A Heap of Ashes is a collection of nine short stories most of them set in Nepal. In my stories, I attempt to show how my characters’ thoughts and lives are affected by their socio-cultural milieu as well as their memories of the past. Though my stories don’t fall into any particular type, it’s easy to see certain recurrent themes and issues, such as loss, memory, dream, fear, melancholy, nostalgia and poverty. My stories are usually based on my own life experiences and reflect the protagonists’ problems with growth and adjustment to life and reality. My protagonists are usually male, ranging in age between adolescence and middle-age.
A HEAP OF ASHES

A Thesis

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by

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No More Fear, No More Guilt

Mukund was only eleven years old, and his parents had just entered middle age. The three of them lived in a three-room mud hut in a shanty section of Biratnagar, the town of his birth.

On a Saturday morning in April, Mukund sat at the southern end of the verandah, on a white plastic mat. The sun reached the mat, but it still felt so cold. The wind continued to prickle his face and neck. He wore a snow white T-shirt and ink-blue shorts. Behind him, inside his father’s room, a double bed, draped with a checked cotton sheet, sat against the opposite wall. His father’s clothes—a black kurta and a white suruwal—seemed to be watching him. His father’s old, black bicycle leaned over him, against a round bamboo post. The front wheel with its rusty mudguard turned toward him. He smelled the worn tire. Across the front yard, the latched tin gate blocked the view of the road. His father made sure to latch it, going in and out. A paperbound seventh grade English grammar lay open before him. Two months ago, when his father accompanied him to the school office for the quarterly progress report, the principal told him, “Dahal-ji, your son is not making any progress in English. He’s failed the subject again. Our attention at school alone is not enough. You need to watch him at home as well.” His father’s brown face became the color of yam with shame, as if he himself had failed. Mukund hated the principal not mentioning the other subjects which he had passed. Back home, his father slapped his face. In the evening, Miss Kamala stopped by to talk to his father about him. She recommended Narayan Dixit’s *English Grammar and Composition for Secondary Level* and told Mukund to come over to her house whenever he wanted help. His father bought the book immediately and said, handing it to him, “Now no movie until you memorize the whole book.”

As he tried to concentrate, the right side of his stomach, just below the navel, ached as if a screw was tightening. He kept shifting position. He hated to read on the weekend. But he had to if he didn’t want to be shouted at or caned by his father. His father was the only person in the world not to allow his son to have fun even one day a week. He thought of Biren, his classmate—how lucky he was, he had full freedom from his father on the
weekend. Okra sizzled in the kitchen at the other end of the verandah. His mother worked there quietly. In the back yard, where his father was having a bath, water splashed, an iron bucket clanked and the tube well grated. Suddenly the sound of a loudspeaker raced towards his house. A movie jeep! He strained his ears, fixing his eyes on the blue sky just over the bamboo wall. He caught only “Jaljala Cinema Hall” and “Gopi Krishna.” He leapt to his feet, jumped off the verandah, scuttled across the front yard, unlatched the tin gate and hit the wooden slab over the ditch just in time to glimpse the billboard on his side of the jeep. Rajesh Hamal, his favorite hero, stood like a tower with his hands on his hips against the fire-yellow background, in long hair and a black suit, a monkey on his shoulder holding his head, both looking at Mukund. The jeep raced past, the loudspeaker spitting words into the air. He peered through the dust that rose in clouds and spilled over the ditch and across the open yards of the thatched houses. Kids—his age and younger—clustered on the edge of their yards, covered in dust. The back billboard, a duplicate of the side one, blurred rapidly, then disappeared into dust.

“Mukund!” his father screamed.

He jolted around to face his father’s furious glare. He stood on the mat in a red cotton towel, beads of water gleaming across his hairy chest. As Mukund stepped near, his father’s hand shot above Mukund’s head. Mukund braced his face, expecting the hard hand to crash into it. Luckily it stopped short.

“Only movies!” His father gritted his teeth.

Mukund sat down, bending over the book.

After a few minutes, his mother called, “Babu! Come over to eat.” Her tone had its usual warm cadence. Babu was an affectionate name by which his mother called him, as long ago, when he was a toddler, his father called him Munna.

Mukund wouldn’t stir, until his father shouted his name again.

He sat down on a flat wooden seat next to his father, cross-legged like him. That was the traditional and proper way to sit in the kitchen. His father ranted between chewing his food while his fingers worked across his plate mixing rice, dal and okra into a tiny ball. His mother squatted on her seat opposite them. Beside her, two aluminum pots and one black iron pan sat on the warm clay stoves against the smoke-blackened wall. She was a slim woman of medium height with large eyes, long nose and thick lips. Her skin was
light brown, much lighter than his own. She wore a sky-blue cotton sari with a pattern of red roses.

“I ran into Miss Kamala last evening on my way back,” his father said, as his mother spooned rice onto a steel plate for him, her red and green glass bangles clinking. “She reminded me that Mukund’s pre-final is just a month away.”

Mukund felt a pang of worry.

“I’m sure Babu’ll pass this time. He seems serious about his exams,” she said.

His father shot a glance at her. “You always think he’s serious. But I know where his heart and mind are all the time. I’m damn sure he’s going to end up a shop assistant like me.”

“His other subjects are okay, it’s only English he’s having trouble with.”

“And he’s never in his lifetime going to pass that subject.”

“Why do you say that? My heart says Babu will not fail this time.”

What if I failed? Mukund thought as he ate quietly. He looked over at his father’s hand from the corner of his eye. He thought of the cane that leaned behind the door to his father’s room.

Even after the pre-final was over, Mukund’s father didn’t allow him to go to a movie. He looked angry. Mukund was dying to see Gopi Krishna. His stomach burned as he waited for his father to leave for the office. He didn’t understand why his father was delaying so much today—it was already eleven. At long last, his father came out of his room in a black kurta, a white suruwal and a pink and white Nepali cap. Mukund watched slyly as his father wheeled the bicycle out of the yard. Mukund breathed deeply as he imagined his father pedaling away. Rajesh Hamal’s smiling face and the monkey’s intent gaze jumped into his mind. He asked his mother for money.

“What? Movie? What if your father comes to know?”

“Please, ama. He won’t know. He won’t come until evening and I’ll be back by three.”

“I don’t have money. And make sure you’re back before your father. You know your father’s anger, don’t you?”

But all he could think of was the tall, superman-like figure of Rajesh Hamal and the monkey on his shoulders clutching his head.
The three-story building rose before him. The pink of the huge surface gleamed in the soft noon sun. A fast duet from the movie floated from an invisible loudspeaker on the roof: *Kaha chhau kahan*… Rajesh Hamal and his monkey stared down from the billboard without blinking their eyes. The billboard was below a metal sign. It read Jaljala in Devanagiri. The four big red letters climbed up a white iron bar in single file. The sign and the billboard both hung in the center of a narrow wall. The wall stuck out of the surface. It ran all the way down from the top of the building to the first floor, cutting the balconies in equal halves. Mukund stood on the other side of the narrow road, under the tin awning of an embroidery shop. He searched for a familiar face. About half a dozen watchers crowded each window. A crowd leaned on the railing on either side, above and below the billboard. They looked quite relaxed. Not all of them were unfamiliar. But there wasn’t one he could go over to and ask for money. A few times in the past he had run into a kind friend or relative. And he had managed to gain help.

A couple of black marketeers hung around the center of the road. They wore dirty T-shirts and their hair was tousled. They held pink, green and yellow tickets in their hands. They shouted prices. Five rupees for the pink one. All the time four to five people would crowd around them. They would buy after bargaining a little and rush to the entrance. Then another four to five would gather around him. Oh, just five rupees and he would have the pink one! That would give him the right to sit in the front section of the stalls. Rickshaws and cars slowed down and honked.

He weaved his way through the traffic, and headed to the entrance through a crowd of noisy vendors. They served tidbits to their customers with one hand and took money from them with the other. Inside, it felt less cold. Posters of newly released movies stuck high around the walls. The rear door to the stalls gaped open. Some couples stood in line with their children holding tickets in their hands. The doorman, a dark fat man in a white kurta pajama, faced them. He tore the tickets, kept the halves in his hand and handed them the other halves before they entered. Mukund stepped near the door. He inhaled the warm air that blew out. Inside, beyond the farthest row of seats, a strip of black cloth with folds stretched around the light cream screen. Around the black cloth, colorful bulbs lighted up red roses. The roses curved along the concrete edges of the walls that stuck out. None of
these faces was familiar enough. But he didn’t lose hope because music had not started floating from the screen yet.

He ran up the stairs to the first floor; looked at the people lining up before the doorman; searched the corridors, the snack stalls and the restroom; looked around each railing and each window; then ran up the stairs to the second floor, and did the same. But he saw nobody he knew well enough.

He ran down the stairs, taking a quick look at the people at the doors. His heart raced. The screen had started booming out a song. He might still run into someone, a latecomer, he thought. And thank god a million times he spotted Biren, his classmate, on the road.

He wore a gray and black checked shirt tucked into black trousers that like always were too tight at his bulging hip. He held a pink ticket in a hand and was in the middle of taking out money from his back trouser pocket. Mukund ran over.

Biren had a big, round face with a bulbous nose. “Sorry I don’t have money,” he said, hurrying towards the entrance.

“Biren, please,” Mukund said, hurrying after him.

“I’m sorry, friend. But I’m telling you the truth. I don’t have money.”

“Ok, I have an idea.” Mukund tried to grab his friend’s arm and stop him. “You enter the hall, come out with the stub and give it to me. I’ll enter with the help of it.”

“And me?” Biren stopped.

“You can enter without it. The doorman will recognize you. He won’t ask you to show your ticket stub so soon.”

Biren said, “Okay,” and rushed to the entrance.

Mukund waited outside. After a couple of minutes, Biren showed up. He handed the stub to Mukund and waited. Mukund headed to the door to the rear stalls. The doorman didn’t stop him. Mukund entered and waited in the warm dark of the aisle. A trailer showed. In a few minutes, Biren entered. They both headed to Biren’s seat in the front rows.

Mukund squeezed against Biren’s warm body. Above them a colorful, flickering beam of light projected onto the screen. Biren seemed to watch with full absorption. But Mukund kept glancing toward the usher. The tall man moved slowly along the row ahead
of them, checking tickets with his torch. Mukund’s heart jumped. He wished the tall man would skip his row. But the usher soon entered his row.

“How come you two are sharing the same seat?” The tall man waved the torch at them.

Biren showed his ticket stub. Mukund couldn’t find his voice. How he wished the tall man would let him watch the movie!

The tall man grabbed Mukund by the wrist, led him to the door and pushed him out. The doorman also glared at him.

Mukund ate slowly. Like always, father and son sat cross-legged beside each other. An oil-lamp burned steadily between his mother and the two of them.

“Eat well, babu. How thin you’ve grown!” The bangles clinked as his mother helped Mukund to some more rice.

“Yes, you have to be strong enough for the final exams.” His father’s voice sounded stern but not angry.

His father probably didn’t know he had sneaked away to the theatre. That he had cried and made a scene with his mother about not giving him money to see a movie. Mukund still cursed the tall man. What the hell did he get out of expelling him? He envied Biren. How kind and generous his parents were! Mukund’s mother stared at him. There was sympathy across her face. Probably she still saw tears in his eyes.

“Please don’t be so hard on him.” The muscles under her eyes puckered in sympathy as she pleaded to his father for him. “All children have a good time after exams. Rich parents even take their children on trips. Please, take him to a movie.”

For a long moment, his father didn’t respond, then said, “Okay,” without looking up. “The results are coming out tomorrow. If you come from school with the news that you’ve passed in all subjects, I’ll show you a movie.”

The school grounds were almost empty of students. A vendor—a short dark man in a torn gray sweater stirred chatpati in a green plastic mug with a small smooth stick. Just about half a dozen boys and girls gathered around him. They were not from Mukund’s class. Mukund smelled lemon as he passed the crowd. They didn’t talk of results.
He passed another four to five girls down the long straight corridor. They too were from a different class. They didn’t talk of results, either. He walked over to the square wooden notice board that hung on the wall of the corridor next to the principal’s office. He heard the principal talking politics in his loud voice with some teachers. He sounded like a person paralyzed in the lower jaw. Mukund peered through the wire net, looking for long columns of names under the heading of Pre-final Results. But the board was covered with other notices. There was no notice about the pre-final results. Then he felt somebody behind him and turned.

“Oh, Biren, what about our results, friend. It was scheduled to come out today, wasn’t it?”

“I think so. Let’s ask the principal,” Biren said.

They paused in the doorway. Mukund felt hesitant.

The principal looked to be in his forties. He had a plump face with bushy eyebrows. He leaned back in a blue upholstered chair, his hairy hands on the armrest, behind a rectangular desk draped with a green cloth. He spoke with his chin up so the betel didn’t slip out of his mouth. Red betel dribble stained the corners of his mouth. Paperbound attendance registers were piled on one side and a sky-blue globe stood on the other. On the wall over his head hung two framed pictures of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya. Most of the teachers were present. They looked younger than the principal. The rest of them sat in the wooden chairs against the walls, their heads twisted toward the principal.

“Excuse me, sir,” Mukund said to the principal. “Our results?”

“They are ready, but we just couldn’t get them typed in time. So go home, come tomorrow,” the principal said, and went on with his talk.

Miss Kamala smiled at Mukund and Biren, and turned back to the principal.

Mukund talked little as he walked beside his friend down the sidewalk. Dusty green weeds grew out of ditch water in thick clusters along the side. The smells of the weeds and the stagnant water filled the air. Biren summarized the movie. Mukund listened, silently cursing the principal. Mukund might have found his name on the top of the list, who knows. At one place, he picked up a dry hard stem and walked beating and slashing the weeds.
“I’m sorry you couldn’t watch the movie yesterday,” Biren said.

“Never mind.” Mukund tried to sound calm, but he couldn’t help cursing the usher. Then suddenly his eyes flashed. “Biren, I can see the movie if you’ll do me a favor one more time.”

Biren frowned.

“I have an idea. You just come home with me and tell my mother I’ve passed all subejects,” Mukund said.

“But that’s a lie. The result hasn’t come out yet.”

“Won’t you lie once to help your friend? Please!” Mukund said.

“Okay,” Biren said.

Mukund’s mother greeted his father loudly with the news as he wheeled the bicycle in around six o’clock. He stood beside his mother, blushing.

His father’s eyes bulged. “Wow! What great news!”

The handlebars slipped from his hands, and the bicycle hit the pillar. He darted over and lifted Mukund up above him, then clasped him to his chest and kissed his forehead loudly, saying, “My Munna, my darling Munna.” Then he said, “You did it? Oh, I can’t believe it.”

Mukund couldn’t believe he was being cuddled and kissed by his father.

“Okay, which movie do you want to see?” he said.

“Gopi Krishna!” For the first time Mukund named a movie to his father without any fear.

“Okay, I was supposed to meet somebody at seven o’clock. But today no meeting, no business. We’ll go to the movie.” He looked so friendly and sounded so friendly.

He watched the movie beside his father. The colorful beam of light flickered above them. His father’s arm warmed him around his shoulder. His callused hands squeezed his fingers lightly. The tall man waved his torch as he slowly moved along a couple of rows ahead of them. But Mukund didn’t bother about him now. He had grinned, “Please,” showing them to their seats. The fat doorman too had smiled at them politely handing the stubs back to his father. Ecstasy flowed through him as he watched his superhero and the monkey dance across a square and up and down the steps of a temple. But a significant
part of this elation came from the warm body contact with his father. He was surprised he
didn’t fear his father any longer. They laughed and shouted together, like friends. How
his father had shouted when his mother had given him the news! How he had lifted him
into the air! Squeezed and kissed him! Mukund inhaled his warm breath, tasted his lips
smelled his chest and heard the heartbeat through the black kurta. He felt tears fill his
eyes. How wrong he was to think that his father didn’t love him. How much his father
really cared about him! Wanted him to do well in his studies! Then he began to worry as
he pictured his father’s shocked face after getting the correct news tomorrow.

All night he prayed in bed beside his mother.

Next day Mukund didn’t dare to go to school or even meet Biren and ask about his
result. At lunch his father said he would himself go and collect the report in a couple of
days. So for a couple of days, the storm kept outside the gate.

Around six o’clock, Mukund’s heart hammered as he sat on the mat peering into the
blue fog that hung over the gate. The light of the kerosene lamp hanging overhead on the
bamboo beam reflected on the rusty tin. His father had said during the lunch that some
time today he’d take an hour off from his shop and ride to the school.

His father’s cap suddenly gleamed. His hand reached over to lift the latch. It clunked
and the gate creaked open. Inside, he leaned the bike against his waist to push the gate
back shut and replace the latch. His mother, who was coming from the back yard with
rinsed pots, stopped. His father didn’t look at her or at him, for that matter. He just
limped over pushing the bike like an old man and let it go against the post. “What’s the
matter?” His mother’s voice sounded very concerned. A corner of the pale blue card
stuck out of the waist pocket of his kurta. Mukund could see on his father’s quiet face
what the report card contained.

His father entered his room. The dim light of the lamp on the table threw his shadow
on the opposite wall. It moved and met him as he hung his kurta on a wall peg, finally
merged with him as he collapsed on the bed. His mother returned immediately after
putting away the pots in the kitchen, and stepped in. Mukund got up to his feet and edged
after her. She turned up the lamp and asked, “What’s the matter?” When he didn’t reply,
she said, “Did he fail again?” His father kept staring up at the thin bamboos that
crisscrossed the thatch, arms and legs splayed out. Mukund scanned his father’s face from behind his mother. His father’s face didn’t look angry as he had expected. It looked extremely sad and tired.

That evening his father didn’t eat dinner. Mukund thought maybe in the morning he would rage his heart out or cane him and then would return to his normal self. But the next day and for several days after that, his father remained silent. His mother behaved more politely to his father than ever. Mukund would make sure to keep seated on the mat with his English grammar and read at the top of his voice. He wouldn’t stop even when a movie jeep would race by shouting. But nothing seemed to appease his father. Walking in and out the door, his father wouldn’t even glance toward him. Mukund wanted to tell him, “Papa, I won’t fail in the final.” But he didn’t have the nerve to say this after such a shameful lie.

When Mukund opened the gate to go over to Miss Kamala’s, he wanted his father to yell, Where the hell are you going? But he didn’t give a damn. His mother offered to explain, “He’s going over to Miss Kamala’s for help with his English.” His father’s response was silence.

The exam schedule was posted on the notice board. It was to begin in fifteen days. As usual, English was on the first day. He had to devote all of this time to English to bring about a difference. Alternately Mukund screamed grammar rules and murmured through the story and essay books—Miss Kamala had counseled him that rote learning alone would not help, that he’d have to read English texts as well to have a sense of grammar. He put off his dinner until bedtime to avoid feeling drowsy. He wouldn’t budge from the mat until he dosed off over the books, when his mother would wake him up, feed him with her hand and walk him to bed. Mukund went to sleep hours after his father and got up hours earlier. Still the sadness of his father’s face didn’t go. Probably he had taken it for granted that Mukund wasn’t ever going to pass, or that he was just pretending to be serious like always.

By the time the exam was a day away, there wasn’t a page in his grammar Mukund hadn’t committed to memory and he had read the English textbooks a hundred times over. Still he re-read them until after midnight, and into his dream.
The seating arrangement was two students to each bench, a sixth grader and a seventh grader. Biren was right ahead of him. Mukund’s head felt rather muddled because of the late hours he had kept over the last month. He felt confident though, as he wrote his name and roll number on the cover page of the answer book. Unlike before, he didn’t whisper a word of request to his friend that he show his answers to him. Today he was determined to attempt all the questions on his own.

But his confidence and determination shook when Miss Kamala emerged with a thick brown packet of questions. When she passed out a question paper to him, his hand trembled. His palms began to sweat. His heart hammered as he read the questions.

For the first fifteen minutes Mukund couldn’t decide which question to begin with. He didn’t feel sure about any of them. His mind had gone blank. Miss Kamala stood close behind him. He felt her eyes on his hand. Probably she wanted to know whether he had followed her advice or he was just waiting for an opportunity to crib from Biren’s answer book. Like always, she was going to keep a close watch until the last minute so he wouldn’t be able to crib any answer. When his pen didn’t move for another fifteen minutes and tears fell from his eyes onto the white paper, she asked him in a kind voice, “What’s the matter, Mukund?” She walked down the aisle and stood in the doorway, mostly looking outside. Probably, she pitied him, Mukund thought. He almost stretched his hand forward to nudge his friend, who had finished about three pages. But then he remembered his father’s sad face. He didn’t want to bring his smile back by another lie or dishonest means. I’d rather fail one more time than pass by cribbing, he thought. He wiped his tears and forced his pen down. He skipped the grammar section and started on the essay: Education. He crossed out half a dozen sentences until he came up with, “Honesty is the foundation of education.” After this line his pen more or less kept steady, and by the time he returned to grammar section, his head was clear.

He wasn’t sure how well English had gone, but he knew he wouldn’t fail. He worked equally hard on the other subjects.

The day when the results were to come out Biren knocked on the gate and shouted, “Mukund!” but Mukund was too nervous to go to school. Two hours later, around one o’clock, Biren was knocking and shouting his name again. He rushed over to open the gate. “Mukund, can you believe it? You’ve topped the class.” Mukund thought his friend
was joking. They ran in the back yard, where his mother was washing clothes. “Auntie, can you believe it? Mukund has topped the class.” She jumped to her feet and pulled Mukund’s head to her chest with her soapy hands.

In the evening, when his mother broke this news to his father, he responded by silence. But when he leaned the bike against the post, Miss Kamala was knocking on the gate. His father went over. She congratulated Mukund by patting his head, then congratulated his parents and left.

“Is this really true?” his father scowled at Mukund and his mother.

“Yes,” Mukund blushed with pride.

“Can’t you trust even Kamala?” his mother said.

“Oh, today I can’t trust anybody,” he said smiling. Then he gritted his teeth and howled, lifting Mukund into the air. He kissed his forehead and lips, calling him, “My darling Munna,” over and over. “Okay, tonight we’re all watching a movie. Munna, tell me which movie?”

“Gopi Krishna,” Mukund said.

“What? The same movie?” his father said.

“Yes,” Mukund nodded.

The three of them went to the movie. Warmed between his parents, Mukund watched his superhero’s performance again, this time with full concentration because there was no more fear, no more guilt.
The Dream of the Old House

On a cold November morning, Raju wakes up in a well-furnished room on the ground floor of his sister's newly built two-story house, feeling very low. After a few minutes, he sits up, tucking the blanket around himself.

The light filtering in through both muslin-curtained windows—the one at his head and the one next to the door facing him—is dim. Everything around him is a dusty color: the white walls, his sister's gilt-framed paintings hanging on them, the white ceiling fan, the cherry carpet, and the mahogany bookcase and table holding his tenth grade books.

Like every morning, he begins to miss the austere, but spacious, room he used to sleep in. The tiny rounds and ovals of sunlight patterning the walls. The long, straight gold shafts shooting from behind through the holes of the rusty steel windowpanes, teeming with floating silver dust particles. Even on winter mornings, when he opened his eyes, he'd see them there, greeting him. It seemed as if they appeared every morning to invite him to get out of bed and participate in the world of play and fun, which awaited him outdoors among other neighborhood boys.

Every morning he feels a fresh stab in his heart when he returns to the awareness that there's nothing left of that house, nothing.

It was right here—where this new house has come into existence—that his dad's old two-storied house with a front garden, a back garden and a courtyard, stood majestically until three years ago. "It's the first-ever two-story concrete house of the neighborhood, and he built it with his own hands, a few years before marrying me," his mother often said to him when they lived in the old house. She used to describe how his dad suffered and struggled to build it. Even in this new house, the first few days she would mention the old house, at least once, while serving meals at the table. Raju always enjoyed it and often asked his mother to say more about it, but his sister didn't seem interested: she just ate her meal quietly, without responding or saying anything about it. Now there’s no talk at all about the house. Perhaps they’ve forgotten it. How quickly!

His watch shows eight o'clock, Monday, fifteen. But he suspects that fifteen isn't right. He doesn't know which day of the month it is: he hasn't set the date of his watch for
several days. Thank goodness his watch is automatic, or else he'd never know the accurate time. He wishes every month had thirty days, for then he wouldn't have to go to the trouble of setting the date at the end of every month.

Eight o'clock isn't an unusual hour for him to wake up. Neither is it unusual for him to feel, when he wakes up, the way he's feeling now, like flying off somewhere, away from the house. The wound of his heart is getting more and more painful. And, therefore, despite the cold, with a shivering jerk of his shoulders, he chucks the blanket off and walks out of the room. The corridor is filled with a medley of sounds: the jabber of the television, his sister's loud conversation with her husband, and the sizzle of the kitchen. He enters the pink-tiled bathroom, which he's still not used to.

He changes into a dark bluish-gray sweater and black cotton trousers, both old and faded. As usual, before his mum calls him for breakfast, he slips out through the back door. He avoids the front door because he doesn't want to be seen by his sister and her husband, who, at this time, are in the drawing room down the corridor, next to the front door. And if there’s a guest, which is likely, then no doubt his sister is bragging about what she calls the unique architecture of the house, about the high cost of this or that item of furniture, and about her plan to add a couple of new items to the furnishings. And his brother-in-law must be listening quietly, nodding all the time with an exaggerated show of humility and gentleness.

Everybody calls his sister and his brother-in-law an ideal couple. Everybody holds his sister in high esteem for her fame and material rise. Everybody calls his-brother-in-law a decent husband and a well-bred man. Even mum, when talking to guests, is so full of praise for her son-in-law and gratitude for the way her daughter has looked after her and him after her husband’s death. But Raju can’t help hating them.

He walks along the yellow side of the house. The two rows of windowpanes are misted up, and the ground and the conifer trees lining the boundary walls are sodden. Everything beyond the boundary walls is shrouded in mist.

Padding down the stone-paved front walk, between the white wrought-iron railings that fence a strip of lawn on one side and an oblong bed of roses, cannas, marigolds and hollyhocks on the other, he prays he isn't noticed leaving.
"Look at our spoilt nawab!" his sister would say to her husband grumpily, if she caught him through the glass-pane of the window. "Hardly ever does he get out of bed before eight o'clock. And then he's off to God knows where. Sleeping, eating and roaming are the only things in the world he knows. Does he have any worry that there's barely a month to go before his final exams? But what else can you expect of a person who gets free food and a good house to live in?"

And his brother-in-law would add, camouflaging his dislike of him with a polite tone of wonder, "What a time to take walks!"

His sister is a tall, sturdily built woman with a freckled face and thick hands that have many a time twisted his ears and slapped his cheeks. Her husband is a stocky little man with receding hair, thirty years old, ten years older than she is. Both are brown-skinned.

Raju can hear snatches of her high, boastful voice drowning out the sound of the television, drifting towards him through the front door. He hopes the window is too misted for their sharp, roving eyes. He can't help feeling their eyes following him, though. He warns himself to beware of looking back at the house, lest he be called and scolded for roaming the market and not paying enough attention to his studies. As he steps out of the gate into the street and pulls it shut behind his back, he lets out a long deep breath.

Nearly half an hour later, he's sipping tea from a china cup with his frozen lips, seated on a bench in Sharma-ji's tea-stall. It's quiet except for an occasional hoot of a speeding car or bus, as it's too early for traffic. The stall has a flat tin roof, and its walls are improvised out of old, dark gray planks of wood and black, tattered sheets of tar drum. Since it's blocked from the pedestrians' view by the shops that line the street, to one of which it's adjoined, back to back, it's patronized by very few, exclusively those who are addicted to Sharma-ji's tea. It has a small patch of land in front, divided from the white multi-story building of a marwari businessman by an old mossy wall. There's an ancient pipal tree close to the wall, sticking one of its limbs out over the marwari's side, too. Around it is a litter of dirty paper, cans and bottles, mixed with leaves, all washed with the dew that fell overnight from the green canopy. On the edge of the litter is a small-sized black drum made into a tank, with a metal tap sticking out of its base and a water-
soaked wooden slab next to it. This is the place where Sharma-ji washes his dirty pots and clothes and has his bath.

Despite the unsightly mound of litter, this is Raju's favorite tea-stall, about half an hour's walk from his sister's house. He comes twice a day, for morning and late afternoon tea. At first, he picked it for its least-crowdedness, compared to the other tea-stalls around the area, but in the last year he's developed a particular predilection for it, the reason being Sharma-ji's sweet avuncularity towards him.

As he sips, slouching against a large oblong lattice of bamboo strips—which is leaned against the side cement wall of a shop, and which obviously serves as the gate of Sharma-ji's stall at night—he finds himself gazing fondly at the old man's round, stubby face. Except for the wrinkles, white hair and bald patch, Sharma-ji is like him: thin, medium-sized and fair-complexioned. He's squatting on an old wooden cot in his white threadbare dhoti, wrapped up in a torn black blanket. His head is jiggling over his wrinkled hands, which feebly pound a piece of ginger on a small flat stone with the head of a little handle-less hammer. At his side are small uniform jars of crisp biscuits, beaten rice and bhujia, arranged in a neat row; clean white china cups and saucers and a few tumblers stacked up on an aluminum tray; and a large clean steel bucket of drinking water and a steel jug. The boiling kettle in front of him is sending up steam, whizzing jets of blue and yellow flame of the kerosene stove licking its bottom furiously.

Raju doesn't know much about this man's background. Yet something makes him feel as if he knows so much about him! As if he's known him for much longer than a year, and has a deeper relationship with him than his mind can fathom. How old is he? Raju asks himself. If he happens to live as long as Sharma-ji, is he going to be just like him? Is he also going to have so many wrinkles, some running across his brow, some fanning out from his eyes, and one curving from each corner of his mouth? How terrible it must be being an old man and living and running a teashop in a small rented single-room shack! Away from home! Does he have a home, in any part of the world?

These questions give way to thoughts about his dad's house. He sees its huge walls looking like checkerboards, brown and gray, the plaster flaking off all over. Then the permanently open courtyard doors facing each other—one leading out into the front garden abutting on the street, and the other into the back garden. Whenever he played
near any of these doors his dad would call out, "Son, take care you don't move the door!"
The mossy bricks, which formed the top and sides of each door, holding the frame in place, had come loose, and so there was the danger of some bricks falling out if one made the foolish attempt to move it.

The house had become decrepit before time from a lack of regular white wash and repairs, just as a poor man ages too fast from malnutrition.

When something jolts him out of his reverie, he hears the horn of a passing vehicle blaring repeatedly. The way Sharma-ji's face is turned toward him questioningly makes him think that he's asked him a question.

"Yes?"

"What're you thinking about, Raju?" Sharma-ji asks, affectionately.

He's usually a quiet, serious-looking man, going about his work with concentration while the customers talk and laugh over their tea in his shop. He doesn't mind how long they make their single cup of tea last, or what they talk about or laugh at, as long as they keep their noise within civil limits. That failing, he loses his temper and doesn't shy from snapping at them.

He's also a self-respecting man: welcoming and serving customers with an obsequious smile is foreign to him. He keeps the same dignified face and has the same self-respecting, firm tone of voice for all who visit his shop, rich or poor. And all speak to him politely in deference to his age, addressing him as Sharma-ji.

But there's one person with whom he sloughs his serious and firm exterior, whom he does greet with a smile, and with whom he's all softness: that's Raju. The reason may be that Raju is always quiet and gentle; or that he's much younger than these other customers; or that somehow the old man knows that he's too vulnerable to bear hard words.

"Oh, it's nothing," Raju lies. Sharma-ji knows that his dad is dead, but he hasn't told him anything about the old house or about the dreams that he has at night.

Sharma-ji asks him about his schoolwork, directing his eyes down to the kettle.

"It's so-so." Raju refrains from telling him that he doesn't feel like studying at all; that all his reading time is spent daydreaming or learning to use a paintbrush on a canvas.

"When're your exams? You must do well in all your subjects this time."
When the results of his ninth grade exams came out and he brought Sharma-ji the news that he'd got the highest mark in English, Sharma-ji’s eyes shone and he exclaimed with joy. He instantly got out a twenty-rupee note from his wooden cash box and rushed him to a nearby shop to fetch sweets. When he pushed the first laddu of the packet into Raju's mouth, it was hard for Raju to blink back tears. Although he didn't feel so happy—his marks in the other subjects were far too ordinary—Sharma-ji's happiness for him was quite touching.

"They're starting next month. But I don't think I'm going to do well."

"What's the matter?" Sharma-ji shoots him a glance of concerned frown.

Perhaps Sharma-ji thinks that for one who has lost his father at such a tender age, education is indispensable, because it's the only way to a safe and respectable life.

"Nothing, I just have a feeling that I can't do well." Raju doesn't tell him what's been bothering him so overwhelmingly.

"Oh, don't entertain such feelings, Raju. They don't do any good. Tell me how do you like the tea?"

"Oh, it's very nice, as nice as ever," Raju replies, smiling at him politely.

"It's because of the ginger." Sharma-ji turns away, picking up a fresh cup and saucer from the tray.

“Yes, ginger.” Raju’s voice becomes feeble with emotion. He watches Sharma-ji set it in front of him, trying hard to hold back tears. He can’t say, Sharma-ji, it’s your love, not the ginger, that makes your tea so sweet.

"Ginger doubles the taste of tea in winter," Sharma-ji says. “And it's good for health, too. It keeps off cold, you know." Sharma-ji speaks at length about ginger's medicinal value and its different therapeutic uses.

Like dad, Raju says to himself, except for his age—his dad died at the age of fifty, of a heart attack caused by overwork. He asks Sharma-ji his age.

"Sixty-five." He sounds boastful, as if having lived a long life is in itself something of an achievement. At any rate, what does this poor, old man have to take pride in, except that he's still living at the age of sixty-five?

So that's the voice of a sixty-five-year-old man, Raju says to himself.
"Sixty-five?" Raju echoes him, just to compare his voice with Sharma-ji’s. He finds that the fourteen-year-old voice is depressingly weaker. Then he examines the fourteen-year-old hand and notices two thick grayish-green veins on the back, snaking into the sleeve of the sweater.

"What's your age, twenty-two? You must be in your twenties, I suppose?"

Raju looks up at him with a start, suspecting that Sharma-ji has caught him examining his hand. But he's relieved to find him pouring out steaming hot tea into a cup through the spout of the kettle.

"Not twenty-two. Fourteen. Just fourteen." He looks back at his hand again, examining his skin, unable to believe that he looks so old.

Sharma-ji holds out a second cup of tea to him, looking him in the eye. "But I'm flat broke," Raju says, hesitating to take it from his hand.

"Did I ask you for money?"

Raju's eyes mist over, as he shakes his head, looking into the old man’s eyes, whose glint seems to say, Raju, you're like my son.

"Thanks," Raju chokes out, taking the tea.

The old man collects the cups and saucers from Raju's side and moves towards the tank.

In the last year, Raju has come to owe him hundreds of rupees. At first, he'd hesitated in running an account with him, not knowing anything about his paying capacity, his nature or his whereabouts. Wasn't his suspicion right that in the end Raju wouldn't square his account with him? But instead of making a scene, drawing a crowd of passers-by from the street—as most shopkeepers do when they catch an old runaway customer, who suddenly stopped turning up without clearing his long-standing due—Sharma-ji came to have a soft spot for him. Although he's run up an enormous bill, Sharma-ji hasn't so much as mentioned it to him and rather seems to have stopped bothering about it. He still knows very little about his family and has never seen his place; all he knows is that he resides in his sister's house. And all Raju knows about him is that his thirty-year-old son is off in India somewhere with his wife, maybe running a teashop like his.
"Where's your house, Sharma-ji?" Raju asks when he's back on the cot, squatting on his haunches, like before, puffing on a fresh cigarette.

"House!" Sharma-ji gasps, chuckling bitterly to the honks of a vehicle horn. "What are you talking about, Raju? How can you imagine a tea-seller owning a house?"

He fishes a cigarette out of the breast pocket of his kurta, lights it in the stove flame, and has a few puffs, looking toward the multi-story building.

"You mean you don't have any house, not even an ancestral one? Like me?"

"No, not like you. At least, you have your sister's house, don't you?"

Raju says nothing. He can't find voice to say that his sister's house doesn't make him feel happy and proud as his dad's did; that it makes him feel like an orphan; that it stinks of her pity.

"My father did have a house, built of brick," Sharma-ji continues, frowning wistfully, "way back, in Sonapur. I was born in that house. It was a…" he trails off, his face darkening.

"What happened to it?" Raju holds his breath, bracing himself to hear about the terrible fate of the house.

"It doesn't exist any more." Sharma-ji pauses to take another puff. Then he says, rather matter-of-factly, smoke streaming from his nostrils, "It fell down in the earthquake of 1960."

Raju’s house was demolished after his dad's sudden death, bringing an end to his happiness and pride. As long as his father lived, his sister's desire hadn't prevailed, though she would complain tirelessly of the leaky roof and weak walls and the danger of the house collapsing in a heavy rain. She couldn't summon up the nerve to tell him the truth outright: that since she became a national celebrity—after her decoration by the Prime Minister as the best living woman painter of Nepal—she felt ashamed to have visitors in this house. Her bedroom, downstairs on one side of the single rickety wood flight of stairs, which had to double as a painting room as well, and the drawing room on the other side—both were disgusting to her.

Each time his sister broached the subject, his dad would merely respond with a vague nod. He's sure his dad sensed—as well as he did—her wish to pull it down to build a new
one. Her painting school had become quite a going concern by then, and the vet, her husband-to-be, would be only too willing to give her any amount of money. To destroy his paradise!

He's sure his dad would never have allowed her to pull down the house which he'd built with his own hands, and which he loved and prided himself on so much.

She must often reflect gleefully how his death enabled her at last to have her way. But Raju wishes someone would tell her that she's mistaken if she thinks she's destroyed the house completely. It’s merely transplanted to his mind, where not even she can get her destructive hands on it.

In the pale diffuse light that escapes the thinning mist, the street bustles with bicycles, rickshaws, motorcycles, and cars. The narrow sidewalk is thronged with fortune-tellers, cobblers, vendors, and pedestrians lounging around them or passing them. Weaving his way, amidst their voices mingled with the hoots and jangles of traffic, he thinks about the old man reminiscing about his father's house, fixing his gaze on one of the little pipal plants sprouting from the mossy wall. When he turned, Raju noticed in the old eyes a sparkle of an emotion he's only too familiar with. It was a silly question to ask if he didn't miss his father's house sometimes. Who wouldn't miss his father's house—the house where he was born, where the sweet days of his childhood were spent, and where he experienced pure and infinite love for the first and last time?

He tries to imagine the earthquake and the house falling down. Then he tries to remember his dad's house falling, and he realizes for the first time that he can't. Was he not present when the house was being pulled down? He can't have been anywhere else; he's sure of that. Why then is it impossible to remember watching the house fall? Perhaps it'd be possible, had it not transplanted to his mind. Or perhaps it's because mortality and immortality, eternity and transience, can't be imagined together?

The house is so vivid in his mind—each side, each part, and each detail. Each inward glance stabs him with nostalgia. It reigns there as the best of all houses that have ever been or will ever be.

He loved the house, and he'd die to have it back the way it was.
The dreams haven't only been about the same old house, but have invariably featured him center stage. They've been like the replay of many video shots taken of him before his dad's death. In the dreams, he sees himself frisking about the house or rolling in the sunny front garden with his playmates from the neighborhood.

Or he sees himself lying on his back beside his dad on a bare, wooden cot, looking at the evening stars, amidst the buzz of nameless insects and the frequent honks and rattles of passing vehicles, his dad telling him a story of an angel that descends to the earth to help a human being in trouble.

Sometimes he finds himself thudding up the wooden staircase and careering down the veranda, singing out, unafraid, "Dad! Dad!" Then bursting into his room, hurling himself into his lap on the bed, slipping his arms around his neck, interrupting his reading a philosophical book. Then fingering or browsing the shelves of his old-fashioned walnut bookcase that contained books on literature, history, religion, philosophy and so on, and meddling with one of them.

Sometimes, in one of the rooms upstairs, he finds himself uprooting and tasting the light green plants sprouting in different spots. They're where during the monsoons rain drips and his mum keeps him busy setting aluminum bowls.

Sometimes he watches and hears little colorful birds chirping and trilling sweetly and familiarly, feeding their nestling in the top crannies of a room, or just flapping from one ventilator to another.

Sometimes, upstairs, he's thrilled when the floor beneath his feet vibrates as a heavy lorry rattles past.

In last night’s dream, he was jumping on the gray cement steps that led down from the high ground floor veranda to the rectangular, cowdung-washed courtyard, shouting at the top of his voice, "I've turned nine! I've turned nine!" in time with the light thuds of his feet. He'd just heard his mum say to his dad, "You know today Raju turns nine."

In another dream, a couple of nights ago, he saw himself in the courtyard, moving around the tulsi muth, nearly as tall as he, picking leaves from the holy plant and putting them in his mouth. Even absorbed in himself, he could see that both his mum and dad were watching him, brought up short by his tomfoolery. His mum was sitting cross-legged on the steps leading up to the kitchen opposite the drawing room, a nanglo of rice
in her lap. And his dad was sitting on the steps to the storeroom opposite his sister's bedroom, stripped to the waist, a book in his thick hand. She was dressed in a red flower-patterned cotton sari, her hair in plaits, and a sindur tika running halfway along the center parting. His dad's tall, well-built body and fair complexion made a familiar and pleasant contrast with his mum's small, slim figure with slightly dark skin. Neither of them was scolding him for the sacrilegious act, or even showing a sign that they thought it sacrilegious. His mum was saying to his dad, laughing, "Look, he's imitating you!" and he was laughing, too.

His mum was right: in the dream, he was trying to imitate his dad, as he'd always done in reality.

Every morning, after his bath, his dad would come here straight from the pump in his wet towel. Then he'd tip a lota of water, very gently, over the tulsi plant. And, after moving around it a few times with his palms joined, he'd bow and touch his head to the rim of the muth, shutting his eyes. After that, he'd pick some leaves, which would be his first food of morning.

He'd solemnly follow this morning ritual, but his solemnity would instantly dissolve into a loving smile when he found Raju standing beside him, watching. He'd understand what his son was waiting for—he'd put one or two leaves on his outstretched palm, saying, "Here you go." And Raju would put them in his mouth, chewing at it for a long time. Sometimes, especially during breakfast or lunch, he'd talk about the mythology and the medicinal value of tulsi plants, both Raju and his mum listening spellbound.

His mum also worshipped the tulsi muth, but without knowing so much about the plant. All she knew was that Tulsi is a goddess and every Hindu must have her muth built in the yard of their house and worship it everyday. Besides, her method of worship was very brief and not at all as dramatic as his dad's.

The tulsi muth lent the house a spiritual aura and must have been as old as the house itself.

With a canvas from Birat Stationery Centre underneath his sweater, he pushes open the wicket gate and confronts the garish, yellow-and-ochre facade of his sister's house. As
always, he’s disgusted by the inverted V sticking out over the balcony, intended to make
the house look modern.

He enters through the front door because he knows that by eleven a.m. both his sister
and her husband are gone—his sister to her painting school and her husband to the vet's
office. He passes the silent drawing room with a quick glimpse of the white sofa set, the
glass-topped center chair, the twenty-inch color TV and the potted palm in the far corner.

His mum notices him entering his room and asks him to come quickly to the dining
room for lunch.

He tries to finish his lunch hurriedly, without responding to his mum's words. Seated
across the veneer-topped table, she helps him from time to time to more rice, dal and
vegetables from the hot cases. Her head is uncovered and she wears a white cardigan over
her white sari. Her graying hair, the increasing wrinkles on her face, and the conspicuous
absence of vermillion from the center parting of her hair have badly affected her looks.
Her cheeks have grown slightly sunken. In the last three years, her character has also
weakened: she has become a quiet, acquiescent woman with no courage to protest or
argue against her daughter on any matter.

His mum warns him, in an affectionate tone, to pay attention to his studies, since the
exams are barely a month away, and reminds him of his sister’s threat, “If you fail the
final exams, there’s no place in my house for you.”

But he doesn't heed her words. While he eats, his mind is focused on just one
question: how to sneak into his sister’s painting room?

Because of her short-tempered nature, Raju’s never had the courage to ask her
permission to use her studio. He remembers her yelling at her husband a couple of times
for entering the studio and meddling with her things. He also remembers that she has
always regarded her studio—even in the old house—as her sanctuary. As if somebody
else’s mere touching of her painting things would take away the artistic magic from them.

Yet, he's been sneaking into her studio for the past two months, when she and her
husband are away. He doesn't aim to emulate her or become a famous painter. It's just to
be able to portray his dad's house that he's turned to painting. If he can render the
destroyed house through art even half-realistically, it will be a great satisfaction for him.
What a thrill it'll be to show it to his friends and, above all, to Sharma-ji, who's now the
closest to his heart. Raju has often wanted to tell him about the house and how much he misses it; perhaps that will be the best time to let him into it. Sometimes Raju imagines hanging it on the wall of his room in a golden frame.

The new canvas still underneath his sweater, Raju paces up and down in his room with growing impatience. Every five or six minutes, he comes out to steal a glance and pop his head into his mum's room next to his—she may not let him if she knows what he's up to, in case his sister comes to know.

After about an hour, when he's sure that his mum is snoozing and the maidservant has left after doing the dishes, he decides to venture upstairs. He tiptoes up the two flights of stairs, then down the corridor past the master bedroom, and finally pushes the door open and enters. The room is spacious and airy with two large curtained windows. The walls are hung with her new and old paintings. Some of her works—old and dusty—are propped up on the floor against the wall, beside the easel.

He proceeds towards the easel, which stands tilted in a corner. Beside it is a small, color-stained table holding a palette containing colors, a charcoal and paintbrushes. He takes out his canvas, fixes it onto the easel, adjusts it at a convenient tilt, and then picks up the charcoal. For a couple of minutes, he stares at the white canvas, with the charcoal poised, trying to concentrate. He hears the swish of the window curtains, the rustle of the conifer leaves, the occasional yaps of a dog, the honks of speeding cars and even the palpitations of his heart. He must hurry up and finish before she or her husband arrives. He mustn't be caught at it, like last time, he cautions himself. Last time she pulled him out to the balcony by his ear and nearly pushed him off the railing. But luckily, something made her relent and she let him go.

“It’ll be great to have a painting of each side of the house. But I’ll start with the eastern side, the actual façade of the house,” he says to himself. This is what he's been learning to paint ever since he started to sneak into this room.

It takes him no time to sketch the façade, but he has to take care in applying colors, so that it has proper light and shade and looks life-like. While he works slowly, he remembers how he enjoyed gazing at it through the window of his friend's house, a few yards to the east. The window yielded an unobstructed view of the top half of the house:
the two columns supporting the tin roof, the doors and windows of the two large rooms, the airy and bright open veranda, and the nearly three feet high cement railing.

In hot summer evenings, it was on this cool, breezy railing, in front of dad's room, that his dad, mum and Raju often sat, chatting over dinner. Sometimes, after dinner, he and his dad lingered there far into the night, singing Hindi film songs.

He begins to relive one of those summer evenings. His dad and he are singing together, his dad straddling the railing as usual, holding him on his lap with his calloused hands, his mum listening, seated on a low stool close to the railing. Father and son are in thin cotton T-shirts, and his mum is dressed in her favorite red flower-patterned cotton sari. It's an old Hindi film song:

_I don't care if someone calls me wild_
Let them go on calling so
_I'm helpless—I'm trapped in a storm of love._

It was his dad's favorite and, therefore, his too. He sang with his dad as loudly as he could, all out to drown his voice, which his dad let him do, smiling. In those days, Raju believed louder singing to be better singing.

From the railing, the flat top of the wall that enclosed the front garden door wasn't too low for a grown-up to climb down on. It always gave Raju a surge of excitement even to imagine himself attempting it, and he always wished he were grown-up enough for it. The top was mossy and had sprouted a lot of lichen. To him, in those days, it looked no different from the tulsi plant, and if he could have reached down to them from the railing, he'd have loved to pick its leaves and chew them.

Very often, his mum and dad talked about his having fallen to the courtyard floor off the railing several times in infancy without any serious injury. He enjoyed them bringing up this topic; it made him feel strong and proud. Quite unlike today: today even a slight slip or stumble is enough for his feet to sprain or break; he doesn't need to fall from a height. What it was about this house that protected him, he sometimes wonders.

"Oh, I've done it!" he exclaims loudly after the painting is complete. It's like never before! It's so life-like! And without his knowing, everything gets transformed all at once: the painting into the real house and himself into a small boy running up the stairs, then down the corridor and then into his dad's room, singing out, "Dad! Dad!"

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But before he reaches his dad, he's hurled back into the world by a violent pull of his back hair and a stinging slap across his face. It's the thick hands of his sister standing before him in a green fur coat, her eyes flashing fire and the muscles of her face twitching with rage. Her husband is standing beside her in a black woolen suit, grimacing at him.

"Again meddling with my painting things? How dare you enter my studio again in spite of my warning?" she shouts at him.

"I...I...ju...ju...just wa...wa...wanted to make a painting of the old house," he stammers with fright.

"To hell with your painting, you devil!" She yanks the painting off the easel, half tears it down the middle, flings it out through the window, and shouts, “Get out of my sight.”

Her shouts have brought his helpless mum up, who just stands in the doorway, like a statue, obviously feeling sorry for him, but not venturing a word in his favor. After all, she is an economic burden on his sister as he is.

He feels a rush of anger at his sister, but bites it back. He returns her savagery with a silent stare at her white pumps, covering his cheek with his palm, venturing a quick look up at her face. Her eyes show a mixture of guilt and hate. The first is the outcome of the crime she's committed against him by depriving him of his dad's house; the second is something that she's cultivated for him to defend herself against the first. Her eyes seem to say: If you miss dad's house so much, what the hell have you been doing in my house?

His mum still stands in the same place, as if she is stuck to the floor.

He walks out and downstairs, the soothing palm still over the cheek.

As he picks up the half-torn painting from the lawn and rushes towards the gate, there's only one thought flooding his mind: he'll never enter this house again.

The mist has lifted, but the sky remains overcast, hiding the sun. The horizon is lined with a blur of trees. The dirt road he ambles down, the canvas in his hand, wanders through flat fields of wheat.

His sister didn’t pull and twist his ear this time; this time it's just his painting that took the brunt of her rage. But it hurt him much more than last time. If she'd pushed him
down from the balcony, he'd have been hurt much less than he was by her savage
treatment of his painting.

In the cold gusty wind, the struck side of his face still tingles. His emotions are
running wild. He has no reason to look back and consider how far away he's drifted in the
last two hours. He rather feels like surrendering himself to his feelings and wishes to see
how they command him today.

He glances at the other pedestrians. Once he has an impulse to count them, and he
yields to it under his breath: one, two, three, four, five, six… Then he gazes at them one
by one.

A young milkman rides on an old, black bicycle with a large tin milk-pot on the
carrier at his back. As he rides past, Raju can see white globules of milk sticking to the
outside of the container. But his careless riding and the jerking and clanking of the
container tell Raju that the man is returning to his farmhouse after delivering the milk to
townsfolk.

Two middle-aged men of medium height, dark brown and lean but muscular, walk
alongside Raju. They each carry a long bamboo pole, lengths of rope wound and looped
round it. They’re returning home after selling their loads of chopped wood that have hung
heavily from the ends of their bamboo poles and that they’ve had to shoulder around the
market and from household to household all day, dealing with penny-pinching, haggling
customers.

A tall man in a dhoti hurries a little ahead, carrying a small boy on his shoulders.

Farther on, three full-grown women wearing saris carry empty bamboo baskets in
their arms.

Three young men walk behind him. They’re probably odd-job men, returning from
town carrying the wages of sweaty labor.

Their frayed sweaters, ragged waistcoats and holey blankets are covered with dust.
They're exhausted. Yet they look calm and satisfied, heading towards their houses,
wooden or mud, where their families are waiting for them.

But here's a little fellow that has no house to go to and doesn't know where he's going.

A few minutes later, he sees a motorcycle humming far ahead, speeding towards
them, trailing a cloud of dust.
When it comes a little closer, he can see the motorcyclist clearly. He is a dumpy, clean-shaven man with a fair complexion, wearing a red hooded jacket and matching leather gloves—probably a marwari industrialist, returning home from his factory. The noise of the engine swells, until it approaches and whizzes past, leaving all the pedestrians engulfed in thick dust, then slowly turning into a hum once again and dying down.

In the faint light of dusk, he finds himself lying lethargically on his side, the canvas beneath his head, on the high flat grassy margin of a deep, smelly pond. The thin track, curving through the thorny bushes all the way up from the road is visible from here.

His woeful eyes engage the algae bordering its edges and the pattern-less duckweed everywhere. There's a white plump dowdy pond-heron on the opposite side of the water. It's standing almost motionlessly on the soggy edge, gazing at the water, stepping occasionally and with great care in search of water beetles and other insects. A few lapwings and vultures circle low in the sky.

The water is murky and stagnant. He wonders what may be underneath besides countless fish, snakes and other water creatures. Perhaps the bones of a few human beings, who couldn't bring themselves to live.

He thinks there can hardly be a pond anywhere in the world, which hasn't swallowed a human being. He's heard several stories of suicide by jumping into a pond. Only the other day his mum was telling him one. Every time there must have been a splash followed by the end of one miserable life. He's also heard some people say that after death you meet your dead relatives in heaven. So will he meet his dad after his death? And if he does meet him, perhaps he can also find the house. How about one more splash then, in this quiet pond at this quiet time? Luckily, it's far enough from the road and besides, at the moment there's no one walking out there, who might see and try to stop him.

He gets to his feet. As he bends forward to jump, he happens to kick a stone, which rolls down and disappears through a small algal arc. Just then he seems to hear a voice from the heavens, as if in response to it. Looking up, he spots something—a speck of white, gleaming against the dark grey of the sky—descending towards him. As it comes
closer, it grows in size and begins to look half like a man and half like an angel. He watches breathlessly. Soon it's not far from his head, descending slowly and gracefully, emitting a pleasant light and exuding a sweet fragrance. And when it lands near him, Raju can’t believe his eyes. The tall, broad-shouldered figure with short graying hair is nobody other than his dad! Good God, it's his dad turned angel, elegantly dressed in a thin glittering white robe!

"Dad," he cries tearfully, overwhelmed with emotion.

"Yes, my son," his dad answers, smiling, with outstretched arms.

What a pleasant surprise to hear his sweet deep voice after such a long time! Raju hurls himself into his arms, breaking into uncontrollable sobs. His dad gives his whole body an affectionate squeeze and wipes the tears off his eyes with his fingers.

They sit down cross-legged, facing each other, on the same spot where he was lying earlier and where the canvas is still absorbing the cold moist air. For some time they feast their eyes on each other. His dad's sharp-featured face is so handsome and calm, not dark and withered as he looked after death. He repeatedly embraces and kisses Raju and ruffles his hair with a smile, and each time Raju responds with a broad smile, forgetting his unhappiness.

Then suddenly his dad's smile fades and he asks, wrinkling his brow, "What were you doing now?"

At this question, unhappiness surges back through him. But he responds by hanging his head in silence.

"How stupid! That’s not like my son."

"But Dad, I hate that house," Raju bursts out. "I hate Soru didi. After your death, she pulled down your house to build a house of her own. I can't be happy in her house for even a moment."

"But that's no way to find happiness, son. That's no way." His dad gestures at the spot where Raju kicked the stone, and from where he nearly jumped to his death. Then his dad notices the half-torn canvas and throws him a quizzical look.

"Dad, I always miss the old house."

His dad looks back down at the painting again thoughtfully.
"Dad, does it exist in heaven? Can I find it after my death? Can I live there with you for ever and ever? Can I —"

"Why on earth are you running so mad after that house, son?" Raju's dad cuts in with an irritation tempered with tenderness.

"I can't help it, Dad. I just can't help it."

"No, son. Just think with a cool mind," he says in a tone that is at once sensible and soothing, holding Raju's shoulders with his thick hands. He spoke thus whenever Raju had the sulks over something he couldn't buy him because it was beyond his means; or over something he couldn't allow him to do because it wasn't the right thing for him to do. "If I'd gone out of my mind for my dad's house, do you think I could ever have constructed a house of my own?"

Raju doesn't say anything; he just shakes his head slowly, struck by the wisdom of the question.

He tells Raju about his own dad's house.

When he was small, almost as young as Raju, his dad suddenly passed away, leaving him alone with his mum in the world. He was content living in his dad's house with his mum. Then suddenly fate turned unkind once again, and there was a devastating fire in the neighborhood, in which all the houses, including his dad's, burned to the ground.

In those days all houses in the neighborhood used to be mud-built with a roof of tiles or thatch, or they used to be wooden with a tin or tile roof. His dad's was a mud-built house with a thatch roof. It had stood as a revered and happy remembrance of his dad, and he loved it no less than Raju has loved his house. And its destruction was too much of a shock to him and his mum. It was like a nightmare becoming homeless all of a sudden.

Raju's dad takes his hands off his shoulders and gesticulates with them to emphasize his words.

Raju's dad lost neither heart nor head. On the contrary, he pursued his education with all the spirit and determination he could muster, till he was qualified for a teaching job, by doing all kinds of odd jobs—sometimes even as a helper of a mason and a carpenter. He finally took up a teaching job. As primary level teacher with a low salary, he had to scrimp and save, living with his mum for years in a small dark room in a mud hut in a
faraway neighborhood, so that one day he could have a house of his own that was better than his dad's.

When he'd saved some money—not sufficient, though, to hire bricklayers and joiners—he hired a couple of laborers and set himself to build a two-story concrete house with a tin roof with his own hands. He was glad that he himself was the architect, bricklayer and joiner of his house. He was also proud that it was going to be the first-ever two-story concrete house in his neighborhood.

None of this story about the destruction of his dad's house and the hardship he endured to build his own house is new to Raju: his mum has referred to it several times bit by bit. But told by the hero himself, the story is so gripping and uplifting! He listens to his dad with pride, reproving himself at the same time silently for lacking his virtues.

"Look, son." He holds Raju's face with both hands, lovingly, and looks him in the eye. "It's a divine law that everything, no matter how beautiful it is or how much you love it, must perish someday. When something becomes old, God destroys it through His agents like fire, flood, earthquake and sometimes a human hand. He does it so that a human, the best of his creations, may create something that is even more beautiful and worthier of love. So, instead of moping around, you should take His law as an invitation to engage in the act of creation. Remember, the joy of creation is much greater than that of possession."

These last words of his dad's penetrate deep into his soul and tears begin to well up in his eyes.

"Come on, son, cheer up!" his dad smiles affectionately, wiping his tears with his fingers.

Then he gets up to his feet and lifts into the air gracefully, rising higher and higher, growing smaller and smaller, until he disappears in the dark air.

Raju wakes up with a start, his eyes still wet with tears. He springs to his feet, throws the canvas out into the dark water, and turns, thinking that in the course of time it will submerge and come to rest, where it really belongs, on the slimy bed—amidst the bones of the dead.
The sky is starless, and the evening very cold and dark. But the clusters of window lights in the distance look beautiful and seem to greet him with warmth.

As he strides down the quiet, unlit road, buffeted by the wind, he feels so light and no grudge against his sister and brother-in-law. There’s only one thing that occupies him at the moment: the approaching examinations. He's determined that he's not going to think about anything other than his studies till he's qualified for a good job. That's how he can earn enough money and construct a house that will have a beauty unparalleled not only in his neighborhood, but in the whole town. But first, he'd like to go to Sharma-ji's tea-stall, not to tell him about the dream, just to have a special cup of tea.
Victims

Kishor still can’t believe he is standing in the ground of his village. The only thing he recognizes is the old, wooden bridge facing them from some hundred yards away. Black, tepid mud spreads all around—on both sides of the bridge. Puddles mirror the silver-gray lining of the mid-afternoon sky. On this side, about thirty people slouch in groups—each one family. Small naked children are slung on their parents’ shoulders or arms like thin pups. Most of the men wear only loin cloth or dhoti folded above the knees. They lean on their staffs or prod and flatten the rotten pieces of wood with them that stick up in their way. They are still trying to locate their plots. Hunger and shock have hollowed their faces. Their eyes have become black, handle-less woks. Women’s hairs fluff around their faces and over their shoulders like dirty wool. Some of them, who are old or middle-aged, have covered their naked breasts with the ends of their saris. On men’s faces, beards grow like shrubs. Uncle Jamuna and Auntie Jamuna—the oldest couple in the village and Kishor’s neighbors—are still crying. Auntie Jamuna is beating her thin flat chest with wrinkled hands. Over the past two months all of them camped out on the premises of Morang High School, cursing the flood that washed away their huts and rice crops. It’s been two hours since the lorry hurled them off and left to fetch more people.

“Where are we going to live, what are we going to eat?” Kishor’s mother sniffles.

“The official was saying the city council will distribute some building material and take care of our eating for some days,” his father mumbles.

“But the way they took care of our living and eating out there, do you believe their promise?” his mother says.

“If they don’t take care of us, God will.”

Suddenly Kishor hears a muffled croak. He throws a glance up at his father’s face, then at his mother’s. His staff leans against his side. Kishor cautiously reaches out for it and sneaks away.

He spots the mud-smeared snake right in front him. It glides on slowly, its swollen mouth afloat in the air, trailing a curved line. He turns around. His father’s dark copper back and the waves of his mother’s brown hair down her back over her torn leaf-green
sari face him. He edges forward pointing the staff towards the snake. The mud sucks noisily at his bare feet. The snake stops still in mid-glide, the curved legs of the frog feebly pawing the air. It’s straw-colored and nearly five feet long. Its slick body from the neck down a stretched S, the pointed tail slightly turned outward. Its tiny eye glows a pale brown, unblinking, furiously alert. A chill washes over his hands, as if the snake is slithering over them. He slowly raises the staff above his head to the sound of Auntie Jamuna’s whimpers, aiming right at the neck, where the swelling ends—I must be careful not to hurt the frog, he thinks. He brings down the staff with full force. The strike sounds like he hit a wet sugar cane. A stripe of mud splatters across his brown face. He watches as the snake pukes its prey, sad-faced.

“Kishor, what’s up?” his father’s voice sounds like a bird suddenly frightened into flight.

“What’s the matter, son?” his mother’s voice is the companion bird taking off after him.

Then the squelches of their unsteady footsteps, which get louder and louder. Until he feels some gobs of mud hit his calves and the rush of his father’s tremulous words over his head: “What the hell are you doing?” His father snatches the staff from his hand.

His mother gasps at the sight of the snake. “Aren’t you afraid of death?” She pulls him into the soft warmth of her arms.

The slimy yellow-green creature leaps off in one direction. His father pokes the staff under the snake and allows it to loop around it. Then he walks a few steps away from them and jerks it far off. The snake curves its way off briskly without lifting its head.

Walking between his parents, Kishor feels glad that he has saved the frog. He also shudders at the thought that it wasn’t a cobra because it’d have frightened him to death. Right then the lorry roars in the distance beyond the bridge—the windscreen and the metal-inlaid top furiously dashing through the air like the hood of a giant cobra.

The lorry growls across the bridge, then towards them, the wheels kicking up mud. It pulls up with a sharp turn a few yards from them. All the thirty of them plod towards this new bunch. They gaze at these people, packed in the back like goats and sheep—lips parched, cheeks hallowed like ponds, ribs curving around chests or peeping out through the holes in their clothes. They jostle and look around with a gasp. And whimper, some
loudly. On the ground, some that have not wept in the last two hours respond with loud wails. The passenger door creaks open. The official, a pot-bellied man with a dark, pock-marked face, climbs down and slams the door back shut. His face grimaces at the stink. He takes out a white handkerchief from the front pocket of his white vest and clamps it over his nose. The cuffs of his blue trousers are tucked in his black rubber shoes. He squishes to the back of the lorry, snorting loudly through the handkerchief. The two soldiers in camouflage unbolt the back side and then let it crash down heavily into the mud.

The official’s face puckers as the folks try to clamber off one by one, still crying. “Oh, stop crying and don’t be so damn slow. We’ve got to go and bring the rest of you.”

The soldiers begin to pat these folks on the heads and the shoulders. The pats soon become shoves, and the folks begin to fall to the mud like potato sacks. The soldiers’ dark brown faces don’t even twitch with apology. Kishor hopes the official will shout at the soldiers for their inhuman behavior and order them to behave themselves. But he doesn’t bother about that. He just shouts through the handkerchief, “Hurry up, hurry up!” He sounds sick of this place and of these people.

The flat-faced soldier gives Uncle Hari a hard shove on his back, and the poor old man goes flailing through the air, landing on his chest. He slides past Kishor, hands and legs splattering mud, leaving a deep track behind him. When he stops about three yards away, for a long moment he lies still, like the corpse of a dog wrapped up in mud. Then he stirs slowly, groaning. Kishor shoots a glance at the soldier. There’s no flicker of shame in his eyes. The official takes the handkerchief off his face, sniggers at the old man, and turns back to the lorry, shouting, “Hurry up!”

Kishor’s blood jumps through his head, through his thin arms. For the first time in his life he hates being a small boy. He wants to protest, but the soldiers’ rocky biceps crawling up and down their folded sleeves scare the shit out of him. He notices their holsters hanging on their hips.

The long-faced soldier grabs Panna’s neck. Kishor wishes Panna would protest—he’s always known Panna to fight and knock down boys way bigger than him. Panna is twenty, six years older than he is, very thin, but he has enormous strength. He hopes the aftermath of the flood hasn’t drained all his strength and boldness. The official beams
with a smile as Panna stiffens his neck against the fat fingers. Stiffens his hands in front of him, stiffens his feet and scratches the wet wood with his muddy toenails, focusing his bulging eyes on the deep track in the mud. But the soldier flips him into the air like a cigarette. He spatters into the mud head first and goes sliding and rolling, eating mud all the way.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” the official laughs. His tobacco-stained teeth flash. He puts the handkerchief back in the breast pocket. Kishor hears the sound of the driver’s door, then notices the driver on the other side of the lorry, jogging over to join the official. His wheat brown cheeks are as big as pumpkins. Both turn back to the soldiers expectantly.

The crowd comes closer in two rows, leaving enough space in between as if for the sliding and the rolling to go on unobstructed. Black mud dots men’s loin cloths and women’s saris from the waist down. Uncle and Auntie Jamuna have stopped crying. They stand right across from Kishor, huddled together with their son and daughter-in-law. Their toothless mouths hang open, their horror-stricken eyes peer up at the soldiers and the frightened people up on the lorry.

Kishor is outraged by the crowd’s silence. The men stand in horror, planted in the mud beside their staffs. Their faces are blank posters with only one thing written across them: WE CAN’T PROTEST AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT PEOPLE. He hears his father’s jaws grind behind his black beard and sees his brow twitch and his fingers tighten round the staff. His mother’s face is flushed and swollen, as if stung by a swarm of bees. A couple of times, they trade glances over his head and gaze back at the soldiers, helpless.

Kishor’s teeth clench and his thin hands tremble as he holds a volcano down in his throat. If he dared protest, the flat-faced man would lift him up in the air by the throat and squeeze him to death. He pictures the other one kicking his parents and then firing bullets into their chests.

The soldiers don’t discriminate between ages. They don’t give a shit whether they are pushing a man or a woman. They don’t even give a shit about the baby the person is holding in their arms. Up next is a widow, Sister Buna. She arranges her sari and balances her baby in her arms. That is her only baby. The tall soldier won’t wait. He puts his hand to her back. Her eyes swell, and she cries through clenched teeth, pressing her
baby into her chest. He shoves her as if opening a door. She stiffens her arms and bends her head over the baby as she sails through the air, ends of her sari fluttering behind her like a flag. Right before crashing on her back, she does a somersault. And goes hydroplaning and rolling. Her sari and hair thicken with mud. When she stops, her baby rolls out of her shoulders, as if it is her own head rolling off. She frantically does one more somersault, grabs it back into her arms, and lies there curled up.

“Oh, wonderful, wasn’t that wonderful?” the official pats his thigh and laughs loudly. The driver laughs with him nodding his agreement. The soldiers’ tight lips open into wide smiles. They look encouraged by the official’s taking pleasure from their work.

The official skips over and stands an arm’s length away from Kishor. He bends with laughter, patting his thighs through each slide and roll. I must do something, I must protest, Kishor says to himself. The volcano rushes up his throat. He holds it there for a moment longer and then lets it go in one monosyllabic explosion: “Stop it!” The air goes silent: no laughing, no thigh-patting. The soldiers’ hands lift off the weak, struggling shoulders. The soldiers straighten themselves to their full height, looking surprised. The official turns around slowly toward Kishor. The sky flashes across the pock-marked face. A rumble passes overhead and ends in a huge metallic clap just above the horizon. The official’s bulging eyes sweep his parents’ faces and those of the others standing on their side. His parents’ hands grip his arms. They huddle closer against him. He feels his mother’s fingers tremble.

“Who said that?” the official growls.

Each member of the crowd is as silent as stone. His eyes slowly return sweeping them again, and then he turns back. The spectacle of inhumanity goes on under the flashes and grumbles. Soon a rain begins to slash over the ground. It adds to the game for the official by making the mud more slippery: the slides and rolls become faster and funnier.

The boys, much younger than Kishor, scamper to the sides and try to climb and jump off. The soldiers grab for their heads, and shove them back in, yelling, “Not that way.”

Now they are pushing two at a time. Each soldier clutches a boy by the hair or the back of his shirt collar. The boys wriggle like fish and duck their heads under the fat hands. But finally the hands fasten around their delicate necks. The soldiers bend the boys’ heads down to their feet and give them a shove on their buttocks with their kneecaps. The

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boys bounce into the air like soccer balls, turning somersaults and splash on their backs, and slush through the mud legs forward. Both side by side, then briefly kick each other’s feet, turn around, bump into each other’s head, then go on repeating this motion. 

The pot-bellied man hoots. His thigh-patting gets more frenzied with each new item. Sometimes he runs after the victims, as they pass him. The driver laughs in a relatively subdued way, probably in deference to the official.

At the far end of the track, Kishor sees several unconscious people covered in mud. Some stir after a long time of giving no sign of life, scramble to their feet grunting, and limp away smoothing out mud over their arms and chests and faces. The kids rub mud into their eyes and howl into their parents’ muddy clothes and arms.

The rain slicks the official’s hair and streams down the back of his ears and neck. His bug-colored pate jigs before Kishor’s eyes, and makes his hands restless. He wants to see blood spurting out there like a fountain. His father’s staff stands clenched in his hand. He won’t give it to him to do what he wants to do. For the first time in his life Kishor hates not having his own staff. He looks around. He quickly counts a dozen staffs on both sides. Will these men come forward to join me, if I start a fight? he thinks. He keeps turning his head, trying to catch their attention. Some of them do meet his eyes, every time he glances at them. He sees in their eyes the same intent that is burning in him.

His father leans the staff against his side. Folds his dripping hands before him, closes his eyes and mumbles a prayer. He knows what his father is praying—Oh, God, strike this sinner with your lightning rod. That’s what his father has always told him about sin and punishment. But he knows what he should do. He reaches for the staff and edges forward.

“Kishor,” his mother hisses behind him.

He lifts the staff, aiming for the center of the official’s pate, and strikes it with all his strength. The man’s hands jerk to his pate, and he kneels down. Kishor doesn’t budge, the staff still in his trembling hands poised over the official. The red blood worming through the dark fingers delights his heart. The official bows his head into the mud, grunting. The driver darts over and slumps to his knees. His widened eyes say he never expected something like this to happen. He bends over the official’s muddy head.

“Are you okay?” he asks.
“Oh, my God!” Kishor’s mother gasps.
His father snatches the staff from his hands.
The soldiers jump off the lorry and run over. They fall to their knees crouching beside
the driver. “Are you okay?” they ask.
The official grunts. They each wrap their arm around him and pull him up to his feet.
He takes out his handkerchief and dabs his pate. Then he shouts pointing toward Kishor,
“Get that son of a bitch.”
The fat-faced soldier dashes for Kishor.
“Don’t you dare,” his mother yells at him, pulling Kishor into her embrace.
His father leaps ahead of them, and thrusts the staff out, “Don’t step forward.” His
voice trembles.
The soldier reaches for his gun. But before he pulls it on him, Kishor’s father swings
the staff at his fingers and the gun plops into the water. The soldier tries to reach down,
but his father pokes the staff into his face. The soldier backs off a few unsteady steps and
splashes on his back.
“Strike,” Auntie Jamuna yells.
“Yes, go ahead, strike,” Uncle Jamuna echoes her.
The official’s eyes bulge with disbelief. “What’s going on?” he shouts at the long-
faced soldier.
The soldier reaches for his gun. But by now the crowd is already storming around,
howling like a dozen factory alarms. Men, women, kids. Panna, Buna, Uncle Hari.
Striding, trotting, limping. Holding out staffs, pieces of brick, stone, jagged pieces of
glass, whatever they could find around.
The official and his men leap for the lorry. And soon the lorry is on the other side of
the bridge, diminishing in the rain, its growl slowly weakening.

“But it wasn’t good what we did to them,” Mahesh shouts. His big eyes glint with fear.
“Why wasn’t it good?” Buna snaps. Her eyes glare at Mahesh, her baby leaning over
her shoulder. “Didn’t you see they were treating us worse than animals?”
“But have you thought about the consequences?” Mahesh says.
“Yes, they are likely to come back to arrest me and my son. But you don’t have to fear anything. We’ll face it on our own.” Kishor feels emboldened by his father’s words. He notices that there is no tremor in his voice.

“You are not alone. We’re with you, Banshee,” Uncle Hari says.

“Yes, we’re all with you,” several voices echo.

“Now forget about any help we were going to receive,” Mahesh says.

“I don’t think they were going to help us anyway the way they treated us in the camp.” Kishor’s mother snaps.

“God is there to help us. We’ll rebuild our village with our own hands, as we have always done, with our own hands,” his father shouts.

“Yes, with our own hands,” the rest of the villagers shout in chorus.

“The first thing we need to do is to put up a shed for all of us,” his father says.

The crowd sets about collecting bricks, stone, branches of a tree, pieces of driftwood, anything that can possibly be used as building material. The rain slows down to a drizzle and finally stops. A bank of clouds glows ochre on the horizon.
A Twenty-Rupee Note

Binod pedaled his bicycle unsteadily through a crowd of pedestrians, ringing his handlebar bell. The afternoon breeze blew the ends of his white shirt. His skin was the color of walnut. His round face looked worried, which his black disheveled hair further emphasized.

He braked in front of his father’s shop, which was a portable wooden structure resembling a booth at a checkpoint crossing. It sat squeezed between a tea stall and a grocery. Two men stood with their bellies pushing against the aluminum-inlaid counter. Above them an old rectangular sign read: Keshav Pan Bhandar. After propping the bicycle at the curb, Binod slid in through the side window. The usual scent of betel and spices hung around the walls papered with the illustrated leaves from Nepalese newspapers and film magazines. He did not feel any hurry to break the news to his father. He could wait until dinner. Anyway, he did not know whether he was going to college. The leaves stacked up on one side of the counter needed a splash of water—the red cloth that covered them had gone dry.

“Leave it alone—I’ll take care of it,” his father said affectionately, as Binod was sliding out with a plastic bucket that lay empty in a corner behind a stack of books. These were some of the books that Binod read here during the one-hour school break—one to two P.M. He would ride over to relieve his father to go home for lunch. His father was a slight, thin-haired man, clean-shaven, with skin slightly darker than his own, and hair slicked back with mustard oil.

Binod did not listen. He got water from the tube well in the back of the tea stall. He removed the cloth, splashed the cool water over the leaves with his hands, neatly replaced the cloth, then slid back in with the empty bucket.

His father laid half-clipped betel leaves one beside the other in front of him on the edge of the counter, nodding and chuckling at what the customers were saying about the politics of Nepal amidst the noise of the traffic. They did not look to be in a hurry. Nobody ever knew which political party his father supported. But he was good at acting a staunch supporter of his customer’s party by nodding, laughing and occasionally putting
in a well-chosen remark. He would have to learn this, Binod thought as he chopped nuts into the shallow copper cup that sat among a dozen other small pots and cans. The porcelain kattha pot, which was shaped like a jar, had a wooden stick poking out of it, twice as thick as an index finger.

“Did you pass?” his father said.

“Yes,” Binod replied in a soft voice. He did not mention first division because what did it matter if he was going to end up as a betel seller?

“Wow,” his father beamed. He lifted his arm, his loose sleeve folding down to his elbow, and patted Binod’s back with his forearm, taking care not to stain his shirt with his hands.

“What grade did you pass, boy?” one of the customers asked. He was a businessman, with a long nose and dusky skin, dressed in a white suit.

Binod did not reply—he felt enraged at the man’s class-conscious, patronizing tone. Binod dropped the iron cutter and slapped the nut crumbs off the plastic sheet. His hair grazed the bottom of a small showcase that hung on the wall to his right. It was lined with cigarette packets.

“He graduated high school,” his father said, taking the kattha stick out and rubbing the smeared tip over the first leaf, then the other.

“That’s real good news,” the businessman said. “What are your plans? Are you going to college or do you just want to sell betel like your father?” The other customer laughed. The man had tried to sound bantering, but his voice had a clear ring of sarcasm, which Binod had not missed, and which he could hardly fail to see in the man’s yellow eyes.

“Never,” his father said. “I couldn’t get beyond high school. But I won’t let that happen with my son, I won’t let him sell betel.”

Binod sighed with pride at his father’s reply. It was the first time he had ever heard his father responding to a customer’s humiliating remark in a self-respectful way, though this time too his father had an ingratiating smile on his face. Binod felt sad that his father’s proud remark would not come true. He hung his face to hide his feelings.

Binod and his mother stayed up till one A.M. because that was when his father closed his shop. During the day time, his father did not get enough customers so he had to wait
till the last of the drinkers had staggered or whizzed by on their motorbikes. His main customers were late-night alcoholics—mostly businessmen and civil servants—who on their way home from pubs would stop by for the last betel and cigarettes of the day.

“Admission charge is very high—five hundred rupees,” Binod said bitterly to his father.

Binod still did not have the guts to tell his parents that if he had that much money he would rather start a new shop. That Pushpa was willing to let him a section of his beer shop to sell betel. Binod hunkered down on the chair against the plywood wall, at the head of the bed, running his fingers through his hair, and watching as his father ate on the bench. The mention of the amount had furrowed wrinkles across his brow. His mother squatted on the edge of the bed in an old red sari, knees gathered up to her chest against her knotted hands. Her light brown oval face also frowned with worry. The muffled dialogue of his uncle’s cable TV puttered over the tin roof, the background music swelling off and on. From time to time, bursts of laughter punctuated the TV noise. Binod could distinguish the voices of his uncle, aunt and their son, Ranjan. A short while before his father showed up, Binod had climbed the stairs to the top floor verandah and talked to his uncle about his problem. His uncle had flatly said, “I have no money,” in his loud throaty voice. Then one hand caressing his huge belly, the other pointing to the low tin roof, his uncle had said, “Stupid, worry yourself about earning money and repairing the house.” His father’s house really looked like an old garage against his uncle’s tall house. His uncle did not even have elementary schooling and his son had long ago stopped going to school after sixth grade; still, they had made so much money through business. His uncle had a wholesale grocery store at the heart of the city and both father and son ran it together, not giving a damn about books and scholarship. His uncle was right—it’d really be stupid to go to college, Binod thought.

“Five hundred rupees,” his father mumbled for a third time, chewing his food and rubbing his forehead.

While his parents worried about his admission cost, Binod wondered how to raise five-hundred rupees, the advance Pushpa had demanded. Binod knew one or another of his father’s wholesale dealers would not mind giving him credit to help him get started.
“Don’t worry. Your studies won’t stop because of money.” His mother rose from the bed. She knelt down and pulled out her rusty tin box from under the bed. She rummaged through her clothes and fished out a red paper wrapper.

“I’m not going to pawn your earrings for my admission,” Binod said, though he regretted he was making his mother sad.

“What use are they for me, son?” his mother said.

“No way. Whatever little jewels your parents had given you, you have already sold for my books and tuitions. These are the only pieces left. What will you wear to a party?” Binod said.

“Party,” she laughed. “Who invites us? People have become very clever these days. They invite only those from whom they can expect expensive presents.”

Binod suddenly realized how true it was. In the past few years, his father had not received any invitation card. Only last month there was a party down the road—it was Shukralal Shah’s daughter’s marriage. The cloth merchant invited his uncle and his aunt, but not his parents. Binod had seen his uncle and aunt walking past his front yard, dressed up in expensive clothes. His aunt carried a huge gift in her arm. They looked so smug; they did not even turn towards his house. Really, it doesn’t matter for how many generations you have lived together in the same neighborhood, people will not recognize you unless you have money, Binod thought.

His father turned to him. “Keep them, Binod. At the moment, your admission is more important than anything else.”

Binod dropped the earrings into his front pocket, half deciding that he would give the money to Pushpa. He did not want to think about how his parents would react, though. For a moment it seemed his problem was solved, and he sighed with relief. Then suddenly he pictured his customers leaning over him, as he rubbed kattha on their betel leaves. They assaulted him with the mixed stink of cigarette smoke and liquor and their loud political ramblings. He knew he would not be able to pretend with his customers as his father had trained himself to over the years.

After his parents went to bed, Binod slid on his back and stared up at the wooden beam across the corrugated, smoke-blackened tin, and the torn web that hung from the beam and twined around the black cable halfway down to the electric bulb. He thought of
his school life: How much his classmates and his teachers liked him! As soon as he stepped through the school gate and across the brick-paved courtyard, he felt so happy; in class he felt like a young prince. There was no question his class teacher or students thought he would not be able to answer. His most favorite teacher was Mahendra-sir. His full name was Mahendra Prasad Acharya. His colleagues called him Doctorshab because he had a Ph.D. in English, but Binod, like other students, called him Mahendra-sir.

Mahendra-sir came from a poor family and had earned his doctorate through great financial struggle. He often cited little humorous anecdotes. Sometimes he talked of great personalities from around the world, which would inspire Binod to be like one of them. Occasionally he talked about his own personal struggle. For him inculcating high thoughts and a sense of optimism in his students was as important as explaining the lessons to them. Binod often wondered if he would ever be able to speak English as well as Mahendra-sir or acquire as much scholarship as he had. His eyes moistened at the thought that this possibility had now come to its end.

The next afternoon, Binod pondered a long moment in front of New Jewelry Mart, still on the bicycle. Once the money went into Pushpa’s pocket, it would be hard to change the decision. Let alone his parents’ anger. Then suddenly he found himself pedaling on, heading for Mahendra-sir’s school apartment.

Mahendra-sir’s place was at the end of a long series of identical single-story apartments linked to one another like the coaches of a long train moving in a wide arc. The walls were dark gray, furry green patches sprouting here and there. Neem and mango trees shaded the verandah. The green paint of the front double door had lost its gloss.

Binod knocked on the door, below the name plate: Dr. M. P. Acharya. Mahendra-sir himself opened the door. His light brown face flashed a smile. He was not in his undershirt and lungi; he was clean-shaven and neatly dressed in a cream shirt and sky-blue trousers. That meant he had either just arrived from outside or was about to leave. Binod bent and touched Mahendra-sir’s feet in greeting.

“Come on in,” Mahendra-sir said.

Binod dropped his flip-flops outside and followed his teacher into the room, which was his study-cum-living room. Mahendra-sir sat on the edge of a divan that was pushed
against a wall, asking him to take a seat. Four wooden armchairs lined the door side wall facing the divan. Binod occupied the one next to the door. The room was small and poorly furnished—no carpet, no curtains, no wall hangings; the arm chairs were old and unpainted and the divan was covered with an old cotton sheet, its green completely faded. It was nothing compared to his uncle’s living room. Yet there was a spiritual and scholarly aura about this room that he had not experienced in anybody else’s room in all of Biratnagar. On one wall a framed picture of the four-armed goddess Saraswati rested on a wooden ledge. To the side of this a small flame rose from a tiny clay cup, like a good fairy dancing. On the other, several incense sticks sent up strands of fragrant smoke. The goddess, dressed in a white sari, sat on a red lotus in a modest attitude, playing a sitar with her front hands, without any wrinkles of concentration on her face, her eyes staring out affectionately. One of her back hands held a rosary and the other a sacred scripture. A swan turned its yellow beak up towards the instrument from pecking at something on the flower-strewn ground. A peacock meandered close behind her. Right under the picture stood an uncovered wooden desk, on which sat a black adjustable lamp beside a pile of books. The top book was entitled, *A Critical History of English Literature*. On both sides of the desk stood two wooden book shelves. Binod could read some titles in the light streaming in through the iron-barred windows, where two deep red roses sticking up from green stems jostled together to peer in.

This room had always made him want to become nothing but a scholar. Today, too, he wanted to draw the same inspiration.

“Did you pass?” Mahendra-sir asked, just as his father had.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

Mahendra-sir’s wife entered with a white cloth bag in one hand and a twenty-rupee note in the other. She was dressed in a plain moss-green sari and a matching choli. Her dark face looked tense with worry—probably financial. But as soon as she saw Binod, a smile of pleasant surprise spread around her thick lips. “Oh, Binod! Good to see you.” Then her brow wrinkled. “Did you hear about your result?”

“He has passed!” Mahendra-sir said, in a pleased tone.

“Congratulations!” Her smile returned.

Binod got up from the chair and touched her feet.
“Shine like a star in the sky of education,” she said.

Binod leaned back in the chair, smiling and feeling pleased at her blessing.

Mahendra-sir took the bag, then the note from her hands, saying, “Only twenty rupees? This won’t bring even an evening’s worth of vegetables.”

“Tomorrow you’ll get your salary, then bring two days’ worth of vegetables,” she said.

Mahendra-sir slipped the note in his front shirt pocket, laughing. Binod chuckled politely. That pocket was where Binod was used to seeing his teacher’s white bi-focal glasses. Obviously, he wouldn’t need them to buy vegetables.

Binod would be sure to miss Mahendra-sir’s class, whether or not he went to college. He pictured himself sitting in the classroom, Mahendra-sir entering and taking the glasses out of his shirt pocket, putting them on and calling roll, looking serious. Then explaining the text slowly, pronouncing every word with strong emphasis.

Out on the verandah, Mahendra-sir asked, “So Binod, now you’re going to be a college student. How are you feeling?”

“Well,” Binod faltered then said, “Seeing the circumstances of my family, I’m not sure if I should go to college.”

Mahendra-sir told him to leave the bicycle in the yard, that he would like to walk with him around the lawn for a while before parting.

They walked down the narrow paved paths meandering across the school lawn, bordered on both sides by Tacoma hedges. Far to their left, the janitor, an old dark-skinned man, slouched on a wooden stool leaning against the wrought iron gate. Binod had his hands in his trouser pockets. Mahendra-sir held the folded bag in one hand and talked in his usual manner—gesticulating and every now and then wiping sweat from the back of his bald head with the empty hand. Binod listened to his teacher’s words very attentively, nodding politely. At the moment, Mahendra-sir did not have the air of classroom formality; he spoke quite intimately. Binod felt honored that his teacher took so much interest in his private life and felt concerned about his future career.

“If you get into business right from now, you can surely earn some money and raise your family’s economic status a little bit. But then you will never become a great man. Do you know Madan Mohan Malvia?” Mahendra-sir asked, and when Binod shook his
head, he continued, “His parents were not rich either. But through struggle he not only grew erudite, but also succeeded in founding a university, which is famous in India by the name of Benaras Hindu University. Laxmi Prasad Devkota, the greatest poet of Nepal, he wasn’t born into a rich family, either. Ironically, he was born on the day when Hindus worship the goddess of wealth, but he lived and died a poor man.”

Of course, Binod knew about Devkota—he had read some of his poems at school—but still he listened to all the details because it was so uplifting.

“These people could have chosen the path of money over education. But they wouldn’t have achieved the fame and immortality that they did if they thought as you do.”

“But sir, everybody can’t be a Madan Mohan Malvia or Laxmi Prasad Devkota,” Binod said, suddenly realizing that he had never argued with his teacher before.

“Everybody can. You need to suppress your lower motives and cultivate higher thoughts.”

While Mahendra-sir continued along these lines, Binod, whose eyes had mostly been on the concrete walk, suddenly spotted a twenty-rupee note lying to the side of Mahendra-sir, as if asking to be picked up. But he did not think it good manners to hurry ahead and pick it up. He waited to see if it caught Mahendra-sir’s eyes. But Mahendra-sir was so much absorbed in preaching to him that his eyes did not turn toward it. So they passed the note.

While Mahendra-sir kept up with these stories, Binod kept thinking about the note. His father had to sell ten pieces of betel to earn twenty rupees. And then how long his father might have to wait for ten customers, he was trying to imagine.

Soon they turned around. When they reached the spot, Binod picked up the note and put it in his front pocket. By this time Mahendra-sir had started another story, but he began to falter and even pause, often quickly and for long, and finally got fully stuck, as if he had forgotten it or did not find it inspiring enough. His face became serious, as in the classroom. Only now it was real and unpleasant. He began to wipe the back of his bald head more quickly, and kept his eyes on the side of the walk constantly, frowning. Then suddenly, he switched to talking about himself.
“Look at my misfortune,” Mahendra-sir said in a low, plaintive voice. “The note was there all the time on my side yet I passed without seeing it. That tells the story of how I’ve missed so many opportunities in my life. It hurts me to think about it.”

The man Binod was walking with was no longer the Mahendra-sir he had known so far. He was surprised that his teacher did not talk of ignoring opportunities but missing them. But then he should not be surprised, he thought; it was the truth, the only truth.

Binod listened, glancing sideways at his teacher’s sad face, feeling sorry for him but quite happy for himself. It felt good to think that he was a lucky man. While he listened to Mahendra-sir, he felt the weight of the note in his shirt pocket.

Mahendra-sir did not bother to think of another story or example. He continued, frowning as they were approaching the school gate, where the janitor stood looking toward him with meek respect.

“Binod, if you don’t mind, give me that note,” Mahendra-sir said.

Binod felt a sharp sting in his heart as he took out the note and handed it to him. He saw that Mahendra-sir’s frown had gone and his face looked quite relaxed. For all his scholarship and friendliness, Binod could not help hating him at this time. After all, money made everybody stoop, he thought. He felt the charm of Mahendra-sir’s words losing their grip on his mind.

When they approached the gate, the janitor saluted Mahendra-sir with a grin on his thin face.

“How are you, Ramashankar?” Mahendra-sir asked.

“Fine, sir,” the old man said in a humble voice.

Mahendra-sir took out the other twenty-rupee note from his shirt pocket, the one that his wife had given him for shopping, and folded the two notes together and held them out.

The janitor’s eyes glinted as he took the notes and put them in the side pocket of his shorts.

“Actually, it’s customary for every teacher to give him a little amount of money at the end of a year,” Mahendra-sir said about fifty paces away from the janitor. “Poor fellow! He has a large family. This is the only money he gets besides his small pay. Every teacher has already given. Only I was left.”

Binod listened to his teacher quietly, walking beside him.
On the bicycle, Binod reproached himself for misunderstanding his teacher. He thought about the janitor who, like his father, was struggling to manage his family on a small income. He chuckled as he tried to imagine how Mahendra-sir’s wife would have reacted to his returning without vegetables. Then he thought ahead to pawning the earrings for his admission fees and sped up through the street air that had begun to cool.
I Haven’t Kissed You Yet

Anita sits across from Manohar, in one of the wooden chairs pushed against the opposite wall close to the doorway. Her fingers wrap around the synthetic purse and leather-jacketed notebook on her lap. She wears her black hair in braids, which reach beyond her slim waist. Her eyes roll toward the doorway every time someone passes. She looks Manohar in the face very briefly, only to respond to his questions or remarks, which are random and rarely concern English literature. Her eyes mostly rest on her sandals that match her purple salwar-kurta or on the front of the desk. That gives him ample opportunity to feed his eyes on her sharp-featured face, and to steal glances at the delicious curves of her light brown flesh at the neckline through the white transparent shawl. Her full lips excite his desire to kiss them. The metal wall clock to his right over the wooden window shows two-thirty. In half an hour it’ll be time for her to go.

After a while, she gets up and steps over. She takes out some bills from the purse and puts them on the glass-topped desk, next to his leather-bound copy of Petrarchan Sonnets. They are three hundred-rupee bills folded together.

“What’s this?” he says, trying to not show his anger.

“Next month’s fee,” she says, smiling at him politely.

“Yes, but….In the past it was different. But now we’re not merely a teacher and a student. We’re more than that.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Aren’t we?” he says.

She blushes, but doesn’t take back the bills. And he becomes doubtful. Has this girl been fooling me for a month? It suddenly seems so stupid that he hasn’t even kissed her yet.

Outside the window, the gravel walk reflects the mid-June heat. The dark green foliage of the old mango trees shades only the sides of the walk, along which a few motor-bikes tilt in rows. He can see boys and girls walking side by side, carrying their books. A tall boy in white kurta-pyjama and a girl in black trousers stand in the shade of
a tree, face to face, almost touching each other, talking. Manohar can see the dark brown face of the girl. *The boy must have kissed her so many times.*

Every once in a while, the hallway echoes with students making inquiries at the administration office across the hallway and the head clerk making replies in his usual irritated voice. Anybody—a student, a teacher or an administration staff member—can pop in during the time he and Anita are in the room. And he hates this. He wishes he could arrange some other time to teach her. But other times, either he has a class or she’s not free. And beyond five, the college closes and her parents would not allow her to go to any other place for instruction in the evening, unless it’s their own home. And there Manohar wouldn’t like to teach her. There, he’d get even less opportunity than here.

He’s always kept a chair beside him. It’d be easy to kiss her if she sat there. But she never sits there. That may trigger scandal: YOU KNOW PROF. MANOHAR, THAT NEW ENGLISH TEACHER, HE AND ANITA ARE IN LOVE. This could resound through every single classroom and cafeteria or ripple across the grounds, wherever students are gathered. This can also appear as big cartoons on the college walls. If this ever happened, it could ruin his career that started only last year. It would also end his five-year relationship with Prof. Gyaneshwar, his Ph.D. thesis supervisor and Anita’s father. He can’t forget that it was through Prof Gyaneshwar that he got this job and he still needs his recommendation to get confirmed as a permanent teacher.

Anita’s face looks as if she is ready with her pen and diary if he would only teach. And if he would just chat, she would be ready for that, too. He doesn’t feel like teaching. In fact, in the last month, he has hardly taught her anything. They’ve just talked about each other’s families, friends, movies, and such. *But never kissing or cuddling. Does she want me to make the first move?* Actually, it did occur to him a couple of times that he should attempt it. But he didn’t dare. Somebody could walk in right then or just see them while passing the door.

The sight of the bills makes him wonder whether to feel like a lover or a teacher. He doesn’t know what to talk about.

She scribbles on the white cover of her diary. She bought it one and a half months ago to write a journal. She was flying to Kathmandu for fifteen days to stay at her aunt’s. He asked her to keep a journal for the entire period. That would be a great practice in writing,
he said. The truth, though, was that he wanted to know how much she really thought of him. On return, when she turned in the diary, he was surprised to find that the journal was full of references to him—how she liked his teaching style, how she liked to speak and write English the way he did, how she was impressed with his academic career, how he became a university teacher at only twenty-five. The same day he bared his heart to her. It was a long-winded emotional rambling before he could finally force out “I love you.” Even that day there had been no kissing.

So far he’s been assuring himself that she loves him. This self-assurance, though, doesn’t last more than two or three days. And he has to check it over and over again to make sure his love is safe, like people keep checking their bank accounts to make sure that their balances are safe. One day he asked her, “Do you think your parents will allow you to marry me?” She said, blushing, “I don’t know. Why don’t you talk to them yourself?” Another day he said, “You know since I’m still not permanent in my job, and you’re still doing your B.A., I think we shouldn’t hurry to marry right now.” And she nodded, ‘Ok,’ blushing in a way that made him feel stupid for doubting the love between them.

The folded bills overwhelm him with doubt, more than ever before. She scribbles on the cover of the notebook nervously. That tells him that she’s aware of his restlessness.

“Ever since I fell in love with you, I’ve been going crazy,” he finds himself saying. She continues to scribble.

*Perhaps she expected me to say this.*

He reaches out for the window. It looks like the boy in white pyjama-kurta has just kissed the girl in black trousers because she covers her face with her hand and the boy looks around as if to see if anybody noticed. His relaxed, smiling face shows that he’s sure nobody did. He turns back to the girl, who takes her hand off her face, blushing. Manohar pushes the window shut and sits down.

“Please come over here,” he says, patting the chair beside him.

“I’m fine here.” She shakes her head, perhaps reading his intention.

“Please!” he says.

“No,” she grimaces.

“Please!”
She shakes her head.
He steps over, takes her hand and pulls at it gently, saying, “Please!”
He keeps pulling, but she won’t yield. Finally, she does. Right then Prof. Ashok, her father’s close friend, enters. Manohar sees the man’s shock and drops her hand. She remains seated in the chair beside him, quiet and nervous.

“I’m sorry I came at the wrong time,” Prof. Ashok says, rolling his eyes back and forth between him and Anita.

“No, sir, it’s okay,” Manohar says, his heart thumping.

“Actually, I came to ask if you’re free from two to three tomorrow. Something has come up unexpectedly and I won’t be able to take my class. If you’re free, would you mind?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Sorry once again, how are you Anita?” he smiles at her on his way out.

“I am fine, sir.” She doesn’t look up at him.

After he’s gone, she closes her eyes and presses her hand hard against her chest. She looks like she is about to cry.

She doesn’t say anything for a while, then suddenly rises, saying, “I’ll go now.”

What the hell! I’ve messed up everything. I shouldn’t have hurried. But why did she bring the money? Why didn’t she easily come over and sit beside me? And this bastard Ashok... couldn’t he find any other time to pop in? He visits Prof. Gyaneshwar’s house almost every evening. He’s sure to tell him what he saw today.

His heart feels like he’s jumped off a cliff. Even though he continues to walk down the Umar Road that leads to her house, he doesn’t feel sure whether he should go there or not. She must be angry and refuse to see him. Prof. Gyaneshwar may suspect that Manohar’s visit has something to do with his daughter. But Manohar has a feeling that she won’t come for tutoring again, and he won’t be able to meet her and talk to her in private.

I’m going to leave this city forever. But I must see her once and return her money.

In front of the barber’s shop next to the gate to her house, he hesitates. He feels like he is going mad. The shop is candle-lit. Its wall clock says seven o’clock. Manohar enters the gate, hoping against hope that Prof. Gyaneshwar is not home. He feels like a thief as
he walks up the dark steps of the verandah. His heart jumps when through the window he spies Prof. Gyaneshwar sitting in a couch in the living room, reading a newspaper by the light of a fluorescent lamp. Before Manohar can even think of slipping back, Prof. Gyaneshwar spots him. “Who’s there?”

His knees tremble as he moves to the door. “It’s me, Manohar.”

The professor motions him in. He enters and sits on a couch facing the tall, dark, mustached man. Prof. Gyaneshwar wears only a faded gray lungi. He looks quite serious—no smile. He gets up and pulls the curtains of the inside door. Manohar wonders if Prof. Ashok has already been here and told him everything.

“What’s up?” Professor Gyaneswar says, in a rough voice, settling back in his couch.

Manohar has nothing to say. He hasn’t made up any excuse. He says, “Ummm and well,” and then surprises himself by saying, “Sir, if you don’t mind, I want to marry your daughter.”

Prof. Gyaneswar doesn’t respond for a moment. His silence makes Manohar wonder if he has really said those words or just dreamed them. He’s so scared that he prays he didn’t say them. His neck feels stiff and he can’t look up to face his former supervisor.

“Just a minute,” Prof. Gyaneshwar says getting up and disappearing through the curtains.

Manohar can’t tell whether the man is friendly or angry.

Manohar remains in his seat dazed and bloodless, his heart bouncing like a ball. In a few minutes, Prof. Gyaneshwar returns, followed by his wife in a pink cotton sari.

Manohar doesn’t have the courage to face them. He keeps his head bowed, ready to take the hailstones of their anger and insult.

“We’d like to meet your parents,” Anita’s mother says, sitting on the couch next to her husband.

Manohar doesn’t respond because he doesn’t fully understand her.

She repeats, naming him politely.

Prof. Gyaneshwar speaks, but doesn’t sound like Prof. Gyaneshwar—his voice has softened into a sweet parental voice. “We’d love to give you our daughter’s hand in marriage.”
“I’m very happy. Manohar and Anita will be a perfect match,” Anita’s mother says, turning to her husband.

“To tell you the truth,” Prof. Gyaneshwar says, “you’ve been in our minds for Anita for a long time. I’ve been hesitating, not knowing what you thought about her.”

Manohar looks up at them blushing. He can’t believe his ears and eyes.

Manohar and Anita enter the huge metal arch of the Shiva Temple. She carries a copper tray containing incense sticks, marigolds, a small copper tumbler of milk, and small clay pots with ghee and thick twisted cotton threads. A silver moon bathes the flagstones of the spacious yard with its soft light. The yellow flames of clay lights dance in the narrow niches of the miniature temples surrounding the main temple, which is huge with a wraparound porch. Anita lights a clay light in every niche.

She and Manohar walk up the steep steps of the main temple. A tall man wearing a white dhoti and three lines of red candlewood across his forehead tolls the large bell on the side of the main door. Some men and women walk down the porch, circling the walls.

Inside, Manohar watches as Anita squats and bathes the black phallus with milk, then sprinkles it with marigolds, which slide down and rest on the large wet heap of flowers. Then she stands beside him and folds her hands, closing her eyes solemnly. He also folds his hands and closes his eyes, but soon opens them to look sidelong at her lips.

Outside in the yard, a foreigner is taking a picture of a woman lighting a clay light in a niche.

“How about a picture?” he asks Anita.

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Anita says.

They approach the tall, middle-aged blond woman.

“Where are you from, madam?” he says.

“I’m from America.” She smiles.

“How long have you been in Nepal?”

“About a month.”

“In a month, have you ever seen a Nepali man kissing a Nepali woman in public?”

“No,” she says, raising her eyebrows.
“Would you like to see?” he says.

“Oh, yes,” she nods excitedly, looking at Anita, who’s looking at Manohar with a bemused smile.

“Ok, here we go.” He holds Anita’s face in his hands.

“Wait, let me take a picture.”

The tall woman squints through the lens of her digital camera as Manohar kisses Anita’s mouth. Anita doesn’t resist.
Shankar Chaudhary was thirty-one, thin and dark-skinned. He lived alone in a two-room apartment that was part of a single-story brick building on the side of a road.

When his sister-in-law handed him Naina’s picture and asked his opinion, he thought he was dreaming. Naina’s large brown eyes sparkled at him. She stood smiling in a purple salwar suit against a wall-size painting of gardenscape, holding her plait over her navel, a white transparent shawl draped around her shoulders. Her body curved lusciously from her waist. He blushed yes, and the same day his sister-in-law fixed the date of marriage.

On the first night, he asked her, “Are you happy?” kissing her hands that were covered with henna tattoo. The golden sequins of her red-wine sari glittered in the dim light of the side table. She simply blushed and nodded without looking up at him. He tried to get her to speak by asking further questions, but she would only whisper yes or no. He gently pulled her into his arms, slid the veil off her head and kissed her lips passionately, at the same time reaching for the clips of her blouse on the front. She wouldn’t let him undo them. She would hunch over his hand, blushing. He made love to her with her clothes on and her eyes closed.

In the morning, she patted him gently on the arm. He woke up to a tray in her hand holding two cups of tea. She had changed into a pink chiffon sari. Her face was unveiled, the ends of her sari wrapped across her shoulders and tuck in the waist. Her loose hair dripped over her hips. He set down the tray next to the lamp and pulled her into his arms. She covered her eyes with her hands allowing him to unclip her blouse and pull off her sari, and they made love while the tea cooled.

After that, whenever they got on the bed, she took off her blouse and spread her hands out for him. During intercourse, she pressed her nipples into his mouth in turns, saying, “This is all yours.” And afterwards, when he rolled off of her exhausted, she held his hand over her breast.

The next year he started a small grocery store in the center of the market, half an hour’s walk from his apartment.

Shankar ran the shop from eight AM. to eleven PM. He left for lunch around twelve o’clock and hurried back even before the hour was over. As he scooped rice from a jute
sack and measured it on the balance next to the wooden counter or wrapped vegetable spices in a newspaper leaf for his customer, he thought of Naina. Sometimes he hated that he had to serve his customers the whole day while she waited for him all alone.

Every Tuesday evening, Shankar would take Naina to the Hanuman’s Temple and from there they would ride on a rickshaw half an hour to his brother’s two-story brick building. His brother was a college graduate and an accountant in the city branch of Nepal Bank Limited. At dinner table the brothers would sit on one side of the table and the sisters-in-law on the other side. Shankar would take this opportunity to compare Naina with his sister-in-law and swell with pride that Naina’s skin was fairer.

He loved Naina with his whole being and wanted to provide her with as much happiness as he could. He did not want her to feel that she lived a poorer life than her sister-in-law. Right across from his shop stood the Ganesh Sari Shop. A couple of times every month he crossed the road to the shop. The shopkeeper was his friend. He showed Shankar the best fabrics and the latest color designs imported from India and loved to offer his opinion on which would best suit Naina. He was willing to give Shankar any number of saris he wanted. He did not demand immediate payment. When the turnover was good, Shankar would visit Laxmi Jewelry Shop two blocks further down the road and pick a little piece of jewelry for her. She would jump at the sight of them and throw her arms around him and they would kiss.

He made love to her almost every night. But he had begun to prefer sex in the dark. If she left the light on, he would pull a blanket or a bed sheet over their faces. “Are you crazy?” she would fling it off her face. “You’ll suffocate me to death.” But he insisted on that because it made him hornier and once he was done with lovemaking, he rolled over to the other side, ignoring that she liked to sleep in his arms.

The single bedroom window gave on to the road across which stood a tea stall—always noisy with louts and druggies. Shankar wanted Naina to keep the window shut during the day. She obeyed him for two years. But after that, she began to be sick of acting like a demure bride. Almost every day coming home Shankar would find the window open. That made him wild with anger, but he would just frown at the window, walk over and shut it, without saying a word. He would pull the table in and sit on the chair wondering about her. As he waited for her to serve lunch, he kept his anger in check.
and tried to persuade himself that probably the room was too hot and stuffy. And after a long while, his anger would subside and he would smile at her while he ate. Before marriage he had heard people say that women feel heat more than men. Probably they were right, he thought.

But he could not come up with any justification for her not being careful about her clothing. Often she sat on the bed or walked in and out of the room without her blouse on, not bothering that she was visible through the window. This was too much. A couple of times he snapped, “What’s that?” She responded by immediately covering her bra with the end of her sari and then pulling on her blouse.

But every time he snapped at her, he felt remorse. He wished the wall had no window or the shop had not been right in front. He felt his skin crawl when he saw the men watching him as he entered and exited the gate.

Shutting the window felt like a cowardly solution. He felt sure of that when he heard their laughter following his shutting the window. So occasionally he resorted to the reverse strategy. After lunch he would open the window wide and squint up at a sunny patch of cloud, slowly lowering his eyes toward them—to show that he was not a coward, if that was what they were thinking, that if need be he would even confront them and beat them up. At first, they all responded by turning away as soon as he opened the window. And he thought part of his worry was his imagination; that the matter would not go as far as he feared.

But of late one of them—a dark-skinned, muscular man of about twenty-five, with curly hair, sleeves of his t-shirt rolled up showing his biceps—had started experimenting with not averting his blood-shot eyes. He stared back with a crooked smile through the smoke that coiled up from his cigarette. His friends sneaked glances, holding back their laughter. One of them rolled finely-chopped marijuana in a tiny piece of newspaper leaf. Shankar would slam the window shut and listen to their laughter and hooting. He would fume with anger, not knowing how to deal with the situation. He could not go to the police because they would laugh at him for not being able to handle such a trivial thing on his own. He could not take the help of his brother because his brother might also someday turn it into a joke about him.
One day he prepared himself for a fight. He kept staring at the metal bar, used as the
door latch, propped against the wall next to the door, and as he heard their jabber through
the slits in the window, he pictured himself running at them with the bar. He knew it
would suffice to take care of just one of them. He just needed to split one head and
everything would be all right. Then slowly the thought of police involvement and gossip
that would follow calmed him.

Then one day Shankar surprised himself by saying “hi” to the man right in front of his
shop. Shankar had just shut down the shop and was heading toward home for lunch.
“Hi,” the man replied. His brows furrowed, his eyes shone and a half smile suspended
on his face.

“Is everything going well?”
“Yes, perfect,” the man replied.
“How about your friends? Are they fine?”
“I think so.”

After a friendly grin, Shankar said, “Why don’t we get together someday? Would you
care to come over to my house for lunch?”

The wrinkles across his brow deepened and the smile faded completely.
“How about tomorrow?”
“Fine.”

Shankar felt so nervous he didn’t remember to ask the man’s name.
He told his name over lunch. “I go by Jaggu.”

They sat in chairs across from each other, a table in between. Jaggu wore a gray shirt
with white lilies and tight jeans. Along the threshold his white sneakers dwarfed
Shankar’s black leather sandals and Naina’s red plastic flip flops. Naina served them
deep-fried puri and mutton stew. She looked happy to have a guest. There had not been a
guest in their apartment in months except his sister-in-law. Later, Naina served them tea
in china cups. They talked mostly about Jaggu. He was a high school drop-out. His father
owned a small restaurant in the city that was doing a brisk business. His father wanted
him to join in, but he hated to run a restaurant. He had not decided anything about his life
and career. Shankar noticed that the man behaved quite decently, and blushed each time
he glanced at Naina. What a dramatic change, Shankar thought. He thanked himself for
not having acted in anger. He felt relieved that his decision to invite him over was right and felt sure that the problem was solved. He pictured the tea stall devoid of the louts.

For some days everything looked as he had expected. When Shankar came for lunch, he would not see any of those people—only a few genuine customers sipping tea from glasses, sitting on the bench.

Then one day he was stunned, almost horrified, at the sight of the sneakers on the threshold, carelessly taken off next to Naina’s flip flops. He heard Jaggu and Naina talking and laughing in their bedroom with an air of intimacy.

Shankar entered, forcing a smile, and slumped on the edge of the bed beside Naina. Then he looked at the two emptied tea cups that sat on the table.

Naina got up, looking at Shankar; he could perceive her gaze from the corner of his eyes. “I’ll fix you a cup of tea,” she said and disappeared in the dim kitchen door.

Shankar was still trying to get over the shock—how come he did not foresee this possibility. He let out a long sigh to disguise his anger.

“Tired?” Jaggu grinned.
“Yes,” Shankar nodded.
“It’s terribly hot, isn’t it? How is the shop doing?” Jaggu said.
“Good.” Shankar kept his answers curt so Jaggu would see that he was in no mood to talk and leave right away.

For some time Jaggu waited in silence then rose from the chair, saying, “Now I must get going.” But instead of leaving through the front door, Jaggu walked up to the kitchen door, popped in his head and said, “Sister-in-law, I got to go now.” His voice sounded overly polite.

In his mind Shankar said, “Bastard.”

Naina showed up in the doorway smiling, then followed him toward the front door, saying courteously, “Do come again.”

“See you later,” Jaggu smiled at Shankar, twisting his feet into the sneakers.
Shankar forced a smile back at him.
Naina waited as Jaggu laced up his shoes, then followed him out up to the gate.
As Shankar ate his lunch, he struggled with the impulse to shout at Naina for being so intimate with somebody whom they didn’t know well, who didn’t have any character and
whose main business was to do drugs and flirt with women. But then he thought maybe
he was overreacting—maybe she would get sick of him herself and he would stop visiting
after a few times.

But this went on longer than Shankar could possibly bear. Jaggu started visiting when
Shankar was not expected. Shankar caught him in his bedroom only two times, but he
was sure he visited regularly. One day Shankar exploded, “Why does he visit when I’m
not home?”

“I don’t know,” she said, frowning.

“I know.”

“What do you mean?” She frowned.

He slapped her. “Tell him not to come here.”

At the shop it became hard for him to concentrate on his work. He told his customers
wrong prices, measured more or less than they wanted, made mistakes in calculating the
total and returning change. He tried to persuade himself that he had become too
suspicious of his wife and was drawing a wrong conclusion. Maybe by now she would
have told Jaggu not to come and he would have left. But then Shankar pictured Naina and
Jaggu making love on the bed with the window and door closed, and hot blood raced
through his head. He shut down the shop surprising the customers who were waiting for
groceries. As he strode down the sidewalk under a scorching afternoon sun, he pictured
himself kicking the door open, frightening Naina and Jaggu from each other’s embrace,
then grabbing the bar from behind and rushing for their heads.

As he approached his apartment, he saw that the window was closed. He dashed
through the gate. The door was also closed. The black iron chain dangling at the top
banged against the dry wood, as he kicked the door open. The sun hit the bed which
turned out to be empty, the light orange bed sheet rumpled over the mattress, the pillows
overlapping each other. He darted for the kitchen door and peered around, listening for
any rustling or scrambling. Nothing, only an overwhelming quiet floating with the hum
of outside. He opened the window. There was none of the gang—two old men sat on the
bench in the shade of the tin awning sipping tea languorously. He opened the cupboard;
the clothes bars glared at him bare except for his clothes. She had not left anything,
except for her worn flip flops on the threshold. Then suddenly he noticed the wedding
necklace coiled on the dressing table, right in front of the mirror. He could not believe his eyes. It was the first token of love he had given her on the day of their wedding. When he had brought it from Laxmi Jewelry Shop, his sister-in-law had praised it, saying it was more beautiful than the one she had received from his brother. As he tied it around her neck under the marriage canopy in the courtyard of her parents’ house, both the groom’s and the bride’s parties clapped. And the priest explained the meaning of the two strings of black beads—they were meant to protect the marriage against evil.

Shankar sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the necklace, not daring to touch it. It looked like two snakes kissing.
A Lost Child

Dilip, a thirty-year-old man, pauses on the grassy sidewalk, below the wooden wraparound balcony. He has a blank face. He wears a white cotton shirt and black corduroy trousers. He stares at the people walking, pretending to be waiting for somebody to show up. One hand above his eyes against the afternoon sun, the other in his trouser pocket. From time to time, he looks out of the corner of his eye at the two slim girls seated on a bench with their backs to the street. The girls look to be in their twenties. He doesn’t see the tall man or his wife. They may be inside, he thinks. They must have changed a lot in appearance. Their faces must have wrinkled, their hair must have thinned and grayed. Dilip is sure to recognize them once they enter his vision. These girls must be their daughters. Their thin arms are playing with the rail. He strains to listen, but from their unclear mumblings between giggles he can’t understand what language they’re speaking.

Dilip’s eyebrows lift and his sweating forehead stiffens when a fat, gray-haired woman appears behind the railing, walking toward the girls. Two white plates on a colorful tin tray—probably snacks for them. She wears a pink gown with white polka dots. Looks around fifty. The tall man’s wife, Dilip hopes, and waits for her to speak, holding his breath. “Aren’t you hungry, girls?” His face drops to his chest, his pointed nose crumples, his lips curl tightly backwards. He sighs like a tire punctured by a street nail. Damn, she speaks Tharu. He continues his walk down the scorching street. The tall man and his wife spoke Bhojpuri. Their words jingle in his ears, too remote and slurred for him to understand. On both sides, two-story brick buildings rise behind the cast-iron gates. On the balconies, old couples lounge in wicker chairs, chatting in a relaxed way. Through the small gaping doors in the center of the gates, he can glimpse part of the empty stoops. The lawns are blazing carpets.

Last night in bed, as he closed his eyes, he got a vague feeling that around age five, he walked to a tall man’s house. The feeling was accompanied by a hazy image: an old single-story structure with a wraparound balcony held up by tall wooden posts. Lest he forget it by morning, Dilip reached for his diary and made a quick note: SEARCH OUT
THE HOUSE. He wonders why it never once occurred to him in such a long time to search out the house and meet the tall man and his wife. Or did the thought come often and fade away as soon as it was light and noisy? Like a memory that surfaces only in the hazy calm of night, when your eyes are closed? He feels sure this has nothing to do with Namrata leaving him.

Dilip began his quest on the narrow lane in his neighborhood that he hadn’t walked for years—just in case. At Shanti Chowk, two narrow streets branch off the main street and meander like rivulets intersecting the main street every half mile or so. He entered and followed almost each one, scanning each house, even though the street the tall man’s house stood on was quiet and narrow. Dilip can picture his small feet moving down it toward the house.

Dilip could have so easily visited the house when he was still a boy or adolescent. But at his present age, wouldn’t it look way too awkward? How is he going to introduce himself? They have likely forgotten him, and may even hate talking to him, thinking him a stranger, let alone welcoming him with warmth.

Whatever, Dilip must visit. The thought of talking to them about that sweet little incident feels so soothing.

At three thirty, he is passing a saw mill. Lemon wood dust floating in the air sticks to his sweaty black hair. Beyond the stacks of sun-dried timbers, under a wooden shed, the teeth of an invisible electric saw whirrs. Parvati, his fourteen-year-old housemaid, must be wondering why he didn’t return for lunch. She must have cleared up the cup and plate that he put back on the desk beside his blue diary. In front of the silver frame, out of which his mother always stares at him with a wan smile begging to love, or begging to be loved? Her thin gray hair hangs to her shoulders in irregular, untidy waves. Her face tilts a little to the side. He thinks of his classes. Each of them must have raised a din disturbing the adjoining classes. He thinks of the principal’s bearded face puzzling and freaking out over his unnotified absence. He joined Ideal Secondary School as a science teacher only last year. It’s his third job in the last three years. From the last two jobs he was dismissed for the same reason: his students complained that he didn’t speak aloud and didn’t explain enough.
He trudges on, shifting his gaze from balcony to balcony. The cuffs of his black cotton jeans sweep over his black leather shoes. Namrata’s pink face smiles at him. He inhales the soapy smell of her neck, as she bends over to hand him a morning cup of tea. Her black hair wrapped in a towel dripping over her back. Namrata. Namrata. Every morning, as he’s lying in bed, it’s not Parvati whom he expects to walk over with his breakfast, it’s Namrata. Namrata knows that too well. He’s used to it. But he has no right to blame her. The truth is, he hardly gave her the happiness a husband is supposed to give his wife. He didn’t even have two sweet words for her. Five years ago, when she first saw him, he had a smile on his face. She must have thought, What a cheerful husband he’s going to make! How long was it before she got to know the truth? A year? A month? He would never have allowed his inner unhappiness to show up in her presence, if it were in his power. To prevent it, he wouldn’t even have sung a sad song in her presence.

A quiet green house catches his eyes. Tall weeds choke the front lawn where red and yellow flower beds used to blink. He doesn’t see anybody. He wants to enter but doesn’t dare. He remembers playing below the balcony, and the boy up on the balcony shouting a nursery rhyme. He was Dilip’s school friend. Dilip doesn’t remember his face or anything else about the boy’s parents, but thanks them for sticking to green—Dilip’s favorite color. It’s two-story and wooden. Yet this is not the house he’s looking for. The tall man’s house doesn’t have such a big yard on the roadside.

A few paces further, he pauses near a bamboo-barred gate. His eyes race over the small lawn, where three dry saris ripple on a plastic line stretching between bamboo poles. The four o’clock sun shines on the white walls of the two single-story buildings. A narrow brick-paved yard cuts through their verandahs. In the verandah of the new building (which did not exist back then), a young woman dressed in a sari slouches against a pillar. A little girl in a red frock, probably her daughter, tugs at her hand. Both are dark-skinned and look to be tenants.

As he is wondering about the landlady, she emerges from the yard, pulling the end of her purple sari over her gray hair. Her bulging hips jiggie as she walks across the lawn to the saris. She has put on weight and become a little slow in her gait. But she retains the intent look in her eyes. Despite her dark skin and excess flesh, there’s something about
her that reminds him of his mother—perhaps her thick lips and protruding upper teeth. His ma’s teeth weren’t so prominent, though. More than the teeth and the lips, it’s the language. He remembers the landlady speaks Bhojpuri, like his mother. The desire to talk to her overwhelms him. In Bhojpuri! Maybe his mother would answer through this woman’s voice. When he asked his mother eight years ago, “Ma, how many years more do you think you’ll live?” She said, “Five at the most, but don’t worry, I’ll be with you even after leaving this body.” She didn’t keep the promise, though. She died the very next year.

The landlady pulls the saris into her arms, frowning at him. He steps forward across the pavement grass. She approaches, and looks into his face, frowning deeper. Then explodes into a smile. “Areee! Dilip!”

He smiles back. His smile like a wave foaming a quiet, dusky shore.

“Step in, step in.” She quickly slides the bamboos for him to step across.

She holds his hand and leads him into the yard. Her hands feel like his mother’s. They pass the first door of the old building. He notices her husband resting in bed, his pointed face under the window, his white pajamas shining. He is much thinner than his wife—hasn’t changed over the years.

“You know he’s my first son, has come to visit his mother after twenty-five years,” she introduces him in her loud voice to the young woman and her daughter. The little girl gazes at him in wonder. The young woman smiles at her affectionate way of introducing a stranger.

“Who’s it?” The landlady’s husband calls out in a grumpy voice.

“Vikram’s son. The road contractor, our old tenant,” she calls back.

Everything wrenches his heart: the sloping tin roof of the older building that has rusted so much ever since his days of living here, the crumbling walls, and most of all the verandah and the old, black door. The landlady pushes it open. He follows her inside. The room has been turned into a guest room: an old-looking couch set against a wall facing a fourteen inch TV atop a tall wooden cabinet and a lavender-painted steel wardrobe standing against the opposite wall. The walls have been repainted and the floor has been given a smooth concrete surface.

“Make yourself comfortable while I fix you tea.” She steps out with the saris.
He sits on the couch in front of the wardrobe mirror. Takes out a white cotton handkerchief from his shirt pocket and wipes the sweat off his face and neck. As he looks around, the present dissolves. The room gets dim and stuffy. The plaster peels off the walls. The mud floor dampens his thighs as he sits cross-legged next to a bed. He smells his father’s sweat-drenched shirt hanging on the bed post and the greasy pots of food in front of him. His stepmother, her thin, dented face the color of walnut, squats opposite him, dressed in a brick-colored sari. On a steel plate yellow dal seeps through the rice and collects around the edges diluting the fried potato chips. She shifts her eyes back and forth between his face and his plate. His father is resting in bed after lunch, a cigarette glowing between his thick, dark fingers. His stepmother sustains a smile around her lips to make his father think that she really loves his son. For his part, his father talks to him in Nepali, rather than their first language, Bhojpuri—the language of the minority—to make her believe that he hates the entire Bhojpuri part of him including his first wife, who can’t utter a single correct sentence in Nepali.

“Are you going to school regularly?” his father says.
“Yes.”
“Stay home after school and concentrate on your book. No fooling around.
Dilip listens silently.
As he lifts each morsel and forces it into his mouth, Dilip fears he may throw up. He wishes his father would quickly throw on his shirt and go back to work. How free he will be then to play outside or do whatever he likes!

In the present, Dilip replaces his handkerchief in his pocket and walks out the door. In the unfenced back yard, he slowly slashes through the weeds that stick through the corduroy into his calves. The window absorbs his eyes. The black wire netting is torn and twisted in a corner at the bottom, right where it used to be so. It looks much more torn and twisted and rusty, though. The unkempt ground stretching to the next house—also old and single-storied, but comparatively much stronger and well-kept—sucks at his heart. The gnarled mango trees still stand between these two houses, tilted, as if chasing one another. The trees have gone dry and black and look like ghosts. Where are the other children? he asks himself. Whom did he come to see in this other house? They must have
grown as big and old as he. Will they recognize him if they get to see him? Will he recognize them if he gets to see them?

“Oh, there you are.” The landlady hobbles over with two steaming cups.

“Thanks very much.” He takes the cup. “Where’s your son?”

“Oh, he’s in Kathmandu, doing M.A. He’s grown bigger than you. All your friends have grown so big you won’t recognize them. Most of them don’t live here anymore, though. You remember Sangita?”

“Sangita?” He sips from the cup.

“Yes, don’t you remember? She used to live in that house,” she points to the house.

The faint brown face of a small girl in a frock smiles at him.

“A couple of years ago, her father sold this house and went to live in Kathmandu. He didn’t want to live here after her marriage.”

“Is she married in Kathmandu?”

“No, in America. He’s a doctor.”

“Tell me about yourself. Are you married?”

He smiles bitterly. “Yes.”

“It was so sad to hear about your father’s death. But honestly, your father wasn’t a good man. He left your mother for that slut. I knew all along that the slut was not going to stick with your father. That’s the difference between a woman you marry and a woman that you pick up in the street.”

Dilip didn’t pick up Namrata in a street. It was a traditional marriage, though unattended by his father.

His father died last year. A couple of times Dilip ran into him around the market, but his father wouldn’t so much as throw a glance at him. Simply because Dilip ran away from him at the age of nine to live with his mother.

His feet hurt on his way back. As a small child, he couldn’t have walked so far, he thinks. But then it’s not impossible. Once in a while he must have escaped from his father and stepmother and walked all the way to his mother. In the house—in his grandfather’s house—where his father never visited his mother or sent her basic necessities, she lived
like a prisoner, surviving on what the neighbors offered her out of pity. She waited and waited and waited for her son to show up just once.

He remembers sneaking down the street as a child. How hard it felt to approach this house and move past—a house where his mother gave birth to him and where she died saying to him, “I’ll be with you even after leaving this body.” Sometimes he’d sprint past. Other times, he would hide himself behind a wooden street pole near the gate and peep toward the upper floor window until his mother’s face showed up, pale and sad. Sometimes his mother would catch him peeping. Then a smile would redden her face. She’d nod and beckon to him, cajoling, begging, with her smiles, with her tears. But as if trying to escape a racing wind, he’d hang behind the pole, peeping out, not responding to his mother’s call. And finally, the only thing he’d know to do was to sprint out of his her vision and walk back, heavy steps and a heavier heart, to his father’s rented apartment. He used to worry his father would tie him up in a sack. His father never did that, though. All he remembers is that his father sometimes threatened neighborhood children that way. And he often imagined being tied up in a sack by his father.

Dilip still doesn’t know whether it was on his way to his mother’s or on his way back to his father’s that he got lost. But he feels sure that it was on one such storm-blown trip between his father and mother that he got lost. And drifted away to that sweet house, where that sweet man and the sweet woman lived.

It’s past five P.M. Where is that house? His eyes begin to moisten. His search takes a circular turn.

About fifty yards from his house, his feet slow down again in front of a two-storied brick house. Prakash’s children are chasing one another across the lawn screaming and yelling. The rusty tin-roof slopes steeply. The side of the narrow cement balcony stares at him, as if saying, “Do you remember me? Once I used to be wooden.” The setting sun gives the yellow balcony a pleasant ochre glow.

Prakash suddenly appears on the balcony. He’s medium-sized with thinning hair and a round face, about five years older than Dilip. As soon as he catches Dilip’s eyes, he
waves and smiles. Dilip waves back, smiling, his heart filling with admiration and gratefulness. Prakash looks away, but Dilip continues to look in his direction.

Dilip and Prakash don’t meet each other as often as before. When they pass in the street, they just smile or wave, and move on. There’s no longer anything of common interest. Playing on the lawn has become a past thing, no longer suitable for their age. Besides, ever since he dropped out of college without completing B.A., Prakash has occupied himself with looking after his ancestral farm land. Dilip has not seen this land, which Prakash once told him lies six miles east. All day Praksh is gone there; in the evening he hangs around with political activists, chatting with them at the main chowk of the city. Sometimes when he passes this group, Dilip overhears his friend telling a joke. Dilip loves the mock serious tone in which his friend delivers the joke and chuckles silently while the others squeal with laughter behind him. Each member of the group is so clever at cracking jokes and so capable of laughter. Dilip wishes he were like them. He laments he is not a good talker. He doesn’t blame Prakash for being formal and distant in his manners with him over the years. Like Prakash, his house also has changed—new walls, new colors of paint. Yet it’s a house that has seen grandmother living with grandfather, father living with mother, and grandchildren chasing one another across the lawn screaming and yelling.

This small lawn was the playground for all the neighborhood boys. They used to play all sorts of games: football, volleyball, chess, and cards. Everyone liked Prakash and Prakash liked everyone. But Dilip felt that Prakash secretly liked him more than he did the others. Toward the end of the last game at dusk, Prakash would glance at him more and more, as if checking for something. When all the boys were gone, Prakash would whisper to him to go downstairs and wait under the balcony. He’d whisper so his parents didn’t hear. After a few minutes, half a dozen ears of corn would fall one after another right before Dilip on the grass with a series of light thuds. Prakash would look down with a smile and quickly disappear for fear of being caught by his parents.

Prakash had a kind heart. He knew Dilip was hungry, that his mother had nothing at home to cook for dinner.
Dilip’s house is unpainted, two-storied—all brick, no wood. He pushes open the gate, pushes it back shut. The instant he flicks on the staircase light, an invisible tiger leaps over him from the landing. He struggles up the stairs. Flicks the door switch, walks into the turmeric light and flops on the edge of the bed, flinging the letter onto the side table. He lifts the remote from his side, switches channels, finally settling for a Hindi movie. He sighs and moans. It takes a while to realize that he’s watching Pyasa, starring Guru Dutt, a man whose real life was as sad as the role he played in movies. Who committed suicide.

“Rice has got cold. May I warm the rice or would you like me to cook again?” Parvati asks from the door.

“I’ll warm it myself. You can go home.”

Dilip turns down the TV and stretches himself out on the bed. The rolls of student papers on the desk fill him with contrition. He wonders what excuse he is going to give to the principal. He tries to concentrate on the screen. Then his gaze slowly turns to the blue diary. Part of the letter sticks out like a goat’s tongue after decapitation. In thirteen days, he has read it thirteen hundred times. He reaches for it again.

Dilip,

I hope you’ll apologize me for what I’m going to do and won’t come after me. I’ve decided to leave you. I don’t think I can ever be happy with you. You can’t say that I haven’t been a faithful and devoted wife. I have done the best I could to please you. I thought you would change but I was wrong. I can’t spend the rest of my life with a melancholic man.

Namrata

He crumples and flings it into the waste bin under the desk. It perches on the scraps of paper like a dead rat. He stares at the ceiling fan. The flickering light of the television plays off the spinning black blades. From the desk his mother stares at him without blinking. He waits for the cool air of the fan and the low television jabber to lull him.

His eyes close finally, and millions of tiny gray specks begin to assemble in sharp relief against the silent black space. As he begins to perceive everything, a sweet quiver passes through his heart.

It is a single-storey wooden house with a tiled roof, perched high on three rows of tall,
wooden posts, on a quiet brick-paved street. A young child drifts towards it in a soft drizzle. The brown-red cobblestones are soaked and feel soft to his bare feet. From the ditches on both sides, frogs croak in their gentle song.

A young man, tall and lean, notices him from the balcony and rushes downstairs, calling, “Oh, my God! There’s a lost child on the street!”

The man lifts him into his arms and kisses him.

The cramped dirt yard of the house squelches under his feet as the boy walks across it toward the stairs, clinging to the man’s hand.

The man carefully walks him up the wooden stairs. Upstairs, a woman dressed in a red sari, probably his wife, showers Dilip with kisses. Afterward she brings him a white plate of rice and milk with sugar. As he eats hungrily, the man and his wife surround him talking in Bhojpuri about his whereabouts with utmost concern.

Dilip doesn’t open his eyes. He strains his sleepy head a bit, waiting for the faces of the tall man and his wife to become clear.
My God/Devil

My mother, my wife, Anjana, and our thirteen-month-old son, accompany me to the Jogbani railway station to see me off. It is still a while to the ten-thirty departure. I allow them to keep close to my window. Anjana holds Bablu up in her arms. He looks very proud of the maroon T-shirt he wears to imitate me. Both my mother and Anjana think maroon suits our wheat-brown skin. Every once in a while he clings to the iron bars, saying, “Papa, Papa,” and I stretch my hand through to caress his soft brown hair. I repeat to them, “Take good care of yourselves and Bablu.”

When a railway man blows his whistle, I say, “Step back,” and they do. They stand in the long band of sunlight that falls in through the gap between the train top and the edges of the platform roof. My mother’s white red-bordered sari blazes; her light brown face shines and so does her gray hair. She looks much younger than sixty-five, despite her wrinkles. Anjana also looks gorgeous in her purple cotton sari. The tiny round bindi sparkles against her brown forehead like a pearl. They stand close in a line: Anjana a head taller than my mother, still holding Bablu in her arms. They smile at me and I smile back. Suddenly the train whistles long and shrill and lurches forward. Bablu’s smile changes to an expression of wonder, and I chuckle. He doesn’t know where I am going. We wave at each other till their faces slide past the window.

Three hours later, my head aches because of the clanging of the tracks. The gritty draughts feel as if they are scraping a hole in the back of my ear. The black trees, beyond the racing wheat fields, stalk the horizon like ghosts. As I stare out at them through the afternoon haze, my hands stir and crawl towards each other on my lap, as if they were crabs wanting to mate. They want to pray. Not once, not twice, but over and over again till I’m back home. Whenever I travel away from my family, I’m worried to death that something terrible is going to happen to them. So I keep praying—of course, I do it on the sly. My prayer has two parts. First, I join my palms and when nobody is watching, touch them to my forehead. Then one by one I picture my family members having come down with some serious illness, or meeting with some accident. My god/devil says that is how I’ve saved my family so far. I have listened to him for too long now. I must get rid
of this superstition and try to enjoy my journey as others do. I curl my fingers into tight
fists and try to concentrate on pleasant thoughts. But I fail. Every mile the train puts
between me and my family makes my heart sink a little. In two days anything can happen.
My hands stretch towards each other and touch. I swing my right hand up and run it
through my hair. Once, twice, several times. Finally it rests there, fingers cupping a mass
of hair. I try to imagine Sabitri, Anjana’s sister, and her newborn son, whose chhatthi
I’m on my way to attend. The letter Sabitri wrote requested that Anjana and Bablu
accompany me. I smile at my splayed hand rubbing over my slim thigh. She knows little
about our financial condition. If any one in my family got seriously ill or had an accident,
I wouldn’t be able to do anything but watch them die. I don’t know when my hand
slipped from my head. It rubs over my chin and then the left arm, making its way
downward.

The dark, unshaven man next to me stares out the window. I can smell his bad breath.
Next to him, a bald man, neatly dressed in a milk-white dhoti-kurta, reads The Hindustan
Daily. His tanned pate glows in the yellow light of the ceiling bulb. I steal glances at the
couple sitting right across me. The woman’s skin is light brown. Her midriff rolls over
her waist. Her husband is a thickset, too. His broad face looks like a rock. His huge
biceps move up and down below the sleeves of his sky-blue T-shirt, as he cracks peanuts
out of their shells and pops them in his mouth. He’s probably talking about some of their
relatives. His voice sounds firm and nonchalant. From time to time, she laughs, cupping
her hand over her mouth. The ends of her green and gold silk sari drape around her
shoulders and across her large breasts, and are clenched in the other hand on her lap.
Sometimes when her hands slow down in separating peanuts, he hands her his own.
Anjana and I have seen this couple several times in Biratnagar at the vegetable market—
always together. I jerk my hand away, and decide to introduce myself.

“Where are you going?” I ask hesitantly.

“Delhi,” he replies.

I wish they were also traveling to Banaras.

“And you?” the woman asks.

“Banaras,” I say, rubbing my hands against my blue corduroy trousers. “To attend my
nephew’s chhaththi. It’s the celebration of a child’s sixth day.”
“Yes, yes. We’re also Hindus, we know that,” the woman says.

Over the next two hours we speak to each other on several topics. I still don’t know why they are going to Delhi. A couple of times I want to ask but finally I let it go.

At the Purneya Junction, the train clatters to a stop. I move my fingers in and out, and watch as the dark, unshaven man and the bald man elbow their way through the crowd to get off. It is barely five minutes before the compartment refills with passengers.

Vendors hurry by, hawking their tidbits through the open window.

One of them comes along, calling in a usually affected, throaty voice, “Samosa! Samosa! Samosa!”

The husband raises his fleshy arm and the boy stops.

“Six,” he says.

The boy wraps up six samosas in a loose leaf of *The Times of India*, and pushes it between the bars.

“Chandar-ji, please share with us.” The husband places the oily leaf on the wooden seat between him and his wife.

“No, thanks,” I say, smiling.

“Please!” his wife insists.

I can’t refuse.

After the samosas, the husband signals to one of the tea vendors rushing past the window carrying their aluminum kettles of tea and glasses. The dark thin man, clothed in a faded white vest, pours a glass of warm tea for each one of us in turn, which we reach out between the bars to take.

At two p.m. we arrive at the Katihar Junction. At a newsstand I buy a copy of *India Today*. In the second class waiting room, they wait for the four p.m. Rajdhani Express, and I for the five p.m. Mahananda Express. I flip through the magazine, to keep my hands busy. A female voice repeats the same announcement over my head. The room is stuffy. The large, dusty blades of the black fan oscillate sluggishly. Flies swarm and betel-spit stains the walls like dark menstrual blood. To top it all, every time someone pushes open the gate to the restrooms, a stench assaults me. When the woman suddenly faints, I think it is because of the hot, stuffy room.

“Parvati! Parvati!” the man calls, holding her head in his arms.
I fetch water from the bathroom in a plastic mineral bottle and sprinkle some on her face. Each time he calls her name, his voice becomes more panicky.

“Oh, my God, what do I do now?” He looks around and then back at his wife’s closed eyes.

I tell him to go get some medical help.

“I don’t know where to go,” he says, like a child, almost crying.

“Don’t panic. The railway must have some urgent medical service for passengers,” I say, though I doubt it myself.

“Will you please watch her till I come back,” he says, trying to compose himself, then rushes out.

I lean over her face, fanning it with the magazine. I wonder what suddenly went wrong with her. It doesn’t seem to concern the other passengers waiting in the room. Eating snacks, taking a nap on the floor, reading a newspaper, they seem quite used to seeing such things on a journey. The stink doesn’t bother them either.

It is more than half an hour before he comes back with a dark, dry-skinned woman, who hardly looks like a nurse. Her loose hair masses over her shoulders. She wears a faded blue sari and carries an aluminum box in her hand. That must be her first-aid kit, I sigh with relief.

“It happens sometimes when the level of insulin gets too high,” the dark woman says in a flat voice, inserting the needle and pushing God knows what drug into her flabby arm.

I realize the woman must be diabetic. The big man turns to his wife then back to the nurse, slack-jawed and wide-eyed, asking over and over if she is going to be alright. The nurse reassures him. I miss his firm, confident manner. I miss his wife’s soft voice and laughter. After another half hour, the nurse tells him to rush his wife to hospital right away. He follows the nurse out and in another half hour returns with two dark-faced men carrying an old green stretcher. The dried blood stains make it look as if it has carried more dead than living patients.

The men carry the unconscious woman on the stretcher out of the waiting room and down the platform through a milling crowd of waiting passengers, railway clerks in black jackets, vendors and beggars. I struggle to keep my hands in my trouser pockets as I watch the poor husband follow the stretcher. I wish I could accompany him.
My delayed train departs at five A.M., twelve hours after the scheduled time.

Outside the concourse of Banaras railway station, I spot some idle rickshaws. The wooden eateries on both sides fill with travelers seated at the tables, eating from large steel plates. The one on my right blares out Kishore’s *Khaike pan Banaras wala, khuljaye band akalka tala*. Blue clouds of smoke curl up from their large coal-stoves on which the fat, sweat-drenched cooks bake chapattis. I bargain with one of the rickshaw drivers over the fare to Godaulia Chowk, and finally get on with my hold-all on the floor at my feet. I have one hand fingering the strap and the other in my trouser pocket.

The rickshaw turns into a narrow lane that snakes between small narrow stores—ranging from garish showrooms of electronic goods, clothes, and furniture to dim grocery stores, restaurants and betel shops.

Six p.m., my wrist watch says. I immediately thrust my hand into my pocket.

“A little faster,” I say to the driver.

The ceremony must have begun. But that doesn’t bother me. Anyway, I’m sure my sister-in-law will not mind my late arrival once she knows the cause. I want to get the unconscious body out of my mind. Is the woman receiving good treatment? I hope the man has enough money with him for treatment. I picture her dead and him crying. But there I halt my thoughts—I know where they will lead to. The restlessness of my hands returns. To keep them from joining, I tap my thighs with my fingers inside the pockets and hum *Khaike pan Banaras wala, khuljaye Band Akal ka tala*.

Where the lane is not crowded, the dark middle-age man rides with his thin body bent forward. He rocks from side to side, shifting his weight from one pedal to the other. The creaking of the rickshaw’s rusty chain fills the gaps in my humming.

A procession headed by a band drowns my voice. It fills the lane, choking the passage of vehicles, moving rapidly towards me. The mixed stream of pedestrians and vehicles veer aside to clear the way. At first, I think it’s a wedding procession. My fingers stop tapping my thighs, and I stop humming. I really need to hear some good music. And what I hear is not bad, it’s a holy strain: *Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram Pati Tapavan Sita Ram*. I resume the tapping in time to the music, which feels good. But oh, shit, it’s a funeral procession. My hands stop and go slack. My rickshaw sticks behind a red throbbing
scooter. Some hurried pedestrians manage to push their way through, but the tempos, motor-cycles, rickshaws and bicycles remain trapped in the jam.

The dead is an old woman. Her still body is covered from the neck to the feet with a shawl. The red words *Hare Ram Hare Ram, Ram Ram Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare* chase one another in rows all over against the ochre of the thin fabric. The marigolds, different shades of yellow and red, roll into one another across the shawl and around the brown face. On one side of the face a bunch of incense sticks smoke—the blue strands spurt back for a certain distance and then vanish into the air. As it passes me, I inhale the strong, mixed smells of the incense and the decaying flesh. Some people raise their joined palms and tilt their heads forward, as if a sleeping statue of a goddess were passing. My hands slip out of my pockets. A part of me says it will not be embarrassing to pray to my god/devil here—people would think I’m paying respects to the dead body. But I take control of myself and force them back in. I try to imagine the face of my nephew and the ceremony, the ceremony of birth.

The next morning my brother-in-law accompanies me to the auto-rickshaw stand to see me off. He carries my hold-all for me out of courtesy. He is short and his big head gives him a funny look, which works to his advantage when he’s cracking jokes in his Banarasi accent. I feel grateful to him; he kept me entertained through the ceremony with his talk. I’m glad the impulse to pray didn’t bother me much.

I sit on the back seat of a yellow-and-black auto-rickshaw next to an old man, the only other passenger, with my hold-all wedged between my knees. “Mughalseroy, Mughalseroy,” the driver shouts into the hot gray air. He won’t budge until he gets three more passengers—one for the back seat and two to share his driver’s seat on his either side. I have my right hand resting on the horizontal iron bar that runs along the back of the driver’s seat. My brother-in-law leans on the side lip of the door. He talks to me, tilting his face up so the betel doesn’t fall out. From time to time, he repeats, “But you’re returning too soon.” Each time I apologize and promise to visit them again very soon.

A young couple heads towards the auto-rickshaw. The woman wears a black chador over her sari, her light brown face left unveiled. Her huge eyes are red and swollen from crying. Dried tears spoil the beauty of her high-cheekboned face. She carries a baby in
her arms under her loose black garment. I can’t tell whether it’s a boy or a girl. It should be about a year old, I guess. The husband is a broad-shouldered man with a thick curled moustache. The dark gray smudges of dirt down the front of his white suit match his skin. He points to the place next to me. As she settles, I feel her soft arm squeeze against mine. Soon two more passengers show up. They sit on the driver’s sides, adjusting to the edges, securing themselves by clutching the lip of the roof and the horizontal iron bar, on either side of my hand.

The engine stutters, and I feel my body tremble against the woman.

“Do visit us again, and next time please bring along sister-in-law and Bablu, too,” my brother-in-law says, tilting his face up. He waves.

“I sure will,” I wave back and immediately clutch the bar. My other hand rests between my knees fingering the strap.

The two men left behind stand beside each other, as the auto-rickshaw veers out of the stand, slowly picking up speed down the road. One smiles and waves; the other, much taller, stares silently toward the woman. I wave back, looking from one to the other till the auto-rickshaw whisks us off their sight.

The auto-rickshaw bounces down the broken road, swaying frequently. Twice it passes through city dumps that line both sides like small rotting hills. I hold my breath. But soon it speeds through the greenery of fields or a domestic setting. The wind ruffles the woman’s hair. Fresh tears well up and roll down the side of her face. Are these really tears of parting? A woman generally cries when she’s parting with her parents and is on her way to her husband’s home. If she’s coming from her parents’ home, then who was that man? Maybe her baby is terribly sick, and she was in Banaras to visit a doctor. The doctor must have told her something terrible. Or maybe she is going to see a doctor in Mughalsaray. Maybe somebody told her there’s a better doctor. A couple of times I almost ask her what is wrong with the baby, but each time I think it may make her sadder. I hum the same song and busy my hands drumming on my kneecaps. Occasionally I look over at her out of the corner of my eye. She sits still as a statue, staring out through the windshield.

The open farms and lonely trees give way to groves separating small old brick houses. I see more and more people—some cycling down the dirt roadside, some walking with
cloth-bags slung over their backs, some relaxing in their unfenced front yards looking at the passing vehicles. I keep drumming my thighs until the auto-rickshaw pulls off to the roadside. A solemn crowd of men, women and children stand waiting with shocked expressions.

As soon as the woman gets out of the auto-rickshaw, a middle-age man steps out of the waiting crowd and takes the baby that turns out to be completely wrapped up in a dark blue shawl, as if it were a small thin piece of wood. The woman collapses into the arms of an elderly woman, and both begin to howl into each other’s shoulders. The rest of the crowd circles the man holding the baby and they cry loudly, some beating their chests with their hands.

I sigh deeply when the auto-rickshaw pulls out. The scene lingers in my mind for a long while, and the thought of having traveled with the body of a dead child sends shudders through my body.

I lie on my berth, thinking about the two corpses and the unconscious woman. I push my fists into the thin fabric of my trouser pockets. The darkness of the compartment makes me want to let them out and perform the ritual. Bloody images almost burst through the dam of my consciousness I’ve so far managed to keep intact. I spring out and flick on the ceiling light. I open the magazine but can’t concentrate on anything. I thrust my hand out into the cool current, and strike the metal just below the window and hum.

The rickshaw crosses the Jogbani border into Biratnagar, and after the regular customs formality, begins to sail down the highway. The thought that my family is now just twenty minutes away thrills me. I feast my eyes on the familiar fields, houses, trees, factory gates, and the people heading towards Jogbani for shopping. Some of them, who turn out to be my friends, wave at me. I wave back.

As the rickshaw turns onto my street, my heartbeat speeds up with every passing house. I begin to feel my mother’s warm, calloused hand on my cheeks, I begin to smell my wife’s shampooed hair, and I begin to kiss my son’s butter-soft mouth.

The gate is right in front of my eyes. I’m about to tell the rickshaw driver to stop. But my next-door neighbor, a short thin-haired man, stops in the middle of sweeping the front
yard of his house. “Go straight to the hospital.” That shoots a chill into my body. I grind my teeth and apply all my strength to unlocking my hands.

At the hospital gate, a male voice says my wife and my mother are in the children’s ward. No, I mustn’t conclude anything. My hands hang loose at my sides. I feel too drained to curl my fingers into fists.

I spot my mother and Anjana among a small crowd of neighbors. I see only parts of the bed and an oxygen cylinder and a bottle of yellowish-green fluid hanging from an IV stand. I charge through the white painted metal beds, almost yelling, “What’s the matter?”

“The doctor says pneumonia,” Binita, my next door neighbor, says. Her hand is caressing her sleeping son’s small forehead. So my mother and Anjana are here to see Guddu. I see Bablu holding my mother’s hand. He calls, “Papa,” beaming at me. I lift him up in my arms and kiss his mouth. I take a deep breath and kiss him again.
A Heap of Ashes

I feel too hung-over and don’t want to get out of bed. Besides, I haven’t had any sleep. I turn over again under the stinking, bug-infested shreds of a quilt. Sleep seems to have journeyed too far away. Without opening my eyes, I reach for the bottle at the side of the bed. I gulp the leftover homebrewed liquor to relieve the hangover. Then, in the gray morning light seeping through the slits between the wood planks, I watch the bottle roll away from my hand and clink against the pile of bottles in the corner. Then I sit up and light a bidi. As I puff, I listen to the voices coming through the common wall. I’m glad it’s not the neighborhood kids. I hate them because everyday they come to my shop, jeer and hoot at me, and take my wife and daughter away from my sight. I’m grateful to God that it’s the voices of my wife and daughter. I can hear them clearly over the whizzing stove. They are working in the shop, which faces the mountain highway. I love these voices; I need to hear them to keep going.

“Saru, when will your buwa get up?” Maya calls out in her soft voice. “It’s already time for bus passengers. I can’t take care of them on my own. Wake him up, chhori.”

“Papaaa, get uuuup! It’s time for passengerrrrrs!” my nine-year-old daughter warbles.

As I listen, I visualize their rosy cheeks and long black plaited hair reaching their waists. Neither of them is like me and I’m glad about it. I’m dark both outwardly and inwardly. My only light is Saru and Maya. As I puff on the bidi, I draw nourishment from their talk, which is often interrupted by the noise of the passing buses and lorries. Suddenly Gauri emits a bellow, as if it were her last. These days she bellows like that.

“Oh, my God, nobody has fed Gauri yet,” Maya says. I know by nobody she means me. “I just don’t know what one person is to do—prepare the snacks for passengers, or go get grass for her?”

Sometimes, her voice does assume an edge of annoyance. But I know that’s superficial and momentary. She loves me infinitely. And the proof of it is that she hasn’t left me despite all the trouble I’ve given her. She doesn’t want to cry in front of me because that will make me unhappy. Occasionally, when tears well up in her eyes, she
immediately wipes them off. I ask, “What’s the matter?” and she says, “Nothing, my eyes just water sometimes.”

I bend down to extinguish the butt against the damp mud floor. Then I smooth out the torn bed sheet and roll the quilt. But before I turn around, I notice that the quilt looks like there is a dead body rolled up in it—more so because it’s white. This has happened many times in the past. I hate this sight so I throw myself upon it, frenziedly trying to reshape it so it doesn’t look like that. But no matter how I fold and roll it, the corpse won’t disappear. All I manage to do is make a change in its posture. I walk out cursing, slamming the door behind me.

Gauri sits quietly on her folded legs in the little wall-less shed, her bony, yellow-brown shape standing out against the hazy mountains. As I approach her, the voices of my wife and daughter fade away, and I hear the faint gurgles of the Trishuli. The cow hardly moves, except when she has to drive off the tormenting flies with her tail. She is tied to a small dung-smeared post, her muzzle over the empty trough. Perhaps she has lived too long. When she sees me, she bellows again, but in such a way that it’s hard to tell whether she’s really asking for grass or for her death.

“I’m going, I’m going,” I say. “And don’t kick off till I come back.”

I start down the grey rocky slope; it’s the slope that keeps me brisk. I slouch along the pebbly bank of the stream, puffing away on a little bidi. I look for soft green grass, but find none. Everyday these mountain slopes grow poorer and poorer. Everywhere there are hard rocks, thorny shrubs and big trees.

My black waistcoat and white suruwal are worn and dirty, and when I run my hand through my hair, it feels so knotty. Perhaps this is why the children jeer and hoot at me. I carry an empty cone-shaped bamboo basket over my back, the cotton strap around my head. I have a scythe tucked in my waist. The river surges wildly in the opposite direction, huge gurgles, glides and splashes. The chill breeze has no effect on the thought and image of the dead body that lingers in my mind.
I’m dousing my face, looking at my reflection and saying to myself, “What made her fall in love with a man who has the face of a black dog?” I’ve barely finished these words when I hear a faint commotion in the hazy distance. I can hardly check my impulse to go and see. After a few hurried strides, I find myself approaching a confused and excited crowd of people gathered right where the river curves slightly. They are staring at something.

When I get close, I shout, “What’s up? Hey, what’s up?”

But most of them don’t give a shit about me, though we are from the same village.

“You fucking bastards! Your spoiled kids jeer and hoot at me, and you look at me as if I was a madman. You’ll know when I smash their heads one of these days.”

I push through them, getting wild with impatience. Soon I’m right in front of the thing, my eyes glued to it: the body of a woman precariously held by a large rock from floating downstream. For a moment, it’s like I was looking at the goddess of the stream herself—sleeping so becalmed and unstirred by the turbulent water and by the rescue team trying to get her out. What a contrast, I think, between her repose in the river and the excitement of these people and even my own flustered state! Her choli has come half-unbuttoned and a large part of her red sari is unwrapped. Her long black hair and the unwrapped sari ripple rhythmically in the water. To me nothing about the woman seems to cause any worry or alarm. Rather it brings my heart and mind so much peace that I want it to remain like that forever. It is such a great delight to see the sleep, the beauty and the rhythm beyond the reach of the excited crowd.

But the crowd won’t leave her alone. They seem determined to wake her up and make her unhappy. They won’t stay still. Every one of them has gone crazy. Three men, who look fatigued, keep casting a net over and over, aiming far enough to trap and fish her out. Half a dozen are trying hard to swim against the current, and a few women are shouting instructions from beside me. On the other side of the river, too, a crowd is gathering fast.

“Why the hell are you bent on waking her up from her quiet sleep?” I yell out, mad at all this fuss. “You sons of bitches! Your kids come to my shop and scare my wife and
daughter. And you come here and don’t let this woman sleep in peace. Don’t you hear me? What’re you up to? Don’t disturb her...hey you... stop it! Get back! Oh, damn you!”

I keep hollering curses, running about wildly, but they don’t give a shit. At last they manage to trap her in the net. I hate the way the crowd cheer when her body is pulled ashore. As she is laid on a flat rock, the crowd squeezes and knocks against one another to gain a closer look. I also fight and squeeze through them, and like them, I, too, want a closer look.

My heart jumps. Her swollen face looks like my wife’s. I bend lower to look more closely, my heart beating fast. I feel sure that if left in the water for a long time, my wife’s face will look exactly like this one. I don’t know what to do. I stand there as if she were nobody to me. Wave after wave of shame pass through me like the water surging behind me. The crowd keeps moving around, looking at her from different sides, trying to identify her, repeating the same question that they have been asking right from the time they spotted her in the river: “Who’s she?”

Why don’t I go ahead and say, “She’s my wife”? As an elderly woman buttons her choli, wraps her sari tight, arranges her hair, why do I keep away like a complete stranger? The elderly woman turns her body over and gives her back a few compressions; she responds by spewing up the water she has drunk.

Everybody waits silently, the Trishuli constantly surging with its huge unvaried gurgles. She opens her eyes slowly and sits up with the elderly woman’s aid, trembling, without caring about her clothes and hair. The elderly woman arranges her sari and her hair, and says a few tender words. I think her eyes will search for me and find me where I’m standing. But she doesn’t even lift her eyes. She keeps them downcast as she always does when I swear at her or strike her for foolish reasons, which I later find are no reasons at all. My eyes scan her face for the scar and it is right there, below her right eye. I find my fingers feeling the hard silver ring that left the scar. How the red blood gushed out filling me with shame and terror! How I felt that I was just shit! Why can I never give it up, this goddamn drinking?

I can tell that she is aware of my presence. Why then does she not look up at me? I can’t imagine that she is harboring hate for me, because if there is one thing that seems
impossible for her to do, it is to hate me. She does look sullen and unhappy, but that is probably because I’m still shying away from acknowledging her as my wife in front of the crowd; because I’m still holding myself from embracing and kissing her and saying, “I love you.” Or maybe if I only uttered her name with love, she would spring to her feet and run into my arms. But I do neither. I just stand there like a complete stranger, frozen with shame and self-hate, while she sits on the hard rock hunched up, trembling with cold, water dripping to the rock from her long black hair.

“What’s your name, nani?” asks the woman in a soothing voice. She is dressed in a faded blue faria, black choli and a white patuka. She is dark brown with a wrinkled face and thin, grey hair.

The drowned woman responds with silence, blinking wearily at her feet.

“What did you attempt to take your life?” the elderly woman asks.

I expect her to burst out saying, “What have I got from life except half-starvation, beating and humiliation?” But Maya responds to this question by breaking into silent tears. Then without looking up, she wipes her tears with one hand.

“Speak up, nani. Why did you attempt to take your life?” the elderly woman repeats.

“Because I don’t want to live,” she responds in a firm, angry tone. It is the first time I’ve heard her say something like that. I’ve never known that she has come to hate life. Have I brought her to this state?

“No, nani. In life everybody has problems, but that doesn’t mean that one should commit suicide. Come on, get up and go home. Or tell us about your place, we’ll take you there.”

Maya rises to her feet lethargically. Those who stand in her way move aside. She walks a few slow steps, away from the racing water, then stops a moment, thinking. To everybody’s great astonishment, she turns round and runs back and takes a second dive. Everybody stands aghast, their breath gone with the splash, the surging water. After a moment, she surfaces, drinking and fighting and crying for help. I know she doesn’t really want to die—after all, she loves me so much. I’m the first to recover, but can do
nothing except wish that I knew how to swim. She drinks and chokes and fights for life as she is being chucked up and down and away by the current. I also choke and yell wildly at the men, who earlier tried to save her and now look too shocked to move.

“Hey, you sons of bitches! What the hell are you waiting for? Please get her out! Please do something! Save her for God’s sake. Oh, damn you, you heartless bastards!”

As if in response to my yelling, they swing into action. But this time they lay a dead body on the rock.

The crowd tries to find out about her relatives, and all they can determine is that her husband is a worthless alcoholic and the young man to whom they gave their only daughter in marriage is linked to a woman-trafficking business in Mumbai. So assuming their social duty once again, the villagers set about preparing for the cremation. And once again, I just watch from a distance as they collect dry logs, make a pyre, place her on it and set it afire. They leave when the pyre fully burns down and there is no visible trace of flesh or bone left. But I remain close to her longer, mourning her death and regretting not having acknowledged her as my Maya.

I go to the edge of the water, splash my face and climb the slope for grass. I cut grass very slowly and throw it into the basket, all the while gazing at her. I wait like this until she turns into a heap of ashes. I seem to hear her faint voice coming from within the heap, saying, “I didn’t want to die. Why didn’t you save me?” I say, “I was helpless. If I knew how to swim, I wouldn’t have let you drown.”

With the basket of grass on my back, its strap around my head, I climb up the slope on my way back, arguing with my mournful heart that the crazy woman wasn’t Maya. What if she had my wife’s chubby, rosy cheeks and long black hair? What if the voice, too, sounded the same? These external things don’t make a woman my wife. Maya would never think of suicide. She’s the wisest woman I’ve ever met in my life—a hundred times wiser than the elderly woman herself.
I empty half of the basket into the trough, saying, “I’m sorry I’m so late, Gauri.” I put the other half away for the evening. For a while I pet Gauri’s bony back as she hungrily eats the fresh green grass. Then, calling out, “Saru! Maya! I’m back!” I hurry into the shop. Of the eight wooden booths, seven are occupied by passengers, and one by the driver and three of his conductors. They’re taking snacks hungrily. On the iron stove the large aluminum kettle boils and Maya pours out hot glasses of tea for the passengers.

I take the glasses to their tables, and then walk back over to the rickety cash desk, where my little Saru is seated in a tall, wooden chair. She greets me with her sweet smile; I return her smile with a smile and a kiss on her cheek. I join her in taking charge of the cash desk.

“Why do you always go so far to cut grass and get late?” my child scolds me.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“These days you’re really not paying enough attention to the shop,” Maya says in a soft whisper.

I don’t say anything because I know I’m wrong. But more than anything, I love her voice. It sounds all the sweeter after all those morbid thoughts.

“You should be right here behind the cash desk in time, to make sure that each customer pays not less than what they owe. You know I’m not good enough at calculations. And if we always let them fool us and pay less, then what’s left for us?”

“You’re right,” I say, sounding a little sad, “and, according to this goddamn contract, we’re supposed to pay fifty rupees to the driver and free tea and snacks to him and his troop of conductors. And if we don’t accept their terms, then next time they won’t pull up at our shop for snacks, and we’ll be forced to close down our little shop. And then….” I think about the older, harder jobs that we did together: carrying a load of bricks on our backs at the construction site or hawking vegetables on commission.

“Now, don’t be sad. Our good days will come.” She smiles, probably guessing that I’m getting into the same sad mood again.

Whatever job, whatever circumstances, she’s always been with me, sharing my work, sharing our hardship. Despite all the hard work and poverty I’ve caused her, she’s always
brimming with hope. “What does it matter if we’re poor?” she says. “We have the wealth
of being together, and we’re working toward a better future. And you’ll see one day our
daughter will go to a good school and stand on her feet, and then you won’t have to
worry about her future.”

So how can that crazy woman be my wife? What if she had my wife’s face and hair?

I kiss Maya’s face. I lean over and kiss Saru’s face. Then I notice that the
mischievous kids have gathered again at the entrance. I quickly pick up a big stone from
the ground. They see it in my hand and read in my eyes my intention of smashing the
head of the one who dares to be the first to play the trick again. They are quiet. This time
they’re scared, not I. They look sure that this time I’m not going to let them make my
wife and daughter disappear. This time I hoot and laugh, and even chase them out of my
shop. And what a sense of joy this gives me! But when I return, there’s no customer and
Maya and Saru have disappeared again and I’m alone with dry rickety booths, the broken
cash counter and the uneven ground with grass just starting to grow.