

He picked up the cigarette pack, lighter and handkerchief from the three-legged stool and put them in his trouser packet. "Did you hear me? Be ready in the evening," he said, glancing at the clock. There was no need to hurry, he assured himself. It was just 9.40 and he could cycle to his office in twenty minutes. No one showed up before 10.30 anyway.

Mridula gathered his clothes for washing them. She placed the handkerchief and socks at the top of the pile on the floor, craned her neck in his direction and asked, "Really, what for?"

"Don't you know what day it is today?"

"No, I don't."

"Madam," he sat down on the bed and smiled at her. "It is *Pooranmasi* tonight. In Agra, only two kinds of people await this day – those who perform the *Satyanarayan Pooja* and those who visit the Taj Mahal."

She pushed back the locks of hair that had scattered themselves on her temple and smiled back, "But didn't we go there the last time, too?"

"Well, I like going there every *Pooranmasi*. Haven't you noticed how the Taj looks when it's bathed in moonlight? As if the earth has melted under the moon's spell and someone has cast it in the mould of the Taj."

"Is this what you do in the office all day — compose poetry?" she asked, chuckling as she sat on the stool, resting her chin on her palm. "So what did you do at the Taj? Ogled at girls?"

"No, I merely used to look for a wheatish-complexioned girl whose eyes would be like pools and lips like a flower."

"You liar... you must have been enamoured of the smartly dressed girls in parallels and *shararas*,

SHORT STORY

Raakh*

○ Pratima Verma

Translated from the original in Hindi by Mona Sinha

flaunting goggles... what is so special about me?"

"Come here and I'll tell you what is special."

Stretching his hand, he pulled her towards the bed.

"Mridul, why didn't I ever meet you at the Taj all these years? I had always dreamt that I would find my wife-to-be at the Taj."

She laughed again. "You really are romantic, aren't you? How could I have come all the way from Delhi just to see the Taj?"

He felt annoyed. "Just the Taj! You cannot say 'just' for something as grand as the Taj Mahal. The Taj is unique, it's unparalleled. So many visitors come from Delhi to see it, don't they?"

"And from America, Germany too..." she laughed gently and turned towards him almost apologetically. "One should have the resources. If daddy had that much money then..."

"Then he would have married you off to some Collector or

Superintendent of Police, isn't it? Otherwise how would a clerk like me..." he didn't finish that line of thought.

"My clerk is dear to me," she said, drawing him into an embrace. A glance at the arms of the clock interrupted the moment. "It is twenty past ten," she said worriedly.

"Let it be — at the most, people will say that we are newly married."

The rain suddenly stopped, and the cloudburst of memories petered away. He rebuked himself. How could he seek that image of Mridula today? It was as if a droplet from the ocean had soared into the air, only to disappear into unknown depths once again. Would he be able to trace that droplet? Did it count that it once contained a rainbow?

His eyes met those of a girl with her husband, probably on her honeymoon. He imagined that every newly wed girl had the same image in her eyes, brimming with surrender and fulfilment in love. Unconsciously, he was drawn towards that pair of eyes, as if they were the still surface of a lake, from which Mridula's image would reappear in a familiar, bride-like *avatar*. The girl looked away from him. Once again, apprehension swelled up inside him. Would he again have to see Mridula as an earthen idol that had been immersed a long time ago, colourless, crumbled, a distortion of what she had been once?



*Ashes

The train stopped. Outside, he spotted a tree that he could not identify. Perched on it was an unfamiliar bird, its dull, grey wings dotted with pale red marks, its tiny pink beak attached to a jerky neck. He watched the bird's antics for a while, hoping to stifle the restlessness mounting inside him. Bored, he shifted his attention to his fellow passengers in the compartment. Seated next to him were an old Punjabi couple and their bespectacled daughter. On the seat opposite were *Lalaji's* family and the honeymooning couple. A young lad lit a cigarette and stood at the door, looking outside, his elbows resting against a panel; the honeymooning girl struck up a conversation with the Punjabi lady. Several voices could be heard:

"Why has the train stopped here?"

"I really don't know... just a single track can be seen; can't say what the signal system is like in these parts. There has to be some reason..."

"This is absolutely the limit! We have halted in the middle of a jungle for no reason at all. And what wonderful speed!"

"Trains have to move like this on the hills, sir. They would derail if they gathered speed."

"My dear *saheb*, on reaching Shimla, you'll spend all your time gazing at the scenery. Isn't it picturesque here too?"

"Did you get married recently?" he overheard the old Punjabi matron asking the girl. The bangles on her wrists clinked as she bent down to smoothen the pleats of her saree. Her nose ring glinted as it caught the sun and she smiled, "Oh yes, we were married on the fourteenth of this month."

After the usual round of inquiries about her parents and in-laws came the next question, "Where does your husband work?"

It caught his attention and he focused his eyes on the old lady. Her



experienced eyes were measuring the lanky fellow in question. Was he capable of holding on to a job or was he just having a good time at his father's or father-in-law's expense? The word 'husband' jarred in his ears; it was one of those words that annoyed him these days. There were times when his imagination blended his past and present into one seamless mixture, needling him no end. With a wince, he turned his face away, before the old dame's eyes could tear him to shreds with the same unpleasant query: "Do you do something or are you living off your wife's money?"

There was a chilly wind, but tiny droplets of sweat lined his forehead. Wiping it away, he gulped down two mouthfuls of water from a flask and looked out of the window. The train was moving again, albeit a bit absent-mindedly. The rugged green hills disappeared from view and the scenery went back to what it was earlier: clumps of trees, nesting on which were many birds. Once again his emotions overwhelmed him. From the wallet in his pocket, he took out the ticket and reservation slip saying 'From Agra to Kalka and back – berth reservation Kalka to Shimla'. Mridula's letter flapped in the wind.

In these two months, I have written to you eight times, asking you to come over. But you have

simply ignored my request, not even acknowledging it in your letters. Don't I have any right over you? In all your three letters you have asked me for money and that too, eight hundred rupees at one go! I am making arrangements to dispatch it, but if you do not come this time, I shall not send you the money. These days I am in Shimla. I am enclosing a ticket, come over. Mridula

He felt humiliated. He was being forced to go to Shimla, under duress. If he did not go, she wouldn't send the money. And if the money didn't come, then... then... His brow felt hot again. He wiped the sweat with his handkerchief, drank some water and tried to calm himself.

When the letter fluttered again, he realised that there was now a difference in Mridula's style of writing. Earlier she would end it with 'yours' and yours' only Mridula' or 'your own Mridula' or some such silly endearment. Just as she seemed to assert that she belonged to him, he too constantly reassured himself that it was indeed true, almost like a child who had lost a plaything. So what if it was gone? It was his, nevertheless. It was on this faith, built on a slippery pedestal, that his entire manhood rested.

It was a full moon that evening as well. Mridula hurriedly wound up her chores in the kitchen to get ready. The routine was by now established. They would leave in the evening to watch the night descend upon the Taj. Even before Vimal would get home from the office, *Amma* and *Vibha* would hasten to make her leave the kitchen, "Go and get ready. Vimal will be home any time now. If he gets annoyed, he won't even have his tea properly."

"In a minute *Amma*. The curry will be done soon."

Vibha would force her to leave, "Oh *bhabhi*, I am around to take care of the dinner at least for one evening."

Mridula would rub the dough off her fingers and laugh at her, “*Bibi*, relax while you can. Once married, this yoke will permanently rest on your shoulders.”

She had put the *bindi* on her forehead and was applying a second coat of powder on her face when he slipped into the room like a shadow. A shadow, not because she glimpsed him first in the mirror, not because his normally cheerful face was clouded, but because he literally looked like a shadow of his former self. The shadow pensively dropped into a chair.

“You are looking very tired today. I’ll fetch your tea.” She descended the stairs, her heart pounding with apprehension. Indeed, it was nothing less than a disaster. She saw *Babuji* directing his ire at an invisible target. “It is nothing but a racket. I understand these tactics very well. I shall lodge a complaint, distribute anonymous letters, I shall not let these fellows get away. They charge a thousand rupees for making one appointment and turn them out two years later. Mark my words, after six months, they will re-advertise the posts and again charge a thousand rupees from fresh candidates. It was my fault to assume that the boy would find a way out once he took up the job. Now, even those thousand rupees are gone!” Mridula was too stunned to take the tea upstairs, and silently sat down on the floor.

Probably, *Amma* and *Vibha* too were sitting somewhere. The vegetable curry smelt burnt, as did *Babuji*’s rantings. The air reeked of burnt curry for a long time. This was the beginning of an end.

●
Amma must not have heard his footsteps, or else she wouldn’t have lashed out at Mridula. She was standing in front of her timidly, listening to *Amma*’s shouts: “How many times have I asked you not to put so much milk in the tea? How can we afford such

luxury in the mere 125 rupees that come from the pension? Gopu, get less milk from tomorrow. Those who want to have tea can have it black!”

Vibha, who had been reheating *Amma*’s tea, took Mridula’s side: “But *Amma*, we have been getting only one *pao* milk for the tea. *Bhabhi* put more milk in your tea only because you don’t like it black...”

“I wish I could die. If this is going to be the state of affairs, I will have to take poison one day.” *Amma*’s voice was brimming with tears. Her tirade continued even after Mridula left the scene. “This marriage has only brought ill-luck to the family. It has

on you. Don’t you feel bad?” he asked her that night, taking her in his arms and stroking her hair.

“This is nothing new. You have heard her ranting just today,” was the reply that came to her lips. Instead, she smiled and said gently, “Not at all, she scolds me so because she is worried. And why do you think mothers are so keen to get daughters-in-law? Maybe because even if the sons don’t pay attention, at least their wives would be compelled to listen. After all, chiding is their right.”

She laughed and he laughed along with her. Suddenly his face fell once again, “I am scared lest your laughter



been my misfortune to have a daughter-in-law whose arrival gobbled up her husband’s job.”

Mridula stood in the verandah, her head bowed down, as if accepting her guilt. She had asked for the services of the part-time maid to be dispensed with and had undertaken all the household chores herself. Her hands had become roughened and her hair coarse. Only *Babuji*’s clothes went to the dhobi now. But *Amma* continued to blame her for all the misfortune.

“*Amma* is strange, isn’t she Mridul? She is taking out her anger

been lost. But Mridul, if you keep smiling, I can face anything. I shall give you every happiness possible in the world. Just be with me!”

Mridula had stayed by his side and continued to smile, but he had been unable to keep his promises.

Even when she fell ill and shivered with fever, she would resume her household duties the very next day with a forced smile on her dry lips. In the morning, she would break coals, do the dishes, have a bath and then enter the kitchen — a routine that continued unwaveringly.

Then one day he said to *Babuji*, “There is a vacancy in Delhi for which I have applied. I want to go and check out what resources I need for the job. I am thinking of taking Mridula along so that she gets proper medical attention.” *Babuji* couldn’t say anything; he was well aware of the edgy situation himself. Even a bottle of cough syrup roused *Amma*’s ire. In the beginning, Mridula tried to manage with homemade remedies, like hot tea with *tulsi* and black pepper. When that didn’t help, he took her to the hospital twice. The medicine was free, of course, but the expenditure on the rickshaw alone was three rupees in a day. This certainly could not go on.

Mridula began her preparations for the trip with great enthusiasm. It pinched him, even though he understood that it was but natural for her to look forward to it, especially under the circumstances. But, he responded by becoming withdrawn. He suppressed his gentle side and wore an armour of thorns to protect himself from any probable attacks. Perhaps that was why he stayed in Delhi only for a week despite the repeated requests of his parents-in-law. An inner voice seemed to nag him constantly. Even though there was no palpable difference in their cordial manner towards him, he could read in several pairs of eyes that he had been relegated from the sky to a dust-filled gallery.

“We shall write as soon as we come to know about some other vacancies.” At the time of his departure, his father-in-law and elder brother-in-law had said that with complete sincerity, but he didn’t like it. He didn’t think that it would be easy to live pitied by others, unless it became a habit.



After his separation from Mridula, another precious thing was snatched away from him — his room. This was

no less a blow for him than the loss of his job. When he reached home, he was about to go to his room upstairs, with his bag in his hands, when *Amma* said hurriedly, “Oh, I simply forgot to tell you. We have let out your room to a tenant. *Babuji* suggested that we might as well keep him since we found him easily. Who knows when we would have found another? And no one would have so easily agreed to pay a rent of 70 rupees just for a single room.”

In her attempts to laugh it off, she looked cruel and conspiratorial. But there was truth in what she was saying. The entire household was now centred in the inside verandah, the corner outside the kitchen and the storeroom; there were probably some changes in the drawing room as well.

“Everybody is feeling bad, but what to do?” *Amma* was now wiping her eyes. “As you can see, there is such a shortage of money. The children’s school fees have been due for the past two months, the electricity bill has to be paid, and the milkman and the grocer have to be dealt with and the day for paying taxes is drawing near.”

None of these reasons registered inside him. *Amma* continued, “There’s hardly anything left in the storeroom now. There are neither sacksful of grains nor cans filled with ghee and oil. The few things there have been kept in the kitchen loft. And the stuff in the room upstairs is now in the storeroom. Now, Vibha and I sleep there. Once *bahu* comes, she can stay there. It’s just a matter of a few days. Once you get a job, we’ll ask him to leave. We have told him that he will have to vacate the room at a notice of 15 days.”

He could not understand anything. His brain seemed to be throbbing in a vacuum. His fingers kept drawing circles over the tea spilled on the saucer. He suddenly got up, “*Amma*, I am very tired. I want to rest for some time.”

“Yes, do go and take rest ... Vibha, put *bhaiyya*’s bag in the store room.” *Amma* felt relieved as he got up.

Vibha took his bag to the storeroom and placed it atop a pile of seven or eight trunks. He lay down quietly on the bed. Above the trunks, two bamboo poles ran into the wall, and on them, a long sheet made of old tin had been placed. The sundry items from his room were scattered amidst the clutter of utensils, boxes and containers. The small stool on which Mridula would spread a tablecloth with floral embroidery and keep a flower vase in front of their framed photograph was lying overturned in a corner. He tossed and turned as beauty gasped for breath in each corner of the room. He forced his eyes shut with the tips of his fingers.

This was not a momentary pause in his life as he had known it. It was the beginning of a series of problems. His very being had slipped from his hands and was now controlled by strange forces.

For Holi, he went to Delhi and discovered that Mridula had joined a course in typing and shorthand. His father-in-law said, “A woman should be prepared in every way for any unforeseen circumstances. Once you find a job, do as you please, but till then at least she should not be dependent upon others for her needs.” Mridula’s elder brother and her elder sister’s husband voiced the same opinion: “Thank heavens that there are no children. Mridul can do anything now, otherwise it would have been so difficult.”

After he got back to Agra, Mridula’s first letter arrived.

Everybody is here, and everything is the same as it had been before, but without you there is nothing. I cannot live without seeing you for such a

long time. Don't you ever think of me? Can't you come over once every month, or perhaps, two months? My course is about to get over and daddy has already begun looking for a job for me. Why don't you try there in Agra? Do I still have to stay away from you?

Then the next letter arrived.

You've lost once again. Daddy has won this round but... it feels strange to think that I have to stay here and work and send you money. It seems to belittle you. But what can be done when there are such compulsions. Keep looking for a job for me there. I shall leave my job here.

He couldn't find a job for her or for himself, except for an inconsequential assignment that involved teaching part-time in an evening college. Life went on: his sister Vibha trained in Montessori teaching methods after completing her graduation, the young professor continued to occupy his room and a regular series of money orders and letters arrived from Mridula.

It seems as though someone is gradually clawing me away from you. Our relationship has now been reduced to a money order form. Don't you ever think about what kind of people I am surrounded by? Who do I speak and laugh with? How is it that my life, which was meant just for you, is being shared with others?

Mridula wrote this letter when she was transferred from Delhi to Chandigarh. As he read the letter, his blood turned cold. He reached Chandigarh anxiously, where, instead of the roly-poly, wheatish-complexioned Mridula, he found a weak, cross and irritable woman in high-heeled sandals. She stared at him for some time with a lost look in

her eyes, then, as if recognition had dawned upon her, she shrieked at him hysterically, "I hate you... hate you." Then she buried her face on the bed and began to weep.

He looked at the letter in his hand. What was it? A show of strength to prove that she could call him whenever she felt like, just because he so desperately needed her money? He could do nothing but rub his hands together, swallowing the insult. Mridula's letter was proof that the blaze of love between them was now reduced to ashes, ashes that had turned cold eons ago. And like a dog



in the cold, he was compelled to dig into the ashes to search for any remnants of warmth. Why had Mridula summoned him in this manner?

The train reached its destination and, inside the compartment, people began jostling each other. Voices of women could be heard from the back, "Bhai, have you pulled out that brown suitcase?" Looking at their excited faces, his sense of loneliness became ten times more acute. Had Mridula been on the journey with him, in spite of all the bitterness, they would have planned their stay. The shape of things to come would have been clear, but for now, he was in the dark. Would Mridula be happy to see him or would

she greet him with a pained smile to show that her feelings did not really matter? Would he still be slighted? There was no way he could find out, but he was sure that even if he did, there was little he could do about it. He was connected to several wires and the control switch was in Mridula's hands. When she turned on the switch, he had to light up like a bulb, and when she turned it off, then... the only way he could take revenge was by staying switched off! Her fingers would wander over the switch desperately trying to manoeuvre him and hope would turn into despair... You cannot give me any joy, so isn't this, in a way, your defeat?

There were only a few passengers left in the train and as he was about to pull out his suitcase, he felt somebody's hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw that it was Mridula. In spite of the smile on her face, she was looking ill. He would have looked at her longer, but for the awkwardness that he was feeling at the moment.

"Oh, it's you...?"

"Oh course. Weren't you expecting me? You don't seem too happy to see me. Is it because I forced you to come here?"

There was no arrogance, anger or sarcasm in her voice; instead, there was a strange kind of helplessness and guilt overshadowing her face. His rancour began to melt and he smiled: "Oh no, there is no such thing. I was only thinking of all the important business you must have had to postpone to come here. I would have come on my own, I did have the address."

"Hmm! Now there is just this formality between us..."

He himself hadn't been sure that his smiles would deceive Mridula. He saw the dejected look on her face. Strangely enough, now the control switch was in his hands and he was repeatedly making futile attempts to turn it on, "No, no, not at all... why

should you be thinking so? I was just..."

As they came out of the station, Mridula suddenly laughed and began to walk holding his arm. For a while, he looked at her bewildered, and then smiled. He remembered *Amma*. Before his journey, *Amma* had made *moong laddoos*. It wouldn't have been proper if she hadn't done even that much for an earning daughter-in-law. *Amma* had told Rama *chachi*, their neighbour, who had come to help, "A woman might earn lakhs, or travel, but she cannot stay without her man. *Bahu* has done the right thing by sending the tickets and the rest. Otherwise Vimal would have merely made plans."

The thought that made both of them smile now had appeared false and vulgar to him at that time. Now it seemed as if they had been right. In the past six months, there must have been occasions when Mridula had longed for his embrace. And it was but natural. Didn't he himself miss Mridula? As they walked along, he stole a glance at her. Everything, right from her hairstyle and dress to her footwear, had changed. She looked smart and graceful.

Her shampooed hair was raised a little high, the folds of her saree touched the ground, and her body was enveloped in the sweet smell of perfume. This Mridula was almost a stranger, but her touch, smile and body odour were familiar. They were sufficient to stir him. When they left the road and began the climb by the bushes, he took Mridula in his arms. Mridula looked at him once, her body shuddered and, resting her head against his chest, started to weep inconsolably.

"Are you very upset with me, Mridul?"

The tenderness in his voice was spilling over and, in answer, Mridula pressed harder against his chest, sobbing.

It was very late; probably two hours had passed. Mridula was in a deep slumber, like the string of a musical instrument that had broken after creating melodious tunes, its notes wafting in the air for long thereafter. That he was still capable of feeling the music in the atmosphere was surprising, indeed! He had expected so many complaints — perhaps Mridula had, too. Despite that, they had said very little to each other.

"Didn't you like coming here?" she had asked him.

And he had answered, "No, it is not so..."

Before they could find out which raw thread floating in the air had touched them like an electric wire, they had reached the villa. Once inside the room, they had bolted the door. *Amma's* guess had been absolutely right, although it was he who had taken the initiative. After all, it had been true for him as well.

He strained his eyes to look around the slightly dark room with low wooden ceilings. Besides the bedstead, there was an old, long sofa. Its grimy cover had a print of an English woman with an umbrella in her hand. On the windowsill lay some magazines beside Mridula's and his suitcases. Daylight trickled in from the places where the curtain revealed the windowpane.

"I'm sorry..." He saw that Mridula had woken up. Shaking off the blanket from her arms, she leaned on her elbows and sat up, saying, "I should have first got you tea and something to eat, instead, I just dozed off."

She was smiling coyly and like the days of yore, he felt a warmth in his blood. Holding her, he pulled the blanket over himself and said, "Let it be... hunger is a reality surely, but sometimes forgetting it is also good!" His mind was full of affection, but then he realised that notwithstanding the

intimacy, a cleft still stood between them. Many words could be exchanged, but it was not necessary that they would convey anything. An unexpressed, unknown shadow darkened Mridula's face.

"When did you come here? Whom does this villa belong to?" he wanted to know.

"It's owned by our circle-in-charge's relative. He runs a restaurant on the lower mall. After his wife died, he rarely comes home. That room and the small hall adjacent to it are given out on rent during peak tourist season. The assistant manager had taken it for a month."

She stopped for a second, looked at him, and said, "Our company has to seek clearance for its goods from the defense office here, so people keep coming and going."

"So, then, the assistant manager was here with you?"

Mridula laughed, "Are you jealous?"

"Shouldn't I be?" he wondered loudly.

"Of course, you should be. In fact, you ought to have been a long time back." A listless smile played on Mridula's lips.

He suddenly felt that she was being sarcastic, and said, "Even if I had been, you know that I was in no position to ask you to leave your job. And why should you quit on my request even if you had an alternative? If you are playing with my compulsions, then..."

"Isn't everybody here playing with each other's compulsions?" Mridula's smile had vanished. "What is my compulsion? That of being educated and qualified, of being a servant, the compulsion of hanging on to my job at all costs! When Vibha wrote in her letter that *bhaiyya* talked of running away or killing himself, you can imagine how I felt. Then you demanded 500 rupees for *Babuji's* operation. Did you even imagine to

what extent a woman would have to stoop in a new job to get an advance of 500 rupees?" He was looking at her, stunned, when Mridula laughed. "Come on, change your clothes, we can talk some other time..."

"One can have tea any other time... one, two or three hours later. I am in no hurry." And he added hurriedly, "I am not in the habit of having tea and snacks."

"Why, you are amongst those who have five cups in a day!"

"I used to, I no longer do."

He got up, pulled aside the window curtain and, looking out, said, "Sometimes I am surprised to think that I have seen such days, Mridul. There was nothing more important than two square meals a day. Cigarette and tea seemed to be a luxury to me. I have quit them since then. Even if somebody offers it to me, I tell them not to ruin my habits."

Mridula sat quietly on the bed for a long time, her arms folded around her knees. When he turned around to look at her, she said, "You know what I think? You are punishing yourself because your wife is earning more than you do. Yes, when your self-esteem is hurt, you seek reprisal by hurting me. You know I am bound to you."

In her eyes, two teardrops glistened. The shadows of all those hotels that she had visited with her colleagues and the circle-in-charge danced between her and Vimal. Even the furniture, crockery and brassware of those places seemed to hang between them. The shadows, trembling in the air, became so dense that she felt it would take her ages to cross them and reach Vimal. She was staring at those fanciful shadows, hoping to see through them, as if he was somewhere far away.

"I see that you have formulated several new theories!" Coming close to her, he put his hand on her shoulder

and laughed. "All right, let's go and have tea."

He took out his shaving kit from his suitcase and began to shave by the window. By the time Mridula came out of the bathroom, he had changed his clothes.

"Take your coat, too. By the time we get back, it will be night and it gets chilly," Mridula said, hastily putting pins in her hair. When he didn't stir, she asked, "What is the matter?"

"You know about the coat. The *dhobi* burnt it when you were there. I couldn't have brought it here. I



suppose I can manage in this sweater. It doesn't seem to be so cold."

Mridula stared at him silently. It was the same old double-knit sweater that she had made during the first winter after their marriage. Now that design was old-fashioned. The shirt-collar beneath the sweater was frayed. The old shoes were covered in a thick layer of shoe polish. The trousers were the same tight ones that he used to wear earlier.

She suddenly felt like weeping. Just last Monday, she had gone to the *Prince* with assistant manager Jaipuria to watch a special programme by the French delegation. There had been admiring glances when people saw her with such a dashing personality. Even today, she had taken

out the same chiffon saree with bright blue dots that she had worn that day. Drink, dinner, dance and dim lights had transported her to a different world altogether.

Making an effort to avert her gloomy eyes, she turned and put the saree and the cardigan, which had been lying on the bed, back into the suitcase. Then she draped herself in an ordinary saree and threw a shawl over it.

"Let's go..."

They walked past the skating ground to climb up to the Mall. From an artificially created hillock on the Ridge, they gazed at the scenery around them. The steep slopes of the mountains beyond the street, the setting sun drawing pictures over the distant hills, the chubby children dressed in caps and socks, were being plonked on horses or prams. Then they walked down a bit and sat on a vacant bench. As the evening grew darker, it seemed as if the faux yellow, green and blue stones and the white railing had lost their sheen amidst the crowd of eye-catching costumes around them.

"So how do you like Shimla?" Mridula asked in a normal voice.

He too appeared to be happy, at least on the outside. Everything seemed to be so far away that he couldn't be bothered now: the Mridula-less home in Agra, *Amma's* unfulfilled ambitions, the stab in his heart each time the professor climbed the stairs, sleeping in the sitting room with *Babuji* alternately snoring and spitting out phlegm, the stinging words floating in from the neighborhood — "*Bhai*, if one gets a wife, she should be like Vimal's, not just beautiful but earning too! Had she not been there, it would have been difficult for these poor people to save their pride." He wanted to say something that could express his feeling of comfort, but something else had happened.

“When you look at life here, it doesn’t seem as if there is poverty in other places in India. What are people like us doing here?”

He had actually begun to feel inferior. On the one hand there were people nibbling fruit chaat, ice cream and Cadbury chocolates, people spewing out rings of smoke from their cigarettes and cigars, people laughing at jokes. On the other hand, there he was, sitting in a corner with Mridula, acutely conscious of what he could have been and what he was not.

His eyes were still focused on the sea of humanity surging below. When he looked at Mridula, he saw that she was piqued. In an angry tone, she said, “You are poor not because you cannot make do with three-four hundred rupees but because you are allowing your dreams, your desires and your personality to be frittered away. The truth is that such a person, feeling arrogant about his affliction, can never rid himself of the thought of helplessness.”

“Say what you want, you have all the right.” But he was hurt.

“Why? Just because I send you some money, is that why? Is that why you bow your head and acknowledge my right?” She was very angry. “I ask you, what right does *Amma* have to taunt you, to scold you? Do you and I together contribute less than what your requirements are? What right does *Babuji* have to preach and belittle you each time? But no, you have given them these rights, which they have grabbed with both hands and now you are wallowing in your own pain. Listen,” she stopped for a bit to take in his pale face and said, “All these are imaginary pains. Now I am going to make you feel real pain. I am two months pregnant. I wanted to give the unborn child your name without your coming to know of it, not to protect myself from any shame, but to shield you from any kind of harm. But now the situation is beyond my control.”



“What?” He gaped at her, his mouth open. His pupils became dilated. He sat stiffly as if he had been paralysed.

“First you asked for five hundred rupees, then eight hundred. I had to make arrangements, didn’t I? And here one has to cross all limits to save one’s job,” Mridula’s voice was becoming faint.

He suddenly burst out, “All this is merely your excuse. Actually, you have become used to this grand and luxurious lifestyle! How could you ever imagine that I would accept the filth of others? I would have taken a loan from somewhere, sold myself, but now in this condition...”

“By all means, don’t. I just thought your needs might compel you just as I have been compelled.”

Mridula’s voice was calm and he was beginning to feel weary. Mumbling, he said, “Needs.”

“Perhaps you are thinking of Vibha.”

A sarcastic smile was playing upon Mridula’s lips. Startled, he stared at her. “What about Vibha? What do you know?”

“Almost everything,” Mridula said and got up. “It would be better if we get back now.” He walked with her some distance, amazed, but could not stop himself from asking her,

“How did you come to know about Vibha?”

“From Vibha herself; she writes to me regularly.”

He tried to guess what Vibha could have disclosed in her letters. He did not feel like talking to Mridula at all. Walking with her, he felt a strange kind of repulsion, as if he had been drenched in slime or had been disrobed in front of a huge gathering. Mridula too became silent. She bought bread, butter and a few other provisions from a shop while he stood outside, smoking a cigarette. He could not remember when he had bought that pack of cigarettes. When Mridula came out and they started walking down the slope towards the villa, it suddenly occurred to him that not so long ago, on these very paths, the assistant manager or someone else would have walked down it holding Mridula by the waist, blowing cigarette smoke upon her face, bringing his lips close to her every now and then. And Mridula, instead of walking lifelessly as she did now, would have probably been tittering and swaying. This thought struck him like a sharp whip, so much so that he hurried forward and, almost running, went and stood in a corner of the villa’s portico. Even after Mridula unlocked the door, he stood outside.

Mridula came out after a while.

“Listen, as it is, you are not wearing enough woollens, why are you standing outside? Come inside. If you want to be alone, then you can go to the other room, or if you say so, I shall go there.”

He sharply threw down the glowing stub of the cigarette and went inside, and pushed open the door to the other room.

Mridula came in behind him to switch on the light and after some time brought a blanket.

He threw sharp glances around the room — there was a sofa, which could double as a sofa-cum-bed, two

chairs, one central table, and in a corner, on a high table, some old newspapers and an ashtray. Spread out on the floor was an old, coarse carpet. On the wall was the previous year's calendar. It would be difficult for anyone to believe that the assistant manager slept in such a place.

He stood in the centre of the room, looking around. And then he pushed at the other door. It didn't take him long to conclude that the owner had locked the door from the other side, so the only way to come into this room was from the room that Mridula used now... even if one had to use the bathroom... His eyes fell on the two bottles of whisky lying below the table with the newspaper pile. Blood rushed to his temples. Feeling powerless, he collapsed in the chair and stared blankly at an old calendar with a multi-coloured floral design hanging from a newly painted wall. For a long time, he remained seething. Then it occurred to him that there could be a purpose even to this meaningless gazing. His first thought was that Mridula had after all told him the truth. What was the need for a room inspection such as this to arrive at a conclusion? He had to make a decision now... the only decision, and what other decision could he make other than that, that... but... He suddenly felt as if he were a rat caught in a mousetrap, helpless, forlorn, in no position to perform feats, tiring itself by running from one end of the grilled space to the other.

He opened the door a little and looked out. Mridula was sitting motionless, her feet dangling, the bulb behind her filling her face with shadows. When he turned back into the smaller room, he felt that were he to stay there longer, the room, full of his mind's permutations and combinations, would remain permanently etched in his head. A few moments of hesitation later, he pulled



up a stool and sat down beside Mridula. For some time, silence hovered around them. Mridula began to aimlessly turn the pages of a magazine.

He asked the question that had risen to his lips earlier. "What do you know about Vibha?"

Mridula raised her saddened eyes. "Just that she is going to become a mother even though she has no compulsion like I have, an unwed mother!"

Ashamed, he began to look the other way. Silence trampled upon the intervening moments. After a long time, he asked, "Was there anything else in her letter?"

"Yes... there was," Mridula became a little calm. "It is not all Vibha's fault. This has happened because of *Amma's* planning. She deliberately encouraged your tenant, the professor, and put the idea in Vibha's head that she should find a well-employed husband. It is *Amma's* fault and nobody else's."

Amma! With his teeth clinched and fists tightened, he got up and began pacing up and down the room.

"And now that the professor has gone, *Amma* has been abusing Vibha night and day. She has kept her locked in a room, beating her. It has been rightly said that understanding women..."

He felt as if a series of explosions were rocking him inside, threatening to tear him apart. But outwardly, these explosions merely made him hasten his pacing.

Mridula questioned him. "But what are you going to do about Vibha?"

He continued walking up and down for a while, but then sat down. "There is a poor but bright boy, we have fixed her marriage with him. But before that the abortion... we'll have to take her away. The lady doctor charges 500 rupees, then the medicines, the cost of travelling..."

"Is that why 800 was required?"

"Yes..."

"The money is ready... You can take it."

Mridula looked sad once again and she silently began to flip through the magazine's pages. But her straightforwardness had him fuming and, in a very harsh, spiteful tone, he said, "And for that, I shall have to become the father of somebody's child?"

"Not somebody's, your wife's child." For a second, a challenge flashed in Mridula's eyes. "But I don't make such deals. After all, Vibha means something to me as well. I am giving it to her."

"And you? What are you going to do?" He asked with some hesitation, although the sharpness of his questions sounded piercing even to himself.

Mridula looked him in the eye for some time and in a very flat voice said, "Well, it all depends on what you're going to do."

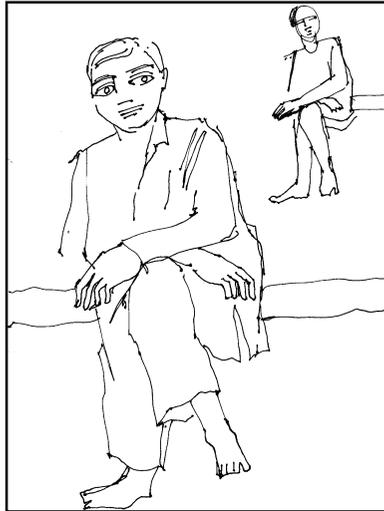
"I..." he panicked, for the moment of decision had come. "I... to tell you the truth, Mridula... I am so filled with loathing for you that had it not been so late in the night, I probably wouldn't have waited here for even a minute. I... to me..."

Mridula laughed sarcastically. "I too had been filled with loathing for you when you left me and stayed back

at home. You would have found teaching jobs paying you 90 rupees had you come and stayed with me. But then, you would have been constantly assailed by the feeling that you are a non-entity compared to me. To protect yourself from this small upset, you left me here by myself. When I wanted to leave the job, you talked about Vibha being married off and silenced me. Now I can say that love and hatred are all temporary emotions. Had it not been for you, I wouldn't have been... anyway, let it be. Take the money tomorrow and please go away... your love could have given me something - what would loathing and pity give? I do not wish to force myself upon you."

His eyes lifted and fell several times. He wanted to overcome his unbearable shame and chide her. He wanted to unleash his hatred, his rage, upon her, but something held him back. Perhaps it was to do with Vibha and the money he needed, perhaps it was an admission of his own guilt. There was some truth in Mridula's accusations. In an uncertain manner, he said, "You are right to feel upset. To an extent, what you are saying is true, but do consider what you would have done had you been in my shoes..."

"Me? Oh!" A sarcastic and dejected smile crossed Mridula's face. "Perhaps I too would have created double standards, one for my sister and another for my wife... even though she had to fall into this abjection for my sake!" she spoke in an incensed voice. Her smile broadened bitterly, and then, looking at his pale, ashamed face, she checked herself, "Forget it, I am not complaining. If you are worried about money, let me tell you that as long as I am alive, I'll keep sending it. I am not thinking of suicide like you. A load of wood, whether one mound or nine mounds, won't worry a corpse. Yes, that is what I am now — a corpse.



There is no level lower than the depth to which I have fallen, not even that of death."

He did not know why the occasion of his grandmother's death flashed across his eyes then. She was very fond of him and, on her death, he had cried the most. But when she was laid on the pyre, he had become absolutely quiet. Others had been worried about the dispassionate, detached way in which he had watched the entire proceedings.

"This is what is called *shamshavairagya**. Whosoever comes here feels it in some measure or the other,

everything will be all right," somebody had said. He realised with amazement that what he was feeling was something akin to *vairagya*, though he was not in a cremation ground. But it wouldn't be wrong to say that pyres burn in the mind, too, and an intertwined garden made of human bonds can be transformed into ashes.

That day, a breeze had suddenly come his way and dust had got into his eyes. Somebody had put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Pick up the ashes, son, this is the only property left now, this is the truth of life."

After his grandmother was cremated, there were just a few bones scattered here and there along with the ashes. The barber had put an urn in his hand and gestured to him to pick up the ashes.

"This is the only property left now." He repeated the words in his mind. A strong easterly wind pushed open a window. He felt as if there was dust in his eyes. Shutting the window, he turned and began knocking at Mridula's shut door... knock...knock...knock.

* Detachment of the cremation ground

Retreat on Criminalizing Gender Based Abortions in China

The National People's Congress, China's Parliament, has scrapped a proposal that would criminalize abortions based on the sex of the fetus, the state media reported, despite a growing population imbalance between males and females. Newspapers said lawmakers were divided over criminalizing sex-selective abortions. The original amendment called for fines and prison terms of up to three years for aborting a fetus because of the sex for nonmedical reasons, the reports said. A three-decade-old policy limiting most couples to one child has made abortion a widely used method for controlling family size. As a result, and because of cultural preferences for sons, China faces a growing population imbalance, with many more boys than girls. The New China News Agency said there were now 119 boys born for every 100 girls, a larger gap than the government's previously published figure of 117 boys per 100 girls. Globally, the average ratio is about 105 boys to 100 girls.

From: *The Associated Press*