each came to respect and admire the qualities that the other had. Fatima was fairly confident about her material wealth and her financial fortunes, and was glad that her Abba had left her everything that he had, despite the disagreement that he had had some few years before he had departed. Her one everlasting regret was that she had not had the humility and the courage to go up to him and give him a big hug and say let bygones be bygones. Doesn't matter, she consoled herself, she would live out her life in such a manner that Abba would be proud of her, not merely in the business world but also in her personal life and in her relationships with her family and her friends.

Sara on her own part, was, of course, only full of worries and problems and Fatima used to tell her that if she were in Sara's place, she would have collapsed, with no strength to go on. The quiet confidence and conviction that Sara revealed was admirable and Fatima did indeed feel that with her decency and her faith and her gentle demeanor, she would be able to sort out things to everybody's satisfaction.

In the train, they spent many hours talking quietly about the future ahead and wondering how things would turn out for both of them. The long journey of over two nights was interminable and enjoyable in turns. The image of Jaggu haunted her in the night, as she lay awake and listened to the trundling, heaving, screeching sounds of the wheels of bogies. At stations, Fatima would always go out to have a look at the sights and sounds, while Sara was content to stay in the compartment and read some old book she had picked up at Wheelers. Fatima would always be the last to get back into the train as it gathered speed from the station and invariably she would bring back some small snack, some fried pakodas or some fruit or hot puris and potatoes and once even some hard-boiled eggs. They enjoyed these snacks greatly, but they would have filled their stomachs by the time dinner or lunch provided by the Railways was brought in.

Soon they ordered only one thali between themselves and preferred to snack their way throughout the day. Passengers came and went: since they were in the coupe, very few disturbed them, but sometimes some people performing short journeys came in and sat for a few hours before they got off at the next station. Once it was a young couple, obviously just married and very much in the throes of love and Sara had to turn her eyes away as they sat on the berth just a few feet away from them. She felt awkward, as she could not avoid watching them. Fatima, on the other hand, was both enraged and bemused at the same time. Fortunately they departed at the next station.

On another occasion, it was an old woman, obviously well off and traveling in style with luggage that was imported and stylish. She chatted with them about her trip through exotic India, which she was seeing for the first time. Although she was originally from India, she had lived a lifetime in the United States, had married an American there and had indeed settled down on the West Coast. Now, in the evening of her life, she wanted to see and experience once again the sights and sounds of the land from where she had gone away so long ago. She was exquisitely dressed in an embroidered caftan and stylish sandals and the two girls found it a delight to talk to her as she related tales of her experiences in the Wild West with a millionaire ranch owner of a husband. They were sorry to see her get off in a cloud of perfume and flown kisses at the next big stop.

And thus they moved on and in the afternoon of the next day, they finally reached New Delhi station. The suburbs of the city were noisy and dirty but the scenery considerably improved as they moved through the newer parts of the town and into the station itself. The noise of the passengers and the coolies and the tea vendors and the taxi wallahs were like a dinning earache when they moved out into the bright sunlight.

The nervous young officer in shirt sleeves and tie, who had been informed about Fatima's arrival was waiting at the entrance near the exit gate with a big placard showing the words: Welcome Madame Fatima Ahmed, our new beloved MD. It brought a blush on Fatima's face and a smile to Sara's as the fellow eagerly pushed his way right up to his new boss and touched her feet and welcomed her to the city. He ushered both of them to the waiting car and they were soon riding through the city on to South Extension and the guest house of the Ahmed Exports and Imports, the Corporation of which Fatima had just become the Chairperson and Managing Director.

Fatima recognized the jumpiness in the underling and pushed in her advantage in her forceful and usually arrogant manner ordering him to be present at 6 in the evening with the rest of staff for a briefing meeting and admonished him for not having brought the summary note on the financial working of the corporation with him to the station. She stared at him unblinkingly as he stuttered and fumbled, with his hand drawing circles around his face and pulling at his ear and he promised to bring it with him in the evening. Sara tugged at Fatima's kurta and tried to hush her up, but there was no stopping the harridan when she was in full steam.

Thankfully, they reached the rest house and Fatima swept in through the door waving a royal hand at the bearers and the servants standing with folded hands at the door. Sara followed as best as she could with a flustered smile at them and tried to put them at ease by nodding and pausing for a few seconds to see that the luggage was coming in. She knew there was no use in scolding Fatima about her conduct especially when she hardly realized that she was being abrasive and insufferable. How would she manage her staff, she wondered, especially when her Abba had been a man with a heart of gold and had gone out of his way to be particularly good to them? What happened to the golden principles of man management? She would need to sit down and have a talk with her, she thought.

Lunch was outstanding, a great spread, a wonderful variety of dishes that tempted the palate and tickled the olfactory senses. The bearer stood at attention and the ever-critical Fatima herself had no option but to praise the delicacies. After the two days of mixed and indifferent fare that they had had on the train, both Fatima and Sara tucked into the food. The palak paneer was heavy but totally satisfying. So was the biriyani that had obviously been bought from the nearest restaurant. The servants were bending over backwards to please the new mistress and the new mistress was willing to be treated that way. By the time the plates were swept away, it was almost two in the afternoon and the girls thought it was time to retire to their respective rooms and take a quick nap.

Sara's room was nice and comfortable and the curtains were heavy and when pulled across the windows, turned the room dark and restful. She threw off her sandals and lay on the bed and tried to close her eyes and doze off. After the continuous train journey lasting over two days, it seemed that the floor was moving under the bed and as she dozed off she could swear that she was still on the train. She seemed to be floating on a cloud of the memories of the past several hours, the swaying of the train and the dim blue night-light in the compartment and the whiff of somebody else's perfume. Snatches of conversation that she had had with some one came back to her in short bursts of sounds. Fatima's reassuring presence was a constant image that floated through her mind.

But through it all was the sad and painful longing for the one friend that she had deliberately let down, had rejected, had abandoned and had left confused and baffled and dejected and, no doubt, heartbroken. How could she have been so callous and uncaring, especially when he had been all gentleman and honorable and kind and decent? Jaggu must be in a torment of agony and despair and wondering what he had done to deserve such an abrupt end to their relationship. To have been sweet and loving to him and then suddenly to have left him in the lurch. And what must he have thought of that stinging kiss that she had given him at the station, in the presence of all the people around, Bhaiyya included, which, while it must have startled him, would also have left him more confused than ever.

The blanket of depression that had shrouded her ever since she had left Jaggu now settled down firmly over her as she lay in bed, perilously close to tears. She seemed to see behind her closed eyelids the dull and morose face of Jaggu, as she had last seen him a few moments before she had rushed into the compartment. His face loomed large and monstrous and seemed to fly over her like a vast fractured image in a nightmare, leaving her broken and wrung and twisted and bruised in body, mind and spirit. In her half doze, half conscious state, her mind fell into a dark cavernous vault. She was tumbling into its unrelenting, implacable depths. With a start she jolted herself out of the nightmare.

And then it was all too much with her and she had no secluded corner to take shelter in, no place to hide, no shoulder to cry on and Fatima in the next room was a thousand miles away and she felt naked and exposed and fragile and abused and degraded and terribly vulnerable. She felt like a vicious and mean bitch who had betrayed the one true love that she had had and had walked away leaving not a trace of herself behind. She had just picked up her bags and sauntered out with not even a single backward glance. And damn the jilted lover! And then the tears came, hot and angry and bitter and burning like acid on her cheeks. She was weeping like a grown woman in torment, with deep, gasping gulps of air and sobbing her heart out, pouring out her grief at the wild and senseless world that had turned its back on her.

Base camp

It took them about a week to settle down and establish a routine. The first three days were hectic but also, in a way soothing. As Sara saw the gradual build up of pressure in the office, she realised that it was helping her push away her pressing mental tensions into the background. Of course, Fatima had completely exempted her from all her duties as far as the office was concerned, making her free to come and go as she pleased.

But Sara's sense of the right thing to do, prevented her from accepting a sinecure. Even though she knew that she would not be as efficient as she would have liked to be, and as Fatima would not expect her to be, she felt she should be as useful as she could be. So she sat quietly in the interminable meetings, taking notes and listening carefully. Fatima was, as could be expected, all fire and brimstone, admonishing the staff for the lax discipline and the fact that the books of accounts were not being maintained properly. She felt that far away from Kerala, the staff had grown to a relaxed and laid back style of work. There was a crying need to bring in a sense of urgency and professionalism into the work. Abba had relied on the statements that were being sent to him regularly and had not really bothered to double check. She did not wish to be so trustful. She would ensure that the staff worked hard and long to earn their pay.

Fatima soon realized that there were no wrong entries or even the hint of misappropriation or embezzlement anywhere. In fact, all of the dozen or so people in the staff owed personal allegiance and loyalty to her father and would rather kill themselves than do anything that would reflect poorly on the Company. It was just that they were used to a work style in which life passed easily and with fluent regularity. When the goods sent from Kerala had been packaged and were ready for export, there would be a flurry of activity and intense hard work. But once the goods were on their way, then things would become quiet and comfortable again. There was a natural flow of work in the office and no one was under stress and everybody worked in perfect understanding with each other. That is, until now. The new boss had brought along a hurricane in her suitcase and she had churned up the office as nothing ever before.

The staff went into a huddle in the lunchtime but could summon up no response to the kind of expectations that she had had from them: to be punctual on the dot, to have all the answers ready in your memory, or be prepared with brief notes on all matters of things under the sun, or to get the financial statements updated on a weekly basis. They all agreed though that the Lady Boss herself worked with the energy and gusto of all of them put together. She did not hesitate to sit with them and help them work from the various journals and ledgers. It was also true that she had a sense of business that could only have been inherited. But her father had been a man with a heart of gold.

So, how is it that his daughter had inherited his business sense along with a mean streak that sometimes overshadowed everything else? Well, they would have no option but to suffer her because the staff numbers here were too small to even consider some kind of a Union or action group being formed to legitimately stand up to her under the banner of workers' rights. In Kerala that would have been possible. They could have expected to obtain support from a number of splinter groups, which would join them in the fight against capitalistic hegemony. But here in Delhi there was nothing that they could do to gain any kind of reprieve.

All of them did wonder as to who this pretty girl was, the one with the fair, sad face, who accompanied Fatima wherever she went. She was like a shadow to Fatima, sitting quietly and taking notes and saying not a word during all the discussions that were going on. It became pretty obvious that Fatima cared for her like a big sister and was always enquiring whether she wanted something to drink or take a rest or to go to her room for a nap. Her status in the Corporation was also not clear: she was listed in the Company attendance rolls as General Manager, and second only to the CMD. But there were no duties assigned to her in the schedule of delegated powers. They did gossip as to their relationship especially since it was clear that Sara was not a relative and not even a Muslim. Then what was she doing in this place, they wondered?

It soon did become very clear that Sara was made of a different cloth than the one her shrewish friend the Boss was made of. Sara was gentle and kind and always had some pleasant words or a ready smile for the staff. They saw her almost wince when Fatima was shouting at one of the clerks for some small error in the calculation sheet or a typographical mistake in the drafting of letters. Some of them were even pleasantly surprised to see that she would slip up to their tables when Fatima was not in sight and help them in correcting a business letter to some buyer in Europe. And she wished to take no credit for the quality of the letter when Fatima bestowed a gruff compliment on the clerk for the effort, not knowing it was Sara who had written the letter for him to type out.

Sometimes, when one of them had gone out to the market area to seek out some potential client's office and came back hot and bothered, Sara would arrange to see that he got a glass of cold lime juice to help him cool off. When the typist's younger brother was suddenly admitted to hospital with an appendicitis problem, it was Sara who offered to go with her and to see

that he was comfortable and to insist that the doctors attend to him promptly. These little things soon endeared her to the rest of them, who would invariably compare her to the monster whom it was their misfortune to have as boss.

Sara was an intrinsically kind and gentle person, but she realized that she could not be opposed to Fatima in the administration of the office. It would not do for the staff to think of her as a guardian angel and Fatima as the very devil incarnate. It would divide the office and create discontent and lead to indiscipline and all kinds of interpersonal problems that could well be avoided. So it became clear that she should now start to formulate her plan of action and begin the series of events that would bring her face to face with her destiny.

And thus it was that one evening, having got back from the office, Sara sat down with Fatima and over a cup of hot and wonderful elaichi tea talked about her future. Delhi had become a kind of base camp before the struggle to climb the mountains of her fortune and fate. She had to prepare herself mentally and physically and take along the safety netting and the ropes and the ice pick and the storm shoes and the goggles that she would so desperately need to sustain herself and save her soul from perdition. On the summit she would meet her awesome fate and she had no clue as to whether she would be able to come out unscathed or whether she would be blown away by hostile winds.

She knew only too well that over twelve years had passed since she had last seen Giridhar, standing behind his mother. He must have been about thirteen or so at that time; an awkward boy who had begun to grasp the complexities of the adult world and had felt sharply the sorrow that the little girl, who was his bride, must have felt when she had lost both her parents so dreadfully within the span of a few minutes. Surprisingly those memories were very clear in her mind; well, perhaps not so surprisingly, because they were the most horrific and traumatic moments in the little life that she had had till then.

Now he must be a young man of about twenty-five, in the prime of his life. She wondered what he was doing, was he helping his father in the agriculture business, or was he working independently on his own? Was he still in his village or had he migrated off to earn his living somewhere? How did he look like, tall and handsome? Short? Dark? He may hardly know English and it would be difficult to communicate with him.

She had kept in touch with Hindi and she spoke without much of an accent mainly because Harish Chacha had insisted on the use of his mother tongue quite often in the house. In effect, therefore, she was using English at school and when talking with Bhaiyya, and Hindi when at home with Chacha and a smattering of laboured Malayalam when she was alone with Choti Maa, especially when she insisted that she should be able to speak at least a few words to her distant cousins and uncles and aunts when they did in fact go home for an occasional holiday. She even went as far as teaching her the Malayalam alphabets and wonder of wonders, she could even manage to read a few words! But to get the point, the fact is that she could speak Hindi and could make herself understood. And so talking to Giridhar would not be much of a problem.

That point having been settled, the next question to address was how she could get to the village that Giridhar lived in. It was not too far from Surpura, but for the life of her, she did not really remember the name of the village that he lived in. So she would have to get to Surpura first and then take her new bearings from there. And who would help here there: it seemed a hopeless conundrum. She remembered the affable, but childless, Draupadi Mausiji, who had taken Saraswati to her heart and had looked after her like her own child.

Would she still be there? She must have been more than sixty then and would now be more than 70 perhaps. Was she alive? And in good health? Would she be willing to help her out after all these years? That was a chance she would have to take, and she would try her best to involve the old lady in her quest. But, if she were not there, or was unable to aid her, or refused to do so, then what would she do? She would have to play it by ear then, she would have to take the path she thought would best lead her to her goal and then she would have to sort out things as they happened.

Fatima agreed to come with her on her first foray into the plains of Rajasthan and she was glad of the sure and certain, though sometimes heavy handed, direct approach of Fatima. Where there was some subtle care and concern required, then it would be up to Sara herself to do the needful, but otherwise she would have to rely on Fatima to a great deal. They would have to be away from office and the work of the Company for a few days, but then there was no other way they could accomplish what they had set out to do.

And thus it was that on a Sunday, the two girls caught the early morning train from Old Delhi Railway Station on a meter gauge train that chugged its way in a slow and stately fashion southwards from the metropolis into the suburbs and then into the plains of Haryana and later down into Rajasthan. The landscape was turning flat and dry and barren and earth coloured. Here and there were patches of green and yellow, fertile colours where a tube well or a deep baodi dripped water into the thirsty land, which in turn gave life and vegetation in abundant exchange for the precious gift.

Looking out from the window, some memories were dredged up from Sara's past, as the landscape turned increasingly familiar, replaying some of the earliest memories she had of Surpura. The graceful, swaying women in the fields, the turbaned men with their moustaches, and the children, like children anywhere, laughing and running and playing with each

other. Whenever the train cut across the road or passed parallel to it Sara was able to see from the window, the traffic of life itself as it moved in a never-ending pattern. The haughty camels were slowly towing their laden carts along the road, while the heavy trucks carrying all kinds of goods swept past them on the National Highway linking Delhi with Ahmedabad and then Bombay.

There was a brief halt at Rewari where they were served tea in mud vessels that gave the brew an earthy taste, surprisingly not unpleasant. And then they were away once more, sometimes halting for no reason at all in the midst of nowhere, slowly dragging out the minutes for an eternity and then suddenly catching up speed once again. At times when it stopped in the middle of a green field or at the end of station, they would find vendors of all kinds of stuff clambering on to the train and persuading the passengers to try out a savory channa or bhel puri or attempting to sell some tawdry toy. The ticket inspectors were quite lax and they would permit them to climb on and would only shoo them off when the train started to move. There was an easy familiarity and a give and take in the entire scene. Sara wondered if it meant that the vendors had to bribe the inspectors for this favor. Probably not, she guessed, because they seemed to be in a state of penury and really not able to look after themselves to keep body and soul together.

About three hours after they left Delhi, the train finally reached Alwar railway station. It was not a big terminal, but there were crowds already waiting to hop on for the journey down to Jaipur. They climbed out of their compartment, sought the help of a coolie for their bags and then they were out into the bright sun light in the open yard outside the station. The sun's heat was a blast from the furnace. She had momentarily forgotten how in the summer months, in her infant days at Surpura, the village used to lie baking under the sun and the windows were closed and people lay lethargic and soporific within the houses.

She closed her eyes and flashes of memory from some long bygone days moved across her mind. For a moment, Sara stood immobile as she took in the sounds and the sights around her and on the roads beyond. She had reached a critical point in her movement towards her destiny and the gravity of the moment struck her like a shaft of lightning. After many years of pondering and debating and postponing and delaying, here she finally was, on the land that she should have called home, but which had become alien by the inexorable vagaries of time and circumstances.

Outside the station, with Fatima searching for a taxi, Sara stood for a long moment with her eyes closed, in a state of perfect stillness, as if in a cocoon and surrounded by cotton wool, with her mind in a cold numbness and her thoughts in suspension. She was barely animate it seemed, with only the quiet movement of the air in her lungs to reveal she was alive. The ebb and flow of the passengers from the station and the bustle of the traffic outside the gates were but the quiet backdrop to this moment as she focused her mind to reach the still quiet pool of peace within her consciousness. Oh God, give me the strength to meet my destiny and make me accept whatever is Your will. It was a child's prayer, but strangely adult in its acceptance of the inevitable. It was both surrender and a willingness to go forward and meet the awaiting future.

And then the mystery of the moment was over: Fatima was calling out to her and she was throwing her bags into the yellow and black taxi that would take them to Surpura. They moved out of the station and the busy roads of the city, past the office buildings and then into the quieter suburbs and finally down the highway southwards to the little village that awaited Sara. The driver knew the way and assured them that they would reach there in about an hour.

Sara felt her heart beat faster as her nerves were slowly but surely getting unwound. As a rope when scraped against stone slowly frays and splits and each strand then twists around like a spinning tendril to scatter the careful weave, so also could Sara feel her mind start to lose its form and binding. She leaned back into the seat and closed her eyes; the watchful Fatima noticed the withdrawn expression and far away look and reached out to hold her hand and whispered to her that everything will turn out all right. And don't you worry for I am here and will be here with you as long as you need me.

Friends. There is no better word than friends and when the friends are sisters too, then there is no further need for any words. There is a bond among sisters that no force or power can comprehend. It defies the ravages of time and the beatings of adverse circumstances. It is a profound mystery to understand that sisters can be consanguine or not related by blood at all. In this case, the bond was perhaps deeper than the flow of blood in the veins.

And so, by the time they were nearing their destination, Sara was looking brighter and ready to face the prospects that the ever approaching moment of time would bring. And Fatima spread her confidence and her strength through the soft skin of her hands massaging the Sara's wrist and soon enough Sara found the strands of peace and tranquility binding back together again in her mind and then she was smiling and then she was excited and then she was looking forward to the moment when it would all happen. It is amazing how a friendly face and a few comforting words can bring about a world of a change in the way a person perceives the world around.

The car turned off the main highway and onto the graveled road leading diagonally across the countryside into the distance. There were gnarled twisted trees on both sides of the path and the landscape suddenly seemed to be familiar. The car wheels raised a cloud of fine brown dust behind them. Swimming up through the recollections of the past twelve years or so came

the long submerged memories of the little girl who had left the village in such horrific circumstances. The sights and sounds of the outskirts of the little village suddenly seemed to become animated and alive and even the very stones seemed to be whispering to her, you have come back, you have come back.

As she neared the habitation it was clear that Sara was now turning back the hands of time and metamorphosing to Sarasu: she was changing to a nine year old and she could now clearly see herself in long skirts with her hair plaited in a tight swirl behind her back and she was running along the pathway in front of her home, barefoot and wild, and her Maa was waving to her and shouting to her to slow down and she was flying away like a bird and she was thrilled at the wonderful world she was a part of and she was happy. Happy, with no conditions or parenthesis or provisos attached: just simply happy.

It was uncomplicated then and all that mattered was the joy of a home and the nearness of loving parents and the satisfaction of good food and sound sleep at night in the unconditional safety of the arms of Maa. What bliss; she had no recollection of the hot summer days and the cold, cold winter nights and hard physical labour of the life that her father lived and the ever present fear of the failure of the rains.

All that stayed in her mind was hearing the quiet beat of her father's heart as she lay like a still, small doll on his chest after he had come home from his work. And the smell of cooking from the kitchen where her Maa tended the slow fires that were kept burning the whole evening, the fragrance of spices sautéed when the dishes were about to be taken off the fire. And on special occasions, the exquisite taste of the sarson-ki-saag and sangdi cooked with ghee. And how could she forget the small wooden doll and the rail-ki-gaadi that she kept below her cot in the bedroom where her Pitaji and Maa rested for the night?

And Maa, of all things that she kept turning to in her memories again and again, it was the quiet and collected presence of Maa. Who, wonder or wonders, kept her warm in the cold and cool in the heat. Who hugged her and kissed her throughout the day until sometimes she pulled away in exasperation. Who sat through the night with glistening worried eyes as she watched the little feverish head when the child fell ill. Who played with her in the evening as the day turned dark and the oil lamps starting to glow. And who committed the gravest sin of all, of coming back home one ordinary day, wrapped in a bloody shroud, without even a final glance or a word of farewell to her.

The vehicle stopped in front of the small fair price shop where a crowd of people was buying their monthly quota of wheat. The car immediately attracted attention and the children gathered around looking with open curiosity through the windows. The driver, armed with the instructions given to him, stepped out and asked for the house of Draupadi Mausiji who used to live just near the house of the late Ram Chander Choudhary who had died some twelve years ago. There was a moment of silence and then the shopkeeper asked some question in clarification and finally pointed to the distance and gave the appropriate directions. They moved on with the villagers staring at them. The Memsahabs were obviously from far away: they didn't look like locals and one wondered what they had to do with Draupadi ji. Anyway, it would soon come out, they nodded wisely, for nothing was ever a secret in Surpura: the mystery would soon be revealed.

Sarasu and Draupadi Mausi

The taxi stopped outside a small house towards the eastern corner of the village and both of them stepped out and peered in through the gates. Reality had now superimposed itself on the memories that Sara had had of the village, modified and amended by the passage of Time, and now she could clearly remember the homely stage where the scenes of her childhood had played themselves out. Just across the stonewall that separated Draupadi Mausi's abode was the home where she had grown up. Her home, her sanctuary, her place of refuge and palace, where she had spent the first nine years of her innocent life, blissfully unaware of the simple, everyday tragedy that a child marriage meant and the horrific change that a matter of minutes would make to her future.

But for that dramatic stroke of Fate, she would not have been flown across the ocean to a different world where she would win the love and affection of people she had never known. Again, but for the stroke, of a different kind, that had felled Harish Chacha in the midst of a domestic moment at the breakfast table, she would never have flown back to the green fields of Kerala, would never have met Jaggu and fallen for him in a long slow romance that seemed doomed to failure. And but for the chance telegram that had come to Fatima, and her involuntarily accompanying her to Munnar, she would never have got the support and love of this unlikely friend, standing now by her side, who would stand by her through thick and thin, through happiness and adversity.

Before they moved in through the gates, Sara walked up to the wall and peered across to the house that was locked and bolted. It appeared to have been well looked after though no one had been living in it for the past decade or so. Perhaps Draupadi Mausi ji had made arrangements for its upkeep and its periodic cleaning. The area in front of the house was bare whereas Sara could clearly remember the patch of land as being green with some vegetables such as mooli and methi, painfully grown from the wastewater of the kitchen. There had been then some flowers along the hedge, simple colours standing out against the dark brown of the earth. Where have all the flowers gone...

In the back yard there had been a neem tree and a small swing had been fashioned from its branches. The branches of the tree could still be seen; it had grown large and shady and covered the rooms at the rear of the house. Of course, there was no sight of the swing. The house appeared dark and forbidding from outside. All the warmth and kindness that Sara had experienced within its walls, the exclusive love that a single child reveled in, all that seemed to have oozed out through the walls in the years it was kept closed and shuttered. Of course, before she left from here, she would go in and see for herself what the house looked like.

And then they were moving in through the wooden gates to Draupadi Mausi's house and walking up to the door. They knocked and waited and were amused to see that the shutters of the houses nearby had been raised and curious women were peeping from under their covered heads at them. What were these Memes — Hai Bhagawan, they are dressed in pants and shirts! —doing in Draupadi's house, they wondered. After a long wait, the two girls heard the shutters being drawn and an old woman, quite bent over with age appeared to peer out at them. Sara caught her breath and Fatima looked at her asking her if this was the one that they were looking for. Of course, it was, there could be no other with those sad, kindly eyes and the face that she had held so dear in her heart when she was a child. Her heart beating loud within her body, Sara, Sarasu, took the first excited step towards her.

“Mausiji, do you remember me? It is Sarasu !”

For a long moment, there was no expression on that lined and tired face, no inkling of the purport of that dramatic moment. She only stared unblinkingly as slowly, slowly, gently, and then with a rush of blood to her face, her mind started to accept that information. The old lady was analyzing it and was starting to feel the growing incredulity and amazement, the excitement sweeping her away. Her eyes widened and she took in her beloved Sarasu's form and height and the features of her face and she struggled to see the little child in this young woman's visage and then the tears were prickling at her eyes and she was weeping and reaching out to Sarasu.

She clung to Sara's neck and dragged her down and they were both squatting on the ground and hugging each other and for Draupadi, even if this were the very last day of her life, she would know that there was nothing more to be attained or achieved and that after all these interminable years of waiting and watching, the moment that she had been longing for was finally here and that she could now be taken by the gods and she would feel no regret whatsoever. Sara was amazed at the strength of her feelings as she felt herself being swept away on a sea of emotions let loose within her and she was weeping too. Fatima standing apart and watching them felt the power of the moment and in an uncharacteristic gesture was wiping at her eyes and cursing herself for being such a weak-kneed creature.

“Where have you been all these years, my laadli,” she cried and went into a fresh bout of tears. “You could have written to me or sent me some news. I did not even know if you were even alive! How I longed to see you and talk to you and how I despaired that I would not be able to see you again. I have heard that even Giridhar beta and his family has also been searching for you and that they were really not able to trace you out anywhere, even in that vilayathi place where Harish had taken you. Where have you been, beti, all these years, hey Bhagawan, all these so many years?”

Sarasu felt the old hands around her neck and for a moment, even in the midst of the emotions sweeping through her, suddenly thought of another old woman who had hugged her and caressed her and had cried over her so many years ago. Choti Maa’s mother at Mavelikara, who had not even seen her before and with whom she had no blood relationship and to whom she could easily have been an unnecessary bother, but who had opened her wrinkled, patient arms and had accepted and embraced this strange quiet girl with so much affection and love. And now this unlettered old woman, at quite an other end of the country, who had, with no questions asked or explanations offered, accepted the responsibility of looking after the house and its memories as if it were a duty cast on her. Both women had had no familial relationships with her but had shown her the meaning of love beyond the confines of duty, beyond the obligations of the flow of mere blood.

“We have a lot to talk about, Mausii. I need to be with you and tell you the story of what has happened to me and hear from you of things that have happened to you and to all the people here. This is Fatima, she is a friend of mine and like a sister to me and she knows all about everything that is known to you and to me and she and I will tell you a story that will astonish you and make you want to hate me. But I love you like a mother and I need you to stand by me in these dark hours and I hope that you will not desert me. But that will be in a short time. First I need to see the house where I was born and from where I have been separated for so long. Do you have the keys to my home, Mausii?”

“Of course, I have the keys. They have been waiting for you for such a long time and I have tried to keep the house the very same way that you had left it. Come with me!”

The keys were brought out of a shelf and Mausii ji and she with Fatima in tow were walking across the yard and through the gap in the wall that separated the two houses. And then they were standing at the door of the house that had been Sarasu’s home for the first nine years of her life. The keys were turned in the lock and the doors creaked open and Sara who was Sarasu peeped in. It was a somber moment and Sara held Sarasu’s breath within her chest and took in the sight of the rooms that was now so clearly etched in her mind that she wondered how she could have almost forgotten it.

Motes of dust were caught in a shaft of light streaming in through a crack in the window. Within the room was a hushed silence. To talk in whispers was expected. Two things struck her immediately: the place looked much smaller than she had imagined. Perhaps she had grown physically and the dimensions of the rooms had collapsed in commensurate fashion. The other thing was that it looked so spic and span that it was obvious that Mausii had looked after the house with much love and care.

And then in the rush and excitement, she was almost pushing aside Mausii ji and running helter-skelter into the room and she was slipping and sliding and losing her balance and she was flying into a fall with all her limbs in disarray. There was a shocked silence and Mausii was rushing forwards to help pick her up off the floor with solicitous words of concern. It was Fatima who, trying to suppress a laugh, made a choking sound in her throat and then the ludicrousness of the situation struck them all and they were laughing and patting each other on the back and lifting Sara to her feet. Breathless she helped herself up and stood with her arms around Draupadi Mausii ji and Fatima at her side and she watched the memories of her childhood fall into place around her. She was joyful and full of the need to talk and to show her friend how she had lived as a child in this house, which circumscribed the boundaries of her world and her universe before Fate had intervened to upturn her life and make things too utterly complicated and incomprehensible.

The skid and the fall had a necessary impact on her mood. She had come prepared to be gloomy and morose at the sight of the home where her briefly happy world had been suddenly turned to a nightmare. But now the temper of her mind had changed, she was now enjoying the task of explaining things to Fatima, with Mausii ji overhearing but not understanding a word of what she said to her because her English was nonexistent. Fatima heard the child’s voice speak from Sara’s throat as she pointed out the rooms where she had run about as an infant and then as a toddler and finally as a child bride. Here was the kitchen where she had often been shooed away from the open flames by her mother, who would then relent and pass on to her on a small plate the samples of hot delicacies she used to prepare throughout the day for the family. These were small pre-lunch or pre-dinner snacks, so as “to taste the salt” she used to say. Many a times she had burnt her tongue in her eagerness to eat and had promptly received the quick reprimand of her mother. And here was the small bathroom where her mother would bathe her in a bucket of warm water and then take her bundled away to the aangan, the courtyard, where she would warm herself under the rays of the sun and listen to the wind blowing through the leaves of the neem tree.

The courtyard was in the middle of the house and was open to the sky and the elements and it was here that she would play on the hardened earth and toss her stones at the squares she had drawn at the corner and where she had perfected her aim so

that she could play with the other children in the complicated games that children are wont to play. And here, her bedroom which she shared with Pitaji and Maa. At the corner of the room was a small cot, now lying bare and uncovered, the sheets and the mattresses having been stored away in the absence of the residents of the house who had all flown away to their permanent or temporary destinations. It was there that she had spent some of the happiest moments of her life at Surpura. Lying curled up under the blanket after dinner in winter and hearing the murmur of the conversation of her mother and her father talking in bed as she drifted off to a dreamless sleep. Or of Maa singing a lullaby to soothe her. She could now see the engraved patterns on the cot that had been so much a part of her daily life. She would count the lines on the sides of the cot and display her numerical talents to her proud Maa.

In the front room was Pitaji's favourite chair, where he would sit and see visitors and serve them tea and biscuits as they discussed matters of the village and the coming monsoons and the agricultural seasons. She would crouch behind the table and pretend that nobody could see her and hide there until the visitors had all had gone, when she would emerge and climb up to her father's lap where she would nestle while he went through the morning papers. Once she had pulled at his moustache and it had probably hurt him quite a bit. But he had merely smiled and extricated himself out of her small fingers. Never, not even once, had she seen him angry or losing his cool with either her or Maa, although she now knew that he could quite clearly speak out his mind at Panchayat meetings or other gatherings in the village where the elders would call him to ascertain his views.

And now the mood was again changing and the somber shadows seemed to flit through the rooms and Sara could no longer pretend to be happy. Try as she might, she could not forget the terrible scenes that were so imprinted in her mind as the bodies, shrouded in white cloth, were brought and the horrified face of Draupadi Mausi as she placed her hands over Sarasu's eyes so as to block her view. As her face had been turned away by Mausi ji so many long years ago, so she now turned her face away from Fatima and Mausi and looked out through the window at the little barren plot of land adjoining the house and felt the joy of the past few moments seeping out of her body like the slow draining of water from the earth after a brief spell of pouring rain.

"It is time to get back to your house, Mausi ji," she said abruptly and walked out through the door. Her eyes had again clouded and she couldn't bear to let herself be seen with wet eyes and moistened cheeks, turning her unsightly and ugly. Fatima helped Mausi ji lock the doors once again and brought her back to her house where by now Sara had once again found her composure and was waiting for them. She shook her head ruefully at Fatima as if to ask her forgiveness for her rude behavior and Fatima nodded and smiled and things seemed to be back to normal again. Draupadi Mausi was busying herself in the kitchen trying to put together something for her beloved Sarasu to eat. She was still trying to absorb the fact that her darling child had come back after all these years: she seemed to have grown into a sophisticated young woman, like a city bred Memsahab, who had come for a visit to meet her rural folks.

Somewhere down the last twelve years, she had changed so completely. But for the shape of her eyes, so like her mother's, she would not have believed that this was really she. She quickly lit the stove and boiled water for the tea and grabbed some mutri and pickles, which she had stored in the cupboard for occasional visits from her neighbours. She lived virtually alone but for a young girl who came in to wash the dishes and sweep and swab. Badami, the servant girl was a simple and affectionate soul who took good care of her mistress. Draupadi Mausi was wondering where the two girls would stay for the night and how these city-bred ladies would be able to manage in such a house in the middle of nowhere.

With the tea and the snacks on a tray she went back to the room where the two girls were waiting and then she sat down with a sigh and said, "And now, beti, you tell me all that has happened to you in the past dozen years. I am just waiting to get all the news."

Sara paused closed her eyes and said, "Mausi ji, I have a lot to tell you: I want you to listen to me and not say a word, and not think bad of me until I am done. I fear your views about me will change and you will consider me as an evil, wayward girl when you have heard me out. I am afraid that your love for me will vanish by the time I have completed my story. But I have no option but to tell you the whole truth and pray that things will be all right between you and me despite all that is buzzing like a bee in my mind. So listen, Mausi ji and listen well for I will be quite long in the telling of my story."

Sara had quite caught Mausi's attention by now and she watched as the old woman sat down in the chair and sipped at her tea and listened as the tale unfolded. Fatima said not a word, but she could just about follow the Hindi that Sara spoke. She spoke slowly, gathering her thoughts and pausing often to arrange the sequence of events while she bled out her thoughts and her emotions and the deepest fears that had been eating into her for the many past years of her life.

Only once earlier, in the room over looking the estate in the heart of the forests of Munnar, had she told Fatima this story, though in a much more abbreviated fashion. But now she was attempting to convey her modern thoughts and feelings to a loving woman who would not understand half of what she was trying to convey. But she had to make the effort because to

tell the story as best as she could was crucial to the success of her campaign in the days ahead. At times, her feelings were so strong that her voice cracked and she was unable to speak for a few minutes. But Fatima went over to her and placed her arms over her shoulders and gave her strength and soon enough she controlled herself and she continued to speak.

Mausi heard it all and as promised she spoke not a word, but she sighed and groaned and shed a few tears from time to time, especially when she came to the part about the stroke which had changed Harish from a strong and vital man into a vegetable doomed to lie in bed for the years left in his life. She was shocked to hear that Harish had been already married when he had come to collect Sarasu to take her across the oceans. She was aghast that he could have ever contemplated such a thing, that too with a casteless woman, without a word to his elder brother, Sarasu's father. She thought better about Choti Maa when she heard of the love she had lavished on the poor motherless girl and the care and concern she had showed in her upbringing and her education. The sudden change of location from the land over the seas to the village of her Choti Maa in the deep South confused her and made her sigh in sorrow for the awfulness of her poor child's experience.

Her mood changed when Sarasu spoke about her complicated emotions with regard to Giridhar and she quite could not understand how a girl already entered into wedlock when she was a child could even contemplate the thought of getting out of holy matrimony on the grounds that she was now an educated woman who could not countenance a marriage that had been solemnized without her consent. She heard out Sarasu's halting confession about her mixed emotions regarding a classmate of hers in the college she had studied in down south. The emotional turbulence Sarasu felt in all this left a deep impact in her old and tired body and mind.

It was dark by the time Sara finished and she sat back drained and exhausted with the wall behind her and Fatima sitting like a patient shadow next to her, wordlessly giving her strength, for the telling of her story had exhausted her completely. Mausiji too remained silent, pondering at the mystery of a malevolent fate, which had wrought such tragedy on the poor girl.

There was a long pause, a deep silence that settled in around the three of them. The impact and purport of the long story had by now fully sunk in. Mausiji did not approve of the very concept of educated women and, therefore, could not for the life of her, understand what she had meant about the enormous injustice of child marriage? The consent of both the partners in a marriage: whoever heard of such a thing! And once the marriage ceremonies had been performed it was final and irrevocable. Now what sort of new fangled ideas was this girl talking of. And what right did she have to come back after all these years, suddenly out of the blue, and burden her poor old heart with all this talk and confusion. And what did she expect this lonely old woman to do, considering all the circumstances.

Clutching her knees, she painfully got up from her position against the wall and moved to the kitchen and tried to light the lamps and make something in the kitchen for the girls to eat. She called out to the servant maid to come and get the kitchen fires going and then bustled about putting together the ingredients to make a simple meal of chapaties and the sabji.

Through the confusion that prevailed in her mind though, was the single thought that dominated everything else. Here was the poor girl who had come to her in the midst of all her troubles and had sought her help. And though it was not quite clear what that help she really wanted was, she was duty bound to help this little girl, who had once been the delight of her heart in the days when she had flitted in and out of her house. Small and delightful and chattering like a bird, she had captured her Mausi's heart, totally, completely and without reservations. In such a complete surrender, there was no question of refusal to help. It was an unconditional love that had held her in thrall and made her a virtual slave to the tiny girl's dictates. And Sarasu's love for her too had been complete and without fault. In this kindly old neighbour who had taken her into her home and her heart, she had found a patient listener and a devoted slave who would give in to her slightest demands, much more than her parents would have.

Sara remembered how late in the afternoons, when her father was away in the fields and her Maa was having her afternoon snack, she would often hug her Mausiji and go to sleep in her lap, while she was fanned and kept cool from the summer heat in the embracing kindness of this childless, large-hearted woman. And so, as she put together a simple meal for her guests, she decided that in such a relationship, the merit of the argument should be of no concern to her at all. Sarasu had called out for help and her Mausiji would help her, even if it meant that she would have to ignore her qualms of conscience, even if it meant that she would have to go beyond the confines of the social mores and customs that had bound her for all the days of her life. Her decision made, she felt lighter and more cheerful as she called the girls to the dining table for dinner.

"I must tell you too, beti, of things that have happened here while you had fled from your Mausiji. I have lived here all alone with none but friendly neighbours to help me now and then; the money I receive from my land and from the cows are more than enough to keep me going. I help people in the social ceremonies of the village, be it marriages or deaths, and am generally a busybody that no one can resist. Harish had taken you away but had asked me to keep an eye on the house and the property and to take care of it while he was sorting out things. In all these twelve years, he had written to me several times giving me directions as to what to do and how to take care of the money received from the properties."

“Perhaps you do not know that he had arranged to give the mustard fields that he and your father jointly owned, on rent to Agarwal ji whose fields themselves lie to the west of this property. I think there was some kind of share cropping arrangement and the receipts of the income have been going in all these years into an account made out in your name in the cooperative bank. Come to think of it, you must be quite a wealthy young woman by now with all the income of the past dozen years having come into your account. I have no idea how much that it would total to, but you could check it out tomorrow. Agarwal ji has been more or less honest in his dealings in the matter, because even his conscience may not have permitted him to deceive the daughter of someone who had passed away in such tragic circumstances.”

“And it seems quite difficult to believe that twelve years have passed since you had gone and I have little to tell you of all that has happened in the interval. Life has been slow, and thankfully without incident. I have had all the excitement and terror that I can ever face in the few moments that took away your parents. I really cannot think of what kind of curse had fallen on you so swiftly and suddenly and I was going slowly mad with all the agony until Harish Bhai came back. And now that it seems that you have lived more in these dozen years than I have lived all my life. Well, I do not understand what you want from this old woman, nor do I understand the kind of things that you have told me but you are my beti now and I will do whatever is in my power to help you in your woes.”

Sara and Fatima exchanged glances and smiled at Mausii ji. Sarasu got up and hugged the old woman and held her to her heart and prayed in gratitude for the compassion and goodness and kindness that pervaded through every pore of her ancient body. Within this uneducated and illiterate woman, was a beating, living heart, with an acceptance that was without question, an understanding based, not on logic or reason, but on the solid foundation of undiluted and boundless love. What more could she ask for? As they sat down to eat, Sara felt that the second part of her journey into herself was now complete. The first part of her train journey from Kerala to Delhi under the tutelage and firm grip of Fatima had given place to the second lap where she had sought refuge in the heart of this old woman. And now perhaps she would not be all alone as she went on to the third and final stage where she would have to undertake the journey to meet Giridhar and face the consequences of her decision, whatever that may be.

Giridhar revisited

The taxi driver who had brought them to Surpura had agreed to stay on and, of course, had to be given his dinner and a place to sleep before they all settled down for the night. Before they did manage to sleep, they quickly chalked out the next day's plan. They would all leave in the morning for Chanderpur, Giridhar's village, where he and his parents have been living all this while. It was less than hour away. It was bigger than Surpura and had been recently upgraded to a Panchayat headquarters. It was electrified and had a regular school and a dispensary.

There, they would first go to Giridhar's house and Mausijji would discharge the awesome responsibility of introducing Sarasu to Giridhar's parents. They would try to reach the house at a time when Giridhar was not likely to be there. The confusion and acrimony that would follow would have to be absorbed by Mausijji and also by the hapless Sarasu. How on earth would they be able to explain her absence of over twelve years? How could they possibly be expected to understand the tensions in the conscience of the young girl who had left the village as an unlettered child bride and had come back educated and poised, but in deep crisis about herself and her life ahead.

And then what? They would have to play it by ear, for Sara herself was confused and uncertain as to what she should do and say. How could she now turn up at Giridhar's door and announce she is not in a position to adhere to her marriage vows taken in the presence of members of the family from both sides? How could she now repudiate a holy ritual after having made the seven circles around the sacred fire? Was she sure that she would be strong enough to turn away from Giridhar and run to the arms of a baffled and disheartened Jaggu, who in turn may or may not accept her, when he realises she had hidden the truth from him during the years they had known each other.

Mausijji had been warned not to mention a word about the young man in distant South India when she talked about things with Giridhar's family. That itself was disconcerting to her. How could Sara hide the feelings she had for Jaggu from Giridhar? Could she keep that truth hidden when Jaggu was one of the reasons for her to deny the marriage she had so long entered into? How could she forget the intellectual growth that England had gifted her with and agree to be once again the victim of a child marriage, when the very concept was abhorrent to her? She could never agree to lie supine and be brutalized by the reiteration of this age-old crime.

Mausijji had informed that in the interval when Sarasu had flown away like the Sarus crane and had not been heard of, Giridhar had gone to Mayo College at Ajmer for his schooling and then had completed his MBBS and become a full fledged doctor. Although she had not had much contact with his family, she knew that his father had not been quite keen that he become a government doctor and get posted to some place far away. Rather, he had helped Giridhar set up a small clinic a year ago in their village itself where, he had managed to do well for himself.

It was said that Giridhar was kind and gentle and had done much to help the people understand the need for cleanliness and hygiene. The people of the village loved and respected him, mainly because he was not too money-minded and was not averse to waiving the charges of the very poor who regularly visited his clinic. Mausijji maintained that he was a fine man and kept repeating it over and over again. It was as if, even though she had vowed to help out Sarasu in her travails, she would be only too happy if the poor girl realised the folly of her ways and finally agreed to abide within the boundaries of the marriage solemnised so many years ago.

The girls were dressed in salwar and kameez, and had packed away the pants and shirts they had worn the previous day. There was an understanding that in the coming meeting, there should be few ruffled feathers and any sort of cultural or social disparity should be eliminated or minimized as much as possible. In a traditional society, such as the one she was now entering, the sight of the bahu of the family wearing jeans and a shirt may be too galling and distasteful for them to absorb and would lead to a situation that could be easily avoided with some wise caution.

Sara was tense and her body felt stiff. Her neck was severely cramped and she seemed to be on the verge of getting a severe headache. As the moment of departure arrived, the fears in her became quite too much for her to handle and she sat down heavily on the chair and asked for a glass of water. Fatima full of concern, with worry writ large on her face, rushed to the kitchen to get it. Mausijji missed the moment as she was getting together her things for the journey. Sara gulped down the water and felt relieved in a moment. She took a few deep breaths and resorted to her favourite trick of imagining soothing patterns and colours in her mind and within a few minutes she was all right again. Fatima who had been witness to Sara's sudden failure of composure on a couple of occasions in the past kept looking sideways at her and gnawed at her finger nails and tried not to get too worried. And then Mausijji was ready and they were moving to the car for the short journey to their destination.

The morning was bright and hot. The sun was already heating up the interior of the car and it was getting uncomfortable sitting within. The driver was in a garrulous mood but nobody paid him any attention and he soon lapsed into silence. The car went back to the diversion they had taken from the main road, climbed once more onto the highway and then a few kilometers later took another side road, leading to the east. The sunlight was now directly in her eyes and Sara had to slip down in her back seat and cover her face with her dupata. She hoped she would not be further put into discomfort with the oncoming headache.

The road was dusty but they were able to travel the distance quickly enough and soon the houses and fields near the village of Chanderpur came into sight. Mausī had never been here before, so they had to stop at the chowki and ask for directions to the house of Chatter Singh Chaudhary and his family. While it was true that Sarasu had come to this house on the fateful day of her marriage so long ago in the past, and later on a couple of festive occasions, she really had no clue, after such a long absence, as to the whereabouts of the household. However, it was easily pointed out to them by curious onlookers and within a few moments the car stopped in front of the big double storied house. By then her headache had settled down to a dull throb in her temples and the back of her neck.

They opened the doors of the gate and moved in. At their approach, a young girl, just about the age of Sara, came through the front doors of the house and smiled tentatively at them. She was very obviously pregnant and there was a glow and a shine to her face that some happily expectant mothers often display. With a start, Sara realised that this was Lakshmi, Giridhar's sister and she had obviously come home for her confinement. She should be ready to deliver herself of a bonny baby any time now, she thought.

The mood she was in subtly changed after she set eyes on Lakshmi. In a flash, the contrast between the two of them became apparent to her. Lakshmi, brought up within the close confines of a traditional family, had very probably, like Sarasu herself, entered into marriage at a ridiculously young age, and had settled down nicely into the family of the choice of her parents and had made what was apparently a fine marriage. The fact that she looked well and healthy and contented said it all: she was unequivocally happy in her marriage. She must have had some primary education in the local school and would have learnt the arts and crafts of home management both from her parents and her in-laws and she was, to all appearances, quite a wonderful, young, contented woman in every aspect.

And she, Sarasu turned Sara, had upturned all the established conventions of her society. She had fled from her village to a foreign land leaving her home and hearth and her husband's family and had lived out a decade of her life among the alien corn. She had grown up differently, suave and sophisticated, educated in a world quite so alien from this rough desert landscape, understanding things that Lakshmi would have no comprehension about. In the heady intoxication of that learning breathed in from the air of that town sprawled along the shores of the distant sea, she had become a foreigner to her own home land. She was married in name and not in spirit and body. She was unhappy and despondent to the point of becoming depressed and she had no clue as to what she should do to resolve this intractable problem.

How could one acquire knowledge and still be unhappy, while Lakshmi, educated in a rudimentary and simple manner, safe in the confines of her village and her family, had been blessed with a bountiful happiness. The irony of Sara's predicament stood out in clear relief as she watched the radiant face of Lakshmi. All these thoughts flashed by in the few moments that it took her to reach the door of the house. And then Lakshmi with a tentative smile was enquiring as to who they were and where they had come from.

Chatter Singh and his wife Bhanukumari were in the inner courtyard, leaning back on their easy chairs. Basking in the glorious expectation of seeing their first grandchild, they were all concern and care for their daughter. Grizzled and gray, the stocky old man and the still youthful looking handsome woman were chatting amongst themselves and nibbling at some snacks served out to them. On hearing Lakshmi's voice, they turned towards her as she led the visitors into the courtyard. Lakshmi made the visitors sit down, saying that they wanted to meet them. There was no sign of recognition or awareness that this was a moment of the very greatest import: a huge event in the life of their family and one that would change everything that they had known through all these years of uncertainty.

In the long drawn out years after Sarasu's flight, there had been countless debates between the two of them in the sanctuary of their bedroom or when the children were not about, on the particular conundrum that they had been put into. The marriage had been solemnized, but the bride had flown. The saving grace was that Harish had promised she would be returned when she was old enough to accept her domestic duties. This by itself was not sufficient to turn away the puzzled and sometimes malicious queries of inquisitive neighbours and friends and family members. But they had to be content with the slender hope that Harish's promise held out.

They had written from time to time, enquiring about the little girl, about how she was growing up, how she looked and, most important, when she would be back home. The responses were muted, revealing but the most important details, leaving the

two of them unsatisfied and worried. But, after Sara had turned eighteen, it finally became unavoidable to write to Harish, this time in no uncertain terms. Briefly stated it was a warning: it is time Sarasu is returned to the rightful owner. The letter had been duly dispatched after it was carefully drafted and re-worded and re-read many times. That had been over three years ago. There had been a complete silence thereafter. Not a word in reply or even in acknowledgement. Discreet enquiries through some relatives of distant friends in Britain had revealed that there had indeed been a Dr. Harish who had fallen ill after a serious stroke and who had left with his wife and children to some place back in India. Their address or their present location was not known. The trail had run cold and there was nothing more that could be done. Their source had made a reference to Harish's wife and family, which was confusing, and there was some doubt as to whether it was the same Dr. Harish they were talking about. But now what? What about Giridhar, what about the sudden loss of the pride and dignity that the family had enjoyed for centuries? Would it all be destroyed, their family honour and prestige tainted and not worth redemption?

During all these years of uncertainty and confusion, Giridhar had grown up into a handsome young man. His father could afford him a good education and with the money that he made from his vast tracts of family land, was able to send him to the exclusive Mayo College in Ajmer, where he had done well and excelled in scholastics. And then, with his own desire to become a doctor, he had sought and obtained admission in the Ajmer Medical College and had passed his MBBS examinations only a couple of years ago.

Giridhar understood the torment that his parents were going through and knew too that he himself was not unduly worried about the whole thing at all. Saraswati was indeed his tiny child bride. But his contact with the world outside his village, his college education and later, his medical instructions, had left him with a positive distaste about age old customs that forced innocent children into relationships which would bind them down forever. He bemoaned the fact that since they did not know any better, they would assume this to be their lot and would stick with it through thick and thin. But Giridhar had a certain sense of patience that made him take things with equanimity. He would just smile and say that things would sort themselves out.

Chatter Singh ji was certainly not demanding the repudiation of the marriage that Giridhar had entered into. It was just that he thought it unfair to both of them and, in the long run, to both their families. As the son had grown older, the father would broach the subject with him, at first a little tenuously, and later with more insistence. Not merely as to what he should do, now that the bride was nowhere in sight, but that he was now a young man and should think of another marriage and the rearing of a family. And that he could not be expected to remain a bachelor groom-in-waiting forever.

The discussions would soon be wound up, as Giridhar would only smile patiently and tell him not to worry too much. Thereafter, Chatter Singh would turn incommunicado and after some time, would refuse to speak. The pain of the fate that he was forced to deal with was sometimes so humiliating that he would have to turn his face to the wall. His only prayer was that this problem be resolved before the end of his days or that he would be able to solemnize another marriage for his son and the episode of the past would be forgotten once and for all.

At the moment, however, the two of them were chatting about the forthcoming arrival of their grandchild. Both of them argued good-naturedly about the gender of the new child. Chatter Singh swore that his family honour would be upheld only if the baby were a boy, while his wife would smile and say, wait and see, the new arrival will be a wonderful girl who will bring wisdom to her grandfather and good luck to her grandmother. Within the four walls of the house there was a lot of good-natured ribbing and laughter. Decorum demanded that outside the home, in the company of strangers and other people from the village, the two of them would hardly look at each other or exchange a word between themselves. So when the strangers came into the sitting room, they hushed themselves up and welcomed them into their abode with formal courtesy and indeed, some measure of curiosity.

Mausi ji began the introductions. She said that she was a neighbour of the departed Ram Chander ji of Surpura and that she was for all these years in charge of looking after the property that had been left behind by the departed, after their unfortunate death in the road accident some dozen years ago. She had dearly missed the presence of that family after the sudden disappearing act of the little girl engineered by Harish Bhai and had longed for her to come back to her own land where they belonged. She had despaired that this dream of hers would never come true. And now, just yesterday, after a gap of so many years, the one impossible thing that she had been longing for had suddenly happened. Her little Sarasu, their long missing bahu, had appeared from out of the blue and here she was in their midst. She pointed out Sarasu to them sitting at the corner of the room where she sat uncomfortably tense in her high backed chair.

The silence that suddenly fell on the room was deafening. Later, when all the shouting and the excitement had died down, Sara would think that Mausi ji had not introduced the subject in a gradual manner, trying to reduce the shock on the two elderly people who were in near trauma by the time her short preamble was over. But as it was, there was disbelief and there was hurt resentment and then there were accusations and then there was a moment of quiet contemplation. It was obvious that there were some very major questions buzzing around like hornets in their heads. Lakshmi brought in the tea for them, not

knowing what had happened in the interval that she was away and there was an awkward silence while they waited for somebody to introduce them to her.

A little diffidently and hesitantly her mother-in-law told her that this was the missing bride, now come home after a lapse of twelve years. There was shock on the young girl's face and then her smile broke through in absolute delight. With the simplicity of a young girl, she cried out in joy to her Bhabhi and rushed straight to Sara's arms. It was almost like the final scenes from a Hindi movie and Sara was conscious of the fact that she had no equivalent response for her that would come straight from her heart. For Lakshmi, who perhaps did not know all the details of the absconding bride and may not have been informed about the doubts and worries and qualms of conscience involved in the reappearance of the girl, the moment was one to treasure forever. But all that Sara could do was stand up and hug the radiantly blushing, heavily pregnant girl. To Lakshmi, the arrival of her Bhabhi was a thrilling moment, a new friend in the house, a partner, a companion and together they would be able to sort out the problems of the world.

Fatima was but a silent spectator to the unfolding family drama, but was fully clued in to the developments and emotional outpourings that she was now witnessing. She saw a crease appear on the forehead of Chatter Singh ji and then a whispered word to his wife and then he was standing up and saying, "Beti, I'd like to talk to you alone for a moment, would you come to the inner room?"

Sara instinctively realised that this was the moment that she would have to confront. Perhaps this may, in the long run, prove to be even more significant than her first meeting with Giridhar. She knew well enough that the sons of fathers in this part of the world would only abide by what was told to them. There would be complete acquiescence thereafter. What should she say? Should she tell him that as a matter of conscience, she abhorred the very idea of child marriage; that she was but an innocent victim in an event that diminished the human soul; that she would no longer have anything to do with it; that she may be excused from assuming the responsibilities of a bride for the simple reason that in the interval between her marriage and now, she had educated herself and the very knowledge she had gained prevented her from obeying the dictates of evil social customs?

Or should she say that purely as a matter of coincidence, she had met a young man in her class in college, deep in the South of peninsular India, with whom she had a wonderful relationship based on mutual respect and affection, that may very well turn into love, and therefore the prospect of spending her life with a stranger in a land she had forsaken so many years ago, through a decision not of her own, was intolerable? Should she confess that maybe she would have preferred to disappear completely from their lives and leave them to pick up the threads in the absence of the bride and that Giridhar should marry again and be free to live a life that he desired and with a bride of his own choosing? So as she followed Chatter Singh ji into the inner room, she knew this could be the very moment that would decide the course of the rest of her life.

"Sit down, beti, and listen to me carefully", he said softly as he pulled up a chair for her and he himself sat at the edge of another sofa. "We are very glad that you have come back and you can imagine how much joy it gives us to see you again in our house after all these years. We know that Harish ji wanted to give you a good education and to care for you and that is why we did not make such a fuss when he took you away. Neither were we in any position to resist, because the trauma of the moment. His great grief silenced all of us."

"But you can well imagine the intolerable plight that you left us all in after that moment. When you did not come back, we used to say that you are busy in your studies or that it is very expensive to make the trip or that Harish was busy and so on. Later, it became obvious to all our friends and neighbours that we were just making excuses to hide the fact that our bahu, by now a young woman, had simply disappeared and that she would not be coming back at all. And though there were some spiteful comments and snide remarks aimed at us, within a short time we were left to our own devices and to the endless task of talking and discussing the whole matter between ourselves on countless occasions."

"So, when you suddenly land up on our doorsteps, you can imagine the extraordinary dilemma that you put us in. I don't know what Giridhar would think after all this time. He has been quite frank during our discussions with him. He would say that times have changed and now one must make one's own decisions and that the system of child marriage will last only until there are uneducated people and that one day, perhaps all marriages will be between adults alone and maybe their parents will only have a marginal role in the choice of the bride."

"I really don't know what he means by all that; nor do I know how upset he was by your permanent absence. Perhaps, he was in a kind of limbo where the absence of a decision was itself a way to prolong the present state of affairs. To lead one's life as normally as possible and to keep going forever like this with no end of the problem in sight. Sometimes he smiles and tells me that I am worrying unnecessarily."

"To us, it would appear that now the problem is over and that both of you can live together in happiness from this day on. I hesitate to tell you this as you are our bahu and we will accept you as that; but you are a young woman about 21 or 22 by now, I guess. If you had been with us you would have been the mother of maybe a couple of our grandchildren.

“But you have been away, you have been a stranger to us, and we have no clue as to what has happened to you in all these years and whether you would now be able to live with us in this little village after having spent so many years in a foreign land across the seas. You are a complete mystery to us and you realise that in the society we live in, there has to be social acceptance of you. We would not want people to talk behind our backs and, God forbid, if some comments or aspersions are cast on you by spiteful gossips like where you have been or what you have been upto in all these years, it would break my heart and I would die a bitter old man, feeling all my life’s dreams have turned to ashes.”

“And so it is that I must confess that I have much fear in my heart. We kept longing for your return though we knew that with each passing day the prospects of your coming back were getting more and more remote. And when you do finally return, we find ourselves perplexed, confused, uncertain what to do. I wonder if the ending to this long wait will be a pleasant one or not and whether things will be resolved as we wanted them to be. It has been twelve years, beti. Almost as long as Sita Maa was away from her Shri Ram Bhagawan! Do you understand the implications, beti?”

There was a long silence as Sara stared down at the cement floor and tried to absorb what was being told to her. The truth suddenly struck her squarely in the face and she gasped. What this friendly old man was telling her was not merely that he was uncertain what had happened to her in these past twelve years. He was telling her in a tangential, roundabout way his apprehensions as to whether she was a virtuous woman worthy of entering the Chatter Singh household as Giridhar’s wife. Whether, consequent to leaving Surpura at a tender age after the trauma of her parents’ death, she had lived a good virtuous life and had not been led astray by the temptations that the foreign country would so brazenly offer.

Simply stated, he was asking a question: was she still a virgin? Was she a good girl who would make a blameless bahu?

She placed her hand over her mouth in shock and looked up at the old man who was peering into her eyes and felt for a brief moment a swaying in the room around her. Her migraine flared in sharp pain behind her eyes. She looked up at him in anguish. She saw an immediate softening in the old man’s eyes as he smiled in confusion at her very apparent shock and looked away in some guilt and uncertainty.

“What I meant, beti, was that Giridhar is our heart’s delight and we want the best for him and his life ahead.”

This explanation was not any better. He had to retreat in confusion, he had to backtrack. “I think I have not been able to express what I really wanted to say, but I hope you do not think I have been crass and rude. I think I have spoken too much. Perhaps we should wait for Giridhar to come back. Maybe he should take the final decision. After all, he is the one who will be most affected by all that is happening. I can see that I have caused you much pain with my words and I am sorry for that. Let me call in my wife. Your Saas will be able to explain things better to you.”

Sara understood only too well how her dramatic appearance was the cause for the confusion, the mixture of joy and dismay generated in the household. She realised too that any parent in such circumstances would have been liable to feel the same way. And that she could not grudge an old man, who loved his son dearly, his suspicions. Would she have to assuage their fears first before telling them that she wished to be freed from her obligations towards them?

On the other hand, if she wished to press home a point, she too could have expressed a grudge against Giridhar’s father. How could she forget that it was soon after his letter had reached Brighton that Harish Chacha had fallen victim to a cerebral stroke that had left him motionless and comatose for the last three years? Of course, she could have hurled this into his face, if she wanted to. But Sara, being Sara, only bowed her head.

As Chatter Singh ji went out of the room to call in Bhanukumari, she saw Fatima pushing her way in with a look of worry and concern on her face. As Fatima sat by her with an arm thrown around her shoulders, Sara whispered to her the gist of what she had been told. Fatima was suddenly all fire and brimstone and there was a flash in her eyes and she clenched her fists. When Giridhar’s mother came in she saw the two girls huddled together, one quiet and in deep consternation, the other belligerent and ready to explode.

And so it was that she fell victim to Fatima’s outburst: a clatter of harsh words in English (which fortunately she did not understand) and Hindi (which was broken and almost incoherent). Bhanukumari ji understood little of what was being said but comprehended that she was being berated for something her husband had said which reflected poorly on Sara’s character and virtue. Bhanukumari was a kindhearted woman and probably had no idea what her husband had told Sarasu in his conversation, but she immediately sensed the antagonism in the room and knew that her husband must have uttered something unpardonable.

A woman of her age has seen enough in life to know what she has to do in domestic situations likely to cause distress. So she smiled and said something to the effect that her husband had no idea what he was speaking of but had probably said something that he was already regretting. Of course, everything was all right and let’s wait for Giridhar to come home and then we’ll all sit down and have a good talk. By then Draupadi Mausi ji was also in the room and Lakshmi too came in and

the atmosphere suddenly became lighter and Fatima piped down too and things soon came down to an even keel. Sara realised that she would have to talk things out with the other main protagonist in this play, Giridhar himself, before things would sort themselves out. And so let things move along until then, she said to herself.

In a few moments there was some light conversation and then some laughter and then they were asking each other questions about life at Chanderpur and life at Brighton. Chatter Singh wisely stayed out of sight after having sent in Bhanukumari to tackle the situation and then he waited around in the front porch for Giridhar to come back. He felt as guilty as he could possibly be and cursed himself for the mess he had made. He sat down to wait for Giridhar with a lump in his throat and restless apprehension in his mind. Giridhar had gone to his clinic and would be back for lunch in an hour or so. Until then he would wait in his room and hear the laughter and the buzz of the conversation from within the house and wonder if this were the final denouement of the long drama that had been all these years playing out in the back of his mind.

Giridhar himself

It was about one in the afternoon when the tired old jeep pulled into the porch of the house. Giridhar had returned for lunch from his clinic after seeing his patients. He was exhausted but happy. He had got through a whole lot of work today. Now he had a break for a couple of hours before he went back for the afternoon shift. In that fairly large village, there were many cases that he had to deal with every day.

The government primary health center was notoriously slack and there were neither sufficient quantities of medicine nor regular attendance of the medical staff. The doctor sometimes disappeared for hours on end because his house was in a town some dozen kilometers away where, it was rumoured, he had set up a private clinic, which was, of course, more remunerative and paying. The compounder and the nurse could be callous and berate the patients on and off for either not standing in queue or for persistently demanding attention. So, even though these poor people had to pay a higher fee to the private clinic, they were willing to do just that rather than face the wrath of the government staff that treated them free of cost, but like expendable dirt.

Giridhar with his own source of finances from the family property had set up his clinic and medical center. He was determined that he would treat his patients with care and empathy and that they would receive the best treatment available at affordable prices. His consultancy fees were very low, and the medicines dispensed in the clinic were subsidized, thanks to the family trust that his great-grandfather had set up over half a century ago. Initially, the proceeds of the trust were donated to the nearby temple deity. In Giridhar's father's time, it was used to feed the poor on festive occasions such as Deepavali or Dusshera. Giridhar had felt that a more permanent result could be achieved with the money by investing it in public health and improvement of hygiene and sanitation. And thus his medical college degree and his clinic.

As he parked his jeep, Giridhar noticed the taxi at the gate of the house and wondered who it was that had come visiting. Could it be Sanjay, Lakshmi's husband? He was a fine young man and beginning his career as an Assistant Engineer in the Irrigation department, and he was certainly fussing over Lakshmi most of the time. It was Giridhar who had suggested that she come over home for the confinement. With a doctor in the house she would be certainly well looked after. At the porch, he saw his father looking unusually worried and flustered. Giridhar went up to him and enquired what the matter was.

The garbled answer confused him and for a moment he wondered if he were dreaming. Here was his father trying to tell him that the impossible had happened. How could that be? Sarasu come back, to his home? And where had she been all these years? His heart was pounding. He felt a sweat break out on his forehead and a sudden exhaustion flooded his body. Twelve years of his life had gone by and not a single day when she had not walked through his mind; twelve years without even knowing where she was and what had happened to her. Twelve years when she could have been a part of his life, when they could have lived together with great happiness and joy. Instead, he had been discarded like an old newspaper and left in the dustbin. For a brief moment he felt a flash of anger. How could he be treated this way? But then he said to himself, he must wait and hear out her story before he condemned or excommunicated her. There must be a pattern, an unknown design hidden in this mystery somewhere. Who was he to question the unfolding of events? He may be blind as humans are wont to be, he may not be seeing the whole truth.

Quelling his sudden anger, he walked up to the main sitting room with his father in tow. He quickly took in the sight of his mother and his sister smiling at an old lady and two young women. He did not need to be told who Sarasu was. While she had changed, the outlines of the face and the shape of the eyes that he had seen for the last time in the sorrow filled house at Surpura were more or less the same. She had not as yet seen him enter the room from the rear. She had a small smile on her face as she looked at Lakshmi who was holding out a plate of biscuits for her. Bhanukumari who saw Giridhar first, stood up. With a nervous, fixed smile on her face, she introduced him to them.

Even as the earth was turning and the sun was shining, the room stood still for a moment. Everyone stood up, but everyone was only watching the expressions on the faces of the child couple, now suddenly grown into adults. Sara stood up, confusion writ large all over. Her purse fell to the floor and she bent to pick it up and then she stood up again to look Giridhar straight in the eye, but had to turn her face away as she stuttered a Namaste in a small voice. Giridhar too ducked his head and smiled and said hello. Words do not necessarily reflect the turmoil within and both of them struggled to maintain the façade of normalcy in this, their first meeting after the passage of a dozen years.

There were worlds hiding coiled in their first utterances. How does one greet an absentee bride? There were no written guidelines for the occasion. Etiquette had not yet devised a set of conduct rules to take care of the situation. So they resorted to age-old techniques such as polite greetings and smiles brought on to their faces from somewhere deep inside. The fact that she had folded her hands and made the graceful gesture of the namaste, which was pure India, was in itself of much

significance. She, who had lived the life of an expatriate and had learnt of the wide world outside the confines of Surpura, was, nevertheless, willing to be met and understood in the grammar and language of her village.

And Giridhar, who had stayed loyal to the dark soil of his land, had learnt to rise above the narrow walls of his village and had become a fine student of the sciences in a medical college and then had gone on to become a doctor, though still bonded to the mud houses and the step wells of his community, had spoken the language of the English world in welcoming her back to her husband's home. There were some compromises and unwritten concessions somewhere in these first words: some conciliation, some giving and taking, some willingness to understand the other's view point.

Giridhar found himself looking at a slim young woman dressed in salwar and kameez and fair of face and shy in demeanor. She was beautiful, of that he had no doubt. Her face had the porcelain perfection that should have come out of inner peace and serenity, but her eyes betrayed emotions in a transparent, immediate manner that gave the lie to the apparent calmness on her features. She was flustered and confused but kept herself in a controlled posture of body and mind that surely, must have come out of introspection and deep contemplation. It was also clear that she had much to say, much to explain for he could not contemplate any other reason why she should have made this sudden re-appearance.

One more thing was apparent. If she had not wanted to be a part of his life, she could as well have disappeared without a trace into this wide, wide world and never be heard of again. The fact that she was back meant she did not want to break the bond from the past that had bound her to him for the last twelve years. That she was back was in itself a miracle, but if she were back to cut the cord and leave again, after having made her explanations and given her reasons, then that would indeed be a cruel joke perpetrated on him. Or maybe it would be kindness of a sublime order, after having suffered the torment of the last many years as he watched one friend after another get married and live happy ordinary lives with their wives and their children. And here he had been waiting for an eternity feeling jilted, betrayed, abandoned and discarded. But on the other hand, if she did indeed leave him, and by mutual consent, then indeed he would be set free and there would be a new door opening for him in his life ahead.

On her part, Sara, who was Sarasu, saw a tall, handsome man with an open face, with character written all over it. He wore thin-framed glasses, which heightened the intensity of his personality. He had a broad forehead and his hair was straight and swept back. His lips were not thin, but pleasantly curved and seemed to be somewhere on the edge of an amused smile. There was courage and commitment and honesty and some dark brooding pain at the back of the eyes. He was man of more silences than words, but when he spoke it was with a deep voice that reflected deliberate thought and intense introspection.

That he was startled and surprised was obvious to Sarasu; and why not, for he was presented with a situation, which he may have once hoped for, but when it came, had come so late and with such a shattering intensity. The tensions that it generated were sizzling around in his head and Sara knew that he was not sure as to what he should say or do. But he had put on a brave face and was asking her to sit down and also telling his mother to make extra food for them for the lunch. As Bhanukumari bustled out of the room, there was an awkward silence for no one knew what was to be said. It was Giridhar who took the matter in his hands. He quietly observed the situation and then decided to speak.

"Well, it's been some time, Sarasu", he said in what was obviously an unprecedented understatement and the exchange of looks across the room from all seated there spoke volumes without words.

"I know. I know too that much is to be said. I think I'd like to talk to you about it when we can get some time". That was all that she could say in a low, soft voice. It was good that the matter had come out into the open, as no one else had the courage to raise the topic. The fact that it was Giridhar himself who raised it was important. That it was the most significant subject in the world for the two of them was a given, but the reticence of all of them to talk, that too was understandable. The avoidance of the subject could not be prolonged for too long. But Giridhar knew that this was something that only he and she could sort out. There could be no intermediaries or translators between them. So it was immediately clear to them that they had to get through the lunch and then find a quiet place to talk about things.

He observed that Sarasu's friend, a tall sharp-faced young lady called Fatima, was trying her best to keep the conversation going, asking him about his work and about the weather in this part of the world. She went into a long explanation about climatic conditions in Kerala and how there they were blessed by two monsoon showers each year and how coming to Rajasthan was like coming to a different planet altogether.

Drapadi Mausi also added her little bit by speaking of the things she had had to do to look after the property of the departed parents of Sarasu, and how shocked the entire village community had been when that horrific accident had taken place. She spoke with tears brimming in her eyes of how gentle and wonderful Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi had been to her and how she had been a much loved aunt of the little Sarasu. She started out by narrating anecdotes of how Sarasu had played her little child's jokes on her parents and how the heavily built Chaudhary ji with his monstrous moustache had been but clay in her hands. Fortunately, Lakshmi interjected the conversation with her sprightly comments and everybody was smiling and

laughing and soon the overwhelming presence of the subject to be talked about did not hang like a heavy cloud over their heads.

Hear ye well, for there were three levels of conversations going on at the same time. Simultaneous expressions of words, each meaningful and full of significance but each at different spatial and mental planes.

One, the obvious pleasant social conversation as if between people who have met each other after a long time and are exchanging information of the events of their lives all these past days and months and years.

Two, there was another altitude in the conversation, again noticed by Sara acutely and maybe Fatima too in a superfluous way, as also by Giridhar and his family. It was obvious that both the parties were in a way ranged against each other. There were two camps. Draupadi Mausi ji and the two girls on the one hand, and Chatter Singh and his family on the other. There was being made a continuous assessment of the virtues and values of each other as the conversation went on. Bhanukumari was thrilled at the lovely vision of her daughter-in-law. Better late than ever, she said and though she knew that there would be many questions asked which would have to be replied to, she was confident she would be able to get through them. The cynics would be washed away by the crystal purity reflected in the face of her Sarasu. Chatter Singh, more cautious, had some doubts but was already thinking of the explanations that he would have to devise to satisfy the many curious friends and relatives. Lakshmi was all joy and there was not a doubt or worry or disturbing thought in her mind. She was glad for Giridhar and for her parents and she was glad for herself too. How delightful: she would have such a fine, beautiful Bhabhi. It was a wondrous thing to have happened.

And three, deeper below the surface, there was a frantic searching for the reasons and the causes of this dramatic second coming, as it were, of the missing bahu who had reappeared from nowhere. The event had been long awaited, but, in fact, when it did come, the difficulties of accepting the consequences were becoming apparent. So, below the surface there was an invisible tide, an uncertain ebb and flow, an imaginary conversation, of questions asked and replies given, all in the mind.

In Giridhar's mind the questions were buzzing around and just waiting to be uttered. Where were you all this time, and what were you doing in your life till now, why did you not write and tell us of things that have happened, and why did you appear today? Have you come to be my wife and take up the chores and tasks that a wife has to in the course of her life, or are you about to fly away again? And how do you think all this is affecting me? Can you even begin to imagine the years of doubts and worries and agonies that you have made me suffer? And do you think the people around here will accept you even if you decide to stay?

And in Sara's agitated consciousness, the questions were answered in the form of pleadings and supplications and agonized slow replies that seemed to fall away and disappear like snow in summer even before they were thought of. You must hear me out, she said to Giridhar in her mind, you must listen to what I have to say. How will I ever be able to tell you of the sweeping and unimaginable changes that have carried me away from this place and made me a different person altogether? And what I feel about choice and the exercise of judgment and the need to protect the right of the woman to take the decisions that affect her life and her body and her soul? How do I begin to even say that I am no longer the little Sarasu that you once wed on a cool summer evening? I have become a stranger to that very person I once was. I am no longer here in that manifestation and shape for you to accept and embrace as if nothing had happened in the years in between. And thus the words and phrases and the interrogation and the answers kept going back and forth over the table, over the chapatias and the vegetables. But for the two of them, no one even noticed that a barrage of words was being exchanged between them.

Giridhar's thoughts were, of course, more complex and he agonized over the decisions that he would be called upon to take soon, very soon. But he too observed her over the food, her pecking at her plate, how she had taken up the spoon beside the plate and then had discarded it when she noticed that all of them were eating with their hands, how she averted her eyes whenever they happened to glance at Giridhar's face and how she deferred to his parents in all the small etiquettes of the table. He saw the face that had haunted him over all these endless years and realised that what he had imagined in his mind and in his dreams was, in fact, a poor facsimile of the original. There was much to be thought of, much to ponder on and he would now decide what he had to do, not in haste, but after careful deliberation and consideration. This was a jewel, a priceless diamond, that he would not throw away without knowing what she had to say, without giving her a chance to reveal all of what had happened to her life in these past twelve years.

And for Sara too, there was much to ponder. She ran her fingers over her forehead and her temples, to soothe the headache that was now finally beginning to subside. She had come to expect a young man who would be just about literate, having studied in the local village school and fully involved in the cultivation of the family property and perhaps working earnestly as his father's right hand. She had all along pictured him as a rural youth and the idea of how her thoughts and feelings would mesh with a person of such a background had always been niggling her at the back of her mind. The cultural gap would be immense, a gulf that could not be bridged and even if she had not gone through the refreshing experiences of college life in

Kerala and the fine wonderful relationship that she had had with Jaggu, she would have still found it difficult to reconcile the westernness of her personality with the native earthiness of Giridhar.

It was difficult for her to put these things into words. But she could remember her own background at Surpura. When she had left from that tiny village so many years ago, she could still remember the deprivation of ordinary comforts that was so much taken for granted in England, for example. Drinking water on the tap, electricity throughout the day, the company of friends who knew much and thought and understood and contemplated, the ideas of individual freedom and personal choice, the vastness of a liberty that came out of prosperity and a well conceived political system. She had come to expect, frankly speaking, a country yokel, and though she knew that he would be good of heart and mind and that he would take care of her as best as he could, she was sure that they would not be able to live a life together. They would be on parallel rails where each thought and spoke and acted in a different fashion.

But the sight of Giridhar changed all that. He had been educated in an exclusive public school and then gone on to get his medical degree. He was now a full-fledged doctor and spoke English very well indeed. And although much of the conversation on the dinner table was in Hindi in deference to the others, she could gather no flaws in his diction or in his vocabulary in the few sentences that he had spoken to her in English. This was turning to be a different and more complex situation than she had imagined. It was now not merely the rejection of a country bumpkin in favour of a well educated and pleasant friend she had known and come to be fond of very much for three years in college. It was now a matter of a choice between equal but different personalities. Her argument of incompatibility on the grounds of cultural differences would not hold water. She was, therefore, deep in complex thought processes as the lunch came to an end.

The chairs were pulled back and it was time for the others to get out of the way of these two much-perplexed people. Sara had no clue at all as to how and where she should begin and what she should do to start the conversation. She was, therefore, pleasantly surprised to hear Giridhar calling out to his mother that he intended to take Sarasu to the clinic to show her the place. He told her that he would be back after the work at the clinic was over. He would also take Sarasu for a trip to the village lake to show her the sights and the spots of the place. He promised to be back by late evening. Sara frantically looked out to Fatima for help or guidance but she was completely out of her depth and she had no words of advice to give her. She was in no position to refuse or demur. Draupadi Mausi ji looked both worried and happy. She was not aware at all of the restless undercurrents that had flown under the table during the conversation, nor the subtle changes in the mood of the main protagonists.

Giridhar's parents looked not quite happy. Their doubts had not yet been set at rest and they were not sure whether Giridhar should pick up the threads of this relationship again straight away, without knowing the full and complete details of what had transpired in the intervening lifetime. But instinctively they knew too that their son had now grown up and was cut from a cloth very different from that of their daughter. Lakshmi would be happy wherever she was and would abide by the dictates of her parents or her husband's family and also find uncomplaining happiness in what Fate laid out for her. On the other hand, Giridhar would think and cogitate and then take the right decision for himself. His grooming at Mayo and then in the Medical College had set him apart from the mould that the family had perpetuated over the generations. He was the first person to break away from the bonds of the land and find his true identity in a profession where he could serve the people in a closer and more useful manner. He was a young man of deliberate thought and action and so they knew that he would take a decision that would be best for all of them.

So Sara found herself walking up to the jeep and she got in through the left side door in the front seat while Giridhar took the wheel. After the coolness of the house, the light outside was harsh and painful and she feared that her headache would reappear. With a wave of his hand to his family and the visitors, who had come out to the gate to see them off, and indeed were watching them with much interest, he switched on the engine and then they were on their way.

"Let me first show you the clinic," he said, "it's at the western edge of the town. I wanted it to be accessible to the people living in the poorer quarters of the village. It will take us about 10 minutes to negotiate our way through the center of the village market to get us there."

He was talking, talking all the time and it was as if he didn't want her to utter a word throughout the time he accompanied her today. The words flowed in a jumble of phrases and idioms and difficult constructions, but it was, she was amazed and, indeed, happy to see, grammatical all the way! Her country yokel had turned out to be a well-educated, articulate and handsome young man and it was important for her to realise that there was some change in her perception about him. Somewhere, her logic control and the workings of her thoughts were shifting into a moderate gear and the hitherto high-toned strain of the wheels singing in her mind had slowed down. Not much, but a little, and for a moment she wondered why she had been tense all this while.

The heat was extreme and Sara had to screw up her eyes and drape the dupata over her head to protect herself from Rajasthan's mid-summer blaze. The jeep had to halt at times for the traffic at the middle of the village market square and he

had to wait at the edge of the road and let the oncoming traffic through down the narrow road. That he was well known in the village became obvious immediately. There were many people who hailed him from the side of the road with a 'Ram, Ram' or a 'Namaste ji, doctor sahib' and the expressions on their face showed only good feelings towards him. He waved back or shouted a response, as the situation demanded. There were curious glances thrown at her and obviously people were wondering who she was. Politeness prevented them from asking the questions that were so obviously on their lips, but their glances veered off her face and turned away as soon as their eyes met hers. The doctor sahib too did not venture to make an explanation and as soon as the traffic permitted he was on his way.

Soon enough, the jeep stopped at the outskirts of the village outside a small building adorned with a bold sign announcing the bliss that follows if the small family norm is adopted by the country. Giridhar smiled ruefully at Sara as he noticed her reading the board and told her that thereby hangs a tale. Obviously the demands of the small family campaign hung heavily on all medical establishments in the country and the small family was a favorite slogan to motivate and encourage and even to terrorise the simple country folk around. Who could have imagined that an issue such as this would be enough to bring down the government a few months down the line. But for the moment there was nothing to do but keep the family small and follow orders and smile.

They stepped out of the jeep and walked down the few steps to the clinic. It was here that Giridhar dispensed medical advice and treatment and, in his own way, tried to change the lives of people who had lived for generations in ignorance of the simple rules of good health, hygiene and cleanliness. It was an awesome task actually, come to think of it: to modify ways of thinking and to take the leap from tradition and ignorance to a modern and scientific temper of life.

There was already a long queue of patients waiting for him, at least twenty of them. The nurse, so very obviously a young girl from Kerala, where nursing has for generations been accepted as a noble profession for women, was taking down the names and other details of the patients and filling in their cards. Her dark complexion and curly hair made her stand out in the crowd very clearly. It was also clear to Sara that the patients regarded her with friendly looks and chatted with her almost as if she were a family member. Sara watched her for a moment as the crowds made way for the doctor sahib to enter his room and then decided to surprise her. Giridhar was calling out to Sarasu to come in and see how the typical rural patient was and what sort of complaints they had to report.

She hung back for a moment and asked the nurse, "Veedu Keralathil aanu, elle? Peru ennanu?" Choti Maa had taught her enough to make the inevitable polite conversation, such as whether she was from Kerala and what her name was. For a moment, the nurse was stunned, to hear her native language in this place so far away from home, and that too from a young woman who looked so very apparently from North India with a sophistication that was uncommon. "Aiyo, Malayali aano?" She smiled back, obviously thrilled and wondering if Sara was a Malayali. "Alla, Malayalam ariyamene ollu!" she said indicating that she only knew the language "Ente pere Shantamma. Doctor saarinte kooda aano vannethu?" she enquired as she revealed her name and wanted to know if Sara had come with the doctor sir. There were many questions she wanted to ask and Sara would have loved to chat a little more with her, but she waved her hand pleasantly at Shantamma and walked into Giridhar's room.

The doctor's consultation chamber was small but comfortable. There was a bed along the length of the room. The table and chair was placed near the window so that the light streaming in fell on the patient. The stool for the patient to sit on was near the doctor's chair and as soon as Sara walked in, he was calling the first patient in. A young woman somewhere in the fourth or fifth month of her pregnancy stepped in, accompanied by an embarrassed young man, obviously her husband. Both of them obviously knew the doctor from previous appointments. They had only come for a routine consultation and everything was quite all right with them. They promised to invite the doctor to the party that would be arranged when their first-born son would be delivered. That it would be a son was obvious to them and was not a matter of doubt or uncertainty. And then he was calling in the next patient.

An old woman shuffled in, shrouded in a shawl that completely enveloped her. The pallu of her chunri almost entirely veiled her face. A young child of about ten was clinging to her hand. She sat down heavily and spoke in a dialect that Sara could just about make out. She was unwashed and dirty and she complained of pain in her chest and of a constant feeling of exhaustion. Sara watched as Giridhar checked her out with the stethoscope and then made her lie on the bed as he peered into her throat and felt her neck and her stomach. Giridhar then told her something about her diet and wrote out a prescription. He asked her if she had somebody to look after her, somebody older than the child with her.

She went into a long litany of her woes, of how she lived with her son who was away in search of employment and how she was left to the mercies of her daughter-in-law. And although she did get her food, she was not sure whether she had enough money to buy the medicines that were now required. Giridhar called out to Shantamma and directed her to give the old woman some essential drugs. He scolded her and admonished her to look after herself as best as she could. He also frowned

at the young child and warned him to convey the message to his mother, the woman's daughter-in-law, that the doctor sahib would be very cross indeed if she were not looked after well by her.

The third patient was a heavily pregnant woman in her late thirties. She came in alone and with no help at all. The weariness in her face showed the obvious. Frequent childbearing and backbreaking domestic work had made her an old woman when she should have been in the prime of her life. Giridhar looked like black thunder as he saw her come in. He started what was a tongue lashing of the kind that Sara had not seen anyone use before. He shouted at her for not taking care of herself, of being a victim to her husband's lust and destroying herself with no thought of the family and the four children she already had. He threatened that this was a fit case to be reported to the police and that even though he was a doctor, he would have no qualms about doing just that.

He softened in a minute and asked her to promise to him that this child would be the last, that she would accept some method of contraception in the future. If necessary, he would come after that no-good husband of her and teach him a lesson that he would never forget. Sara was frankly aghast at the language he used and at the manner in which he was threatening the woman. But she saw too that the message was going through and that there was some determination showing large on her face indicating she would indeed accept the doctor's good advice in future. Perhaps this was better medicine than the vitamins and the prophylactics that he would normally have prescribed for her. In the end he had a smile for her as he asked her to take care of herself and that in future, she should not be a fool for anybody, including her husband.

As he was talking to her, Giridhar casually turned to Sara and asked her to bring the patient a glass of water. She got up and obeyed him without really thinking at all. Then for a moment she wondered what the hell she was doing, quietly obeying commands given to her without even a moment of demurring. She started to, but silenced herself immediately though and did as she was asked. The woman took the glass gratefully from her and drank it down in a gulp.

For a moment, however, Sara got a feeling of being blessed for the little favour she had done this tired and exhausted woman. It made her think too of the kind of work that Giridhar was doing, day in and day out, helping the poor and the sick, the countless ill patients that he was seeing and treating and looking after. If each patient looked after by you meant a little grace for you in the life hereafter, then a life time of treating such patients meant that the bank balance in your account of good deeds would be heavily in your favour and would make even the most parsimonious god smile in benevolence at you. There is much to think about here, she considered, there is something going on that may make me change my stated position. There is a different wind blowing here, she thought. There was a stirring somewhere in the mind, somewhere where it counts and she needed to think greatly about it.

And thus the time passed. The line of patients went on and by the end of the evening, Giridhar had gone through them all, dispensing a word of advice here, a stern warning there and a kindly smile to most of them. Sara helped now and then when she was asked to and then realised that even without being directed to do a particular task, she could help in the general management of the queue of patients. There was a quiet contentment in the benign dispensation of relief to these people and watching Giridhar dealing with them with understanding and compassion was a sight for her to absorb and understand and appreciate. At the end of the day, Shantamma came in with hot cups of tea for both of them before she sought permission to close the doors and bid farewell for the day and see them off. There was still an unanswered question in her eyes as to Sara's identity, but there was no occasion for her to satisfy her curiosity when she saw them off at the gates of the dispensary.

It was a satisfactory day for Giridhar. He had seen a large number of patients, had harangued some of them and shown the others much understanding. It was easy to see why the people in general had a fondness for him, why he was becoming so very much loved by all of them. He explained to Sara that the dispensary was kept closed on Sundays, but on that day he used to go around to the poorer quarters of the village where the Scheduled Castes lived and taught them the value of good hygiene and drainage and sanitation and the need for a balanced diet and cleanliness in the home and in the workplace.

On the way to the lake, he wished to take her to see some of these places so that she could understand how the slow changes he had initiated were indeed modifying the lifestyle of these people. His work, while being completely absorbing and satisfying was, nevertheless, exhausting and sometimes frustrating. But as he spoke, she saw that there was nothing smug or self satisfied in his tone or his conduct. She could see that he did not smile too often and when he did, of course, his face lit up like a child's. Sara wondered whether he might have developed an entire philosophy of life based on the concept of work and service and dedication or whether he did what came to him without thinking too much about values or beliefs involved in his action.

He turned the jeep and took the mud-track to the little habitation where he worked during his off time when he was free from the clinic's work. The colony was of a community who worked with leather and skin. Their ways of lifestyle and living was abhorrent to many and it bred a certain sense of disgust in the minds of people of other communities who spend their lives in cleaner and more hygienic circumstances. They were, by the dictates of time and custom, forced to live at the end of the

village where the odorous results of their occupation did not assault the olfactory senses of their more fortunate co-villagers. The habitation was a group of about twenty-five houses set up in a circle with a largish common thatched hut at the center where the elders discussed matters pertaining to their work or where meetings were held now and then, where everybody gathered to hear and discuss common matters.

As the jeep neared the little hamlet, a group of children started running after them in the wake of the jeep. They were shouting “Doctor saheb aa gaya, doctor saheb aa gaya” and welcoming the visitors with their smiles and their childish chanting. As the jeep stopped in the middle of the group of hutments, an old man stepped out from his hut at the edge of the common open land in the center of the hamlet and approached Giridhar, bowing low and welcoming him with a broad smile. Within a few minutes the people of the village were all around them and were chatting animatedly with the doctor saheb as he enquired about their general health and well being.

Sara noticed a distinct odour in the air, which came from their work with the dead carcasses of animals they skinned and treated and then transformed into leather, which, in turn, found its way into the outside world as bags and shoes and belts and suitcases. She was standing alone next to the jeep and watching Giridhar sitting with them in the open hut and explaining to them the need for drainage and sanitation.

From a rudimentary drawing which he pulled out of his pocket he explained to them how waste water from their treatment of skin could be filtered with some rough and ready fibres and cloths and then be put to use for watering their fields in the vicinity. A drain constructed from their treatment site could lead the water away to the filter and then could be discharged into the small cultivable plots of land nearby. This would also give them some additional income if they could put this land to some constructive use for growing crops. The suggestion led to some animated discussion about costs involved and the need for some financial aid from the Panchayat for which Giridhar assured that he would indeed put in a word to the Sarpanch.

As they talked, she noticed some of the women peeping curiously from out of their houses at her and whispering amongst themselves, very obviously about her. She was a little embarrassed that their attention was so pointed and direct. But she realised that they would be naturally curious as to who this woman was who accompanied their favourite doctor saheb. A couple of them ambled out of their huts and came towards her. They sat down on the ground before her, looked up at her and asked: “Doctor saheb ke lugai ho?” She had no clue as to the meaning of their question, but guessed correctly that they were interested in knowing what exactly her relationship to the doctor was. Giridhar who noticed her obvious discomfiture called out to her to join in the discussions.

A little nervous and worried as to how she would be able to communicate with them, she walked over to the hut and stood near Giridhar. The old man suddenly shouted to someone to fetch a cot for the Memsahab. A wooden stringed cot was brought over for her to sit on it. Sara was quite embarrassed that she alone would be sitting on the cot while the rest including Giridhar were squatting on the ground. So, with a hesitant shake of the head, she declined the invitation and sat down with them. There were smiles all around and nods of approval. Apparently not sitting on the cot had made her seem a little less distant and hence more acceptable to the people. Immediately, the women of the habitation also slipped out of their houses and came to sit quietly behind their men folk. There were curious stares at her and Sara had no option but to bend her head and stare at the ground.

Giridhar now stood up and started a small lecture on the need for health and inoculation. He spoke in a dialect that was hardly understandable and Sara had to listen very hard to really get the drift of it. He read out a few names of some of the women who had to come to the clinic for the check up and free medicines and admonished their husbands that if they did not turn up, the men would have to answer to him directly. For the children, who did not bother to come to this meeting of the adults and were playing with a rubber ball some distance away, he had a smile and a wave as he finished his talk and walked back to the jeep. The people gathered around them to wave them goodbye as they got in once more and then they were on their way. Sara wondered at the kind of work that Giridhar had chosen for himself and the nature of the commitment that Giridhar had taken upon himself to discharge.

The jeep was now on its way back and as promised, Giridhar took the quiet path to the hill top overlooking the village lake where she would get a fine view of the lights of the village reflected in the waters. The jeep took the winding road along the hill. After a sharp turn, they were suddenly on the edge of the lake. There was a sheer drop to the waters and only a single railing separated them from the fall. The view was spectacular. They got out of the jeep and moved to a bench laid out on the edge of the cliff. The lake was not too big, but certainly it was a unique sight for a place where there is such perpetual shortage of water. Apparently this old water body was fed by springs from underground and was not entirely dependent on rainwater. The whole surroundings were green and calmly beautiful. In the diminishing light of the evening, the lake took on an ethereal glow. The small temple on the edge of the water at the other end of the lake, illuminated by lamps and bulbs, was

reflected brightly in the water. The trees and the shrubs all along the edge of the water were growing darker and mysterious in the fast approaching twilight.

Sara and Giridhar sat at the edge of the bench. There was no one else in sight and in the quiet of the evening it seemed that the opportune moment had come for some open and frank conversation between the two of them. There was much to be said and much that would have to be said. This was not a moment to be reticent or shy in the expression of thoughts and feelings. Sara had waited for years for this moment and she would, she knew, find the right words to express her deep reservations and her fears, her worries and her qualms. She took a deep breath and said: "Giridhar, you know that I have a life time of things to tell you. I realise that I owe you some form of explanation for the last twelve years of my life and I must admit that it is going to be a difficult task. But please be patient with me and I will tell you the story of my sorry life..."

She did not expect to be interrupted but was hoping for some reassurance that would encourage her to speak freely. She was not, however, expecting Giridhar to speak out first.

"Hold on, Sarasu, I think its far better for me to speak first. After all, in a way that would be difficult for me to ask you to comprehend, its really I who am the aggrieved party in this matter and I too have a long tale to tell you. So, Sarasu, do hear me out. I know what you have to say will be as significant and as moving as it can possibly be. I must confess that I do admire the manner in which you have taken up the matter and came back to this place when it would have been easy for you to have just disappeared and lived as normal a life as it is possible for you to do in some far away place. The fact that you have indeed come back to your old home, your roots, reveals the nature of your personality, the kind of person you really are. And while I do know that you have many things to tell me, I must insist that you hear me out first. I too have a long tale to tell."

Sara was left with puzzlement and confusion writ large on her face. She had determined to get her long pending story out of her chest and be done with it. The events of the day and the work that Giridhar was doing in the village and the clinic was something that had weakened that resolve. And now Giridhar's request had further stalled her in her tracks. She had no option but to nod her head and mutter "of course" and sit back to listen to him.

The hush over the lake was almost complete. There was a rustling among the leaves in the trees surrounding the lake. And somewhere from within the trees, the birds come home to roost were clucking and chirruping amongst themselves. Across the lake, the pujari was preparing for the aarti and the devotees were straggling in for the evening prayers. The ambience and atmosphere was perfect for a confessional. Giridhar took a deep breath and began.

Giridhar revealed

The day I heard the news of the death of Sarasu's parents in the terrible accident, I felt the shock and horror of it shuddering through me. I saw too the pain and sorrow in my own parents' faces. I was about 13 years old then and was beginning to get a better understanding of the meaning of life and death. Some months earlier, I was witness to the death of an uncle of my mother's who had passed away after a painful and long illness. I was indeed sensing what it is to know the meaning of the sudden cessation of the breath in one's lungs. The end of all dreams and fears.

By then, I did too get to know what marriage means. My understanding of marriage was, of course, based on what I saw and knew about my parents' marriage. As a couple, they were happy all right and lived life in a peaceful domestic co-existence that formed the stable rock of my days of growing up in our household. The event of my marriage with Sarasu was the high point of their lives together. And indeed, mine too. I was nine then, just three or four years older than Sarasu. The shehnai and the drums and the colour of the clothes the women wore, the proud turbans and the moustaches of the men and the loads of delicacies to eat: these remained in my mind long after the event was over. And of course, the Saraswati of the tender, fair face. She must have hardly known what the hustle and bustle was all about. My little sister was around her most of the time, and it seemed that they would get along fine together. Sarasu was like a small doll that moved and smiled and played with the edge of her chunri and hid her face from me whenever I tried to catch her eye.

The long ceremony and the smoke from the fires tended to by the marriage priest, which made tears spring to her eyes, and the chanting of undecipherable Sanskrit slokas, all these must have been irritating her and I could feel her fragile patience and good humour slip away and make her face pucker and her lips droop. It was her mother and an elderly woman, a friend of the family, who made her hush up and smile again. Fortunately, the ceremonies were over soon after and we were sitting up on our throne seats in the pandal while the visitors gathered all around us. My mother brought over a plate of rotis and sabji for both of us. While I broke off pieces from the rotis and fed myself, it was my mother who fed Sarasu with her own hands. She was smiling and the little girl was smiling back at her and I was feeling mighty pleased too.

The trip back home from Surapura under the dark and still night was like scenes from a black and white movie with the sky and the moon and the stars only highlighting the dust rising up from under the wheels of the car. This must have been the first time that Sarasu was alone and separated from her beloved parents. Her uncle Harish ji was in another vehicle following up in the rear and would be in charge of her return journey the next day. She bore it well enough, sitting back in the seat and watching the road roll past. And when we were back at Chanderpur, Sarasu was already asleep in my mother's arms. She was carried out of the car with her head lolling on mother's shoulders and then placed to rest on a small special bed made for her in mother's own room while the rest of the family and I went on to rest and sleep in the other rooms or on mattresses laid out on the floor in the hallway. Morning saw Sarasu bawling her heart out when she woke up in a strange room in the midst of strange people. A servant girl who had been sent along with her was called in and Sarasu piped down after that.

She was a naturally pleasant girl, full of smiles and giggles and when she and I were put together for the morning breakfast, there were wide grins on the faces of all the adults gathered around. We must have made a pretty picture. I was the young self-important boy who was trying hard to be serious and unsmiling and Sarasu was the little girl pulling at my sleeve and chuckling at the toys and knick-knacks laid out for her amusement. Harish Chacha stood by and smiled indulgently.

She was gone back to her home by the evening, having spent the customary day at the bridegroom's. Now there may be only occasional visits during the festive seasons and so on. Tradition demanded that the girl must attain puberty and be old enough to bear the travails of domestic life before she and her husband co-habit under the same roof. Until then she would remain with her parents. For me, I felt a mixture of joy and impatience whenever I managed to see her. Joy at the fact that she was again before my very eyes, the fair and lovely Sarasu who was my child bride. Impatience at the restraining edicts of social custom that prevented me from getting to be with her on a more permanent basis. Life went on in this unsatisfactory fashion for another four years.

And so when the grim horror of the accident struck us like a bolt of lightning, I had no thought for anything else than to be with Sarasu and try to tell her that though there could be no compensation for the loss that she had so terribly to suffer, I would be there to help her face the loneliness of being an orphan child. When we reached the Surapura house, the bodies had already been received and were being readied for the cremation. The childless elderly lady, who was almost like a second mother to her, had taken Sarasu away. There in that house, she would be secured from the buffets of the evil fate that had blown her family away and she would not hear the sobs and loud lamentations that the tragedy had engendered amongst those who had come to mourn their passing away.

I saw her clutched tight in the arms of her Draupadi Mausi, as the bodies were taken away. The weeping kindhearted lady had turned away the little girl's eyes and covered her face, so that she would not see the horrifying last darshan of her parents.

From behind my father and my mother, who were themselves moved greatly by the emotion of the moment, I watched Sarasu's face. She was numb and expressionless, perhaps not even knowing the meaning of what this meant for her and her life ahead.

I suggested to my parents that we could take her back for the night to our home in Chanderpur, but Draupadi Mausi and some of the other relatives remonstrated saying that Ram Chander's brother Harish ji was expected the next day and that all decisions could be taken in consultation with each other. There was no doubt in anybody's mind that that was the best solution. Who else could take better care of the poor girl than her husband's family? True, it was a prospect that I had, for quite some time now, been wishing for, but that it had to be in such gruesome circumstances had never been on my mind. I was struck tongueless by the appalling nature of the accident and in the midst of all the wailing and the moaning I could say no words of comfort to my Sarasu. Grief is an emotion dealt with better by the adults in the rough cruel world around us and children are best left out of it. Perhaps it for this reason they are deliberately excluded from its rigours.

How could I have forecast the very different turn of events that emerged after Harish ji turned up? It was as if a whirlwind swept through the house when he arrived. He was all in loud tears, in complete despair as he wrung his hands and frightened poor little Sarasu whom he gathered up into his arms and refused to let down despite the pleadings of Draupadi Mausi ji. He went on and on about the great debt he owed his brother and how he could not consider leaving the little Sarasu behind. Now that his brother had gone on to meet his Bhagwan, it was his sacred duty to look after his niece. And he certainly would do so, he would brook no intervention by anybody. In any case, the bride would go to the husband's house only after she was old enough to assume some responsibilities. After all he was only asking for a few years in the interval when he could look after her education and where she would not be alone.

It was pointed out to him that he had no family of his own, no wife or child who could take care of the little girl. He started back quite discomfited and was nonplussed for a moment, but he replied that he needed no one at all and that he would be personally responsible to look after her. After all, Sarasu knew him and recognized him and he was, don't forget, a blood relation, her only uncle and how could anyone think otherwise. So there was no argument at all to be tolerated and he would not hear no for an answer and it is, after all, only for a few years and so on and so forth endlessly. There was nothing that anyone could do to dissuade him from his determination. And thus the die was cast that would separate me from my Sarasu for the many years to come. And then she was gone, virtually dragged to the taxi, full of tears and protests that dashed my composure and just about brought tears to my eyes, flying away to another land too far removed from this sand-blown village in the desert.

I see now the situation that my parents would have faced in the days immediately after the departure of Sarasu. Inquisitive neighbours and friends wondering why Sarasu had been allowed to fly across the world in the company of her uncle when her husband's family could have easily looked after her. In any case, what else are in-laws for? At a time of unbearable distress for the poor girl, they should have come to her aid immediately. The significance of these questions was lost on me in those days, although my parents must have had to grapple with them and all that it meant. There would have been ratiocinations and justifications and arguments in favour of Harish Chacha's steps and a willingness to accept it as the ideal decision, the only thing to have been done in the circumstances. And in any case, she would be back with them by the time she was a little older. In the meanwhile, she could very well go on with her education.

And let us not forget, my mother argued, that Giridhar himself is studying and if he wishes to go on to college later, there should be no interruptions, which would stand in the way of his studies. I could see the reluctance on the faces of the enquirers in accepting these reasons, the cynical shake of their heads as also the discomfiture on the faces of my parents. In course of time, I came to see what my parents saw all the while and wondered if I had been left discarded, forgotten, bereft and made to look like a poor fool who could not keep his woman at home.

As time passed, I was left only with the images of Sarasu's face and her puckered smile and her tear-filled eyes, images that used to float through my mind while awake or dreaming. I played out fanciful scenes in my mind of how we would together go for a movie to the nearest town, or climb the Aravalli mountains far away on the horizon, of her and I playing games and running through the fields in the village or floating on a small raft in the village lake. It was all childish and poignant, a little world within myself where I lived out those fantasies.

In my mind I tried to visualize how she would have grown, how she would look standing next to me, how fair her skin would appear when placed next to mine. I imagined her in a red ghagra and choli and in all her bridal finery as she stood before me once again, alive and radiant, like a red, red rose on a summer's day. Of course, I let nothing of this appear on my face or get reflected in my actions. I was quiet and cool and unperturbed almost to the point of being nonchalant. But, in effect, I was left with a void, an unfillable emptiness that appeared to grow and expand with the passing of the days. By the time I was almost

eighteen and finished school, I saw that nearly all my friends who had grown up with me, were married and settled down and a few of them had already had children.

It was a hopeless situation, I knew, especially when letters sent to Harish ji in England received unsatisfactory replies and prevarications and hints of postponements and delays. We did have his address, but a letter could not and did not convey our insistence with force. Nor did we know anyone who could have mediated to help resolve the issue. Harish ji did indeed send a letter about once a year. It was more in the nature of a mere formality, where the information was kept to a bare minimum and no real details of Sarasu were ever mentioned other than to say that she was fine. In time, I learned to cope with the absence, with the great loss and to bend my body to face the cold wind that was everywhere. There were even weeks on end, when I hardly thought of her at all.

Some three years ago, we finally did manage to contact an old family friend who was passing through Britain on his way to the United States. He knew some Indian families in London who had vaguely heard of Harish ji and they had suggested the name of the hospital in Brighton, about an hour's train ride south of London where it was thought that he was working. This was almost at the time when I was 22 years old, and Sarasu must have been 18. It was coincidentally the right time for my parents to broach the subject of Sarasu's return, now that she was old enough to formally become a bride, at a time when the laws regarding child marriage were becoming stricter.

The letter was drafted by my father and vetted by my mother, while I was informally told that such a letter was on its way to Brighton. We waited for a reply. I waited, I know, with hope falling away as each day passed. Nothing happened. A cold deafening silence at the other side of the world, a large, blank vacuum from which nothing would ever emerge. It was as if the letter had been blown away in the wind, landing somewhere in the arctic regions or on the high seas. I once even had a dream about the letter floating on the waves as the ships steamed by and no one even bothered to look at it.

As a matter of fact, Sarasu, it was you who prompted me to go on for my higher studies. Would you have ever believed that? I used to think of how with your foreign education and your English words and your acquired sense of style and charm, it would be quite possible you grow up to be an exquisite creature full of wit and bright lights and the glow of a complexion sparkling with good health. And for the life of me, I would not want you to feel awkward with me, to shy away from the company of some kind of an illiterate, as I perceived myself to be.

And so it was that I made my mind clear to my father, that I wished to study beyond the elementary level and in a school that would give me the best possible education. There was, of course, a wind blowing across the land too, when people were starting to realise that the land and its wealth alone would not suffice to give prosperity and value to the life of an individual. With increasing drought conditions in the State, there was an ever-growing competition for the scarce resources required for converting fallow land to arable productive assets. The realisation was gaining ground that soon enough agriculture could not be the mainstay of life.

And so, even with the hesitation that I could feel in the minds of my parents, I was finally given the permission to go outside my village to obtain the quality education that I was looking for. Fortunately, the land and the other wealth of my family permitted this bold indiscretion, as it were, of studying far away from home. I must have been especially firm and resolute in my demands and they had no choice but to agree.

Looking back, I felt that their acquiescing to this demand must also have been because they wished to keep me happy, keep me in a good frame of mind, in view of the troubles that I was going through. The constant sly comments about my marriage to a girl who had run away, that concerned and well-intentioned neighbours and friends and relatives made sure of repeating to me, only rubbed salt into my wounds. I remained embarrassed and unhappy and my parents were kept in pain and sorrow at the continuing saga of my humiliation. And so it was you, Sarasu, who really made up my mind to go out of the beaten path and start my real education as it were, in the wider world beyond the boundaries of my village.

Mayo College in Ajmer, about five or six hours southwards, was an experience that opened my eyes and made me realise that the world outside was greater and better and more exciting than what I had seen in the years that I had grown up on the banks of the village lake in the sanctuary of my parents' home at Chanderpur. Its sprawling lawns and its old imposing buildings had the ambience of a British Raj edifice, still alive in the midst of an independent India.

I was able to hide the fact of my marriage from the boys there, who had their own ways of making fun of me in matters other than matrimony. It was more by way of my pronunciation and my diction and my accent and the fact that I used to come out at the bottom of my English classes. Of course, this was off set by my performance in the sciences and in mathematics where I was right at the top of my class. But the boys had their own ways of making you feel small. There was a group of them who came from extraordinarily wealthy families, the kind who would go off to Switzerland for their summer holidays, or would flaunt their pocket money in buying treats for their friends, the like of which would have depleted my monthly allowances for

a full term. There were some muttered remarks about my Swadeshi accent and about idiomatic errors in my speech. Of course, nothing was spoken to me, or straight to my face, for this may have provoked me to anger or retaliate with my fists.

You know, Sarasu, it was you who proved to be my salvation even in those agonizing moments of doubt and self-scrutiny. I saw your face float by my eyes with some message of patience and quietude, asking me to bide my time. There was the promise of a meeting somewhere in the future. It was you who made me clench my jaws and accept their jibes and make me determined to excel in all that I did. My attempts to improve my knowledge of English in the Mayo College, is now, I guess, the stuff that legends are made of, pardon my immodesty. My old teachers still talk of it.

Two years, two full years of slogging and sleepless nights and burning the midnight oil and the desperate struggle to rise above the tide line that differentiates the English as it should be spoken and the English as it is, in fact, actually spoken amongst the vast majority of us. I talked to my mirror and practiced my speech with volumes of Wren and Martin and Fowler and other books on grammatical usage. I learnt and recited the poetry of the Romantics and the Victorians and absorbed the sweep and the roar and the melody of Shakespeare. I floated in an ecstasy of the power of the language as it soared into my conscience. There were times I read out the sonnets and saw you as the dark lady. There were other times when you were a very real presence beside me. In about a couple of years, the contrast was dramatic. I was more confident and composed and able to hold my own in the discussions in the class. My marks in the English papers and the Arts soared and I was really at the top of my class. You were there all the time, Sarasu, you were there all the time.

And then the Medical College. My brief, sharp argument with my father. I guess he was as surprised as I was at my determination. I would tolerate no opposition and flatly denied the future he offered me of being a cultivator of land as my forefathers had been. How could I acquiesce while I could do much more and fulfill myself in the achievement of my aspirations? I wished to study and develop skills that I knew I was capable of and do something to ease the misery of the ordinary people around me who led a hard life in the dry desert conditions of this place. I knew that a life of self-indulgence was not for me. I seemed to see a purpose for my life arising out of the very different circumstances that I had been placed into.

Did it make me into an odd and curious person? Sometimes I used to wonder how I maintained the very ordinariness of my appearance to the external world, but that is another set of masks and disguises that I would not bother you with. The fact remains that I was successful in persuading my people to let me out into a new professional area altogether. In fact, there was some appreciation of this change I had made for myself. There is universal acceptance of the role of the doctor in a rural society. He can do so much to make life more bearable and to help you lead a healthy productive existence.

And so I went to Ajmer and studied to get this degree, of which I am so proud, and stayed in the hostel with others like me who were ambitious and wished to make money and find success in the life ahead. A good long grind of five years of absorbing and studying and reading and discussing and getting to know the insides of a body as well as one knew the outside. Many of my friends there had their bearings set on the West and were keen to complete their basic medical education from here and then move on for further higher studies to the best medical Universities in the US or in the UK. Very much like what your Chacha had done some years ago.

There is a distinct advantage of studying for medicine in India. The patients who come to the hospital are in satisfyingly large numbers and they suffer from a wide variety of diseases, mainly arising out of their ignorance about hygiene and sanitation and clean living. Also from the grinding poverty and the backwardness of the lives they are forced to lead. The experience they provide a student who is willing to learn is enormous. Watching them closely made me understand the basic principle of life. The overriding concept of inequality and inequity in everything around us. Our biology and our sex determine the destiny laid out for us. Our forefathers and the line of our descent engrave our fate in the present. Would it be wrong to say that our past determines our present and our future?

I was happy, as best as I could be, and I enjoyed the task of acquisition of knowledge. Life in the Medical College was more pleasant and people were on a more equal footing. There was not much talk of background and bloodline and high caste and untouchability. As we did our practicals, we learnt to cut through tendon and vein to the flesh beneath, to the organs hiding below the surface as rich lodes of ore. The leveling of the personality you see under the surface, in the body of a person opened by the knife, is amazing. Below the skin, the veins and the muscles and the bones and the cartilages are all the same, whether the person is white or dark skinned, rich or destitute. It was brought home to me again and again that inequity is a function of human action, cumulatively piled up over the generations. It is deliberate strategy that perpetuates these differences. You don't need to blame God for inequity.

But on the other hand, are there deeper paradigms and matrices that set individuals on different levels? How could one find countless generations of penury and deprivation running back into time, without even one redeeming glimmer of hope in communities, that have not seen the light of reason and education? What could one do, what could I do, to raise these people to a civilizing level. With quick, effective intervention, could one wipe out from these deprived people, the ignorance

gathered over the many years of ignominy and suffering? There was room for much thought and concern and the depressing thing was that there was so much that could be done and so little that was actually being done.

These thoughts and the memories of things that I saw and observed in the village, those buzzing querulous voices within me, all swept me to a final decision. That is why I finally decided that my life should be one dedicated to the betterment of the people who do not matter. There are enough people who take care of the ones who do matter; in fact the world turns around them. But remember what somebody once said: the poor will always be with you.

And thus this circle I have swung through. From wanting to be polished and suave and a man of the world like my Sarasu, who had gone on to better and more exciting and wonderful things in life than the little village where she was born, to finally wanting to go back to the earth of my land, with a commitment which would place me near my own kith and kin, my own blood and my own rough sand and desert. This is my patch of earth, Sarasu. Does that make me a person with a limited vision content to live out his life in narrow circles, with no thought for the big wide world outside teeming with energy and life? Does it make me a smaller person, to be worried with small things and not be bothered with the grand picture? And will that take me out of the orbit where I would have been able to meet with you?

Now why am I boring you with all this, Sarasu? Do I wish to present you with an image of me that reflects a sensitive and thinking person? To demonstrate that I am not a rural illiterate, but a person who can articulate thoughts and ideas and would, therefore, be worthy of you? Who knows? I don't even know whether I am getting through to you, whether I am making any sense at all. Do you feel that I am pleading with you? Is there a whine in my voice? I really don't know.

All that I do know is I have lived with a vision of you for the past many years and it is a vision that has sustained me and protected me in the difficult moments of my life. The thought that you are here fills me with a wonder and an amazing grace that is really beyond words. The words that you hear are the words that my consciousness speaks in an attempt to get across as much as I can in the short time allotted to me. Perhaps, the words that you cannot hear are the ones that really matter.

And so I am come to the end of what I had to say. It is a miracle that I am sitting here and talking to you, for you can never imagine how often I have dreamed that you would come back to me. The Sarus crane which finally came home (yes, I have heard how you got your name!). It is a miracle that I find in you a spirit willing to listen to my ramblings and listen silently without a word of interruption. I don't even know what you had intended to say to me, and whether what I have said means anything to you at all. I only know that what I have said today is what I have wanted to say in the past many years of my life, words that have taken more than a decade to come out of my chest, words that I could never consider telling anyone else. Your reappearance makes my heart leap in my chest. My hopes soar like the birds in the sky. I am enthralled by how you look and how you move as you walk, how the light plays on your hair, how your face changes with the moods of your mind. I am terrified as to what you will tell me when I am done. I am caught between my dreams and my fears. I would love this moment to last forever. I would like to travel than to arrive. I would rather be left with an uncertain future than exist in the knowledge that my hopes are dashed to the ground forever. I would prefer to live an eternity in this still moment on the edge of this lake than go away knowing that you would never again appear to my sight. This star filled night is either the beginning of my joy or the end of my days of dreams and hopes. I rest my case, Sarasu, I am done.

In thought

The vault of the heavens above their heads was now almost completely dark. The last streaks of light had bled out of the sky and the stars were now appearing, reluctant bridesmaids to the brazen moon rearing out of the horizon. The lake was completely still and lay like a large glass mirror spread out below them. The lamplights of the temple were reflected quietly on the placid surface of its waters. The silence was complete but for the quiet cooing and murmuring of birds trying to find the right perch for the night in the trees behind them. For both of them, sitting on the bench above the lake, it was as if this moment in eternity had been frozen. Somewhere a page had ended and was being turned over. None knew what lay in the paragraphs ahead. After Giridhar had stopped his long soliloquy and the reverberations of his words had ceased, the universe had stopped in its tracks. There was a hiatus, a stilling of the beating of Sara's heart, a rest in the concerto of her life. What new compositions lay beyond the next page would depend on her response.

Now is the moment to be resolute, Sara, now is the time to stand up and say what you have wanted to say, to recite the long speech you had prepared for in your head in the last few years of your life. You know what to say and how to say it and to make it clear in no uncertain terms that you are an adult now with your own life to live and that in the interval between then and now there has been a mighty change, a change which had taken you from Surpura to across the seas and had brought you back an independent, thinking, intelligent woman, who would allow neither custom nor social practice to stand in the way of your own fulfillment, the realization of her own dreams. Put the steel in your spine, let your eyes blaze with your determination, be unfaltering in your steps. Let your courage shine and care not a wit for the foolish sentimentality of the one who sits by your side. His life is different, you live on a different planet, you have nothing in common with him. So be cool, be strong, be cruel if required, but make this the end to all further discussions. Say what you have to say and get out. Now.

But, the blood in her veins shivered and sent ripples into the corners of her body. Her feet felt cold. There was a tremor in her hands. As one part of her mind spoke to her, forced her to say her piece, pushed her to make a statement, the other part, the gentler, the more hesitant part of her, the part that was truly Sara, crept up slowly, rising from her heart, through the veins and arteries, following its route through the throat and up the cells of the brain and into her eyes. It stung her there and stayed for a long moment filling, but not falling over from, the margins of the eyelids.

Her throat was dry and her tongue was frozen and she had not the courage to say a word. The deep pathos that Giridhar's words had roused in her had left her defenseless and exposed. The armour of logic and reasoning she had built for herself over the years was falling away like so many fragments of shredded tissue paper. She could not imagine that Giridhar's words rose from a mere fancy, that it was a passing infatuation, for his words had been filled with a quiet strength sustained over a dozen years. It was a fidelity that had not frayed or become enfeebled with the passage of time and was willing to go on forever in the same uncertain fashion. This could be no whim, no mere affection or affectation, this was something deeper, more stable and solid, like a rock that would never break and splinter.

"I have no words to tell you what I feel. You have taken away from me all the words I had rehearsed over and over again. You have left me dumb and empty, cold and desolate. I had come here to tell you the many stories of my life, the twists and turns in the road that I have traversed and the fact that I am no longer the little girl who had left these parts so many years ago. But my power of speech has gone and I am left bereft of the clever words and phrases that I had learnt by rote in the years I was away from here. There is a catch in my throat and my words stumble and falter before they spill out from my lips and I fear I will make a fool of myself if I speak longer. My eyes burn and my throat is dry. As I feel the grandness of the emotions that you are going through, I know that I am a small and insignificant person of no consequence."

"Give me time Giridhar, give me time to absorb and understand all that you have said and what it means, before I can gather my thoughts and speak to you again. Then perhaps I may hope to make some sense of this vast and imponderable mystery I am plunged into once again in this sorry life of mine. I must seek adjournment for now before the court meets again. Though you have rested your case, I have much to ponder before I stand up in my own defense."

There was a light in Giridhar's eyes, a sparkle of joy that Sara could make nothing of at the moment. He was happy. He was not left disappointed by Sara's brief incomplete response. He was, in fact, overjoyed because his case had been heard in silence and there had been no protests and voices raised in anger. His doubts and apprehensions about the real purport of Sara's visit were not yet fully allayed and he had correctly guessed that she would have had much to tell him that was not good news for his ears to hear.

He had feared Sara was here to reject him outright, to slap him in the face before he could get in a word sideways. He had also been glad that she had come because it revealed an essential goodness that was heartwarming. He had thought about this

matter so many times in the past. He knew it would have been ridiculously easy for her to have disappeared and left him with no clue as to her whereabouts. And so it was that he had long ago determined what he would say should she happen to reappear, and reveal what his heart had concealed behind his bland smiles and everyday conversation. And then, and then, if she would still leave him and go on to follow her destiny, he would do nothing to stop her. The fact that she had been taken aback, shaken by his revelations and the depth of his feelings for her, that she had no words to respond with, was a marvelous sign of such import that it gladdened his heart and made him want to sing into the night air.

“It is late, Sarasu, we must get back. Your people waiting at home must be anxious as to what we are up to. Let’s go.”

She muttered something inaudible in agreement with him and then she was getting up from the bench and following him to the jeep. Giridhar moved a step ahead and helped her into the passenger seat at the left of the vehicle as he moved to the right and the driver’s seat. Their drive back to the house was full of silences. Sitting in the jeep, their moods were complex and intricate. Giridhar’s heart was singing. He had Sarasu by his side and he was living a dream that he had had for many years now. Sarasu, however, was full of unformed fears and apprehensions, doubts about herself and her sense of right and wrong. She had wanted to stand up for herself and her privilege to choose and now she was struck dumb.

She was convinced now, after the trials and tribulations that she had gone through in her life, that every action has consequences and that decisions as important and crucial as this one should not be taken by her off the cuff as it were. The impact on others, in this case on Giridhar, had to be evaluated and assessed before she took the plunge, one way or the other. She now realized that exercising the right to choose merely because it made her feel good and in command of the situation was by itself no choice. She had never considered the depth of Giridhar’s emotions in all these years of self-introspection. She had not paused to consider that like her, he too would have grown in maturity and confidence and maybe he would have realised that the practice of child marriage left no room for the independence of the human spirit. Even if he had, she was willing to bet that either he would have agreed with what she had to say, willingly allowing her to go on her own path or he would have long given her up in disgust as an errant wife, perhaps deciding to get married to someone else.

But for Sara to hear the outpourings of Giridhar’s heart as he allowed one barrier after another in his self to break as he let the flow of his thoughts and feelings flood across his mind and hers: it was enough to leave her shaken and shattered. Any decision now would have to be carefully weighed and considered. She could not allow a heart to break for the simple satisfaction of having stood up for herself and her rights as a woman.

The jeep was now reaching the house. It was about eight in the night and the lights were on and it was clear that the members of the family and Draupadi Mausi ji and Fatima were awaiting their return. Mausi ji was fretting and fuming to get back home to Surpura. She was appalled that Sarasu had not returned till now and was wondering how she could manage the journey back now in the middle of the night. Fatima, lost and feeling strange in a completely new place in a totally unknown person’s house, was also muttering to herself about the impropriety of the situation that Sara had put her into. Where had she gone to, she asked herself. She should be given a talking to, she muttered. But, of course, she would stand by Sara through thick and thin, of that she was certain, for there was no one who could stand in Sara’s road to happiness and not face Fatima’s wrath.

As for Lakshmi, she was not too bothered. In fact, in her mind she was glad that her brother was getting to spend some time with her Bhabhi. She prayed that everything would be sorted out between the both of them. She knew that there were problems that would have to be addressed and in her naïve way she was sure that things would work themselves out.

But as for her parents, they were in a deep turmoil. They were furiously pacing about in the back yard and whispering to themselves about the improper conduct that Giridhar was displaying. They were exasperated and worried that their only son would suddenly take away their new found bahu and disappear for so long, when they did not have a clue as to who she really was and where she had been to all these years, whether she was already spoken for to someone else, whether she had made any commitment to anybody in the long years of her absence. They did not even know what had prompted her to come back, now of all times, and what her plans for all of them, especially Giridhar, were in the near future.

So it was with some relief that they heard the jeep draw up to the gates of the house and they rushed out to greet them. Sara had a wan smile on her face; she looked tired and drained and Fatima immediately knew that something of momentous import had taken place in the last few hours. She was worried for this tenderhearted friend of hers and was ready to take up cudgels on her behalf. Fatima rushed up to her and asked her in a whisper whether she was ok. Sara whispered back: she was; she would have more to speak on the matter later.

She went up to Draupadi Mausi ji and begged her to forgive her for being late. She turned around, a little lost, and asked Giridhar if it would be possible for all of them to avail their hospitality for the night, whether they could all find a place to sleep in the house. Giridhar was all lit up from inside and said, in fact, quite eagerly, that sure it would be definitely possible and that he could not consider anything other than their using his home for the night.

The dinner was almost ready, as Lakshmi had foreseen the possibility of this late night stay in the house. Within half an hour, as Sara used the washroom and the servant scampered in the kitchen, dinner had been laid out and they sat down once again at the table. Fatima had tried to engage Sara in conversation as she had gone into the spare room for a wash. Sara whispered she would speak to her some time later. She gave no clue of the deep contemplation she was in. Fatima was determined that at this moment when Sara was going through some awful mental crisis, she would be there to hold her hand to offer her whatever advice she could give. At times, one had to take charge, she said to herself.

At the dinner table, this time around, the conversation was stilted. Everyone's eyes were discreetly on both Giridhar and Sara. They too were quite conscious of their watchful observation. It was with some difficulty that Sara kept her composure and smiled at Giridhar's parents and the others. Lakshmi was all beaming smiles and chatter and it was she who saved the day. Were it not for her, the dinner would have been a disaster. She asked about their trip to the village lake. She talked of the times when she herself had gone to the temple at its edge, where the presiding deity was supposed to be quite kind to pregnant mothers. Twelve coconuts donated to the priest were enough to ensure a painless delivery of a baby boy.

Of course, Lakshmi had already fulfilled the requisite demands of the stone idol of the temple and she was certain that the promise held out to her would be made good. Draupadi Mausi ji joined in and spoke of the miracle she had witnessed at the Ganesh ji temple at Jaipur where a woman who lived in a village not far away and who had been barren for twelve years, had prayed in a trance at the temple for an offspring. Soon after she had conceived and was now the proud mother of twins. Giridhar muttered that she might have been a bit too anxious in her prayers. He was sure that she would have been satisfied with one son and may have cursed herself for the intensity of her prayers, because managing two young boys is more than what an average mother can take.

Chatter Singh ji and Bhanukumari were quiet and a little distant. They confined themselves to the passing over of the dishes to those sitting around the table and biding their time for later when they would get to talk to their son. After Giridhar had grown up and got himself an education and then became a doctor, they had started treating him with more than due respect and indeed, were in a little awe of him. But talk to him they certainly would, to find out what exactly his intentions were with regard to this bahu of theirs who had just walked in this morning, and whose purpose or motives were as yet unknown.

And now, this girl had invited herself to stay in the house along with her friend and the old woman, and Giridhar, without batting an eyelid or even bothering to consult them, had with alacrity acceded to her request. They conceded that as she was their bahu, albeit a long absent one. She could very well ask them for the indulgence of permitting her two companions to spend the night at their house. How wonderful it would all have been if only these past twelve years had not been, if Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi had not been killed in that accident so long ago and Saraswati had been living with them in Chanderpur and she were the traditional bahu all these years. How normal and predictable things would have been. How could they blame her for the tragedy that had struck her at such a tender age. Nevertheless, there was a resentment growing in them that was difficult to keep down. Anyway, they would wait and talk things over with Giridhar before the next move was considered.

Dinner was mercifully over soon enough. Sara complained of exhaustion and wished to retire to the spare room where Fatima and Draupadi Mausi would also be with her for the night. Giridhar enquired if they needed anything before they went to sleep and sent Lakshmi along to help them settle down. She carried a bottle of drinking water for them and placed it on a little peg table in the corner. She gave Sara a quick hug and smiled at Fatima and Mausi ji and then left quickly.

The servant had laid out some mattresses on the floor and as soon as was possible they had bedded down for the night. Draupadi Mausi ji only asked her if things were all right between her and Giridhar, whether they had reached an agreement on what was to be done for the future. Sara said that things were being worked out and smiled back at her. Fatima could, however, see the confusion and the anxiety reflected in her eyes and pulled her away to the mattress where she could lie down. Draupadi Mausi ji, the old woman that she was, feeling the exhaustion of the day, lay down with a long sigh and a prayer to the gods above and soon was asleep. This left Fatima and Sara time and space to talk: it was just what they were waiting for.

Fatima quickly took charge and ordered Sara to recount the details of what had transpired. Sara was glad indeed to relieve the pressure building up in her chest and in her mind in recalling the words that Giridhar had poured out to her while sitting on the bench overlooking the lake. She could by no way have conveyed the depth of the poignancy, the intensity of the feelings that he had had nurtured for her over the long years that separated her from him. With the simple eloquence of his words, Giridhar had bared his heart and left his destiny in her hands. She told her also of his strong commitment to social activism displayed in such a casual way in the small habitation of animal skin workers. This was the unknown side of him that had astounded her. She could never have known about this distant shadowy world of 'outsiders' who lived on the outskirts of every village, a world crying out for recognition and improvement and wanting to be made whole and alive again in the mainstream of life.

But to Fatima, Giridhar's words rang true and solid and pure as burnished gold. She felt they reflected his character and steadfastness, rare to find in a world where honesty was fast disappearing, where revelation of the inner truth was considered a sign of weakness, where to speak out face to face with another the words of love and truth were considered effeminate or platitudinous.

In the urgent need to be her own person, to live her own life on her own terms, Sara had probably missed understanding the need of this other person, this steadfast, ever hopeful Giridhar, who was also human and who, it seemed, loved her with a truthfulness that was touching, edifying, ennobling. Could one be so selfish as to hurt the needs of the one who loved, or at least seemed to love her with all his heart? Was she blind not to see the desperation and agony of the one who had not lost hope and had kept the faith through the countless days and nights of her absconding, as it were?

Was there a conflict, Fatima asked? The right to choose a partner for herself was indeed a right that she should protect. Sure, she was fully aware of her feelings for Jaggu way down in Kerala. But this was a struggle that she would have to resolve for herself after having seen and judged the pros and cons of the situation as it emerged. Sure, the heart has its reasons and she would have to be certain the reasons that she had counted in favour of Jaggu were more compelling than the reasons now emerging after this brief, powerful meeting with Giridhar.

"I understand all that you say, Fatima but what do I tell Giridhar when I see him in the morning. His words were like a flood swamping me and I am completely overwhelmed with the enormity of the situation I find myself in. I thought I could come here and make a speech to Giridhar and then return to Delhi. I am beginning to think that I have been blind, foolishly selfish, in thinking that all that mattered in the whole wide world was I and I alone. And now I no longer know what to do to get out of this bloody mess I am in."

She clenched her teeth and grimaced with all the pain and anguish torturing her as Fatima took her into her strong solid arms and whispered to her that the terrors of the night would be blown away when the dawn comes. Then the two girls lay down on their mattresses and waited for the sun to rise again. Draupadi Mausi ji was already asleep and her deep breathing showed them that she was really in profound unconsciousness.

As for Sara, she tossed and turned and searched for sleep in vain. At times Fatima could hear the sniffles and the sobs rising from within her as she valiantly suppressed them and tried not to disturb the others. Fatima felt keenly the agony that the poor girl was going through and other than giving her a hug now and then and shushing her and telling her not to worry, there was not much she could do to quieten Sara. The night was long and endless. Nights are wont to be so, when the dogs of uncertainty are yelping at our feet and we run hither and thither in search of the comforting light of reason. In the darkness of the strange room, Sara twisted and turned in the grip of the demons stalking around her in the night.

In the sitting room at the other end of the house, another drama was being played out unknown to Sara or the two visitors. Giridhar was in deep conversation with his father and his mother. There was some acrimony and resentment at the sudden unexplained behavior of their son who had, at first sight, accepted this strange girl who had landed on them from out of the blue, as if fallen from the high heavens. Had he forgotten the humiliation and the shame of the last twelve years? And the taunts and the gibes that they had had to swallow in the years gone by? And what was it that had prompted him to jump in alacrity when she had appeared, when he did not even know where she had been all these years? and what her credentials were?

Giridhar was cool and collected when he spoke up in his own and Sara's defense. Don't forget, he said, with a note of quiet determination in his voice, that she was married to him. Nobody should or could devalue that. And that one single argument was enough to demolish the criticism of anybody. It was no fault of the poor girl that her uncle had whisked her far away across the seas. She had had no role to play in her extended stay in England. The fact that her uncle had kept her there should not be held against her.

And as to her credentials, was it their meaning that she has some kind of a dubious past she wished to hide and that she wished to take advantage of him by suddenly appearing before them. That's a shame, to think in that fashion. One look at her is enough to gauge the strength of the girl's character. Her heart was her face. She was fine and kind and good-natured. He had taken care to watch her reactions and her responses in the course of the day at the clinic and at the habitation of the skin cleaners. And don't forget, it was not at all clear that she was eager to get back to him, her very words and her behavior had seemed to indicate that there was great reluctance in her mind. In fact Giridhar felt, though he did not confess this to them, that she may have come to bid her final goodbyes.

Of course, Giridhar forgot to say his words had been timed and executed in such a fashion that none could have said anything much after his affirmation. It took him the matter of a couple of hours to convince his parents that they should wait and watch. They should understand that the return of Sarasu was something that had been on his mind for the past many, many years. And that he would employ any tactics, any strategy, short of abduction, to will her to come back to him. She was his

wife and he wished her to be with him for the rest of his life. These words were unequivocal and firmly stated and they were spoken in a tone that would brook no resistance. They heard him out, reprimanded as they were. A discreet silence was called for, at least for the moment.

As for the sleepless Sara, there was a sick weight at the bottom of her stomach and it refused to go as she lay clutching her knees and pressing her face into the pillow. And thus the night went on and on and when an eternity was over, she could see the first light of dawn rising, the light like a blessing outside the window, and she thanked the heavens for the end of darkness and the possible beginning of a new promise. She woke up Fatima who was in a slumber and then saw that Draupadi Mausi ji was already up in a quiet meditative prayer with a string of beads around her fingers.

The night had fashioned some sort of a decision in Sara's mind and when she had packed her bag and got ready after a quick visit to the washroom, she determined to tell Giridhar that she would write to him soon enough with all that she had to say. Here in the shadow of the watchful eyes of Giridhar's family, she had been rendered lost and inarticulate. She would prefer the quiet of some neutral place where she would be able to express herself with confidence and strength. And by then, she would have formulated some clear response to a situation that had surprised her and sent her into unknown territory. She would have to reassess her mind, her biases, her opinions before sending on that fateful letter. She would have a couple of days to think about it. Once again she knew that she was postponing a decision she had kept deferring for so many years of her life. This, hopefully, would be the last time she would do so. She prayed she would be on the right track, this time with her feet planted firmly on the road to her destiny.

Lakshmi brought in the morning tea and was smiling at her in a fashion that only innocence and good heartedness could bring to a face. Sara felt a glow of some happiness once more warming her up, even as she looked at Lakshmi's face. There was so much of purity and gentleness in her. It was heartwarming just to look at her beaming face. The tea was drunk and they were ready to leave. The driver of the taxi, who had brought them from Alwar and to Surpura and then to this village and who had agreed once more to stay the night, was also ready. They took their bags and moved to the door of the house. Giridhar's parents and Giridhar himself came up to them and they watched in silence. Of course, Sara could not contemplate the idea of leaving without saying a word, a gesture. She turned, bent low with a formal namaste and stretched out her hand to touch them on the feet. It was a poignant moment full of meaning. To think that when she had arrived she had only raised her hands in a namaste. And now when she was leaving, such change had been wrought in her that she was seeking their blessing. Surely a sea change had taken place and the beginning of a dramatic transformation was stirring within her. Giridhar smiled and seemed indeed pleased with himself. She looked up for a second at him. In deference to both of them, Giridhar's parents and Lakshmi and Fatima and the old Mausi ji moved a few steps away to give them the small privacy they needed at this moment of parting.

"You have given me much to think about", said Sara, "I go now with a better understanding of what you are, what you stand for, and I promise you that I will send my letter to you soon with all that I have to say. I think I am now in possession of all the knowledge I require so that I can respond in a better and wiser manner. I am sorry if I have seemed a little withdrawn and aloof. It is only because what you have told me was so moving, so powerful that I had to turn inwards into myself to learn the import of your words. Please do not think ill of me if I have not told you all I wanted to say. I find it astonishing that you have told me all that you have, without even knowing who I really am or whether I have changed in these past dozen years. But your trust and your candour have proven to me to that the heart beating in you is gold. I pray that mine is as true as yours."

And then she was moving to the waiting taxi where Fatima and Mausi ji were already seated. The taxi started, she waved her hand and then they were on their way back to Surpura.

Setting up home

Surpura again. What a change in a single day. Something had ended last evening, a part of her childhood, her naivete, her image of herself as a unique and singular person free to take any decision on her own and who would stand by that decision whatever happened. Something new was being born too. The idea of a new individual who cannot, and perhaps should not, take decisions on her own with no thought of what happens to the rest of the world. The contemplation that each of one's actions has consequences on others would now gather strength in her mind.

Could she decide on an issue unilaterally when another, a different person, as equally involved in the situation, as she was, an equal protagonist or maybe victim, was also involved? Sara was caught between two worlds, as it were. One, a suave and perfect world in which she, the liberal western educated urbane self, would argue that one's destiny is in one's own hands, that one has to decide what is best for oneself and the devil take the hindmost. On the other side, a thriving real world where the art of living flourishes on the strength of each other's thoughts and actions, where the life of one person is irretrievably linked to every other person around. A unified vision of one world belonging to many persons. She was inclined to scoff at herself for this grand view. She was too young to be thinking of such stuff when she was just about 21 years old. She needed to get out of the mess she was in and enjoy the bliss of youth as she was entitled to.

Back in Surpura, she seemed to acquire a clearer perspective of what was to be done. A calmer and cooler air prevailed and it helped soothe the raging disturbances in her mind. The first thing she wished to do was to relieve Fatima of the burden of accompanying her as she grappled with her problems. She knew Fatima would protest and argue, but she had her own business to manage, her own life to live. Why on earth should she hang around with her as she sorted out her personal problems and the affairs of her heart? So the moment she reached Surpura and the safety of the home of Draupadi Mausi ji, who had gone to her room and decided to nap off the morning, she called aside Fatima. She put on a stern face and addressed her unsuspecting ally:

"Fatima, you have been a darling these few days. I can never thank you enough for what you have done for me. You were there to hold my hand whenever I needed you. But I cannot be selfish. I cannot ask you to hang around with me for the rest of my life. You have a life of your own and too many problems related to your father's business. It is time you went back and resumed your duties at Delhi. As for me, I will have to stay here for some time while I resolve some of these matters buzzing away in my mind. It is not that I love you less when I chase you away from here. It is because I love you all the more that I must insist you should go."

Fatima was stricken and aghast and started to protest. She argued that Sara had no comprehension about her love for her and that she would do anything to ensure Sara's happiness in the days ahead. She scoffed at the idea that her business could not wait and argued that nothing would happen to her father's legacy if it were left alone for a few days. In any case, when her father was alive, he hardly ever came to Delhi while managing his business from Kerala. She pointed out that Sara had no one to depend on here in this far away village of Surpura and that she did not even have somebody who could take care of her. And certainly she could not spend all her life in the care of old Draupadi Mausi ji.

These arguments were sound and valid but Sara responded to each of them. She said that she was back in her own village, the very place where she was born and where she would have spent most of her life if fate had not swept her away under strange circumstances. Sara also argued that Fatima was only fooling herself if she thought that her business would look after itself. Her father had all the acumen of a lifetime and he managed matters from his home in Munnar, with just brief visits to Delhi. She, however, was only a novice who would have to learn in a very short time what her father had learnt over the decades. And in any case, as she was planning to expand and diversify her activities, she would have to spend her days at Delhi and every day she spent on the job would count.

As for Sara herself, she had Draupadi Mausi ji to depend on. She had received from her the love and affection of a mother and she could not be happier anywhere else. And as to her future, well, she would discuss this with Fatima before she left as to what her plan of action would be. There was some nebulous idea taking shape in her mind and she would clarify it soon enough.

With great hesitation and even anger, but really with not much choice available to her, Fatima had to agree. With much reluctance, she then decided to leave the next day in the morning so that she could catch the afternoon train from Alwar and be back at Delhi before it was too late. That would leave her about a full day to see that things were made as near to normal in Surpura as was possible for Sara. Despite the fears that Sara's decision created in her own mind, Fatima knew that the poor girl had to find her own destiny for herself and she did indeed begin to admire what she was doing out here. Well, she'd do her darnest best to help her in all possible ways, even if it meant that she would have to leave her alone for some time now.

After a quick meal the girls nibbled at in a desultory manner, and after Draupadi Mausi had gone back to her nap, they sat down to talk things over. It was going to be a long conversation and would last for hours and well into the next day until Fatima had to leave. But it would clearly define the situation Sara faced. By nightfall their discussions would end in the charting of a road map for the future.

Step one: to ascertain her own financial status. Of course, Choti Maa had given her enough to see her through a few more months and she had arranged to ensure that there would be a steady flow of funds for Sara that would be sent to her from Kerala in the address of Fatima's office. Of course, Fatima would arrange to forward that to her at Surpura. But it was essential to know what Sara herself had as her own assets.

Mausi ji had informed her of the money accumulated in her account from the revenues of the land given to an Agarwal ji who was cultivating her father's land on some kind of a lease. The arrangement was that half the receipts of the land would be placed in her account in the cooperative bank while the remaining half would be Agarwal's to enjoy as recompense for his expenses in tilling the land. If Agarwal ji were honest, then there would be a tidy packet for her collected over the last dozen years. She needed to check that out by going over to the Bank in the afternoon.

Step two: her assets. In addition to her father's land, she had her house, locked and bolted for so many years, but kept cleaned and tidy by the dutiful Draupadi Mausi ji. She could start to live in the house and attain some measure of independence rather than putting Draupadi Mausi ji to so much trouble. She would, of course, need a housemaid to swab and sweep and help in the cooking and she guessed that she would be able to manage for herself well enough.

Step three: what to do with her life. Really, what was most important was what she was going to do with herself as she sorted out the affairs of her heart. There would be not even the hint of stability in her life until she had acquired that rock-solid foundation to her every day life that was vital to her own self-esteem and sense of dignity. The house, her home: it all centered down on the home where she had lived so many years ago, first as an infant and then as a young girl. All her early memories wafted about that home where she had spent the first nine years of her life. She was now perfectly sure that that was the bedrock on which she would build her self-respect and her future.

And thus it was that the germ of the idea that had sprouted in her, as she had watched Giridhar in the little habitation of skimmers at Chanderpur, began to grow and take shape in her mind. Unknowingly, she had absorbed the sights and sounds of the village. It had become clear to her without a shadow of doubt that what prevented the typical village in India from finding its own destiny was not its obvious backwardness and poverty, but the lack of knowledge and learning and education. Everywhere she went she was faced with the picture of unlettered people who did not know what was happening all around them in the big wide world outside the confines of their village.

After all, what was it that had transformed Sarasu to Sara, what made her different, made her think, cogitate, reason and understand issues, but the fact that she had gone to a school where knowledge and learning was imparted to her. More important she had learnt to think for herself. If these benefits had been bestowed on other girls like her, would they also not know the true meaning of freedom and the gift of choice and acquire the confidence to take decisions? Could she do something about it? Could she start a school in this little village and prove to the rest of the world that with some dedication and love, she could bring Surpura's little children out of their blinkered world and make them see the larger picture of life. And make them understand not merely the three R's but also about dignity and respect for others and tolerance and the greater values of the universal world.

As she talked to Fatima, she realised that she was sounding too pompous and proud, as if she really believed that she was some kind of a great female Messiah who would change the world and bring in the new millennium. She criticized herself aloud to Fatima as she said those words. Sara was talking to herself, taking herself through the great decision that she had finally arrived at. Fatima knew she was trying, struggling, to put into words the slowly clarifying thoughts growing in her mind.

Fatima watched Sara as she talked. There was a sense of animation in her, she looked alive and beautiful and the tension she had been in for so long seemed to be vanishing. There was now a growing sense of purpose, a direction to her life being revealed even as she was talking, a clearer view of her future and what she intended to do with her life. Fatima knew too that she was a privileged witness to a creation, the emergence of a hitherto unrevealed new personality of Sara, a late blooming, an emergence from a chrysalis that had remained dormant for so long. Some strange magic was transforming Sara before her very eyes.

Ever since reaching Surpura, and seeing once again the motes dance in the sunlight streaming in through the windows of her home, ever since she had seen again the little bed where she had lain all through the years she was growing up, ever since the earth around her home, lying like a blanket around her feet, had resonated with her steps, and ever since her body had felt the

enveloping warmth of her memories awakened in the kitchen and the yard and the room where her father had held sway, yes, ever since that moment, she had felt the lightening of the load on her head, in her heart, in the pit of her stomach.

As if it were the end of a long fitful, fevered sleep. She was climbing out of a disorienting dream, back to the fullness of her consciousness, back to the solid unwavering reality. Finally, after twelve years of wandering the earth, she was back in Surpura. Her vision was clearer. The air was free from distortion. She was standing taller. Her steps were firmer and the final incontrovertible truth rang out like a bell struck, like a trumpet's call, like the brightness of the rising sun on the horizon. Sarasu was back home, home where her heart had been hidden for so long. Now she knew that all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well.

Sara needed help, of course, first with the setting up of her school. What sort of structure would it have, Fatima wondered, does it have to be registered as a trust or could it be begun as an informal method of instruction with the formalities that would be worked out in due course. And, she was convinced that Sara was a naive and innocent little girl who would have to be told that the world is not all sugar and spice and that there are big, bad wolves out there who may gobble her up if she were not careful.

Sara dismissed Fatima's concern as a mere urge of maternal instinct and joked that she could use that instinct to full measure on her own children when she gets married, and that too soon, she prayed. But Sara was not so foolish as to be dismissive of Fatima's word of caution. For the next few hours she talked with Fatima who, with her inherited business sense, was able to guide her as to how she should go about matters.

The first thing was to go over to Agarwal ji and talk to him. With Fatima by her side she felt a bit more confident. He lived not too far away, and so after informing Mausii ji, who was busy in the kitchen preparing their dinner, both of them walked over to his house. In that little confined village, the mere sight of the two girls brought attention to themselves. At first, a few urchins playing in the street and then some of the older children started following them. Without the pallu over their face and with no sign of the unnecessary modesty that women of the area were wont to display, they appeared to be some kind of aliens who had descended on them. They giggled and grinned at the Mems, as they were soon dubbed, as they walked up to the house of Agarwal ji.

Sara turned to them with a smile and asked them if they did go to school. With the opening of the conversation, small talk became very pleasant thereafter. She also asked if they, and especially the girls, would like to attend a new school, if it were opened here in the village. There were a few nods and uncertain answers. It was clear that she would have much work to do on the concept and introduce it to them after some clear headed thinking was done.

Mausii ji had given them a slip of paper on which she had introduced Sarasu and also Fatima so that Agarwal ji would have no doubts about their identities. With this in hand they went up to the door and knocked. A stout lady, with half her face covered by her pallu, opened the door and smiled curiously at them. When she heard that they wanted to see Agarwal ji, she was even more mystified. She called out to her husband who was in an inner room and when he came out, clothed in a vest and a dhoti, he was surprised too. But when he read the paper thus Mausii had got written out for him, there was a dramatic change in his expression.

He was thrilled and excited and called out to his wife to set up some chairs and make some tea, for Ram Chander ji's daughter had come a-visiting. She came back to the room and peered at them from behind the door and agreed to come out only after she had been greeted by inviting smiles from Sara and Fatima. As for Agarwal ji, there was no doubt that he was really happy to see them and he went into a long recital of how well he had known Sara's father and mother and what a fine man he had been and may Bhagwan Ram ji have mercy on his soul and surely he must be in heaven for the good deeds he had done when he was alive.

He told them also of how he had faithfully fulfilled his promise to Harish ji of paying half the receipts of the crops grown on the land in question into the nominated account. He rushed in to bring out a paper in which the details of the bank account in question were scrolled and he handed it over to Sara. Sara glanced at the bottom line to get an idea of the balance in the passbook. She was gratified to observe that it was indeed a tidy amount and would help her reach her goal that much easier. She passed over the paper to Fatima who glanced through the figures in a more thorough and detailed manner. From her quick look at Sara too it was clear that she was satisfied. Sara also told him about Harish ji who was now ill and lying like a vegetable for the last many years and how he had been almost like a father towards her. The news shocked Agarwal ji who had had no clue regarding the whereabouts of Harish ji except for an occasional letter now and then. He complained that even those letters had stopped about three years ago.

Now Sara broached the subject that she really wanted to talk about. She had decided that in fact, she did not know a thing about agriculture and that she was really not inclined to take up the task of growing crops on this land. Could Agarwal ji consider the question of buying out the land from her, she enquired. The question came as a surprise to him and indeed he

was very pleased indeed. The land was good and with the assured source of water, it was a gold mine. It had yielded crops in excess of his expectations and he had, as best as he could, adhered to the promise that Harish ji had extracted from him. There were times when he had been tempted to give the agreement a go-by, but the thought of the little orphan girl had stayed his hands and made him keep his nose clean. With the young woman in front of him, he was glad now that he had been honest and could say with conviction that he had been truthful and straight in his promise.

As to the offer of purchase of the land, why, he would grab it at the first opportunity. He was willing to give her the market value of the land, though he may take some time to rustle up the required cash. Sara was delighted at the quick conclusion to her task and it was soon agreed that Agarwal ji would ascertain the cost of the land from the office of the nearest Sub-Registrar's office and let her know the details. He assured her that he would be able to pay off roughly half the amount straight away and the remaining within a three-month period. He promised once again that he would not in any way cause distress to the daughter of a man he once used to so greatly admire. With these words and the warm tea in their stomach, the girls bid goodbye to Agarwal ji and set out on their next task.

This was to visit the Sarpanch of the Panchayat, whose blessings would be greatly needed if the school project were to get off the ground. At the Panchayat Bhawan, the Sarpanch was in office and listening to grievances that were put up to him. They were largely of the kind of petty disputes between villagers that could be disposed off by getting the parties to sit down together and make them discuss things openly. They waited while the cases were being discussed, once again feeling awkward in the gaze of curious eyes carefully, unabashedly, watching them. The village folks were certainly not used to seeing independent women unaccompanied by their men folk. The girls stoically waited and watched the proceedings of the Panchayat and heard the Sarpanch pronounce his decisions on a couple of cases until finally he was calling them in.

He was a wise old man who looked at them with twinkling eyes and a slow smile on his face. He immediately asked them what they had come there for. Sara, with her better knowledge of Hindi, began by revealing her identity. As in the case of Agarwal ji, the reaction was instantaneous. The Sarpanch was full of joy at meeting the only daughter of the departed Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi whom he had admired for being fine and respectable citizens of the village. He remembered the horror that he and the rest of the people had felt on that terrible day when the accident had taken place. He had been one of those who had rushed to the accident site to take the bodies to the nearest hospital before bringing them back to the house. Of course, he remembered the little lost girl who had been the center of sympathy and pity of all who had come to pay their final respects.

Sara then revealed her project of opening a school for children, especially girls, and how she would like to see that the children of her village got a quality education so as to strengthen them to face the world and make them independent and right thinking citizens. She said that she was in the process of collecting the required finances, but that she would be ready to start in a fortnight. She would need the blessings of the Sarpanch and the village elders for the success of this venture. She prayed for his support.

The Sarpanch was full of wonder and praise: "Of course, beti, we are all with you for this noble cause and you have our full support. In fact, in our next meeting of the Panchayat, I will raise this issue from my side and we shall pass a resolution to give you all the help you need. We shall also ask the families of our village to send their girls to your schools. There is sometimes a hesitation to send the girls to the government school because there are boys also there. Some of our worthy but old-fashioned families find it embarrassing to have their daughters sit in the same class as the boys of the village. So if your school is exclusively for girls, there will be a better chance of more children joining your school. So think about it."

"Also, you must think about the fees you will charge. The Government can afford to give free education to the children. But you? Will you be able to meet all the expenditure and still not charge fees? And what about teachers? You may get a few young girl teachers who are themselves educated, but they may be living a little far out in the town. You will have to contact them and get them over there. Have you thought about all this, beti? There are so many questions that you will have to answer."

The issues raised were all genuine. Indeed Sara knew that she would have to face all sorts of administrative and logistical problems before the school started. But with the barrage of questions the Sarpanch had presented to her, it was clear that she would need help. Sara was looking a little helpless and Fatima was cursing herself for having agreed to leave the next day for Delhi before these basic issues were sorted out. The Sarpanch saw he had indeed puzzled this young woman and disconcerted her. He did, however, see some spark of enthusiasm and genuine willingness to work for the children and it was that that made him sympathetic to her cause.

"I think you need a guide to help you and give you good advice. May I suggest somebody for you? There is a retired teacher who lives just a couple of houses away from here. Her name is Sujata ji. She spent most of her lifetime teaching in schools all over the State. She has a wealth of experience behind her and though she may be a little difficult at first, I am sure that when she sees your heart of gold, she will help you out." And saying so, he took out pen and paper and wrote a small note for

Sujata ji, which, while introducing Sarasu, also mentioned her project and entreated her help in assisting the project get off the ground.

It was an encouraging beginning but Sara got the feeling that she was rushing headlong into something that she had no idea about and that she may very well fall flat on her face. Her fears were equally shared by Fatima who fretted and fumed at the sudden initiative that Sara was showing, when all along she had been a sweet little girl who would go along with what whatever one told her. But Sara also realised that she may well be on the right track to her real future. She felt deeply committed to the thought that she could do something for her less fortunate sisters. Her determination to carry out this mission to success steeled her to face all obstacles and problems. For the first time in her life, she was moved by a force that was even stronger than her own slight frame of body, strong enough to take her into uncharted territory. She was determined that she should not falter for a moment in its execution.

She thanked the kind old man and stepped outside the Panchayat Ghar, standing for a moment in quiet contemplation. Fatima took her by the hand and urged her to visit the house of the retired teacher Sujata ji, while the iron was hot. Maybe she will find luck today and get her help and find the answer to all her problems. So with some trepidation, they decide to walk over to her house, pointed out to them by somebody at the door of the Panchayat Ghar.

It was just about a couple of hundred feet away, a small house with a wooden door and a lone, woeful dog lying outside it, its head on its paws. As they moved to the house, the dog perked up its ears and watched them without moving, his eyes carefully following their movements. When it became clear that they were indeed coming towards the house, he raised his head and gave a single sharp bark and then went back to lying exactly as he had been a moment before their arrival. The bark apparently was a signal. It took the place of a calling bell and almost within seconds the door was opened. A short white haired lady with a wizened, small face peered out at them, "What do you want, whom do you want to meet?"

Sara and Fatima spoke together saying that they had come to meet a Sujata ji, the retired teacher. They were interrupted with a gruff irritated growl: "I am Sujata. Speak one at a time, girls. If both of you speak at the same time, I won't be able to understand a word." It was clear that their introduction had not gone well and that Sujata ji was still in the mode of a teacher. She was talking to them as if they were students in her class. The two girls exchanged smiles; they were both amused as well as a little worried. After all, this woman may hold the key to Sara's success in her venture and it was necessary to have her in the right frame of mind.

"We are sorry to bother you with no prior notice," Sara said, "we have come from quite far, in fact from South India, and we have some work with you. We hope you will listen to us and that you will please help us."

The words seemed to have the right effect on her. Her curiosity was aroused. Who could have come all the way from South India to see her and what on earth could they want with her? She gruffly invited them in and pointed them towards the dhari and the couple of cushions spread out on the floor. Sujata ji did not believe in chairs. And then she looked at them expectantly and waited for them to begin. Sara told her that she had now come back to her native home after many years spent elsewhere to do something with her life and how she had conceived this idea of giving the girls of the village some form of quality education. Sujata ji's eyes widened at the prospect of this little slip of a girl wanting to start a school in the village. What could she possibly know of the innumerable problems of a school and how it was nearly impossible to get the parents of girls to shed their age-old inhibitions and get them to allow their children to come to schools.

"And what do you know of education," she asked. There was a shrill note of belligerence in her voice. "Have you ever taught in a school? Do you know about conditions in this village? And why girls are reluctant to come out of their houses and into the schools? How much experience do you have in the management of a school? And do you think that you have the money to manage a school? And you'll do this all by yourself? Or do you have somebody older and more experienced to help you?"

The flurry of questions seemed to go on without an end. Sara was nonplussed and a little puzzled by this behaviour. Was this the woman that the Sarpanch had said would help her out? She remembered the Sarpanch saying she would be a little difficult at the beginning. She then remembered the slip of paper that the Sarpanch had given her and she took it out and handed it over to her wordlessly. Sujata ji almost didn't take it, but then she changed her mind and glanced at what was written. Her face seemed to soften visibly as she read the note. Although Sara had not herself read it, it briefly mentioned the story of her life and revealed her identity as the daughter of this very same village, mentioning the fact of her parents' unfortunate death and how she had been swept away by the tragedy of her life and how she had now come back to her old village. The Sarpanch had also affirmed the Panchayat's support in her proposed activities.

Sujata then remembered the details of the awful tragedy that had shocked the entire village some dozen years ago. She had been teaching somewhere far away in a different district then and she recalled how she had herself been moved by the events when she had heard about it then. And how, when she had come back on summer leave, she had gone over to the neighbours of Ram Chander ji and Gauri Devi and had learnt the details of that frightful accident.

“I am sorry, I didn’t recognize you, beti,” she said. Her voice had softened and she smiled a little sadly at Sara, “I used to think about how you as a little girl would have suffered and how you had managed all these years. Some weeks ago, I happened to meet a neighbour of yours. I wonder if you know her, she is Draupadi ji and used to live next door to your parents. She was mentioning about how many years it has been since she had heard from you and she was wondering why you had not even bothered to write to her.”

“Draupadi Mausi ji? You know her?” Sara gave a little scream of delight and told her of how she was staying with the same Draupadi Mausi ji in her house, next to where her parents had lived. It was the one thing needed to break the ice and transform Sujata into a very different person. She then went over to the kitchen and prepared some tea for them. Fatima smiled, it was now clear that things would be very different, that Sujata would indeed agree to help Sara in her activities.

When she brought in the cups of tea, it was Sujata who would not stop talking. She soon learnt enough about the real reason why Sarasu had come calling on her. It took no more than a couple of minutes for her to decide to help this young girl do what she wanted in the establishment of a new school in the village. She told them of the kinds of social barriers that she would have to break through, if she wanted the girls of the village to come over and join her. She did mention some of the formalities that she would have to complete, including informing the District Education Officer of her intentions. She was glad to know that Sarasu’s house, which was nice and comfortable, would serve as a fine building for the new school. And of course, she would help Sarasu in whatever capacity she wanted.

It was clear to both Sara and Fatima that Sujata ji lived all alone in the house. She was the quintessential school marm who had forgotten to get married and find a family for herself. Her family was an ever-expanding circle of students who remembered her with both fondness and fear, with deep respect and a wry smile at the punishment that she would wreak on them: the whipping cane for forgotten homework or a rap on the knuckles for whispering amongst themselves in her class. It was only after they had passed out of her class that they would remember the quality of her teaching and the way in which she had nurtured in them a sense of responsibility and self respect, a desire to learn and explore that was very, very uncommon in village schools during those days.

After retirement, she had come back to her old family home, which had remained locked all the years when she was posted in different places all over the State. Now there was only this canine friend that she really had in the whole world. After retirement, she was not really looking forward to a life of utter boredom doing nothing. The sudden appearance of these two girls was like a miracle sent to her from a God, whose intentions and style of management of the world in the particular fashion that He did, was not really to her liking. But it was clear that He had sent her a special task and that that she would indeed help this young woman in fulfilling her dream.

Sujata had no doubt that Sarasu was indeed very naïve and she did look like as if she were a child herself. But the fact that she had come back to her old village with the intention of doing something special pointed to things noble and good in her. Perhaps the Sarpanch ji had also seen that spark in her and no wonder he had recommended her to him. Anyway, the long and the short of it was that the visit went off very well. When they took leave, they agreed to meet again the morning of the next day, before Fatima left for her journey back to Delhi.

All in all, therefore, it had been a fine day and things were looking quite good. There was a sense of optimism in Sara as she sat down with Draupadi Mausi ji in the evening and related to her the events of the day. When she mentioned Sujata ji and how she had referred to her in their conversation, Mausi ji answered that indeed she knew her and that she had a fine reputation as a teacher, that Sarasu had certainly been lucky to get someone like her to help her out in the new school.

Then with much hesitation and caution, Sara broached the subject she had wanted to talk about with Mausi ji for sometime now. She started by saying she wished to get her own house opened up, to live in her own place and not cause any more trouble to her Mausi ji. As expected, there were loud protests from the old lady. She would hear nothing of it. She had lived quite alone all these years and now that Sara, who was like a daughter to her, had come back to her after she had been cruelly left alone all these years, she would hear nothing about any shifting anywhere.

Sara reminded her that only a wall would separate her from her beloved Mausi ji and that she would be dropping in and out of the house throughout the day. And also that she expected Mausi ji to help her in her school mission, that her blessings would be essential for its success. She diverted the subject by seeking her intervention in obtaining the services of a woman servant who would help her with the kitchen and in the cleaning and the sweeping of the new school. She would pay her whatever she could and maybe provide for her food too. She wanted this to be done early and would Mausi ji be a dear and help her out?

It was fortunate that Badami, the girl who was helping Mausi ji in the house had an older sister who was willing and ready to start work the very next day. The excited younger sister rushed out and quickly brought back the thoroughly bored and buxom Jamna who was introduced to them with a flourish. Badami waited with baited breath for their approval. Sara and

Fatima glanced at each other. For a person who was waiting to be recruited for a new job, it was surprising that Jamna did not display the usual eagerness. Sara asked her a few questions to which she replied in a desultory fashion.

Badami, the younger sister sidled up to Draupadi Mausi ji and whispered something which the older lady duly conveyed to Sara. Sara then nodded and asked Jamna to start work the very next day and that she would watch her performance very closely. If she did her work well, she would consider recruiting her on a permanent basis for some more time. There was a sullen smile on Jamna's face as she bowed low and left with her sister.

Fatima was curious as to what had transpired in the course of the whispers exchanged. Sara told her that Jamna's husband had rejected her a couple of weeks ago, leaving her in dire financial straits and that with a little help of wages from some employment, she would be able to fight for her cause before the Panchayat or in some court so that she gets her matrimonial rights established. It struck Fatima then that the proposed school was already yielding results in unexpected ways, not merely by way of educating the girls but by way of helping people who needed help. Fatima was left wondering where this whole new experiment was going to. What was Sara was transforming herself into in the course of her task of finding herself.

By the time night fell, things had fallen into some sort of an order. The house would be opened up in the morning and made fit for occupation by Sara. Jamna would come over and see that the sweeping and the cleaning is done. She would help in the cooking and other odd jobs required in the house and the school. The old furniture was still serviceable, though it was packed away somewhere. She would require some utensils and kitchen pots and pans, which could all be easily purchased from the local market. She would send Jamna for them in the morning.

The preliminary planning for the school would be undertaken after Sujata ji joined her for discussions in the morning of the next day. The building was ideal for a small school, with a fair sized yard in the front and two good rooms at the side of the house. The Sarpanch would be approached again, once the bare details had been worked out. She would then have to go to the families of the homes with girl children and persuade them to let their daughters be allowed to join the school.

It would be a tough task, but she hoped that when the parents knew this would be a fine girls' school, run by a young lady who had once been the daughter of this village, then perhaps they would shed their inhibitions. She was now convinced that her initial idea to start a school primarily for girls — meaning that there could also be boys in the school — would not work. There was already a government boys' school in the village and traditional reticent mothers living behind the veil, would never consider the prospect of their daughters sitting along with the boys in the same class. Her school would be exclusively for girls and it had better be a good school. She could not consider making it free of cost for she would not be able to sustain the continuance of the school if there were no receipts in the form of fees. So she would have to charge fees and hope that despite the cost, the quality of the education given would tempt the villagers to keep sending their daughters to her school.

So many problems, so many issues, so much of the nitty gritty to be sorted out. Well, this was grabbing her interest and attention as nothing else had in the past in her life. She would have loved to have Fatima by her side, to lend her the sense of assurance and security that she normally carried with her. But it would have been selfish on her part to insist on her company and that is why she had insisted Fatima leave the very next day. Well, she already had friends in the village. And she should learn to survive on her own. Draupadi Mausi ji would be not so much her philosopher and guide, but a mother hen to fret and worry over her. It was nice to know she could count on somebody to do that in this village. She had liked the friendly old Sarpanch who could be relied on to get her all necessary help to get the school going. And Sujata ji, with such experience and maturity at her command, would be a real inspiration. Obviously, she would have to depend heavily on her. And then there was Jamna and Badami and maybe a host of others before long. And the children, the lovely, shy girls of Surpura.

As she got down to the simple dinner that Draupadi Mausi ji had prepared for them and then to a blissful sleep on the mattresses on the floor, with Fatima next to her, for the first time Sara felt that she was getting somewhere. Memories and images, lying submerged in the course of the busy day, now rose up from the bottom of her mind. Briefly the image of Jaggu, lost and baffled at the railway station, rose like a cloud before her closed eyes. She felt the passing away of a transitory happiness that she had had with him in the days that now appeared to have gone by so long ago. Indeed, she was amazed that it was just a short while since she had bid goodbye to him on the dusty platform of the railway station.

She was now in another orbit, a different time zone, a level of consciousness that she never knew existed. And then the face of Giridhar wafted through the retina behind the eyelids and surprisingly it was not difficult to like the image it presented. Pita ji and Maa smiled at her from her home next door; their faces were clear and distinct in her mind. Before she finally slipped off into a deep sleep, it was Choti Maa who reached out to her from many million miles away and gave her that familiar, sweet, grave smile she was wont to. All in all it had been a good day. She had much to do when the sun rose again.

Letters

Fatima had left the previous morning. She had insisted that there was no need for Sara to accompany her on the short trip to Ajmer railway station for she would then have had to return all alone to the village late in the evening. So reluctantly, Sara had agreed. She had found for her a jeep leaving from the village for Ajmer in the morning. Fatima's overnight suitcase was packed and with a sumptuous lunch packet prepared by Draupadi Mausi ji in her bag, the jeep was sent on its way. Fatima had given Sara a tearful embrace with much muttering as to how she would fare for herself in that little place when she had all of Delhi and the facilities of her business at her disposal. Draupadi Mausi ji had also been much taken in by Fatima and she was left wondering as to the fine strength of the friendship of the two girls that had brought this tall stern faced friend of Sarasu so far away from her work place here to this tiny village.

The moment she had left and Sara found herself alone, the enormity of her actions struck her like a fist in the face. Here she was completely alone in this place, though known to her from her infancy, still largely strange to her. And she was undertaking an activity that she had no previous experience in. Was she being too foolish, was she being carried away by the joy of doing social service with no idea of the long-term implications of what she was attempting?

With a conscious effort, she put away the doubts worrying her and got down to business. She needed to busy herself in activity to keep her fears at bay. The secret was constant action and work and she would ensure she had more than enough to do; of that she had no doubt. She summoned Jamna and started the cleaning of the house she would now turn into her home and school for the children of the village. It was exhausting work, but Sara did not stop till the whole house had been cleaned, from the front rooms to the bedroom and the dining room and then the back yard and the kitchen. Draupadi Mausi ji had wanted to help, but she was shooed away by Sara who admonished her not to worry too much, that she had done enough work to tire herself out in the last two days and that she did not want her falling ill because of her.

Jamna was astonished that a fine lady who looked so much like a Memsahab did not cringe at the daunting task of cleaning the house. On the contrary, she had tied her dupata around her waist and had folded up the salwar at the ankles and had set to work in real earnestness. The well at the rear of the house was still full of plenty of sweet water. Draupadi Mausi had got the water cleaned out just a few months ago. She was not sure why she had done it at that particular time, but it was now obvious that she had done the right thing. She was convinced that it was divine intervention. Surely, it was indeed fortuitous coincidence and it had helped settle down the house as early as possible. The new rope and the bucket had been installed as a gift from Draupadi Mausi ji and they used the water in the well to clean out the house.

Separately she had sent Badami to buy some basic utensils and dishes for the kitchen so that she could now set up house formally and start cooking in the house itself. She also needed some atta and some dal and maybe some vegetables from the local market along with condiments like salt and mirch and tea and coffee and sugar and the rest. She had got Draupadi Mausi ji to work out a list of these essentials and had asked Badami to get them all before the day ended. Badami was, of course, thrilled. She had never been earlier given charge of such a lot of money and the responsibility to purchase so many things. So she was extra careful with the accounts. By evening, most of the things were bought.

Wisely, Sara decided that she would shift in only on the next day and spent the late evening and the night in extended conversations with her Mausi ji, talking of things long past. She revived memories of her father and her mother and the things that had happened in the village in the past dozen years. Draupadi Mausi ji saw Sarasu's arrival as a miracle. For a woman who had lived all alone for so many years of her life and who had been charged with the responsibility of looking after the house of her almost-daughter, it was now like a dream come true, a certified miracle, to have her come back. She had returned to her from out of the blue skies, dropping into her lap, as it were. Sarasu had grown into a loving and friendly creature who had already lightened her load and had spent hours with her, simply talking, chatting, smiling at her. When she had had a bad headache after the trip to Chanderpur, Sarasu had pulled out a balm from her handbag and had massaged her forehead and caressed her temples and within minutes she could feel the relief seeping in. What bliss it was to have someone care for her after all these years of living alone.

On the next day, the rest of the cleaning and the swabbing were completed. Then in a mood of nostalgic tenderness, Sara set up the furniture that had been locked away for so many years in a small alcove at the corner of the house. She could now remember every single item as it was brought out from the alcove and set up in their designated places in the home. She had asked for some new coloured, flowery sheets to be purchased from the village store and with a little help from Jamna and the fascinated Badami, she had draped them up on the windows where they served the purpose of curtains.

The house was turning into a warm and lovely place to stay in and all that was needed was to light the kitchens fires and start the cooking. Both Jamna and Badami helped in the task and by early evening the kitchen had been made functional. A rough dinner was prepared and served up. Sarasu insisted that Draupadi Mausi ji join them for the meal and together they sat on the

bed and eat their first meal together in Sarasu's old home. It was just plain chapatti and dal with a dash of local pickles and an onion for taste. But to Sara it was like manna from heaven.

The sun had set and the lamps were lit. Sara knew that she would have to obtain electricity connection soon. When she had left, the village had been unelectrified and now twelve years later, nearly most of the houses had had obtained their electricity connections. Her house, locked and silent for all these years, had had no need of electric lamps as there was nobody to stay in them all these years. She would have to get this done as soon as possible.

Dinner over, Sara insisted that she would stay the night for the first time in this house and Jamna could also sleep in the house in the kitchen. Draupadi Mausi ji was a little irritated. She wondered why Sarasu made so much of her independence and was not willing to stay on in her house for longer. Sara had a hard time placating her but the old woman finally smiled when she was told that Draupadi Mausi ji's house was so comfortable that if she stayed on longer there, she would never be able to move out.

And surely, Mausi ji could understand her feelings why she wanted so much to stay in her own home, where she had grown up with so much love and tenderness and the undiluted affection of her parents. If she closed her eyes, she could transport herself to the old days and even see Pitaji and her Maa as they moved about in the house. It was as if their spirits were around her and were blessing her and giving her all their love and encouragement in her new venture. Mausi ji had no words thereafter and she piped down and let Sara have her own way.

When Mausi ji had left and Jamna had moved to the kitchen for the night, Sara made herself a cup of hot tea and went to the main room. She sat down in the very same chair that her father used to sit on, as he read his papers and welcomed visitors to his house and talked of local politics and the prospect of the coming crops and as to what they would do if the rains failed and so on.

Gingerly she sat at the edge of the chair. She closed her eyes and leaned back and took a deep breath of the sanctified air of the dwelling that had been hers so many years ago. This was now her home, her own home, and she would find herself and her own destiny from this abode. She could almost see Pita ji smile as if in benediction on her. She stayed in quiet meditation, a simple deep contemplation, a kind of humble inward looking that for the first time in the past many weeks, brought with it the peace and the serenity that she was looking for. The Sarus had come home to roost, and though she was alone, she did not feel lonely any more.

After an hour of quietude and peace, she roused herself up and took out her pen and her writing papers and sat down to write. The oil lamp in the table had been pulled out only this morning from the alcove along with the furniture and other things. It was old and black but cast a comfortable, bright glow of light on to the table as she bent her head and began to write. She needed to write two letters today, before she tucked herself down to sleep. The first would be to Giridhar, the one in which she needed to express herself with all sincerity, without any maudlin sentimentality. The second would be easier to write, it would go to her Choti Maa and Bhaiyya. She took a deep breath and began.

Surpura
26 July 1976

Dear Giridhar,

Its been three days since we left Chanderpur and I am sure you are wondering why I have not written to you, as I had promised you that I would. On the banks of the lake, on that still moonlit evening, the outpourings from your heart humbled me as nothing else could have. I had no words to respond to you at that moment. Now that Fatima has left for her Delhi office and Draupadi ji is in her own house next door getting ready to sleep and I am alone in this house of mine, which is both old and new, I have the time and the serenity to think about what you said and to write to you. Its time that I let you know the long and involved reasons as to what this is all about.

Your Sarasu is no longer the little girl who left a dozen years ago, after the accident that killed Pitaji and Maa. The world has turned too many times on its axis to let me remain the very same person that I was. Harish Chacha took me to a world that was alien to me, across the seas to a fine seaside town on the English Channel. But he and Choti Maa and my Bhaiyya made me at home and gave me all the love and affection that would have never been mine, if I had been left to my own devices.

Yes, Harish Chacha was married to a woman he loved from the hospital that he was working in at Brighton. He had hidden this great secret from his brother, my father, whom he worshipped and feared to hurt. That he had kept this as a secret was something he would rue all his life. And he would forever wish that he had made a clean breast of it when he had had the time. Their little son became my Bhaiyya, my playmate and my friend. And I grew up in that gay and beautiful town like a sapling transplanted to foreign soil, finding the change exciting, energizing, filling my mind with new insights and comprehensions that would not have been possible had I stayed on in Surpura.

I have nothing to say about the decision that prompted Harish Chacha to take me away from you. It was perhaps his way to soothe his guilty conscience and return the love that he had for his brother whom he had, in all probability, deceived by his surreptitious marriage to the woman he loved, who was neither of his religion nor of his way of life. I lived the life of a much loved daughter in that far away place, slowly getting to cherish and love the life in England that gave so much to me for my mental growth and my happiness. I marvelled at the freedom that they took so much for granted. I admired the solemn respect for the individual and the unfettered expression of one's mind. But equally, the careless waste of food and clothes and money repulsed me; I was aghast at the casual relationships between men and women that were started and thrown away with no thought for each other. The brown fields and yellow flowers of home used to call out to me from across the ocean.

Nine years I grew up with the strong and exclusive affection that Harish Chacha gave me as also the quiet and unwavering love that Choti Maa sustained through all the years we spent there. This haven of peace and stability, far away from the prying eyes of neighbours and curious relatives, was a lovely oasis of happiness and love and I shall be forever grateful to my foster parents and my Bhaiyya for those wonderful, growing up years.

All that was shattered just about a few days after my eighteenth birthday when Harish Chacha received a letter from your respected Pita ji. It shattered his composure and true to speak, raised guilty feelings in him which combated with his by now jealous possession of his foster daughter whom he did not wish to see leave. It was as if he had to pay heavily for his sins of denying you and your family of your rightful claims over me. The hand of God struck him squarely in the morning of the day when we were discussing this letter: a stroke that left him motionless and like a vegetable for the last three years. I cannot tell you of the great sense of dislocation and alienation that once more afflicted me like a disease eating into my very soul as we left England and sought refuge in the green and sylvan land of my Choti Maa deep in the South of India.

There, once again it was as if I were trapped on foreign soil. I searched for peace and harmony once again. That I was an outsider was clear to me from the very first moment. Imagine what Choti Maa's family may have thought of me, a fair-skinned stranger who had no blood relationship with the family. What frantic rumours they may have churned out as they watched me with Choti Maa and Bhaiyya. But the unstinted support and loyalty that these two gave me helped me find some measure of joy and contentment and harmony. In the wonderful three years I spent in the University at Trivandrum, a small coastal town so far away from the familiar scenes of Surpura, I learnt of the great joy that comes from the search for knowledge in the fine company of friends who share your views and thoughts on many things in life. Throughout these three years, however, the thought of you and the unfulfilled commitment that was waiting to be honoured kept stinging me every day like a thorn under the skin. Until I finally realised that I could postpone it no further. And that I had to face the prospect of a life with you, a stranger about whom I had no feelings of any kind, who had grown away from me in the twelve years that I had grown away from him.

Fatima, she of the gentle heart and indomitable spirit, stood by my side as I braced myself for the visit. On the strength of the fine thoughts of freedom and independence of spirit that I had acquired during my sojourn abroad, I had taken time to consider deeply and decide that the matter of a child marriage I had contracted would have to be questioned, most of all on the sole parameter of individual choice. If I have had no say in the matter of the choice of the man who would be my husband and companion for a lifetime, then how could I accept the validity and legality of that choice? Do I make sense, Giridhar? So I had come to Chanderpur that day with Draupadi Mausi ji and Fatima in tow to deliberately upset the simple peace and happiness of your lovely home and family.

My visit is over and I am alone in this quiet still night and finally I have the peace of mind to pen this letter to you. I find such changes sweeping through me, such a reorientation of my thoughts, such a hearkening back to the past and its values. Was it that I had imagined you would be an unlettered rural villager with no comprehension of higher values and ideals that people aspire to in the rest of the world? Did I think that you would not be the equal of me? I was sure that I could not and would not subject myself to the ignorant existence of a wife and mother cloistered within the boundaries of the village. I would not allow a marriage entered into unwillingly by me to pull me down with the weight of custom and social precedent. But from my very arrival there, I noted the slowness of the moving time, the care and the concern of the people for each other, the deep stability of the traditions that moved at the heart of things in Chanderpur. I asked myself why it is that without a fuller comprehension of the world outside, Lakshmi your sister, product of a child marriage herself, is so happy?

I saw with fascination and pride the work that you do in your clinic and in the hamlet of animal skinners whose life you are doing so much to improve. I asked what made you wait for me and stay truthful to a mere image of me as a child, a mere figment of your imagination, when I was roaming the world with no concern for you and your worries. Where was I when the world was turning and you were growing up in the thought that I would be back one day and by your side? Had I done anything worthwhile than be caught up in the throes of my worries and concerns and damned be the rest of the world? I was fascinated with my own problems thinking them to be the only ones in the whole wide world and that everyone else had to be subordinated to them. Did I miss the greater picture somewhere down the line, the import of which I am only beginning to understand?

I have no answers to these questions and they keep hurting me. I will now seek to answer them as I undertake this new project of mine. Giridhar, after my visit to you and after having seen the work you do in your clinic and in the habitation of animal skinners, I am amazed at how some simple truths had made themselves apparent to you even without conscious thought and contemplation. I am also amazed as to why with all the knowledge of the West and its advanced thinking that I was privileged to know for so long, these thoughts did not come to me. All in all, I have, therefore, decided to spend time now in this native village of mine with its brown and sienna earth and its yellow sarson flowers and do something to bring me back to the sense of what I have missed in the past dozen years. In a way, this is the expiation for some of my sins, sins of blindness and complacency and the thought that I may have learnt too much without knowing anything at all.

My school for girls, which I am opening in my home here in Surpura, should be underway within a fortnight. I have an old, experienced, retired teacher, Sujata ji, to help me keep my feet on the ground. I would love to have a couple of young women teachers who could help in the classes. I may not be able to pay them much, but I do certainly guarantee that they live and work happy. Would you help me find them?

I pray that you would be able to visit me some time soon, as early as you can. I need to have the feel of the goodness that you so abundantly possess and the sense of work and industry that you so naturally demonstrate in everything that you do. Wish me luck. I pray for your prayers for me, and the success of the work that I am about to begin.

My namaste to your parents and Lakshmi.

With regards,

Yours sincerely

Sarasu.

She was finished: she went over the letter again quickly but did not make any changes. She had written from the heart and any changes would only be embellishments of the real thing. Giridhar would get it in a few days. We'll wait and see how things turn out rather than worry about them too much, she thought to herself. Then she picked up the next sheet and with a lighter heart and with a more casual flow of the pen over paper, started her second letter.

Surpura

26 July 1976

Dearest Choti Maa and Bhaiyya,

After my last letter to you, which I sent on reaching Delhi with Fatima, so much has happened that I am not sure as to how and where to begin. In the meanwhile, I hope that both of you are ok and that you are not worrying too much of this 'wayward' daughter/sister of yours. Choti Maa, you know me better than most people but you would be astounded at the kinds of changes that are now taking place and, I think, a little proud of me too.

Fatima has been such a great help and we had gone over to Surpura as we had planned. Draupadi Mausi ji, who was a friendly aunt living next door when I was here as a child, was around to help me. She is such a dear, Maa, and did all that she could to help me out. The house is as I had left it. Mausi ji took good care of it and had kept it clean and nice. She took us across to Chanderpur and I met Giridhar again after all these years and he had a long heart to heart talk with me. Maa, he came across as 24-karat solid gold, genuine and trustworthy.

He is an articulate, well-educated doctor and has his own public dispensary and clinic in the village. He is also doing a lot of social work in the area for people who are not normally treated well by the general public. There is so much of public prejudice against certain castes and communities, which I may not have observed when I was last here (which was twelve years ago!) and Giridhar is doing much to rid the village of such bigotry. He opened his heart out to me and left me wordless with the strength of his love for me, or perhaps for the image of me, which he had cherished and sustained for all these years. He left me in a whirl and I forgot to tell him that I had come to the village to protest about the fact that on principle I opposed the practice of child marriage. After that outpouring, I had no words to tell him that I shall not abide by the dictates of a marriage to which I had not given my consent. That is a conundrum that I shall have to resolve as time goes by.

Be that as it may, I was inspired by the work that he has been doing. It came to me that it is time I planted my feet as firmly on the earth and that I should contribute my mite for the betterment (I hate that word, it sounds so pompous) of those not as

fortunate as we are. Maa, did you know that I have been left some considerable amount of money from the income of the crops cultivated and sold from Pitaji's land. I have decided that the land itself will be sold off so that I have some capital for the project that I now intend to start. You won't believe it when I say that I intend to become a schoolteacher: a proper school marm, to teach the unlettered and unschooled girls of the village. Perhaps it is my way to ensure that they do not have the same kind of problems that I have had in my days. If I have it my way, I may be able to put some sense into their heads and make them stand against all the prejudices and maltreatment that they have been facing for so long now. Maybe together we'll wipe out child marriage from the face of the earth! There I go sounding pompous again.

And so I have recruited a retired teacher and will be recruiting some more staff to help me in my venture. I already have a servant girl; she is called Jamna, and she is helping me in the household chores and the cooking. I am writing this, Maa from the very room in which I used to sleep in as a child, and if I close my eyes I can see myself as a little child again. The big bed on which my parents used to lie is mine now. The small bed at the corner of the room where I used to lie on is now kept in the front room and I am wondering as to what use I am going to put it to. It is all strange and wonderful and I wonder where I get the strength and courage and commitment to go through with this grand design.

How is Bhaiyya? Give him a big hug from me! Perhaps when I am a little more settled, you could all come over here and stay with me. I know that this is a virtual impossibility with Chacha in the state that he is in. But I can hope, can't I? I have much more to write, but I'll do that in my next letter when all this chaos would have hopefully sorted itself out into some order.

Bye Maa and all the love in the world for both of you. I pray for Chacha and both of you. Now, isn't that funny? I never thought much of praying and religion and God and all that stuff.

Loads of kisses,

Yours affectionately

Sara

It was almost midnight. She was done and now she could go to sleep with her mind free of worries and disquieting fears. As she lay down on the bed and covered herself with a sheet and closed her mind, she found that sleep came easily to her. Within minutes she was dozing off. Surely she must have been very tired after all the physical labour of getting the house in order. But more important, she had been able to get down on paper her thoughts about Giridhar and her feelings for the whole complex issue. The letter would soon be on its way to him in the morning. The last thing she seemed to recall, or maybe she wanted to feel, was the presence of her smiling Pita ji and Maa casting blessings on her sleeping form as she lay in the familiar bed and wafted away into a dreamless sleep.

The next few days was spent in organizing the financial aspects for her project. The account in the local cooperative bank was renewed and the manager gave her a long appraising look when he saw the balance in her passbook. Sujata ji who was accompanying her, returned those looks with sharp raised eyebrows that made the poor man blush and turn away. She then visited Agarwal ji again to finalise the sale deed for the properties, which he had in the meanwhile prepared. Sujata ji insisted that the local Patwari have a look at the plot numbers and the record of rights in the register of land records and got him to scrutinize the deed itself. Sara was a little embarrassed at all this examination and peering and querying, but Sujata silenced her with an imperious glance while whispering that in matters of money, Sara was a novice and did not know the ways of the world. Not only the buyer, but the seller also had to beware.

All this took most of the day, by the end of which, the first installment of the sale value of the money was deposited in Sara's account with the assurance that the remaining amount would be given to her in a month's time. Things were getting along fine. The Sarpanch ji had taken her under his wing and sent along the Panchayat Secretary to help her fill in the form for the electricity connection. Normally the process would have taken at least a month, but a nudge from the Panchayat and the by-now fascinated Patwari was enough to speed things up. The Junior Engineer assured her that the connection would be released within a week's time.

In the meanwhile, Sara had identified the two rooms that would be used as her classrooms. The front room where her father used to meet the visitors was definitely the biggest room of the house. Next to it was another room that her mother used to sit in and do her stitching or her winnowing of the wheat and the cleaning of the spices. Sara could now remember that there

used to be a small shelf in the room where some of the condiments and special home made sweets were stored. The shelf was then just above her reach and it was usually a frustrating experience to try and reach up and pick out the ladoos or the gajak from the bottles stored there in. So this would then be the second class room. She realised that she was perhaps being a bit too optimistic. Would she get so many girls at the beginning of her venture, she wondered.

It was obvious that she was attracting quite a bit of attention in the village as she went about her business of setting up the school, walking to and from the bank and the Panchayat Ghar and Sujata's house. Sometimes, the children followed her, but soon enough their ogling changed from incredulity and wonder to curiosity and interest. Sara kept her eyes open particularly for the girls, and would sometimes catch their attention as they stood behind their mothers or their elder brothers. Word had got around that she was going to open a girls' school and there was much interest in her activities.

It was certain that the women of the houses in the village would be discussing her proposal and they would be wondering whether they should send their girls over to her when the school started. Of course, the fathers did not think much about the entire idea of education for girls. For them it was an unnecessary exercise as in any case the girls would be soon enough married and packed off to their lives of domesticity and drudgery. But between sending the girls to the government school, which was a co-ed school for both girls and boys, and the new school that Sarasu was proposing, they would indeed prefer to send them to the latter. At least they would be safe from the eyes of mischievous boys who would normally cause trouble and tease them and pull their hair. And so, unknown to Sara, the debate had already begun in the village.

A couple of days later as she was reading through some papers pertaining to the syllabus designed for government schools of the primary level, and as Sujata ji was in the class room worrying about the kind of furniture that would have to be installed for the children, there was a knock on the door. The postman, old and bespectacled, who had spent a lifetime distributing letters in the village and to whom each and every face was known, had brought her a letter. When he had seen the address on the envelope, he had wondered who this could be and his curiosity was awakened as he walked up to the door of the house, which had been bolted and shuttered for all these years. When he saw Sara, his eyes opened wide and he asked: "You are Ram Chander's beti, aren't you? You have the same nose and the same eyes of Gauri Devi. I would recognize you anywhere!"

It was a comment that won Sara's heart instantly. She called him in and asked Jamna to get a cup of tea and then made him sit down. He spoke at length of the fine couple that her parents had been and how he had personally grieved at the sudden tragedy that had upset her life in such a dramatic manner. He was in a garrulous mood and talked long about the times he had come over and how Ram Chander had had a generous heart despite his huge moustache and how he had taken a personal interest in him and would give him a special tip on festive occasions. He remembered Sarasu as a small girl and how once he had brought over a coloured greeting card on Deepavali from her uncle Harish Bhai from across the seas. It had caused her much delight and happiness and she had spent days looking at the card and trying to decipher the words written on it.

When he had left, she sat down to take up the letter that had been brought to her. There was a sudden leap in her heart as she saw that it was from Chanderpur. She ripped open the letter and read the words in the course of a long single breath held tightly in her chest.

*Chanderpur
1 August 1976*

Dear Sarasu,

I did get your letter yesterday and was thrilled to know about the work that you are beginning. Thanks to the efficiency of the Post and Telegraphs Department, your letter took six days to traverse the thirty kilometers separating Chanderpur from Surpura.

Of course, my prayers are there for you, as always. I believe you know that well by now. First let me get out the details of what you wanted to know. Yes, I shall visit you, most probably next Sunday and I shall bring with me a teacher that may be of help to you for your classes. You know Shantamma, my help in the clinic, who was so taken in by you when you visited the dispensary. Well, it appears that she has an unemployed sister who has just completed her B.Ed examination and is awaiting her results. She would be thrilled to work for you. I'll bring both the sisters over with me on my trip over there on Sunday.

Now as regards your rambling letter with all your thoughts and your concerns, your expressions of guilt. Sarasu, we'll leave all that aside for the moment. You know that you do not need to justify yourself to anybody, and least of all to me. And we shall not talk about the actions of our families so many years ago that brought us together, that bothers you with its insistence. Don't think about it. Believe me, these things will sort themselves out one way or the other. Let us give it some time, ok?

As regard your new project of the girls' school, I am so happy for you. If the fact that the idea for this may have come out of what you saw in Chanderpur, is correct, then I am happy for both you and me. Sometimes our best actions come without much thought and deliberation. Allow your goodness to flow out and see how you change the lives of people around you.

I wish you all the best in the days ahead. Hoping to see you soon.

Yours sincerely

Giridhar.

She exhaled and she bent low on the table and took in deep breaths that were cleansing and refreshing. She had been wondering deep inside her as to what reaction her introspective and apparently selfish letter would have on Giridhar. The fact that he was not unduly worried about her response, that he had virtually given her the time and the space to work out her problems on her own was most encouraging. It must be admitted, she said to herself, that he had displayed so much more understanding, courage and poise than she herself had in their interaction together.

Sunday was tomorrow, she suddenly realised and she would have to get things together as Giridhar would be coming calling. Why was she suddenly so nervous, she who had crossed oceans and seen the world, why was she now getting a little tense about a visitor to her house? She was instantly out of her chair and was calling out to Jamna and instructing her about the visit of the guest the next day. She also called out to Sujata ji who was in the next room and was telling her about the visit. The shrewd old woman wondered what the excitement was all about and indeed asked who it was that was coming. Sara was suddenly silent. Should she reveal all or should she just say that it was an old family friend who had shown some interest in her project? She was a little taken aback and did not know what to say. In some confusion, she muttered that it was someone she knew very well and whose advice she greatly valued and that she would like him to take a good look at the school project.

So when the next day dawned, Sara was up and early and had prepared a list of the few things that she wanted to discuss with Giridhar with regard to the school project. With his greater experience in the field of social sector work, she would be glad to rely on his advice and counsel. As promised, Giridhar turned up in his jeep at about ten the morning. With him in the rear seats of the jeep were Shantamma and another young woman, who was obviously Shantamma's sister, the unemployed teacher who would join Sara in the school.

Giridhar stepped out from the jeep and smiled at Sara and introduced Shantamma, who nodded and bowed low. She helped out her sister Philomena and introduced her to Sara. Philomena was a dark-eyed, curly-haired, small-bodied young woman full of an intensity that was apparent in everything that she did. She curtsied and smiled briefly and held out a file of papers for Sara to see. They were obviously certificates of her educational qualification. Sara laughed and said: "Just a little later, Philomena, first, all of you come in and then we'll have a look at them!" She extended her hand and gestured to the door of the house and escorted the three of them to the main room. Giridhar led the way, while remarking that he could indeed remember the house when he had last seen it so many years ago. Of course, that had been when Sarasu's parents had been killed in the crash, but Giridhar, of course, didn't mention it.

Sujata ji was there to give them all a namaste and in a few minutes Jamna brought in the tea and the biscuits. Tea over, Sara gave them the grand tour, showing them the two rooms that would function as the classes and the other rooms of the house where she was now to live permanently. The bedroom caused a mild embarrassment to both Giridhar and Sara, who passed by it and walked on to the rear of the house where there was a yard where the children could play and spend some free time. It was a shady nook, a place where Sarasu had spent hours running from one corner to another when she was last here as a child so many years ago. It was ideal for recreation and rest.

Seeing how serene and quiet and shady the place was, Giridhar wondered if they could sit there and talk things over, rather than in the house itself. The chairs were brought out and soon they were in a deep conversation about issues relating to the starting of the school. Shantamma and Philomena watched as the Giridhar and Sarasu discussed the many little details that were prerequisites before the school could start. Sujata ji kept chipping in now and then with her useful hints and suggestions. It was decided that Sarasu would need to send a formal letter to the District Education Officer about the new school, lest he would later invoke some forgotten bureaucratic rule and insist that the school was not regular. Giridhar promised he would check from the local district office the legal requirements for starting the school, though he was pretty sure that no kind of recognition was required if the school did not get any financial aid or grant from the government.

Then it was time for Sara to talk to Philomena. She needed to know that Philomena could indeed teach some subject to the children that would be useful to help them gain their education for the primary level. Though she was a trifle shy at the beginning, Philomena opened up soon enough at Sara's friendly questions. She revealed herself to be a quick and bright young woman who was adept at numbers and arithmetic and with sound knowledge of science that would be helpful for the children. Sara decided quickly that she would serve the purpose of a teacher for maths and science. In any case the level of knowledge required for the primary level was not that high and Philomena would be able to manage quite well indeed. As

regards pay and salary, Sara promised that she would offer something equivalent to what her counterpart in a government school would get. There were no more questions after that as Philomena was a little wary in enquiring about more details regarding her emoluments right at her very first meeting with the mistress of the school and especially when she was an unemployed teacher with not a penny to her name.

Sara asked Shantamma and Philomena to have a look around the house and get familiarized with the surroundings. She said this in Malayalam, which immediately brought great smiles to their faces. They seemed to be ecstatic but couldn't for the life of them guess how this fair skinned woman living in this village of Surpura in Alwar district could have possibly learnt Malayalam. It would be an inexplicable wonder for them to try and unravel in the days ahead. She also asked Jamna to escort them both to Draupadi Masi ji's house and introduce them to her. Then they should come back and Philomena should talk to Sujata ji about the kind of work that she would be expected to take up once school started. Sujata had by then gone back into the room and busied herself with the various tasks of preparing cutouts and diagrams and drawings that could be put up on the wall when the school started.

That left both of them together under the shade of the large neem tree towering over the back yard. There was now a sense of calm and tranquility. The tension that had shrouded them the last time they were alone together on the promontory overlooking the Chanderpur lake was now gone. There was a gradual lessening of the initial anxiety and in its place was the growing feeling of confidence and understanding and a respect for each other's work and commitment. Giridhar realised that he was witnessing a young woman's growth towards self-realization and he was proud that he was a part of it. Sara was again humbled by the fact that for many years she had assumed much that had been now proved to be erroneous. She had been misinformed and she was horribly off the mark, but she was happy that her fears had been ultimately proved wrong.

They spent the next hour in easy conversation and mutual smiles and the exchange of information about each other's families. Sara talked at length about the great debt she owed Harish Chacha and Choti Maa and how Bhaiyya had been such a sweet dear and a great friend in the years when she was adjusting to life abroad. She spoke of the deep fears she was beset with in those early years when the horrific memories of the accident kept flashing in her head in long, mindless nightmares that would go on and on and never end. About how Choti Maa would wake up on hearing her groans in the night, how she would come in and hug her and lie by her and ease her back into a restful sleep. About Bhaiyya's stout support for her in school in the first few years as she struggled with her language and her adjustment problems. About Chacha's invincible strength and courage and his continuous support for her in the years she grew up in that seaside resort on the edge of the English Channel. She spoke too of the happy memories she had of the holiday she had spent in Kerala and how she had loved the quiet tranquillity of the backwaters where she would spend hours on the bank of the river, curled up with a book or just idly looking up at the clouds and the unending patterns they drew on the blue sky.

She did talk too, in passing though, and without revealing all the details, of her friends in the college in Trivandrum and how they had been a group of inseparables while imbibing the best of English literature and learning about the great literary figures that had walked the world during the Shakespearean and the Victorian ages. She knew about Giridhar's interest in books and spent some time in comparing their favourite authors and books.

Giridhar in turn spoke of his family and the sudden break he had made with tradition in insisting he would become a doctor and spend time in helping out the more unfortunate people in the village. The idea for his involvement in the hamlet of animal skimmers had really come to him from out of nowhere. He had wondered what would happen to their situation in life if they were helped by some outside intervention who could advise them and help them in matters such as health and cleanliness and give them an over all positive attitude to life. If they were left to their own devices, they may spend the next hundred years at the same level of deprivation, of being ignored and despised by the more enterprising neighbours of the forward communities. He was sure that the little he had done and would do for them would help to speed them on the right path.

And thus the time passed until Jamna called them in for lunch. Along with Shantamma and Philomena they sat at the little table and partook of a simple meal of rice and chapattis and dal. Sara was a little embarrassed that she had not given more elaborate directions for the kind of lunch she would have really liked to serve up for Giridhar. But she, of course, could not mention the matter in the presence of the guests. And then, lunch over, Giridhar and Shantamma, with Philomena in tow, were off in his jeep. Philomena would return a few days later when the matter of her staying arrangements had been settled.

More letters

Surpura

6 August 1976

Dear Giridhar,

Your visit was a great morale booster. Your presence here has helped in transforming my desire to do something from an idle dream to a substantial and workable project. As suggested by you, I am getting some tables and benches built from the local carpenter. It also gives some employment to the carpenter and his family! Philomena, Shantamma's sister is a cute girl and wishes to do her best for the school. Since we are all in this together, all green novices and wet behind the ears, but all wanting to change the world, I think I'll take her in and see how she performs as a teacher to the girls. In the meanwhile, Sujata ji has agreed to accept her temporarily as a houseguest till she finds some suitable quarters for herself.

I have talked to the Sarpanch ji about getting the young girls of the village into the classes. The classes will be, obviously for the primary level. Perhaps I shall start with Classes I and II, which means that I would like to ideally take in about ten to fifteen children for each of the classes. I wonder if the purdah clad women of Surpura would agree to send their children in so many numbers to me. I need to talk to them on a one to one basis. I have asked the Sarpanch ji and he has agreed to call a meeting of the Panchayat tomorrow where I shall explain my project to them. Then I shall go over with Sujata ji and Philomena to do the rounds of the houses. Perhaps in my next letter to you, I will have something to report by way of success.

I have had a thought, which I must share with you. It struck me only after you had left, or else I would have broached the subject directly with you when you were here. Surpura is quite backward, especially in terms of general health. The women of the village live in deplorable circumstances, knowing nothing of personal hygiene or cleanliness. You are already doing so much in Chanderpur and I would not like to burden you with too much more. But I wondered, if when you do come over here now and then, whether it would be possible for you to take a general look at some of the people here. It will do much to improve their general well being. Maybe an inoculation camp or a medical check up for these people, particularly those living in the poorer quarters. My self-seeking interest in this suggestion is that it will greatly improve my chances of making my school project work, if it is backed by a health component. Am I being selfish? Well, I cannot deny that I am! But, nevertheless, could you please consider the suggestion?

I greatly enjoyed the quiet conversation that we had under the neem tree in my backyard. It gave me an opportunity to talk at length with you without other pressing worries and concerns cluttering and scattering my mind. Perhaps we could do more of such talks the next time you are here and that would really be helpful in getting to know each other better.

I must sign off. I am afraid that the lunch that Draupadi Mausi ji and Jamna had whipped up for you could have been a little better in variety and quality. I must assure you that the next time you come over, I'll personally ensure that we get a good meal in you before you leave. Please send my very respectful regards to Pita ji and Mata ji. I think only you will be able to explain the mental processes that I am going through as I find my own bearing. They must be dreadfully disappointed in this reluctant 'daughter-in-law' of theirs.

Lakshmi must be due anytime now. With you to care for her, I am sure that she will be well looked after. Tell her that I am praying for her and the new baby to be.

With all my regards

Sarasu

Sara's meeting with the Sarpanch and the members of the Panchayat was held two days later. There were about a dozen of them seated on the rug in the main room of the Panchayat building. Sara and Sujata ji sat at the corner of the room as the other business of the Panchayat was conducted and disposed off. Largely, they pertained to maintenance and upkeep of the roads and public conveniences as also some discussions about the pastureland of the village. Then the Sarpanch waved them to the center of the room and formally introduced Sarasu as the daughter of the village who had gone abroad for her education and had now returned to do some good work for her native village. He spoke a few words about her father and the esteem that he had been held in when he was alive. Some of the Panchas suddenly perked up when they knew that the young lady was from their own village and that she did indeed wish to do some good for their village by way of education of the girls. A couple of them had known her father and that itself was enough to ensure that she gets a good hearing.

Sara was completely nervous when she stood up and hesitantly talked about her father and her mother and the life she had lived abroad and her desire to do something for her native village, perhaps in the name and memory of her parents. She had

gone around the village and had observed the plight of the women folk of the village and the crying need to do something to improve their lot.

As she spoke, she gained in confidence and was soon enough able to articulate what she had in mind. She believed that if this problem was tackled at the early stage when the girl child was growing up, by endowing her with a good education and the necessary mental and psychological wherewithal to empower her, then there would be no reason for her to stay away hidden behind the purdah. So she was seeking the blessing of the Panchayat in her venture. In the next few days she would attempt to visit the many houses in the village where there were girls who were really not going to any school at the moment. She wished to convince their parents to send them over to her new school.

There was a mixed response to her fervent plea. The younger of the panchas were in her favour. The present dispensation in Delhi had devised a quintet of slogans to lead India to a prosperous future, where 'each one, teach one' had become a clarion call. It was in favour of encouraging education for all, especially for the girls and so they were inclined to go along with her. The older members, however, appreciated the sentiment and even nodded their approval, but it was clear that they were watchful and cautious. Anything that would disturb the equilibrium in the village community set up over the generations would have to be viewed with suspicion. But at the moment, they were no demurring voices.

After the meeting was over, the Sarpanch took her aside and repeated his full support for the new project. He, however, suggested that she could try to enroll the daughter of the village Thakur, for then she would have gained a major victory for herself. She was about seven years old and as was the custom amongst Rajput families, she was subject to the rigorous code of the purdah. The little girl was hardly ever seen; but if she did join, the others in the village too would definitely come out. There was another side to this too. Some Rajput families were fussy about sitting together with people of the lesser castes. So it must be made clear that the school would be for all castes and communities and that if she did enroll, she would be given the same treatment as any other child.

This was something to indeed mull about. Sara knew the caste system well enough having lived here for the first nine years of her life. But they had been layered over, washed away, by the memories she had gained at Brighton in the succeeding nine, which had taught her impartiality and fairness in treatment given to children of all shades and colours in the school she had grown in. Of course, there were bullies and horribly behaved children everywhere, but the system as such did not tolerate aberrations from the accepted norm of equality of treatment. She would go over to the Thakur's house the very next day, she decided.

New Delhi
2 August 1976

My dear Sara,

It took me some time to write to you as I had fallen ill with a severe stomachache perhaps after all those vegetables and grass I ate at Surpura. Have they not heard of something called non-vegetarian stuff down there? Not even eggs! I was starved for good wholesome food all the time I was there! (Just joking, you know!) Anyway, by the time I reached here, I was recording 104 °F and my body was burning up. My staff looked after me well enough and called in a doctor who had me sorted out fast enough. But I was out of commission for about five days and that is why I had not written earlier. If you had been here, I am sure I would have gotten well earlier.

Now the purpose of this letter was to let you know that I think you are a foolish and totally idiotic girl with silly notions that you can change the world. How can you ever bring the women of Rajasthan out into the present century? You know, of course, that this is an impossible task, but that is, by the way, why I admire you tremendously. For the life of me, I cannot understand why you should give up a good settled life with the security and the comforts of a big city like Delhi, to shift to a village at the back of beyond. Which is also another reason why I do admire you. If I were you, I would have given up the villagers of Surpura to their own sorry fate and lived my own life the way I wanted to, with lavish food and stylish clothes and people fawning over me at every nook and corner. That is, in an utterly selfish manner where the only thing that mattered was me myself. But since you are you, you have the right to do as you please. I concede that. I only wish you could do it somewhere here in Delhi where I would have your company!

Now listen, whenever you need me, just call out loud and I will be there. DON'T hesitate. Just because I am some 100 miles away doesn't mean that your shout for help will not reach me here in Delhi. I have decided that I do wish to help your venture as best as I can and though you are no longer working here, your salary in the form of contribution to the school will be reaching you every month. Don't refuse! Actually I do get a tax exemption for this contribution: so really, I stand to gain too!

As regards your personal problems, I guess you will be able to sort them out a lot better on your own without any advice from me. I am sure to mess things up if I poke my nose into it. You have always been good with ways of the heart and a truly great friend to me. And I am sure that your innate goodness will see you through this too. As much as I could gather about him, Giridhar did seem to be a great guy. But I guess you have to make the decision on your own.

Give my love to Draupadi Mausi ji: she is a wonderful person! That is a compliment from one who does not normally dish out praise!

Love

Yours truly,

Fatima

Fatima, dear old Fatima, thought Sara, who could have thought that two persons like us, so very different from each other, would get to be such good friends. I have you on my mind most of the time, Fatima, and don't worry, if I do need you, I will certainly call out your name. 'Winter, spring, summer or fall, all I've got to do is call, and you'll be there, yes, you will.'

Sara took the assistance of Sujata ji once more on the next day to make the trip to the Thakur's house. Sujata ji had some tales to narrate about the old house where the Thakur and his wife and their daughter lived. Oh yes, sure, some stories have been indeed told of that old haveli. She conceded that the stories were all old, perhaps dating back to about fifty years or more. Tales of village girls enticed with pretty baubles and shiny gifts, of bastard children found in the rubbish bin and so on.

But the present Thakur seemed to be a good man, she said, though not much was known about him. He was hardly around. He must be about 35 years old. One knew he was here only when his old Bentley was heard purring around the outskirts of the village. The Thakurani was a good looking woman from some family in Madhya Pradesh and had probably not liked the idea of living in a small village in Rajasthan where her husband's properties were located. But she had accepted her fate and had slipped behind the purdah like most other Rajput wives of the landed gentry. On the Dusshera festival, she would sometimes come to the temple and stand with folded hands and closed eyes for a few minutes before the Bentley drove her back to the haveli. Her husband was never seen in the temple at all. Some said that he had no faith in God and was, therefore, free from the need to follow rituals like other ordinary mortals. Their daughter had never been seen outside the haveli.

They walked up the short slope to the large, old, faded house just about going to seed, with no maintenance or even a whitewash. The Bentley was in the garage, which meant that the Thakur was in. At the door, they rang the calling bell that echoed deep within the house. They had to wait for a considerable time before a servant opened the door and poked his head out wanting to know what they wanted. When they revealed their identity, they were called into the drawing room where an old musty carpet covered the floor and the stuffed heads of deer and bison adorned the walls. The chairs were carved antiques and the silence hung heavy in the room. After a short while, they heard the tinkle of the bells of anklets approaching from the next room and they saw the Thakurani as she entered, smiling stiffly at them.

"Namaste, you wanted to see me?" She was a graceful, handsome woman with the long, lithe body of a person who takes some trouble over how she looked and dressed. She had on a red and green ghagra, the chunnri covering her blouse, with gold bangles on her arm. She wore a bright red bindi on her forehead and looked straight at them. Her eyes flashed a wordless warning that she would tolerate no nonsense.

It was Sujata ji who introduced Sara to her mentioning briefly that she was the daughter of the village and how she had come back to do some good work for the people especially for the education of girls. Sara took up the threads from there and explained about the tragic death of her father and her mother and how after years of having lived abroad she had come back to the village, a kind of return of the native. She would be honoured and thrilled if the Thakurani would give her blessing to this venture by agreeing to send her daughter to the new school.

There was a sudden brightness that flared in the Thakurani's eyes as she contemplated the prospect of sending her daughter to the school. But, in a brief moment, that had faded and her face turned stiff and formal again.

"I am afraid that would not be possible. My daughter does not wish to study. She will stay with us. I have already taught her the numbers and the alphabets and she will not need anything more than that."

"I think you are wrong, and I think you know that too. And judging by the way you speak, I can guess that you may have yourself had a fairly good education. You have no right to deny the same education to your daughter."

Sara spoke firmly, with conviction and some heat in her voice. The Thakurani had not considered the possibility that anyone would have the gumption to question her decision on her own daughter's future and for a moment her eyes widened. Then she looked away and for a brief second turned her face downwards to her hands folded on her lap. In the little moment of silence that immediately followed, the sound of the slap of sandals on the marble floor was heard from the next room as someone approached. The curtains were drawn aside and a tall man with a large mop of hair and a trim moustache walked into the room. This was obviously the Thakur and in deference to local custom, Sara and Sujata ji stood up. The Thakurani whispered long into the man's ear as he inspected both of them from head to toe. There was something disconcerting in his long and searching look at Sara.

"I have heard about you from the Sarpanch", he said in a low cultured voice. "But I don't think you really know and understand what my wife has been saying. Perhaps you did not hear her well enough. She said that our daughter does not intend to study in a school. And that is that."

"Apparently, you did not hear what I had said in reply to her, Thakur ji. Both of you are educated and I cannot for the life of me think of one reason why you intend to deny the benefits of education for your one and only daughter."

"And who are you to question our decision. I am sure you realise that these are personal matters that are ours to decide on." His voice had risen, but was even and measured.

"I am not sure of that", Sara replied evenly, "if everyone felt that way, you would have a generation of illiterate girls all across the world and that would be the end of modern civilization as we know it."

Anger flared in the Thakur's eyes. Sujata ji pulled at Sara's sleeve and whispered that it was time to leave.

The Thakur spoke with heat in his voice. He was close to losing his control : "And who the hell are you to advice me on what I should do for my family. We don't even know who you really are. You have not even seen my daughter and still you preach to me about civilization."

Sara stared back evenly as she saw the Thakurani suddenly turn away her face and a sob escape her lips. Sara stared at her curiously as she turned back to her and said in a voice choked with emotion: "You wish to know why our daughter does not wish to study? Do you really want to know? Wait here, let me show her to you!"

"No," commanded the Thakur, "don't defy me! You will not bring Neelu out". But, in a flash, the Thakurani was gone back into the recesses of the house. Within a few seconds she was back with a child in her arms. The child must have been about six or seven. A small sweet face with dark big eyes surrounded by black hair, peered at the strangers from the safety of her mother's embrace. Then the Thakurani, with tears in her eyes, held out the child for them to see. Sara drew in a sharp breath. The child's lower limbs ended at the knees. There was nothing below them. Some tragic genetic fault had robbed her of her feet. When the Thakurani lowered her to the floor, the little girl looked up at them and then pushed her self forward till she neared Sara.

Sara's heart missed a beat. She cursed herself for misunderstanding the situation. She had assumed that the family wished to keep their daughter uneducated for traditional archaic reasons. She should have known better when she knew that both the parents were educated. But in the heat of the exchange, she had talked of illiteracy and modern civilization, of things totally irrelevant to the parents of the poor girl, whose heart must have been breaking every day at the very sight of her. Once again Sara had committed the error of assuming the wrong reasons for situations she had no comprehension of. She bent forward and picked up the child and cuddling her in her arms, looked her straight in the face and asked her : "Neelu beti, would you like to come to school with me?"

The child was a soft, almost weightless, bundle of nervous fright, and she looked up at her with hesitation. She saw a kindly concerned face and a friendly smile, with no sign of the distaste she sometimes saw on the faces of rare visitors whenever they came. She saw too a bright wetness seep into Sara's eyes. She looked back at her parents standing behind her, who were observing her every move, her every expression. Finding no guidance or help from them, she turned back to Sara and, with fear and hesitation writ large on her small face, she asked: "You will be my teacher?"

"Yes, I will be your teacher; and you and I will learn things together".

"Then I will come", she said quietly, simply. Sara did not have the courage to look at her parents standing behind her; nor did she need to. For this was a victory she had won on her own strength and she owed nothing to the Thakur and the Thakurani. She clutched the little girl to herself and felt the strong beating of the precious heart within the small body, Suddenly her eyes filled with unexpected tears. A fool I am, she thought to herself, to feel so touched by this.

But she did not wish to leave with any bitterness on any side. "Look, I don't want you to think I have come to drag away your daughter, against your will. Of course, I know that without your consent, the child will not come. But please trust me, she will be looked after as my most prized possession. You can count on it, this is my word of honour."

She almost missed the look exchanged between the Thakur and the Thakurani. It was one of exultation, ecstatic happiness. They were stunned, rendered speechless and could only look at Sara with wild hope and faith.

“Teacher ji, we are overwhelmed. This is the first time she has ever talked to a stranger and the very first time that she has expressed the desire to go to a school. You have some magic in you. Surely you have captured her heart”

“As she has captured mine”, she replied while kissing the young girl still held in her arms. The little girl refused to be let down and finally had to be pried away by her mother who called out to somebody in the big house for tea and snacks. Things went on well after that. Sara took care to mention that the school would be a private school and that there would be fees for the child to pay and that children of all castes and communities would be welcome. These were matters of little importance to them for they were too caught up with the excitement that their child was finally going to a school where she would be taught and she would be in the company of other children, getting the chance to grow up as a normal child, that is as normal as she could possibly be.

It was a kind of omen. A harbinger of the positive response that she got in all the houses she visited in the course of the next few days. When she informed people that the Thakur’s daughter Neelu would also be attending school, there was an immediate response from most of the parents. She was looking for children in the age group five to eight and not older or younger. Her intention was to start Classes I and II and that was the right age bracket to get the children in. She made it clear that she would tolerate no nonsense of caste and social discrimination and only those families should send their children who had no misapprehensions about these matters.

In some houses she was made welcome with great fanfare as word had spread about the Mem from abroad who had once lived in Surpura and was now settling back in the village to do some good for all of them. In some of the poorer quarters, she had some problems convincing the parents of the girl that they would have to pay nominal fees for the education of their child. She knew in her heart that free education meant the value of the education imparted would get cheapened. No one can place a value on a thing obtained without paying a price for it. That is why she insisted that some fees be paid. Of course, she did not deny that it sure would help her in managing the school in a more qualitative manner.

But what was more important was that the children and their parents should feel they are getting good value for the money they pay as fees for their children. Was that the reason private schools all over were doing better than government schools where education was largely free? She asked this question to herself, not knowing that in the days to come, many questions on education and the task of imparting knowledge would keep rising to her mind, questions that would help develop and refine her comprehension of the brave new world of activity she was entering.

At the end of her weeklong campaign she had got assurances from about thirty families with children in the right age group that their wards would be sent when the school was opened. She had fixed the fifteenth of August as the day when the children would gather at her home for the first time. She realised that as the anniversary of the independence of India from British rule in 1947, this too would have a symbolic value. Would the inauguration of the school mark the beginning of independence for the female sex of Surpura from ignorance and superstition? That was too lofty a thought and Sara smiled ruefully for entertaining such grandiose ideas in her mind. But a beginning was being made and she was for the first time getting to be optimistic about her venture.

Mavelikara

8 August 1976

Dearest Mol,

We were thrilled to receive your letter today. Events have moved so fast for you that you must be breathless with the pace of things. Your account of your meeting with Giridhar took up all my attention and left me wondering as to where you will finally land up. Mol, I am sure that whatever you do, it will be the best that you can possibly do, for yourself and for others. Allow things to come to you, ponder over the consequences of what you intend to do and then do as your heart tells you. There can be no better answer to any problem.

Here, your Harish Chacha is just about the same. A couple of days ago, I heard a strain in his breathing and I had to call for the doctor in the middle of the night. Apparently the tube in his mouth has started to hurt his tonsils and his throat muscles and it had led to a spasm in his upper chest, which caused some stress in his condition.

Things are a little better today. So I am managing as best as I can and as the days pass I feel a greater serenity than I have ever felt before. It seems now that the purpose of my life is to serve Harish as best as I can, whether in good health or in bad. In the early days of his illness, when I keenly felt the grossness of the injustice perpetrated against me by a blind God, I would sometimes lift my face to the ceiling and scream silently. I was denied even the privilege of screaming loud to express my anger. But now, things have changed. Now I am sure that this too will pass one day and Harish would be freed from the terrible burden he so unknowingly bears now.

I am glad that Bhaiyya is so mature and considerate and helps me with the everyday tasks of the house. He is a sober young man, fully conscious of the responsibility that is now his, especially after your departure. Do not for a moment think that you have deserted me in my hour of need. In fact, part of the quiet peace I feel now is in knowing that you are on your way to your own life and that surely, you will find happiness soon enough. Now Bhaiyya wants to write.

With all my heart

Your Choti Maa

Hi there,

I can't believe that you would land up as a schoolteacher! Amazing! God help your students! Just joking you know that, don't you? All the very best for your new venture. You know that both of us are praying hard for you and all that the future holds in store.

Here I am preparing for my SSLC examinations and I hope that I get to somewhere near the kinds of grades that you were used to in school. If I don't do too well in the exams, maybe I shall join your school as a teacher. After all, I do know how to count till ten.

We all do miss you terribly and are looking forward to the time when you will have settled down and would get some leave to come home to Kerala. Maybe next summer?

Till then, all the best and good luck.

Yours affectionately.

Your Bhaiyya

The letter sent her into a blue mood for some time as she worried about Harish Chacha's condition. It cast a pall of gloom over her. She fretted once more about her decision to leave behind her Choti Maa and her Bhaiyya back at Kerala. The reasons why Choti Maa had insisted she leave were perfectly clear in her mind, but the doubts persisted. Her somber mood spoiled Jamna's evening too as her mistress hardly spoke to her and did not even compliment her on the new sabji she had prepared for her.

With her evening cup of tea, she went out into the darkened backyard where the stars were coming out. In the unpolluted air of the village, they were magnificent and lit the sky like a still scene from the fireworks. Under their gentle appraisal, she tried to learn the meaning of action and acceptance, of knowing what can be changed and what cannot and how despite the tears in her eyes she had to put up a brave front and try to make something of her own life, to find for herself her own destiny.

Slowly she returned to the world around her as Jamna was laying out the bed and getting ready for bedtime. She smiled at Jamna and told her that her dinner was excellent and that she may have appeared a little preoccupied because she was somewhat worried about things happening to some dear people she knew, from whom she had received a letter today.

Chanderpur

11 August 1976

My dear Sarasu,

Let me start with the main news of the week. Yesterday Lakshmi was delivered of a baby girl. She is a joy to behold and Lakshmi is very happy. Her husband was with her on the day at the hospital. So was I, and everything turned out all right. Maybe deep in her heart she would have liked to be the mother of a boy. I am sure my parents feel that way too. But a word from you to her would be sure to keep her smiling!

Your letters are a pleasure to read. Of course, your suggestion to have a medical check up camp there is quite all right with me. It looks as if my weekly visits to you will become formalised if these camps are held regularly. This would also give me a legitimate reason to meet you every week! Shantamma would also be glad to be there, as it would give her the chance to meet her sister.

By now the meetings with the Panchayat and the women of the village may be over. I am keen to know what exactly transpired. I am sure that when they see you and Sujata ji, who I understand has an awesome reputation, they would have no hesitation in sending their children over to you. They must be regarding you as either a nut case or a saviour! I hope it is the latter!

As for my parents and what they may be thinking of you, I guess we must leave that to the future and see how things turn out. I have a great belief in providence and the Almighty and I have no doubts that things will turn out to our mutual satisfaction. Don't let it worry you. In the meanwhile, I once again pray for the success of your venture.

Looking forward to meeting you soon. Do arrange to have the check up camp fixed at about eleven in the morning of next Sunday. You may like to inform the Sarpanch about this program so that he is aware of developments.

Yours sincerely,

Giridhar

She needed to make a quick trip to Chanderpur to congratulate Lakshmi and bestow a Bhabhi's blessings on the little one. She laughed out loud to think what kind of a sister-in-law she had turned out to be. Did anyone recognize her as a Bhabhi, she wondered. A thought struck her suddenly with some force. Of course, some of the people who had known her family, like Agarwal ji or the Sarpanch would have remembered that she had been married as a child to a family in Chanderpur. Maybe some of them would have even attended the marriage ceremony.

Then why was it that no one mentioned anything at all to her? Why was there no expression of curiosity as to who or what her husband was and where he was working or why he had disappeared? When Giridhar had come, she had not taken the trouble to introduce him as the young boy she had married in a ceremony when both of them had been children. But surely, there would have been some who made the connection between Surpura and Chanderpur. There was an inclination within her to decide the issue once and for all and end the dilemma that she had been facing now for so many years. Someone long ago in a book she had loved had said: "Tomorrow is another day." She remembered too the words she had learnt by heart in her Shakespeare class: Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time. How many tomorrows would she have to go through before she reached her destination? She longed to arrive rather than to travel. Whoever wrote to the contrary did not know what it was to be on a journey with no end.

School begins

The formalities of the admission procedures were well under way. Sujata ji and Philomena worked hard to obtain and file away all the necessary papers and the certificates in order. Sara had instructed that each child should have a separate file. This would help the school to maintain her records and to advise the parents of the kind of progress their child was making.

The fifteenth of August, when the school would formally open, was just a few days away. From the very next day there would be regular classes. In the meanwhile, the carpenter was being urged to complete his work very, very quickly so that the desks and the chairs would be ready by then. The school syllabus made available from the nearby government school was scrutinized very carefully by Sujata ji and Sara and with the combination of the former's experience and the latter's innovativeness, a new and more practical syllabus was finalised, which would include all knowledge necessary for children of that age as also a value system to be imbibed by the students. The development of the child's personality would receive paramount importance in Sara's school.

But Sara had to take half a day off to go see Lakshmi and the new arrival. She was glad for her sister-in-law, as it were, though the word signifying that relationship would fall off her tongue only with some strangeness. She left early, about seven in the morning, by a bus that would take her to Chanderpur. She intended to be back by the late evening so as to catch up on all the pending work before the school actually started to function.

It was a hot and tiresome journey and it was almost ten in the morning by the time she reached Chanderpur. When she walked up the steps to Giridhar's house, she felt the same excitement rise once more. She would be glad to see him again and take counsel from him. Giridhar himself responded to the doorbell. He was dressed in the white coat of a doctor with the stethoscope hanging around his neck and he was just about to leave for the clinic. He was pleasantly surprised to see Sara but was concerned whether there was anything the matter that had prompted her to come here so suddenly. Sara replied that she could not stay away after hearing the news of the arrival of Lakshmi's baby. After all the infant was Giridhar's niece!

Giridhar's face lit up and he ushered her in. He called out to his mother and father and then took her into the bedroom where Lakshmi was feeding the tiny scrap of life that had sprung from her body. Lakshmi herself looked a little tired, but that didn't prevent the glow from reaching her cheeks. The happiness suffusing her face when she saw Sara was a delight to behold.

"Oh Bhabhi, how nice of you to come. Now my happiness is complete", she said with a large smile suffusing her face. She made space for Sara to sit on the bed and she proudly displayed the little one soundly sleeping on the cot. Sara tickled the baby under the chin and smiled into Lakshmi's face. There was so much undiluted joy in the young mother's expressions that it made Sara think once again of how wonderful life could be, if one learnt to enjoy the simple things of life with no complications, with only happy acceptance. Blessed are the simple at heart, for their joy is endless.

As she tickled the infant under its chin, she was surprised to find her thumb being grasped in its tiny fingers and pulled into its wet lips where it was sucked at by toothless gums. A thrill ran through her body and she was amazed at the feelings that this slip of a baby could evoke in her. She smiled back at Lakshmi who was watching her reactions. She discreetly placed the traditional gift of the envelope of money next to the sleeping baby's head, murmuring that this was just a small something for the baby for the moment. She would have a better gift when Lakshmi was fully recovered.

Lakshmi's husband had gone to the doctor to seek advice on her return to health and as to the kind of diet that she should take. Old home remedies maintained that she should for the next forty days consume a lot of ghee and a certain kind of ladoos to tighten her innards and make her fully normal again. Her mother was quite keen about this kind of a treatment, insisting that she had herself followed the same regimen when her two children had been born. But Giridhar's modern counsel had prevailed and the gynecologist who was known to Giridhar had agreed to help in the preparation of a complete balanced diet to help Lakshmi get back on her feet again.

Then Sara went in to pay her respects to Giridhar's mother. Mata ji was in the kitchen preparing a cup of tea for her. She bent low and touched her feet, amazed that she was able to do an act such as this which would have seemed so artificial and contrived just a month ago. But now, it did not seem too much out of the normal. It was part of her tradition, the tradition that she had put on hold for about a dozen years of her life. Mata ji was pleased too: "Jeete raho, beti; it is so nice that you could come and see Lakshmi."

Ever since her last visit, Sara had been mulling over the fact that Giridhar's parents may not have been too pleased to see her walk in one day suddenly out of nowhere, as if she were restarting her life with Giridhar all over again. By this time, they may have come to know that Sara was still in the process of thinking things over and that a final commitment was still in the making, if at all. Her unexplained appearance had put them into sudden tension. On that day when she had appeared out of nowhere, Giridhar's father had voiced his fears. Indeed they were not sure at all as to what Sara may have been upto all the years that she was away. Her letter to Giridhar had been summarized for them by him and he had told them of the series of event that had taken her away from the village and the compulsions that had made her return after all these years. Giridhar had pleaded with them to let her be for some time and that together they would sort out all their problems.

Sara's last letter had assuaged their fears quite a bit. They did understand that after spending so many years abroad, the influence of the west would take some time to die out. Hopefully, they thought, it would not be long before traditional Indian values replaced them. They could barely understand Sara's arguments about the time and space she required to arrive at a conclusion to this long saga been going on for some years now. Be that as it may, they were willing to abide by Giridhar's advice to them, for they had ample trust in his wisdom and perceptions.

However, the heart still refused to accept and had become critical and judgmental with the passing of the years. What more was there to be said. The matter was now out of their hands and it was for Giridhar to come to whatever decision he wanted to. Though parents, they felt that they had no role in the situation. If Giridhar was content in having waited for so long, and if he were content in further waiting for the possibility of Sara's final return to him, that is if at all she chose to return, then so be it.

Sara also enquired about Giridhar's father and when she was told that he had gone out for a couple of hours to the home of a distant friend to pay his condolences for a bereavement in the family, she was quite glad, in fact. She knew she had to win the affection and respect of both the parents, not because she did indeed want to re-establish the old relationship of daughter-in-law to her parents-in-law, but because she was uncomfortable with strained personal relationships of any kind. While she was aware that sometimes things could turn rather rough when the son's affections became the battle ground between two women, she was sure that this household believed in love and affection between the members of the family. So she was determined to make an effort to win over the kindly Bhanukumari and then through her, at least the cautious affection of Chatter Singh ji.

Giridhar was a little rushed for time. Sarasu was welcome to come to the clinic if she so wanted, he said, but if not and she preferred to sit at home and chat with the ladies, then that would be ok too. He would try to come home a little early to be with her today. In any case, he was planning to come over to Surpura in a few days time for the medical camp that Sarasu had asked for. So they would be able to talk over anything that she wanted to discuss even on the next day. With that he rushed out to his trusty jeep and was off. There was an awkward silence after he left and it was up to Sarasu to start the conversation again. Lakshmi excused herself saying she needed to sleep for a couple of hours for the baby had kept her awake for most of the time.

It was an opportune moment for some bridges to be mended. Sarasu sat with the handsome lady and talked about her life with Harish Chacha and how he had won her heart by giving her the kind of love and affection that, though not the equal of what she would have got from her natural parents, was, nevertheless, matchless for the two of them were there when she needed them most. She talked of life in England and the education she had received and the love that Choti Maa and Bhaiyya lavished on her and how she had come to accept them as her very own family. She spoke too of the headlong flight from across the seas to the little village of her foster mother where she had tried to find for herself some fragments of the very extraordinary happiness she had lost when, one very ordinary morning, her Chacha had crashed to the floor from the breakfast table in the seaside flat some years ago.

Bhanukumari sat and listened to the young woman pour out her life story in great gulps of words, of breath held within the chest and then expelled slowly, in long exhalations, words where she stammered and hesitated and paused in the telling of her story. Sarasu found it difficult to express the truth of her plight to someone who was virtually a stranger, but she knew she had to, that today she must try to justify her ways to this woman, or else, whatever the outcome of her relationship with Giridhar, she would forever be regarded as an absconding bride who had deserted her husband for the greater pleasures of a material world. And had not bothered to explain the reasons for doing so.

And so she narrated the long tale and felt again the torments of a displaced childhood and the trauma of the bereavement that had shattered her life and how a stranger's family had given her refuge and the strength to find herself again. She bled herself dry in the telling, and the heart of Bhanukumari melted and flowed and she embraced the young woman who was so much

now a part of her life. How could Bhanukumari have judged Sara without knowing the nature of the crime committed. There was a relief that Sarasu felt in her heart and there was a lightening of a load that Bhanukumari had been carrying for these many years and there were smiles and happiness.

Sarasu also talked about her new project for the school and how she had found inspiration for the work from the example that Giridhar had set. She described in detail about the house that was now turning into a school and the finances for the project, her interaction with the friendly Sarpanch and then with the Thakur and the Thakurani while winning the affection and loyalty of the little Neelu. Giridhar's offer to come and hold a medical camp at Surpura and how that would help her in establishing her position in the village was of special interest to Bhanukumari. She wished the young woman all the best in her venture. Much as she had understood the intense problems that Sarasu had gone through, the details of the efforts to get this project moving was even more telling. She tried to understand Sarasu's need to find an identity for herself, and that more than anything made her feel the poor girl was doing her best to get her orientation right, deprived as she was of the roots that would have made Surpura the corner stone of her life.

When Sarasu went back to Lakshmi's room to check up on her again, the elderly lady sat back in her chair, trying her best to get ground under her feet to settle. Bhanukumari decided to tell her husband everything when he returned. It was essential that his mind be cleared from all the black thoughts that had been dismally bothering him ever since Sarasu had returned. That Sarasu had gone through a baptism of fire was now clear, but the question still remained, though. Now that Sarasu was back, what prevented her from taking up once again her role as the bahu of the household, her rightful place besides Giridhar?

In Lakshmi's room, Sarasu waited for some time reclining on a sofa and watching the sleeping child and the drowsy Lakshmi nodding off on the bed. Lakshmi was happy to have her Bhabhi in the room, sort of watching over her as it were. It was a restful time, and the darkened room brought peace and a fine sense of domestic bliss to the three of them. Sara was reminded of the days when she had been with her foster parents in the room overlooking the sea at Brighton or when Bhaiyya and she had played together quietly in the corner of the room next to the window, under strict directions not to make any sounds as Harish Chacha and Choti Maa were taking their after noon nap.

In this quiet room of blissful peace, with the soft light streaming in through the curtains, she lay for some time in a simple and gentle mood. And then within the span of ten minutes everybody was back. First came Giridhar back in his jeep. Then, it was Chatter Singh ji, after paying his condolences to his friend. And immediately later, Sanjay, Lakshmi's husband with a sheaf of papers that he had brought over from the doctor. They were indeed surprised and quite taken aback to see her. Sarasu was quite embarrassed to have been found in Lakshmi's room reclining on the sofa. Sanjay had not met Sarasu before, though he did indeed know about her well enough.

"Lakshmi has told me so much about you," he spluttered and then caught himself and went a little bit stiff. He was not sure of the protocol to be followed with regard to the bahu of the house who had not come home in the last twelve years.

"I know. You hardly know me and its no wonder you were quite taken aback when you saw me here I am sorry I intruded into the privacy of your bedroom. I was enthralled in simply watching the little baby and Lakshmi sleeping here They looked such a picture of joy and happiness that I could spend hours just being with them."

Sanjay was mollified and then quite happy to know his wife and baby had been so much admired. Lakshmi mentioned about the envelope that Sarasu had given her while Sarasu insisted that this was but a token of the formal meeting after childbirth. She would have something better and more substantial later. By then, Giridhar came in and introduced Sanjay once again to Sarasu, by which time it became clear to him that the two had already been introduced. Chatter Singh ji also came into the room and asked Sarasu how she'd been. It seemed to Sarasu that Bhanukumari might already have apprised him, in a very abbreviated form, a summary of the story she had been told by her bahu. There was a distinctly more friendly expression on his face. And then, they were being called in for lunch.

After lunch, Giridhar insisted that he could drop Sarasu back at Surpura rather than her going all the tiresome way back by bus. But she reminded him that in any case he had to be back at Surpura himself after a couple of days for the medical camp that had been promised. So it was decided that she would be dropped at the bus stop to catch the bus due to leave at about 3.30 in the evening. And so it was arranged. She left in the bus with a couple of long backward glances at Giridhar as he got on to his jeep and drove back to the clinic. Sara was sure that there would be much debate at the dinner table in Giridhar's house that evening. Relationships would be assessed and reassessed and some form of compromises would be worked out, especially in the light of the firm, almost obdurate, stand taken by Giridhar that he would wait and see what happens. "Let us

not force the girl into a direction that she may not want to travel. As for me, I am content in the sure knowledge that everything is all right and that things will turn out fine for all of us.”

Giridhar’s visit for the medical camp a couple of days later was a great time for the villagers. Sarasu had given adequate notice to the people around and to the Panchayat. By the time he arrived in his jeep quite early in the morning, with Shantamma in tow, there were a good number of people waiting to see the doctor. Giridhar was a little taken aback by their number and was a little uncertain whether he had the enough drugs and facilities to check all the patients. He wondered, as he had done so many times before, as to why there was such lack of faith in government hospitals. Surpura was a smaller village than even Chanderpur and there was only a dispensary with a nurse in charge. Obviously, she could not manage patients who may have had any kind of serious problems. So, when news spread of the free medical camp, supervised by a qualified doctor, there were enough takers. About forty people were waiting in a queue for him as he stepped out of the jeep.

Sara had opened up a side room of her house for the examination of the patients where Shantamma laid out her kit and put up a small white curtain to offer some privacy to the patients. Giridhar was soon on the job. He talked to them patiently and listened to their woes and prescribed medicines where he did not have them in his stock and freely distributed those he had brought with him. In talking to them, he employed his natural style that Sara had seen used with such efficacy some time ago in Chanderpur.

His knowledge of the dialect he used with devastating effect, which elicited a smile even from dour old women who complained to him of the usual problems associated with age and weary bones. They cackled amongst themselves as they walked away, quite happy with the new doctor and his treatment. In a way, this was also a turning point for Sara, as the people came to associate her with the medical camp. It had a demonstration effect on the school project too. They saw the genuineness of the young woman. Her credibility and integrity was doubled with the opening of this temporary clinic. It was over in about one and a half hours and as the patients walked away there was a genuine sense of satisfaction amongst them.

When Giridhar left, he was exhausted, but happy too. He was at his happiest when he was doing the job he liked best and his day had been very exciting. He had met new people and had helped in reducing their problems as best as he could. Sara was a little wary on how to broach to him the matter of the money he spent in the medicines that had been distributed. But she thought that it would be prudent to do so and she offered to pay him for the same. Giridhar was taken aback for a moment, and then waved his hand and said that she should not bother her head with such trivial matters when she was in the midst of such a big project as establishing the school. Then, after a cup of hot tea and with a smile on his face, he was off, back to his Chanderpur village while Sara was left at Surpura with the image of this knight in shining armour, whom just a few days ago she had so reluctantly and so fearfully agreed to meet so as to resolve the matter agitating her.

It seemed to her that the questions burning within had stopped their growling and muttering and were turning into choices that were easier to understand and accept. Somewhere in the midst of all these pleasant thoughts, she was keenly aware that the face of Jaggu, once so well known and loved, was getting fainter, more indistinct with the passage of time. The shoe seems to be on the other foot now, she muttered to herself.

I am sorry Jaggu, but there are things that I have to do here in this village where I grew up, where once I had found my happiness and lost it. I have to find my feet now. After all, I never promised you that I would be truthful and dedicated for you and you alone, Jaggu, and if I am being inconsiderate and cruel and blind and selfish, it is because of these past days which have opened my eyes more than the past dozen years have. A few days more, Jaggu, and then I will have to open my heart to you and tell you of the things that I have done, and intend to do, knowing full well that you can never be a part of this strange life that I am now living. And so, Jaggu, dear heart, think well of me while I gather the courage to speak the truth.

15th of August is a day off for all of the country: in offices and schools, it begins with the unfurling of the flag and the singing of the national anthem. It was the month of August in 1976. Across the country, the trains ran on time, officers and staff came for their duties in regular punctuality and there was an urgency to perform or face the music. Talk less, work more was the strident slogan that effectively muzzled all forms of protest and forced the pace of work in virtually all government offices. If this were all that the emergency meant, the people would have been glad. An impotent bureaucracy tied hand and foot would suit most people; politicians because they were now free from babus and their interfering rules and regulations meant to trip them up, and common country folk for they knew the damage that government could cause by minions ensuring that their routine papers do not move.

But it went deeper than that. There was a particular agenda high on the wish-list the Government had formulated for the country. The hordes of medical staff that scoured the villages to grab and seize and chase and then undertake on unwilling citizens quick sterilization operations, regarded as brutal acts of emasculation, set the land boiling under an icy calm. The

average illiterate villager would tolerate virtually any insult, but hit him below the belt, under the dhoti, and he would hit back. The day of the underdog would arrive soon, but for the moment, on this the 29th anniversary of the country's independence, today it was all honour and patriotism as the Sarpanch unfurled the flag in the new school building premises.

The children were all there, twenty eight of them in line for the singing of the national anthem which immediately followed. Neelu was there too, at the head of the line for the Class II students. She was sitting on a small stool placed specially for her, while her parents, guests of honour, sat in the front row with the other fathers and mothers on a large dhari spread out in front of Sarasu's old home.

Apart from the Sarpanch, who sat on a raised cushion in front of the people, there were also the ward panchas and some others whom she had come to know in the past few days, who had been motivated enough to come and see the inauguration of the new school. Towards the side of the main seating arrangement, sat Sarasu and Sujata ji and Philomena and, of course, Draupadi Mausi ji. People stared at Giridhar who had made a surprise visit in the morning. Most of them wondered who this personable young man was, though some of the women who had been examined by him in the medical camp a few days earlier, knew he was the doctor from the Chanderpur village, helping Sarasu in her new project.

Among the children, there were some notables. Leela, the eager-to-please, unctuous and energetic daughter of the Junior Engineer who had helped her with the electricity connection; Parvathi, the future flirt and the only daughter of the money lender, looking very self conscious in her new dress and preening herself before the crowd; Shobha with the serious mien, the village storekeeper's child and most likely to succeed; Yashoda, the light-eyed daughter of the village barber, full of trepidation and worry; Hamida, the only Muslim girl in the new school whose father had a small silver and jewellery shop much in demand among the women; then there was the rotund Savitri, daughter of the vaid, who lived for food and food alone; there was also the ever smiling Paro, daughter of one of the ward panchas who represented one of the depressed castes on the Panchayat.

They all sat in a bunch, talking and whispering and giggling. They had all met each other the previous evening as the formalities of the admission were being completed by Sarasu and Sujata ji. Soon friendships would be formed that would last a lifetime. It was an occasion for great excitement and merriment. They were all in the age group five to eight and there was homogeneity within their gentle personalities that caste and economic status had not yet corrupted.

Sarasu got up to say a few words that received the fullest attention of all gathered there. They did not now regard her as a rank outsider, for she was after all the daughter of the village, who had come back to do some good for the people around. They seemed to realise that the fees they would be giving the school would only meet the expenses in part and that much of the money Sarasu put in could not be really recovered. So Sarasu was giving more than taking and that was significant enough for them to realise that here was somebody who cared, who was set upon doing a noble task for them and their children. She then spoke of the cooperation that the Panchayat had given her. She sang praises of the other officials who had helped in seeing that the wherewithal for the school's functioning was provided for. She thanked the people of the village for trusting her with their precious children and promised them she would be doing her very best to see they get a good quality education to equip them for the world outside the village. Women have an equal role to play along with the men and she would do her mite to ensure that these children find their role in life with dignity.

There was a spattering of applause from the crowd. Then Sujata ji was getting up to thank the guests for their presence and was inviting them all to ladoos and tea. It was a small function quickly over and marked the beginning of an enterprise that would transform the lives of Sarasu and those of the village around her. It would find expression in the changed and confident faces of the women who emerged from behind the veil in the village of Surpura. And the best part was that the change was so gradual and spread over the years that stretched into the future that none of the men even noticed the quiet change that had turned their girls and young women from domesticated creatures to individuals and personalities in their own rights.

School grows

Chanderpur
16 August 1976

My dear Sarasu,

I am sending you this letter after getting back here, full of the scenes of the inauguration of your school in my mind. It was a wonderful programme and I am really so very proud of what you are doing out there. I am positive that all your dreams will come true. You know, I am sure that God will grant all the strength and courage to cross over the many obstacles that you may face in the establishment of your school project.

My experience with the medical cases in Surpura was interesting. It revealed to me the obvious fact that the size and development of the habitation defines the awareness of the patient to medical realities. In Chanderpur, people have some more knowledge of medical matters, obviously because it is a bigger and more developed place than Surpura. Out there, as I was examining the patients, it was clear that most of them had no knowledge of basic health hygiene and preventive medicine. I am sure that your efforts at educating the girls will go a long way in developing their general awareness of such medical matters. You know you can count on me to be there to have further medical examination camps when you do require them.

Here Lakshmi is fine and fully recovered from the trauma of labour and childbirth. There is a definite change in Pita ji and Mata ji and the way they now regard you. I guess your visit brought about a change in them, which is remarkable. They have also noted the success of your venture there and they are starting to feel quite proud and happy about your work.

Bye then: I hope to meet you soon on some pretext or the other!

Yours truly,

Giridhar

Time passed, as it must. The succession of day by night, and then by day again. The linear unfolding of the moments of one's life. The ecstasy of a day spent in work. At day's end, the joyful exhaustion of honest labour. Plans made, achieved, sometimes going awry. The need to be perfect, to achieve the best. Children growing up. The manifestation of a plan once dimly seen, now clearly visible. Life itself, spooling out in its endless momentum.

It had come to a state of affairs when Sara and Giridhar would meet each other not less than once a week and it was on one of her quick visits to Chanderpur that they had once again gone to the lake overlooking the little temple and had sat there in the evening twilight. They had much to talk about, mainly about each other's work and how things could be improved. Sara's experience with the now rapidly expanding school gave her new insights as to what could be done to get the children of the animal skimmers of Chanderpur into schools. Giridhar discussed about how his work was now expanding to small habitations of other communities and castes, where people were reaching out to him now that his work was getting to be known and appreciated. He was fearful that he may not be able to manage all this work on his own and would soon require to take on a few assistants.

It was at this point that Sara drew his attention to something he had written in one of his letters to her some time ago. She had read it, observed the uniqueness of it and had determined that she would ask him about it the next time they met. In the letter, Giridhar had expressed his confidence in God and that he was sure He would grant her all the strength to get over her problems. Sara wondered about this sort of faith. Was it just a casual expression of his or did he actually mean it?

Giridhar paused to look at her with expressive eyes suddenly gone deeply introspective. He waited for the words to come to him and then he said, "My belief in God? Sarasu, my belief in God is total, complete and unshakeable. I feel the divine presence all round me, at every moment of my life and I cannot think of a single minute of my conscious adult life when I have had a moment of doubt or disbelief. Look around you, don't you see His presence, His voice, His imprint in everything around, in every moment of the day and night. How do you think I have reached this moment of my life without His help and His guidance? Why should I, the son of an ordinary farmer's family decide to study and take up a doctor's profession and try to do something for people I have never known until now? Why did I have the strength of purpose and courage to face the prospect of your going away and still have the faith to know, despite the questions that almost shattered me, to really know in my heart, that you would be back here to be with me?"

“And Sarasu, why do you think you came back to me, after a dozen years spent in a foreign land, amidst all the prosperity and wealth of that place, when there was nothing that could have interested you in this dry, muddy village in the middle of the desert. You must be blind, Sarasu, if you do not feel God’s guiding hand that brought you here to me. For I can see no other explanation. If you think that you came here of your own free will to try and explain to me why you cannot stay here, then you must surely know by now that you were mistaken. Not only did you come, not only was your resistance removed, but you were guided to stay on and take up the most important work of your life here in this small back of the beyond village of Rajasthan. You have found your vocation, Sarasu, your life, your true place under the sun. I suggest you think about it, seriously, without biases or notions or recourse to intellectual thought. Just open your mind and your heart and let the truth come in. Then you will know that you are not, cannot be, alone. You will know what true joy and ecstasy in the complete surrender to God really is all about.”

These were sobering words, words to ponder on and many a time in the years ahead she would think about them. How the quiet confidence and self assurance that Giridhar wore like a second skin, came out of that unshakeable, rock steady faith in divine providence that guided his life and his destiny. How wonderfully calming and peaceful it would be to leave things to the wisdom of a greater intelligence and to take life as it comes, step by step, day by day. She shook her head ruefully at the thoughts flying around in her head. She had often, in the long ago days gone by, expressed to herself and, she remembered, to friends at school and at college, her views about free will, and agnosticism and individual choice and freedom. Had she been foolish and ignorant to be so self certain in her beliefs when there was a universe outside which she knew nothing about?

As for the school, it grew from strength to strength. The impact that Sara had had on her students was astounding. Her greatest asset was her credibility. She belonged to the village and had lived here for the first nine years of her life. And now she was a role model for the young girls in her school who believed that they could go places too if they were educated and intelligent and able to stand on their own two feet.

Within a year or two, girls from the neighboring villages were clamoring to get admitted at the Ram Chander Gauri Devi School for Girls at Surpura. Her heart lifted each time she saw her parents’ names up on the board over the gates of the school as the children streamed in for the morning. She had to make a rule to the effect that her first priority was for the girls of Surpura and, if there were any seats still left over, she would consider giving them to girls from other villages. With each passing year, she would increase her classes by one higher level. Students from Class I would go into Class II and students from Class II would get promoted to Class III, which was started in the very next year. She would soon require space for more classes and was contemplating hiring another building nearby.

As for money to run the school, the revenues she got as fees from the students were not enough to pay for all the expenses. However, the interest she got from the funds that had been accruing into her account from the land Agarwal ji had been tending to for all the years of her absence, added to the capital that Agarwal ji now gave her as purchase cost for her land, was quite sufficient. Fatima’s gifts in the form of equipment for the school were a great relief. She kept insisting that Sara’s salary as General Manager in her company would be sent to her in perpetuity, although Sara kept protesting that she was no longer an employee of the company, that there was really no need to send her any money on that account. But she knew how violent Fatima could get when irritated and she preferred to keep quiet rather than raise her hackles.

A strange thing happened to her once, which did substantially help her in the financial management of her school. One day the postman delivered to her a brown cardboard box, which had the postmark of some place in north Kerala. She wondered if it could be some teaching material for the training of teachers. Her astonishment knew no end when she opened it and found large wads of money, packed away into plastic envelopes, which when counted, added upto a princely amount of one lakh rupees. She was stunned when she could find no forwarding letter or explanation accompanying the packet. This was a completely anonymous donation from some unknown admirer or friend and who that could be, she could not guess.

It was a mystery that remained unsolved forever. Sara was quite wary about the use of unaccounted money and confided in Giridhar about what she should do with it. He advised her to inform the local government authorities and request them for permission to use the amount for the purposes of the development of the school building. Although the letter was briefly acknowledged, there was no real response for from them. The money deposited into the school account gradually got merged with the rest of the school finances and became part of the corpus of funds with which the school was managed. There were no later questions from any government office, though Sara used to often wonder as to the identity of the real donor.

School was exhilarating. In the early days, she had to initially make an effort to grab the attention of the girls. Unused to attending the classes and disinclined to sit in one spot for some hours together, they had to be carefully brought into the line of discipline by employing all devices such as dance and song and story telling and even a sharp word now and then. But within a couple of weeks the girls were all attention.

Sujata ji came to respect the radically different methods that Sara employed to keep the children hanging on to her every word. She stood by Sara through all the teething troubles that they went through. She had a good handle on matters of village caste politics that could have created bad blood between the students, perhaps on the grounds of pedigree or money, or some other trivial illogical reason. With timely advice to Sara, she was able to defuse some tense situations between certain children before they became too big to handle. Sara made it clear that within the school every child would be treated alike, would be given the same privileges or deterrents and that her assessment of the performance of the child would be solely on the basis of the child's excellence in class.

On one occasion, she had to intervene in a scrap where the fair skinned daughter of a Brahmin family had an altercation with the dark skinned child of a family belonging to a supposedly backward caste. Sara's sharp intervention and a stinging smack on the face of the former shocked the class into silence. She talked at length about her family of children and how each child was irreplaceable to its own parents despite variation in colour or beauty. And that for her, each child was precious and unique. She then called over the two children and hugged them to herself in a long embrace and consoled them both and made them hush their tears and prodded them towards each other to make up and be friends again.

She had to shuttle between the rooms of the classes as they went through the various subjects that they had to cover. Sara was clear that the syllabus could not be so very regimented. There had to be variety and diversity and she had to show continuing ingenuity to keep the interest from flagging. The alphabets in both Hindi and English, the numbers, the joining together of letters, these were the first exploratory steps of the young girls into the delightful, wonderful world of knowledge. Sujata was the firm foundation on which the school rested. Her age and maturity, her experience, her deep commitment to the imparting of knowledge, her support and indeed, sometimes her sharp criticism of Sara when she tended to be too revolutionary when discussing teaching methods – all this and more were responsible for the school's excellent functioning.

Philomena gave her able support and took up much of the load from her often suddenly weary shoulders. Badami and Jamna helped in the house and the school and stood around, especially during the noon break when the children created such a ruckus by running around in a wild melee, that it often brought on a headache for both Philomena and Sara. Jamna would sometimes join in the game of catch-catch and was a great favorite with the children. Apparently her troubled relationship with her husband was clearing up. Now that he knew she had a settled job which gave her money and stability, he was willing to get back into a harmonious marital relationship with her. Sujata's dog, which sometimes she used to bring along, ran with the children as they gamboled during the lunch break, excitedly fetching the ball back for them. His life too had turned quite interesting with the new school and the afternoon break.

As for the children, as in every class, there were some who were exceptionally bright and gifted. Neelu had become everybody's darling. She was loved and cared for as nobody else was. The children would always ensure that her needs were looked after and even when she had to visit the washroom, in case Jamna was not around, one of the children would carry her over and help her out. Her parents used to come with her sometimes in the morning and wait for the afternoon bell to take Neelu back home. Whenever possible, Sara would come out and greet them. There was a smile of great happiness and gratitude on their faces when they saw how happy their daughter was.

Neelu had displayed her talent for drawing. She had a natural sense of perspective and colour and with her native creativity, she used the crayons to telling effect. She used line and form with contrasting colours to sketch some of her classmates and even her Sarasu Mem. Sarasu had her own drawing laminated and hung up in her own room. Some of Neelu's better drawings had been put upon the classroom walls and each time the Thakur and the Thakurani saw them, their chests would fill with pride, their eyes shining with bright tears of joy. The old Bentley would come puffing up the slope each morning and wait in the shade of the tree at the rear of the school till after classes to take back its precious burden to the Thakur's house. There was a lightening of mood between the Thakur and the people of the village. Now for the first time, his tall figure could be seen in community functions, marriages and the like. He was once again mixing with the people in their ordinary day-to-day events and was becoming quite human and likeable again. The Thakurani had a glow on her face, and she often used to bring along the beaming Neelu for these social occasions.

As for Leela, she was all over the class most of the time. When questions were asked, her hand was the first to be raised. Sometimes her eagerness was a little nerve wracking, but Sara smiled it off with a remark that she should let the other children too get a chance at answering the questions. The quiet and confident Shobha was, in terms of academic brilliance, easily the brightest in the school and well on top of the class. Savitri's lunch packet was the center of attraction each day. She used to stuff it with ladoos and sweets and at lunch break the children would go into a flurry to get their hands on to it. Yashoda bit her fingernails in worry and agitation whenever she had to tackle a question. She knew her answers but the ever-present doubts in her mind used to destroy her confidence and make her commit unnecessary errors. Sara had to take her aside and talk to her in quiet reassuring tones until she was able to bring back a smile to her face. Hamida and Paro became great pals. They lived in the same alley in the village and used to come to, and return from, the school together. They became inseparable from the first week onwards and were affectionately referred to as the twins.

In time the school developed a unique personality that could not be matched by any government school in the vicinity. It became obvious that Sara's experiment in personality development of the girl child was paying off. A couple of teachers from the boys' school in the village used to come over to observe for themselves the teaching techniques that Sara and Sujata ji were employing for their students. The beginning was very good. The year brought in kudos from the parents of the children who found remarkable changes in their wards in terms of brightness and involvement.

They had nothing but praise for Sarasu Mem, as all those who came into contact with her fondly called her. It was, of course, an indication of the fact that they still regarded her as a Memsaheb more than a mere teacher. Sara did not mind the appellation, so long as they did not treat her as a Memsaheb! There was something distancing and alienating in that particular term. It was a name given to the wives of British officers who used to live in India in colonial days. Or to their brown-skinned counterparts in free India! But she realised it was applied to her only because of her foreign sojourn for so many years and because she had a slight foreign accent when she spoke Hindi. Of course, her twang was lessening each day as she got used to the nuances of Hindi and, indeed, the dialect of the local population. Before long she would be able to swear in the local lingo!

Sara's relationship with Giridhar's family had reached a stage where, whenever she went to Chanderpur, she was welcomed with smiling faces and joyful embrace. His parents had long ago reconciled themselves to the fact that Sarasu could never be the shy, bashful bride hiding behind her pallu. She had her own personality and she had a vocation in life and she was pursuing her dream of transformation of the women in her village with all the commitment and dedication that she could summon up. The increasing closeness and togetherness that they saw growing between Giridhar and Sarasu gladdened their hearts. Although they would have loved to have her stay with them in Chanderpur, they realised too, a little wistfully that they would have to wait for that to happen. But happen it would, of that they were now certain.

One of the things Sara missed in the village was books. She finally asked Fatima to contribute a small share of her munificence in the form of books for the school library rather than play and nursery material, which she had sent in such abundance. The hint was more than enough for Fatima. In the next dispatch she sent enough children's books to fill a small almirah.

Browsing through the books one late evening, she happened to glance through an encyclopedia, which gave useful information on virtually any subject under the sun. Her eye caught the name Saraswati and immediately, her interest was pricked. She read the small descriptive paragraph with growing fascination. It said that Saraswati, the lost Rig Vedic River is believed to have drained the north and northwest region of India, including a part of Rajasthan in ancient times, supporting a large number of settlements. The Rig Veda, the most ancient of the four Vedas, describes Saraswati as a mighty river with many tributaries, carrying the waters of perennial and seasonal rivers. It further stated that some tectonic movements might have forced the Saraswati to dry up in a period spread over a few hundred years possibly between 2000 and 1500 BC. It is probable that desertification of Rajasthan would have taken place at that time. Analysis of data supports this hypothesis regarding the course of the 'lost' Saraswati.

Reading down the page, she came across yet another reference to Saraswati, as the goddess of learning. Of course she knew that, for as a child she had questioned her Maa about it. But from the book she now learnt that the very same 'lost river', whose name actually means "the one who flows", is really the same diety worshipped as the goddess of learning. Saraswati, is the river of knowledge, she read, which flows in the highest heavens of Brahma, and descends into our minds through the doors of learning that we open through self-effort. She is worshipped by all students and grants wisdom, knowledge, creativity and intuition for the flowering of minds and refinement of character. She dispels ignorance and inner darkness through her grace. Even gods worship her for developing proficiency in different fields.

As she put away the book, Sara was both struck by the aptness of the simile, though she immediately condemned herself for sounding so pompous. Saraswati who had been born in Surapura so many years ago and who had disappeared like the lost river was now back to spread learning and knowledge. The moment she thought about this metaphor as applied to her own life, she muttered to herself, and said, "My God, how idiotic and arrogant could I possibly be?" She cursed herself for such grandiose thought, but the imagery kept coming back to her again and again. She had to exercise strong will power to get the thought out of her mind.

No lost river or goddess of learning for me, she smiled, and indeed I would look ridiculous sitting on a swan with a veena in my hand. She tried to draw her mind away from these thoughts, but then she fancied upon a better simile. She was Sarasu now, not even Sara: Sarasu, the repatriate. Not Saraswati, the lost river or the educated goddess, she was Sarasu, the mustard plant that her father had grown on his dark brown land with such determination and effort, such love and caring.

Maybe she was too, the Sarus crane, which had traveled the world and had finally come home to roost. Without her knowing it, the route back from across the seas had indeed been imprinted in her inner mind and she had followed its instructions to get back home. But, no, she smiled, all told, she was pleased with the image of the mustard plant. The green fields of mustard

with its yellow flowers, was a sight that had been etched in her mind in the happy carefree days she had spent in the embrace of her parents. She had wandered from her own land but had now returned; she was back where she belonged. The mustard flower had found once again its native soil where, nourished by wind and rain, through summer heat and winter cold, she was growing in strength and character with each passing day.

Meanwhile

Time halts for a moment as if to catch its breath. Poor fellow, this man called Time, running all the time. Time too requires a breather now and then and it is time to take a look at what has been happening to the other characters in this story as it plays itself out. If not played out fully, then slowly and surely running out of steam. We now know where Sarasu is going to, don't we? And Giridhar has finally won the rewards of patience, hasn't he? Or do we need to wait a little longer to see the denouement of this tale of a mustard flower. But in the meanwhile, what of the others, then?

Jagannath Nair, Jaggu to all his friends including Sara, walked back home from the Railway Station at Trivandrum after Sara had mysteriously, hurtlingly, bid goodbye to him with a hard, hard kiss that had brought blood to his lips. She had revealed no details of her destination, her intentions, and her reasons for the sudden flight. She gave away no secrets about the future of their relationship and no promise of what that future may so invitingly hold out for them. The dreams he had treasured for long had been drawn on fragile tissue paper and the whistle of the train carrying her away had blown them to shreds.

There was a bus that could have taken him to the hostel, but he preferred to walk. His mind was in a haze, his thoughts scattering like a sheaf of papers unbound and he felt physically ill. Her lips, which were tender and gentle the last time he had tasted it, had this time been sharp and tangy and fevered. She had pushed him away. He had staggered back and he saw her rush into the compartment with not a backward glance at him. He had looked for Bhaiyya, but perhaps he had been coached into the behaviour to be displayed to him. He was already rushing off to the exit gate with a quick wave of his hand and a smile. So there he was, walking back to the hostel, a huge hole in the pit of his stomach. He was due to leave back home to his Pamba river the very next day. Now there was nothing to do but walk the streets as the evening hours rushed in to cloak the city with its shadowy, twilight lights.

He walked about here and there in the dark and deserted byelanes of places that he had never seen in the three years he had spent here. Where there was Sara on the high road of his life, he did not need to walk the alleys. With aching feet and with no coherent thoughts, he had trudged back to the hostel where the comforting and familiar sight of his room and his cot brought just a little respite. The others had finished dinner. They had searched for him, had not found him around and had gone back to their rooms to finish packing and to get an early night's sleep. They all had trains or buses to catch the next day. So they did not attend the farewell parties that some of the rest of the hostelites had planned. In any case they did not belong to the usual jing-bang crowd of students who wasted time in boozing and living the high life. So, with an empty stomach, he slipped quietly into his room and with a muttered good night to the drowsy Thomas, lay down on the bed and turned his back on the world.

The night brought no relief. In his bed, he clung on to the words she had whispered in the few moments spent with him alone at the station. She had muttered some incomprehensible words, that there were some things to be sorted out before she came back, if she came back at all. And that, if she did indeed manage to sort out things to her satisfaction, he would be the first to know about. Until then it was goodbye. Strange, most unlike Sara, the gentle and precious Sara, who had enchanted him, enthralled him and, surely, had irretrievably entrapped him in the past three golden, magical years of his life.

For a moment he was angry beyond words. He gritted his teeth for the pain in his heart was near to bursting. Why had she been friendly with him, why had she spent so much time with him, why had she, damn it, kissed him, when she had no thought in the world for his feelings, his growing love, his very life? When all that she wanted to do was to get away from him as early as possible. He knew he was wrong in judging her this way, but she gave him no reason to think otherwise. She gave no justification for her conduct. Was she just a flirt of the subtlest order? And that she had had interests elsewhere? Or that she had merely toyed with him, played him like an expert angler, so that she could keep him at the end of the line for all this time?

When he took the bus back to his precious Pamba river house, he was greeted by his mother running down the steps to meet him with enthusiasm and joy, which, however, faltered when she saw the grim expression on his face and the dark, desperate eyes that seemed to look through her or wander off her face. His smile was wan and fleeting and Jaggu went to his room complaining of a bad headache. In the succeeding days, he spent most of his time on the river, sitting quietly at the edge under a tree reading a book, or watching the varying moods of the water. Often, he saw Sara's face floating through his mind, reflected on the surface of the water or wafting through the clouds in the sky.

In the evenings he would climb up to the roof and stare at the falling twilight and wonder where he was heading to and what his future would hold. The glittering night, with his favourite Orion constellation, gave him no answers. He had for some time now, before the fateful day, been conceiving of a future with Sara by his side and she had given him no reason to doubt the truth of that prospect. Now, for the first time, he had to readjust his perceptions; he would now have to consider, however painful that might seem to be, a life without Sara, the light of his life.

He would survive, he knew, primarily because she had not rejected him outright, because she had whispered that if she did sort out things, she would be back. It was quite possible that she had wanted to reduce the blow of the parting by making such an idle statement. He could not believe that she was merely playing with him these three years. Nor could he believe that she would have left him so abruptly, unless there was sufficient and grievous cause to do so. But then what could have brought this parting so suddenly and why did she not tell him the reasons for doing so. A word would have been enough and he would have waited for a century. Life without Sara? Could one conceive of life without breath?

We see Jaggu now, in a sore predicament, helpless, bewildered, lost and confused. As time passed, his mother would work on him and in her own quiet way she would divine the reasons for the inexplicable change in her well-loved son. She would chide him for not confiding in her, and would give him wise counsel that would slowly and gradually turn his mind away from the terrible pain that he was bearing within. In the months ahead, while his father was, as usual, busy with his work and unable to pay any attention to his home — and certainly he would have neither understood nor appreciated the problems that his only son was going through — it was his mother who supported him and stood by his side as he grew away from the shadow of the inexplicable behaviour of womankind.

In time, Jaggu went on to college in Madras for his post-graduation and did extremely well in the University. He tried his hand at the Civil Services examination, but couldn't get through. He joined his father's business for a while and then decided to apply for a job in a large corporation headquartered at Calcutta, where, in view of his exceptionally good qualities of expression and commitment to his job, he was promoted in quick succession from one rung of the corporate ladder to the next. His father had convinced him of the need to marry and take on the family business and he, after some hesitation, went through the normal drill of seeing a couple of girls and finally giving his nod to a Nair girl from Quilon, who had lineage and looks and was educated, to boot. The kundali was matched and when the auspicious time was agreed to, the mandapam was set up.

He had a growing sense of stability and satisfaction that things were all right after all and had worked out as best as they could have in this imperfect world. Sometimes the best was the enemy of the good. If the best were out of reach, then the good that was within reach become the best. One had to aspire for the best possible under the circumstances, and not for the all time best, period. That, in essence, was the lesson he had learnt from these past few years.

His mother used to write him long newsy letters, which with the passage of time became shorter as her memory waned and the powers of expression dimmed. His father's letters were sometimes accusatory, and he always expressed the thought that Jaggu should have accepted the family business and should not have run away to seek an independent career so far away from home. As they grew old, it became necessary to take on the responsibility of their care, their medical bills and finally their very bodies as they shifted over to Calcutta almost as invalid patients. In time, they too passed away.

By then there were a couple of children too. Two darlings, sometimes a little loud and spoilt, but their very own joint productions who would grow into reliable and solid citizens. Sara had by then become a pleasant memory at the back of his mind. There was now no sense of loss or of having been deceived in any way. It was now just a nostalgic college memory and he would sometimes smile and shake his head at the thought of all that he had imagined and dreamt of in those golden days some two decades and more ago.

What about Thomas, the quiet giant, who spoke little, but knew all that there was to know. When the results came out, he was almost at the very top of the University. His performance surpassed both Jaggu's and Sara's. His admission in the best colleges of the country was his for the asking. He did precisely that and went onto do his masters from the Delhi University. From there it was but one simple step to enter the Civil Services examination, which he would have again topped, but for the fact that he found the viva voce a little troublesome. Suave articulation was never his forte. His monosyllabic answers did not cut much ice, but the awesome nature of his performance in the written papers was truly stupendous and the interview board had no option but to clear him, though with a little more than average marks in the viva voce. But that was enough.

He was selected into the Indian Administrative Service and allotted to Maharashtra, which was anyway his home state, for his parents had lived and worked there right from the beginning. He was posted successively to various far-flung sub divisions and districts of the State where he gave a sterling account of himself and covered himself in glory. In the course of these early days of his career, he met and married a colleague of his from the very same Service, a frail little slip of a girl who had displayed iron nerves during a law and order situation when she was posted in a small tribal sub-division some years ago. He met her in the course of his tours and other official work. Both were taciturn and reluctant to speak in formal meetings; they, however, developed an instantaneous rapport, which rapidly grew into love and marriage.

That they belonged to different communities and religions was of no importance to either of them, nor their families, and so they lived happily ever after. They had three children in quick succession. Someone jokingly said that since both of them hardly ever talked, they might not have had much to do other than ... The last that was known of them was that they were in

the process of together drawing up a detailed scheme of social security for the poor and the disadvantaged which would help the unfortunate souls to achieve some measure of dignity and self reliance in their lives.

Chandran went on to do his Masters from the Institute of Mass Communication, at New Delhi, where for some time, he would share a room in a paying guest accommodation with Thomas, who at the same time was in Delhi University doing his post graduation in English Literature. He had decided that his talent for wit and sarcasm would be well suited to the world of journalism where one could hurl insults on others and jibe at them mercilessly, all in the name of freedom of expression and journalistic liberty. He did well in his exams and was immediately picked up in a campus interview by one of the leading newspapers of the country. To all accounts he has done well and is moving up the echelons of the hierarchy of the paper.

He is supposed to have the ear of some influential businessmen and politicians and he quite shamelessly uses his contacts to publish revelatory, and sometimes embarrassing, news items that have often put the Government in the dock in Parliament. With the emergence of television, he easily made the switch to the small screen and appeared in countless programmes where the rich and famous were interviewed. His wit and irony sometimes made mince meat of the tall claims of politicians, but it was done ever so gently, with a smile on his face and in such a sophisticated manner that the victim hardly ever knew his throat was being slit.

As for the enigmatic Madrasi Babu, he quietly disappeared into nowhere after his exams, in which, incidentally, he obtained a high second class. In fact, he did not even come back to obtain his college degree. It was rumoured that he had gone into north Kerala where he was working for the cause of an extremist communist fringe group that believed in the total destruction of the landed gentry of the State. He had had several brushes with the police who maintained a thick file on him and there was a memo out for his immediate capture and arrest. His activities were considered anarchical and his speeches and writings, distributed through some underground press in the form of leaflets and printed material, were downright inflammatory and seditious in character.

It was rumored that he would slip unnoticed into Karnataka and Tamilnadu through the forests on the boundaries of the States. However, the police could not find sufficient explanation for the fact that he had developed an icon-like, larger than life image, with a large cult following that seemed to worship him. Whenever Jaggu, Thomas and Chandran did write to each other, they would express shock and disappointment at the way that their friend had turned out, though they did agree that the Madrasi Babu had always been enigmatic and mysterious with a dangerous edge to him that was barely obvious even to the ones who knew him well.

The last that was known about him was that he might have been involved in an attack on a rich farmer of North Kerala who was known for his ruthless exploitation of the labour class. The attack left the farmer poorer by several crores that were stolen from his vault, with his palatial home in flames and many confidential papers stolen. Details of the contents of these papers were trickled out to the State dailies revealing that he had been involved in a large business of money laundering and drug racketeering that destroyed forever the shining image he had been trying to acquire in the past many years.

There was glee in the labour class, though they officially condemned the dastardly attack on the man. The money stolen was apparently used to pay the medical bills of countless labourers for years to come. They would surely have died in their homes in agony, but for the large wads of money that inexplicably appeared at their doorsteps just as they were being taken to the hospital for their treatment. With the passage of time, Babu acquired the glory of a folk hero, a man who was invisible but still so apparent in the hearts and minds of countless deprived labourers of the area.

Then there was Fatima, she of the soft heart and the hard face, the one who stood by Sara through the adversities and triumphs that she faced in life. Let it not be said that she disappeared the moment the school was on its way to being set up. No, she was a frequent visitor to the village and she would bring with her all manner of lavish gifts such as new books, teaching equipment and electric fans and once even a water cooler to provide cold water to the children in the hot summer months. Sara used to protest loud and long about the extra generous nature of her gifts. But she was rebuffed by the redoubtable Fatima who silenced her into submission with one of her fierce looks and an imperious wave of the hand.

Her strongest argument was that her company was making more money than she had expected and that the amount she spent on such gifts was really amount she saved, for in case she did not do so, she would have to have pay more income tax on profits earned. And as to Fatima's own private and personal life, Sara had almost given up hope that she would meet anyone in her life who would show her the true kindness and affection that she so richly deserved. One was so easily put off by her manner of speaking and her rude behaviour. If only Fatima would be her real self, she would have been so much loved. But that was not to be. She did not know how to let her true, wonderful, inner self come to be seen on her face and in her actions and words. She had to be the Gorgon that she pretended to be.

However, on one of her trips to Dubai in the course of an export promotion drive, she did come across an Indian businessman who dealt in the same commodity as she did. The competition in the trade was so stiff that only one could survive. As the

offers and counter offers were hurled at the delighted buyers, it became obvious that Fatima and Iqbal Ahmed were undercutting themselves with suicidal intentions. If this went on, they would both be ruined. A mutual friend put a halt to the bidding and sought a recess when he called them both aside and gave them such a shouting that they both piped down and agreed to sit down and talk to each other in peace and sanity. Good sense prevailed and they arranged their business terms to their mutual satisfaction.

But it was the beginning to a long and fruitful partnership where they joined their efforts together and worked as partners rather than as competitors. In time, they got really close to each other. It soon came to be known that they were prone to visiting each other and that Fatima was persuading her friend and partner to shift to India so that they could really combine their business activities and achieve international monopoly. Knowing Fatima, Sara was sure that she would ultimately have her way. Amazingly, she once brought Iqbal all the way down to Surpura to show him the school. The quiet and contemplative, handsome young man impressed Sara as she took them on the grand tour. He did suggest some modifications in the outward decor of the school, which would give it a prominence that would make it distinctive while at the same time projecting the unique personality of the school.

Sara felt that the partnership could be made into something of a more profound and meaningful relationship. Sara did talk to Fatima on the subject in the few minutes that they did get together. If she only had the wisdom to make her feelings truly known to the other, they would have a happy life together, for after all life is not endless and they were both not getting younger. Fatima did protest and bluster, and said something to the effect that Sara herself should practice what she preached. But the brightness of her eyes and the flush in her cheeks did hide something else altogether. Fully aware that she was being a meddlesome busybody, Sara decided to write to Iqbal some time later, hinting at the possibility of a merger between him and Fatima, not merely in business terms, but in a more intimate and lasting manner.

Surprisingly, that was all the incentive that was required. Things were settled so quickly thereafter that Sara herself was taken aback. She got to know of the nikaah held at Dubai only after the event was over, with Fatima sending an apologetic letter written on stationery of the very hotel where she was spending the week after the marriage with Iqbal. Sara was so delighted that she went to the recently installed telephone exchange in Surpura village and spent three hours waiting for her long distance call to Dubai to materialize so she could talk to her. When the call did finally come through late in the evening, there were excited screams and joyful yelling that had the operator wryly smiling at Sara and telling her not to wake up the whole village.

Of course, there were children, three of them in the years to come. Sara, as godmother, had the additional responsibility of remembering birthdays and anniversaries with the prospect of facing dire consequences if she did happen to forget them. And the gifts did keep coming in. Now that there were two donors, they were even more lavish and extravagant than before. They turned the school into a bright and happy place endowing the atmosphere with a cheerfulness that was rare and unknown in schools in rural areas.

And then there was Harish Chacha, prone and immobile for many years on his invalid's bed so far down south in the little green village of Mavelikara. By a fortunate coincidence, when the final day came, Sara was home for a short break during the Divali holidays, after having traveled down by train for almost three days and two nights to reach her Choti Maa's home. Sara was describing to her the work she was doing in her Surpura, with all the details of the problems that she had faced and how well the school was progressing now. They were sitting in the very room that Chacha was in. Of course, one had not a clue as to what was going on in that still silent mind of his. Was he aware of developments in the world outside? Or was he completely brain dead? Some doctors say that perhaps a person in coma is able to hear what goes on around him.

Whatever the reason, it seemed that he had indeed heard all that Sara had said and that he had been waiting all this while for Sara to find her feet in his and her old village. His breath ceased all at once. There were no struggles, no labored gasps, no tremors or expression of pain. The rasp of his breath through the tubes just stopped. At the end of one exhalation and before the start of the next. It was as simple and easy as that. Almost as if the purpose of the agonized and endless misery of the last many years had been but for this moment; almost as if he were now satisfied that the little girl he had picked up from the arms of his brother and his Bhabhi so many years ago, would now be able to fend for herself. There was no further cause to keep his battered heart beating.

For one long moment, there was complete silence, the absence of sound, the cessation of breath. There is nothing more silent than the mouth of one just dead. Choti Maa's shoulders crumbled as Sara lunged forward towards the bed. She was frantically peering at the tubes and slapping Chacha's face to revive him, but it was of no avail. A sob in the throat of Choti Maa made her look back, "Let him go, Mol, it is time," was all that she would say. Choti Maa's steely discipline, kept in tight control over all these months and years, dissolved as she cried out in great gasps and deep sobs at the feet of her Harish. Sara shrank to the corner of the room with her hands over her face. Then she roused herself up and called for Bhaiyya.

Choti Maa was completely clear in her mind that Harish's funeral would be conducted according to Hindu rites, that he would be cremated and not buried, though this would raise eyebrows amongst people there. She busied herself in the arrangements for the funeral in a tightly organized efficiency that had some of the neighbours commenting on the absence of the grief that a wife should normally display for her departed husband. This was the one and only moment in her entire life that had Sara losing her dignity and her composure as she snarled like a bruised cat at those who had dared make these remarks. Choti Maa pulled her back with a whisper or else she would have flung herself at them and scratched out their eyes.

The cremation was sparsely attended. There were some distant relatives and neighbours who lived in the vicinity but who saw no reason to attend. Harish to them was only a stranger from a heathen religion. He had inveigled himself into the heart of their daughter and caused her no end of pain and sorrow. Why should they mourn his death? And so it was that Choti Maa and her Sara, her daughter in all but blood, who was her life itself, stood silently with Bhaiyya, as the body was laid on to the logs of wood. Bhaiyya was dry eyed and silent like a corpse himself, as he went through the motions and rituals demanded of him by the priest. Stone-faced, he cracked the skull and let the tortured spirit out to blend into the free air outside. Some pariah dogs in the corner of the burial ground lay watching the pyre and inexplicably howled into the evening.

As the flames rose and fell, Bhaiyya clung to Sara and to Choti Maa, dry sobs racking his body. Sara fought for control, but then gave up all icy resolve and surrendered to deep sobs and unchecked tears. Choti Maa was in a deep and shadowy world all of her own. Her eyes were glazed and inward looking. The few tears she had had were now spent and she would have the rest of her life to silently mourn for the one man who had loved her for what she really was.

The next few days were spent in quiet familial closeness as they leaned on one another for solace and comfort. Sara tried her best to encourage Choti Maa and Bhaiyya to come along with her to Surapura, for what could Choti Maa gain in a place where she was regarded as an outsider, where there was none to give her the support and assistance that she would so require on a day to day basis. But she was concerned about Bhaiyya's continuing education and wished to see him on a solid footing with regard to his future. Thereafter, she would definitely consider coming along with her. It thrilled her to hear these words. There would be somebody to stand by her side in the days ahead as she nurtured her fledgling enterprise to maturity. Bhaiyya would not have minded his mother going along straight away, but he knew that, if he were left alone here in Kerala, it would cause only greater worry and concern for his mother. So that was how things were settled for the moment.

Soon it was time for Sara to leave. But now there was a certainty for the days ahead, and though there were still tears and long goodbyes, they were all sure that the difficult days they had been going through were ended and some long needed respite would now be theirs to quietly enjoy. Harish Chacha had only waited for so long as to be sure that Sara was all right and in control of her destiny and her future. It was a good feeling to know that he had fulfilled his commitment to his long dead brother and Bhabhi, to take care of the little girl he had plucked out from her native soil at Surapura.

It was also good to know—and Sara was now confident that Chacha had heard and understood all that she had been saying to Choti Maa on the very day in his room when he had breathed his last—that she was now replanted back into that very soil from where she had been so suddenly and haplessly uprooted more than a dozen years ago. So there was not much of the same sadness that they all felt when Sara had left the last time. Now there was confidence that Chacha had indeed done well by them. There was a quiet determination to see that their lives ahead would be days of fine happiness and simple strength of purpose.

Bhaiyya, in due course of time, flowered in his own special way. He displayed an unusual interest in lost causes, in desperate cases of the underdog and turned to the legal profession in his bid to bring justice to them. He grew in stature, especially after winning a case regarding compensation claimed by the family of a worker of the State Electricity Board, who had been killed in a horrible accident while on duty. The Board had dithered and dawdled until Bhaiyya took up the matter to the District Court and then to the High Court, which passed strictures against the Board and the State Government in such sharp language and tone that the compensation amount was delivered to the widow of the deceased within twenty four hours of the judgment.

Thereafter, there was no looking back. Bhaiyya accepted cases in favor of the environment, cases for the depressed communities, for the physically challenged and the dregs of society, so to speak. His quiet tone and incisive logic soon made him a person to be feared in the courtrooms and the bullies soon realised that here was a person who not only refused to be cowed down, but also would, if he sensed that they were trying to brush him away, needle them in such a persistent and tiresome manner that it was easier for them to concede than to contest.

He came through like a knight in shining armour and there was talk soon of his entering a particular political party. Bhaiyya denied the rumor and stated that politics is the last resort of a scoundrel and the last thing on his mind. He would prefer to earn his bread by fighting for genuine causes that were on the wrong side of genteel society, but on the right side of a gentle heart. His mother was proud of him, beyond what words can tell, and would stand with shining eyes behind him as he was often felicitated by activists groups whose causes he contested for little or no fees at all.

And what about Draupadi Mausi ji? The gentle, childless crone, who had waited with hope almost gone from her tired, old body for a decade and then was astounded and blessed to see the return of her child, the favourite of her heart, if not her womb, who came to rescue her from a meaningless life with nothing left to look forward to. She was invigorated and thrilled to become once more a part of Sarasu's life, and indeed, of her dreams, and to give whatever assistance she could to the brave girl, who had found her roots once more in her own native village. She kept busy herself and occupied as much as she could and gave what was often needless advice. She was buoyed up by the faith and trust and dependence that Sarasu bestowed on her during all the days they spent together.

Sarasu talked to her at length about her own personal problems and the very different way she was now looking at the world outside. She was astonished at the change with which she now regarded Giridhar and could only smile wryly at her original assessment of him as a country yokel! Sara also confessed to the guilt she felt with regard to her dying feelings towards her friend in the college down in the South. But Mausi ji was thrilled. She had sound advice for her about the will of God and how she had been brought back to her old village once more to fulfill her interrupted destiny. She was sure that Giridhar was the ideal man for her and urged her to finally accept him as her husband in holy matrimony. Sarasu had no adequate reply to this, but assured her that she was herself being easily persuaded to think in the same direction.

She was about seventy-four when Sarasu returned and by the time the school was settled and on its way to becoming a fine success, she had almost run out of steam. Sarasu gave her all the love and support that she had never had for half a century. One rainy July evening, a year after the school had begun, when the sky was overcast and full of distant rumblings of thunder, with a steady drizzle filling the space around the house, Sara was getting together a cup of tea for herself and her Mausi ji, who was at the window watching the falling rain and the play of distant light on the clouds. A sudden blast of lightning stabbed at a tree just about a few hundred feet away. The accompanying clap of thunder was instantaneous, loud and deafening. As Sarasu covered her ears and stood in stunned immobility, she saw Mausi ji at the window slide to the floor soundlessly, effortlessly, her body collapsing like a thrown marionette's.

Sara rushed to her with a scream of terror, and lifted her up onto her lap, but it was to no avail. The life had already fled from the tired old body. The sudden clap of thunder had jolted her heart and stilled its movement forever. And nor could all the tears and imprecations that Sarasu let loose on the world around, revive her from her endless sleep. For days after the cremation, when most of the village came to pay their last respects, Sarasu remained in a daze and it was long, too long before she could revive herself up again so as to run her school with some element of normalcy. The hollow part in her mind and her heart that Mausi ji had left behind would never be fully filled up again. The only consolation she had was that her return had brought some measure of joy and bliss to the old woman in her last days, this Mausi ji who had been so like a mother to her.

And now we come to Giridhar's parents, Chatter Singh ji and Bhanukumari ji. After what had seemed a lifetime of consternation and worrying about the fate of their bahu, who had been so mercilessly snatched away by Harsh ji despite their protests, muted though they were, there was now contentment that what was ordained had come to pass. Strange are the ways of God, they thought, to keep them away from their bahu for so long. But they had to shake their heads in wonderment and admiration at the new and transformed bahu that had now come back into their lives. Would she have been able to do anything at all for the people of the village if she had not gone overseas, and acquired for herself the knowledge and commitment and the ability to see old things in a new fashion. Was it for this that they had been deprived of her presence for so long? And was it for this that Giridhar had held on to his faith for all this time, for he had known, without a shadow of doubt he had known, that she would be back and by his side one day.

So the doubts and the niggling questions were finally put aside. The consternation in the eyes of the jealous neighbours who had once made snide remarks was now something to look at and feel smug about. Their status as in-laws had been further enhanced because of the standing that Sara had acquired for herself as mistress of the school that was fast becoming a landmark for very nearly the whole district and the rest of the State in the matter of girls' education. It had set new standards and was becoming a compulsory visiting spot for experts in the subject.

Both of them lived long and useful lives and lost no opportunity in talking about the achievements of their Sarasu. There was a small matter of the breach of etiquette that Chatter Singh had committed on the day that Sarasu had returned. He needed to do something to resolve that particular issue so as to set his mind at ease. Looking back, he was appalled that he had had the boorishness and lack of grace to suspect her of infidelity during her long absence in his inane remark about Shri Ram ji Bhagwan and Sita Maa. He was aghast now as to how he could have possibly made that ridiculous comment. One evening when Sarasu was home visiting, he took her aside and with a tremble in his voice and downcast eyes he confessed that he had been horribly mistaken, that he was a fool to have made that particularly offensive remark.

Sarasu was surprised that he had the courage to raise the issue and the conviction to confess that he had made a fool of himself then. But she was glad that he did so, for she could not deny that it had shocked her and made her think ill of the old man. Sara simply enfolded him into a great embrace and smiled at him and said not to worry and that everything was fine now. The simple words lifted a great weight of Chatter Singh's mind and the sun was shining once again. Of course, Sarasu used to wonder whether it was Chatter Singh ji who himself took the initiative to take that courageous step or whether he had been gently prodded on his way by her wise mother-in-law.

Both of them were happy and lived joyous lives. Their minds were alert and they were full of conversation and anecdotes for their friends and neighbours to hear. Lakshmi and Sanjay had two more children, both as wonderful and mischievous as their first daughter. The children proved themselves to be experts at manipulating the affections of their grandparents in such a way as to have them eating out of their hands soon enough. Sanjay in turn rose through the rungs of his department until he reached the level of Additional Chief Engineer of his Department. He had a reputation for honesty and integrity, considered rare commodities in his profession.

In the early part of 1977, the general elections saw the end of an era and vox populi finally prevailed. Briefly, it was as if a new dawn had broken over the nation. Sadly, too sadly, the golden opportunity was squandered away as bickering and backbiting began amongst the men who had supposedly freed India from its shackles. The bemused nation was appalled and shocked beyond belief. Their mandate was abused and 'we, the people' would have none of it.

A few short months later, a chastised and wiser Party came back to the seats of power. This time the reign lasted for almost a full term, but the hail of bullets from the guns of her own security guards ensured that the Prime Minister's life was snuffed out in an instant. The handsome heir sought to usher in a Camelot but had to leave amidst scandals and accusations, only to be cut down in a similarly brutal fashion that stunned the nation. Governments rose and fell and the life of the people went on as best as it could.

The school went through its ups and downs. Sometimes it seemed to Sara that everything depended on the weather. All life itself in the village was moderated, controlled, directed by the unpredictable fickleness of the seasons. In summer, the glaring sun beat down mercilessly on the baked land and Sara kept advising the children to keep their water bags filled and to stay in the shade till the evening came. They, of course, had their own home recipes of onions and watermelons and were able to survive the season without much difficulty. Just before the schools closed for the summer vacations, the heat would become intolerable with fierce dust filled storms sweeping across the plains and turning the sky dark and brooding. Once it was so powerfully strong that the sun was blotted out and there was an awesome, frightening darkness at noon that frightened the children to tears and loud wailings. Fortunately it lasted but for a few minutes before the storm subsided and the pale sun came out shining weakly.

In winter, the nights were bitter cold, the mercury dropping close to freezing point. The children came all bundled up, their heads covered and their feet warm. Of course, there were some who had found it difficult to clothe their children in warm clothes, and though Sara was not inclined to grant doles to help them buy sweaters, she discreetly made arrangements to see that the children coming from poorer families got the necessary wherewithal to keep themselves warm and protected. At such times, the benevolent sun was their best friend and Sara arranged to have many of her classes out in the open so the children could soak in the sunlight and store the heat in their bodies to help them through the night.

The monsoons were, as could be expected, erratic and unpredictable. The fortunes of the farming households depended on good rains, and the sight of the long slanting drops of water falling from the sky was blessed darshan for the village. As the first giant drops fell, the people came out of their homes and danced and gamboled in the open grounds with such gay abandon, that Sara was tempted to join them in the merry making, to the great amusement and joy of her beloved children and their smiling parents. Once the rains turned to powerful unending storms that transformed the village and its surroundings to a sea of water that lay soaking into the ground for days after. The weather ruled over her village like an intemperate, erratic god, refusing to be bound down by pattern or reason.

And as Sara made quiet history in her elegant distinguished way, Giridhar, in his own field of activity had received the acclaim of social scientists as the changes he made in the community of animal skimmers became apparent. They were getting to be economically free, having disengaged themselves from the clutches of moneylenders after Giridhar put them on to a loan scheme through cooperative banks with a low interest burden and a long repayment period. He strived to improve the quality of their products in such a way that the demand for their skins was growing. The radical improvement in their health and hygiene made them conscious also of the need for education and the improvement of the future prospects of their children. Soon they were being prompted to attend the local schools. Though there was some resistance from the upper castes in the village, the weight that Giridhar threw in on behalf of the children was enough.

The model he developed soon attracted the attention of some highflying non-governmental organizations that sponsored his cause to the World Health Organization and other international funding agencies. Giridhar was a little wary of these large organizations, which he felt could draw attention away from the real problems of the target group and on to themselves and prominent personalities. But he was carefully pragmatic in accepting their assistance when he was certain that by doing so, he would further the cause of the community he was helping. In time he received many awards and citations that would place him in the forefront of social activism.

Together, the two of them made a remarkable couple, a classic study of synergy and cooperation. There was much in common in the work that they were doing; each complemented the other. On certain occasions, they had to attend state and national seminars together and all eyes were on them for the astonishing nature of their work and of their achievements. Sarasu's incandescent integrity and Giridhar's matchless dedication shone like a torch in the dark. Very few, however, knew the more astonishing details of the personal story of their lives together. Some day their children, yes, there were children, would write about them with great pride and honour. The story of their mother, a frail mustard flower who had wandered the earth in search of the perfect soil and who found it in the very place from where she had fled. And the story of their father who had stayed on in their native land, as the foundation, the earth, the very earth that their mother would return to after so long. Saraswati had learnt the meaning of not ceasing from exploration and that the end of all exploring was to arrive where she started and know the place for the first time.

Epilogue

The cups of tea had been drunk and the biscuits almost exhausted. Sarasu and Jaggu had told each other the story of their lives. For a brief period of three years, like ships that pass in the night, they had come close to each other and then their paths had diverged. They had moved on. Choices had been made by them or for them, alternatives available had been judged and accepted, life patterns had been altered irrevocably. But despite the passage of a quarter of a century, the question that kept hammering at Jaggu's temples like a headache was 'what if...?'

What if she had rejected the enticement of the mustard fields and had stayed on with me? 'What if I had never let her go...?' What if I had held her hand and pulled her out of the moving train, clasped her close to my chest and waited for the return of tranquility to her worried, restless heart? What if she had spent the rest of her life in the security of my arms? The 'what ifs' of life, the 'could have beens', the 'almost was', the possible, the probable.... How very frustrating, how very humiliating to know that you were this close and then that far off! How humbling! Jaggu wiped away these thoughts with a smile, knowing that by the next day, back in the comfort of his home paid for by his company, back in the domestic serenity of his wife and the kids, he would be battling with a massive bout of guilt; his sin was fantasizing, the errant indulgence of considering the prospect of 'what if?'

Sarasu (and she had gently reminded Jaggu that she was now no longer Sara) had a train to catch later in the evening to take her back to her precious Surpura. She had come to Mumbai for a brief meeting with an international organization of educationalists on a learning programme that would use Internet and modern communication technologies to integrate her school into a worldwide network of educational institutions across the globe. Twenty-five years of dedicated work for the school had transformed it into a center of excellence, admired by the educational fraternity all over the country.

Sara still insisted that the school was primarily for the rural girls who needed that special opportunity to rise above their restraining cultural and social bonds and so admission was really restricted to the girls who only had the requisite rural background. Draupadi Mausi ji's house, which had been gifted to her by the old lady, had been long integrated into the school campus. She had indeed purchased land around these two plots and was now mistress of enough property that would give the school the required expanse and space where the mind was without fear and the head is held high.

Jaggu was in Mumbai for one of his interminable meetings on business matters that had him traveling across most of the country in the course of his work. He had risen up the corporate hierarchy and was somewhere near the top, though he did feel that as an employee of the corporation, he could never aspire for the top post, which was reserved exclusively for the family of the Chairman. He did come here at least once or twice in a year, but the coincidence that had made them, he and Sara, walk the same pavement at the same time, was one of those freak occurrences of life, an awesome accident, the meaning of which he could not divine. Maybe it was just one of those random occurrences that Sara had once talked about.

It was, indeed, nothing but an impossible quirk of fate that they had met on the Marine Drive at just that precise moment. Both did not belong to the city and both were on their way out. Her train left from Mumbai station in the evening and she had just about a couple of hours to reach there and board the train. Jaggu's plane left later in the evening from the airport, but he had had some purchases to make for his wife and the children before he boarded the plane.

The last two hours they had spent recounting their experiences of the last two and a half decades was like a replay from a dream. Sarasu's story had an inevitability, a predictability that was incredible to think about. She had found her niche in life, the slot reserved for her, the cubicle that had her name written on it. It was obvious watching her, talking to her, that she fit her spot in life like a glove. There could be no one else who could slip into that particular place in the time space continuum. She could state with conviction that she had come home. But as for him, did he fit into his allotted time and space or was he still looking for the right place to park his car?

To know that Sara had been married for all these years was a shock of such profound impact that it shook him to the core. If she had been married all those years ago even in the college days of their youth, then what had she been doing dallying with him? Or was it that Sara, with her clearer concept of free will and choice acquired after a western education, had, when she entered college, already repudiated the fact of her marriage and had decided that she would never succumb to a vile custom that bound two children into a farce of a relationship for life. And, therefore, she was indeed exercising her will to choose for herself when she had met Jaggu and made him a friend. Maybe, in those halcyon days in the College, it had been in her mind to commit herself to him, to contemplate the possibility of a life together for both of them.

By her account of her story, it appeared that she had gone to Chandernagore to extricate herself from the formidable knot into which she was bound hand and foot. But perhaps something had happened to her when she saw those brown fields and those yellow mustard flowers, when she saw the face and form of her Giridhar, and breathed in the air that rose in the sky above

her head. It was inexplicable how she could be so enslaved by a past that had haunted her for long and which she wished so very much to repudiate. To think that that very same past had inveigled her and entrapped her once again; this was difficult to believe. Even as he was thinking these thoughts, Jaggu realised that he was exaggerating the grossness of the situation. Of course, she had now embraced her past with full knowledge and conviction of her action. She was committed to her work and after having succeeded in the establishment of her dream project, she could smile and say that she was indeed satisfied. All right, all right, one could even forgive her for succumbing to the gods of duty and work and the enticement of the brown earth of her village, but why had she not let him know? A simple letter would have been enough.

He had that very important question to ask her and he worried if, in the asking of that question, he would be breaching some rule of protocol or standard of behaviour. But ask he would, since the matter had been burning in his mind all these years. He could leave in peace only if he knew her response.

“Sara, well, Sarasu, if you want it that way, I meant to ask you a thousand times, and ask I will now, with you sitting right in front of me. God forgive me for asking this to you and in the particular fashion that it is being asked. When you had found out your true destiny and that your place was there, in your old village and with Giridhar by your side, why didn’t you let me know? You could have sent me a letter, a note or even asked maybe Bhaiyya or maybe Fatima to let me know you have sorted out your problems, or exorcised your ghosts or whatever. And that you are not coming back, that I need not wait in vain for a fickle dream that had seemed to be so very real at that moment. You do realise that I could not have possibly known where you had fled to, and where I could contact you. Did you ever consider that your words at the station had made me hopeful and desperate, optimistic and despondent, had made me want to sing and cry at the same time? Did you ever think that I might be somewhere out there, wandering around like an unappeased spirit, waiting endlessly for you to return, for a dream to materialize? Waiting for a word from you? And that I would have accepted your judgment, yes or no, and gone home contented?”

Sarasu was taken aback. She lowered her face and looked down at her hands folded in her lap. She had no words, and indeed it seemed, no explanations. Many a time in the years after she had fully committed to being Surpura’s mustard flower, she had considered the question of sending a note through Fatima, who would have quietly ensured that it reached Jaggu. She had worried herself sick in the thought of it and had summoned up complex arguments as to why she should, and why she should not, do so. Her realization that the dark brown earth of Surpura was her final destination came almost within a few days after she had met Giridhar for the first time and talked to him and seen the work he was doing. Of course, it had taken her time to convince herself of this fact and to find the necessary wherewithal in terms of financial resources and mental strength so that her project could be launched. As the school progressed, so did her devotion to the girls of Surpura increase and it became a matter of life and honour and duty to sustain and nurture the sapling she had planted.

Giridhar’s presence in her life had been growing each day and she found herself turning to him for advice on the slightest problem. And he to her, as he came to understand and admire the courage and the determination which fired that slim body as she worked hard and long and struggled through adversity and personal tragedy to reach the position that she had now come to occupy. With each passing day, Jaggu’s face had become more indistinct and fainter until finally she could hardly conjure up the outlines of his face in her memory. Giridhar, the gentle, quiet, patient Giridhar had, like fragrant smoke from perfumed joss sticks, filled the space inside her mind, even as Jaggu’s memory was, frame by frame, fading.

Within a year or two, there was no trace of Jaggu left within her and life in Surpura was one long adventure of the daily need to keep the school running, of gradually expanding her work to cover neighboring villages, now with an added special emphasis on the disabled. She had Neelu to thank for that, Neelu who had shone in class and in her artistic abilities until a prominent newspaper had highlighted her achievement. Her drawings had attracted national curiosity and had become the vehicle for her being enrolled as a painter of greeting cards which earned her money, real money for herself. There were too many things of the everyday life of the school that blotted out memories of her old college days until one day, in the slow and certain unwinding of the days of her life, there was nothing of Jaggu left at all; all the memories had seeped away, dissolved as it were. Time had quenched the need for explanation, maybe even expiation, for the sense of false hope she had unwittingly generated in the hapless Jaggu.

There was a moment of unreasonable anger in Sarasu as she contemplated the question. What right had Jaggu to interrogate her on a few words spoken by her, some quarter of a century ago, in the rush and press of a railway station, in the stress and tension of a crisis involving her very life, and hold them against her now, twenty five years later, when the context of those words, their reference point, had long since become irrelevant. She could have, uncharacteristically, snapped out an answer, ‘I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden,’ and was indeed at the point of doing so, when she paused. Giridhar’s words about actions and consequences rang through her mind. It was after all her own deeds and words that had raised those false hopes in Jaggu. Indeed she could now remember that she had kissed him, not once, but twice and then had left him in the lurch with no explanations, so many years ago. Could she not have written to him, when it was finally clear in

her mind that she had made her choice? Perhaps she had not assessed the impact of the relationship and the traumatic manner of its termination on Jaggu. She needed to apologize and make amends.

She pressed the balls of her hands over her eyes and then raised her suddenly weary face. “Jaggu”, she began hesitantly, “as always you are right. One is never in control of circumstances around you. One is washed away by the ebb and flow of one’s actions. And being perfect was never on my agenda. I am the eternal ditherer, the queen of procrastination, the mistress of postponement.”

“I spent nine years on the shores of a foreign sea, contemplating the predicament of a marriage that I had been placed into, if not against my will, then at least without my conscious consent. But I had seen only half the truth. My thoughts about being wronged, my abhorrence of the practice that forces children into wedlock, and the conviction that I would not let myself be abused, had blinded me to the possibility that there may be reverent wisdom in the past, in the custom of the ages gone by. I came back to my native country to find that the choice made for me by my parents was perhaps the right one, although taken at the wrong time for the wrong reasons. Then I made the choice, consciously, clearly, and in full exercise of my mental capabilities, to stay with Giridhar. I had the luxury, therefore, of exercising my individual choice and, at the same time, complying with parental and social dictates.”

“This was a not a sudden revelation. It came to me slowly, silently and without prior notice. Before I knew it, I was hypnotized, ensnared, as it were, by the logic of the denouement. Even after the truth had stared me in the face, it took me an immeasurably long time to say yes to my self. And to Giridhar. Where could I have gone to, but to the very earth that my forefathers had lived on, had poured their sweat into for their food, and indeed, died on? This is me, this is my land, this is where I would live, and this is where I would surely like to die. And I am astonished that I was so blinded by the glare of the Brighton Sea, that I could not see the truth earlier.”

“And what about you, Jaggu, you have all the trappings of material success visibly apparent on you. A fine expensive suit, a chauffeur driven car, the corporate life style of a senior executive, a beautiful wife and two lovely children. You are educated, perceptive, well read and full of fine sensitivities. You have made a success of your life as very few could have. So what have you lost by my not coming back? To each his own, Jaggu, to each his own.”

“As to why I did not write to you earlier, well, I have no definite answers. I did not have a clue as to where you were, what state of mind you were in, and what consequences my sudden letter, if written, would have had on you. I was the coward, I was the one who ran away, I was the one who did not come back. What would I have written? That my bet on you was misplaced? Or, that right from the start, I was wrong? That I erred in having you as a friend? That I should not have given you the impression that we had a good thing going? Could I have ever told you that what we had considered as friendship, or affection, or even love, was not strong enough to survive the bitter cold or the blinding summer sky of Surpura? Could I have stated that I was content in my child husband, hopelessly and irretrievably content? And so I postponed and put off and finally put away forever. That’s it: no reasons, no excuses, and no nothing. You have made me speak my heart out today. And I shall not say anything more. I have exposed my vein to you and I would not have you bleed me any longer!”

Jaggu, aghast at the torrent that had poured out, stricken dumb at the words, stared back at her, with open mouth. In the stunning silence after her words, the quiet murmuring of the others in the hotel café itself seemed to have become muted. Then Sarasu smiled, “We have to go on with our own lives, Jaggu, the pages cannot be turned back. I did not intend to speak in this fashion. But there were some old bruises in you, and who knows, in me too, that needed to be re-healed. Truly, I wish you well, from the bottom of my heart, and pray for all the happiness that you can possibly have. We had a good time together and I shall treasure the happiness of those moments. Even now in my dreams, I sometimes see you and I and the others, on the steps of the college, talking, arguing, gesticulating, dreaming. Those were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end.... What wonderful days! But they are gone, and the old you and the old I are gone with them. We have our own lives, our own paths to trod and our own separate dreams to fulfill.”

After twenty-five years, this chance meeting should not end on a sour note, Jaggu thought sadly to himself. He smiled and said: “You have given me a lecture today on destiny and the passing of time, when all I asked you was a simple question. It was not my intention to remind you of things as they used to be. I would be the last person to ask you to consider even remotely the possibility of what may have been. I see that it is time for me to leave. I have a plane to catch. Well, let me wish you the best in your life and in all your dreams ahead. My regards to Giridhar and all the children you are helping to find their destiny.”

They moved out of the restaurant and into the darkening road outside. The seas across the drive were restless and the skies cloudy. There would be rain later in the night. A quick nod to each other, a wave of the hand and then they were moving away. As Jaggu walked to the car waiting for him, he shook his head ruefully and thought to himself, “Well, that’s that, maybe we’ll cross paths again another twenty-five years down the line.” The glow that had always been around his memories

of Sara, yes, she would always be Sara and not Sarasu to him, had dimmed, grown darker. From henceforth, the image of Sara would not arrive like welcome showers in times of melancholy and nostalgia.

As for Sarasu, there was a moment of regret. The mustard plant has a delicate and yellow petalled flower that is beautiful to behold when it dances in the wind against the backdrop of the fields, in contrast to the green leaves of the plant. The flower when crushed between the fingers yields a sharp aroma and its extracted oil, a pungency that can be acid and sour. She shook her head and thought to herself that the mustard flower had been too harsh, too sour. She did not need to have been so harsh, damn it, after all, it was just a chance meeting and it was just an innocent question. She shook her head and put the thought away from her head as she caught a taxi for the railway station. It seemed as if she had to halt at every red light on the way to the station.

She paid off the taxi driver, who charged, she thought, exorbitant rates and moved into the cavernous halls of the railway station. The din of the people and the shunting of the engines echoed and re-echoed in the vast space above her head. The train was already at the platform. Her sleeper berth was reserved and she soon enough found her compartment and her allotted seat. She arranged her things on the berth and in the space below the seat and waited for the train to move. As the cabin filled up with the rest of the passengers, she closed her eyes and allowed the main events of the day to pass through her head in silent replay. The project would now go well, after she had clarified a few things to the funding agencies about the school and its administration. The chance meeting with Jaggu had, she felt, not gone as well as it could have. After all, he had been a close friend once and if she had not taken the path less traveled, who knows what could have happened to their relationship. Well, she sighed, choices, alternatives, picking a preference, forks in the road: ultimately this is what life is all about, I guess.

As the train caught up speed and rushed on through the night, the wheels seemed to sing a song, the words of which she had heard when she was a tender child of just five years, but words which, some time ago, she had taken the trouble to learn and repeat and store inside her head. The first time she had heard them she had hardly noticed, had not understood a word of what they had meant. But now, they were eternally shining like a silver engraving in the recesses of her mind. With the rhythm of the wheels beating time, she repeated the now familiar words:

With God as our guide, let us take:

The first step for togetherness, respect and honor;

The second step to develop physical and emotional health;

The third step to increase spiritual health;

The fourth step to acquire knowledge, happiness, and harmony;

The fifth step to be blessed with a healthy family;

The sixth step to develop mutual restraint and longevity;

The seventh step to symbolize mutual love, friendship and companionship.

Then she thought again of the vows of fidelity and trust the old priest had chanted many years ago and the words came back to her now, so easily. Just about a year or so after she had landed back at Surpura, after all those years of alienation, Giridhar and she had repeated them at a small ceremony held at Chanderpur. By then, it was clear that their lives were bound inextricably together. The family had been ecstatic and Chatter Singh and Bhanukumari had experienced the limitless joy that awaits those who have patience. Fatima, grinning like a fool, with Ahmed in tow, was in attendance too. When the guests had left, Sarasu had sat down with the vows written out on a note-book and had learnt them line by line until they were embossed permanently in her mind. The Sanskrit slokas now reverberated in her inner ear, the lines that now sang in rhythm to the turning of the wheels of the train.

We shall both live together with mutual understanding, support and trust.

We will accept our happiness, sorrows, and difficulties together with cooperation and understanding.

We will try to lead a life as one soul and as one being.

We shall share all of our fortunes.

We will consult each other on all major decisions.

We shall be husband and wife, lovers, and partners, and pray to God for healthy children.

We shall promise to live with each other for the rest of our lives.

The train hummed the song as it bore the dozing Sarasu to her destination. It gave her peace and sublime bliss to know that she was going where she was meant to be: meant to be for all the days of her life.