

Novel

THE DECREE OF THE GOD OF MARRIAGE

(PROJAPATIR NIRBANDHO)

Rabindranath tagore



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CHAPTER ONE

Akshaykumar's father-in-law had belonged to traditional Hindu society, but his personal ways were remarkably modern. He had kept his daughters unmarried for a long time to provide them with an education. Whenever people objected, he would simply say, "We are Kulin Brahmins; this has always been the custom in our family."

After his death, his widow, Jagattarini, wanted nothing more than to stop the girls' education, marry them off, and breathe a sigh of relief. However, being a rather disorganized woman, she could never quite figure out how to put her wishes into action. As time slipped by, she resorted to blaming everyone else for the delay.

Her son-in-law, Akshaykumar, was thoroughly modern. He was eager to see his sisters-in-law graduate and be openly initiated into progressive society. He held a high-ranking position in the Secretariat, which required him to work from the Simla hills during the summer. Emissaries of royal families and aristocrats frequently fell at his feet, pleading with him to mediate with the top British officials during times of crisis. Because of all this, he wielded considerable influence in his in-laws' house. His widowed mother-in-law considered him the sole guardian of her orphaned family. At her persistent urging, he would spend the winter months in Kolkata at his wealthy in-laws' residence. During those months, a festive mood would take over his lively sisters-in-law's quarters.

During one such stay in Kolkata, the following conversation took place between Akshaykumar and his wife, Purabala:

Purabala: "If they were your own sisters, I'd like to see how you could sit around so quietly! By now, you would have scrounged up three or four grooms for each of them! It's just because they are my sisters—"

Akshay: "Nothing about human nature is hidden from you. You've figured out the vast difference between one's own sister and a wife's sister at this tender age! Well, my dear, my heart simply refuses to hand over any of my father-in-law's daughters to another man—I must admit my utter lack of generosity in this regard."

Purabala feigned a little anger, put on a serious face, and said, "Look here, I need to make an arrangement with you."

Akshay: "A permanent settlement was already made on our wedding day with holy chants, and now another one?"

Purabala: "Oh come on, this one isn't quite as terrifying. It might not even be that unbearable."

Akshay waved his hands like a theatrical conductor and said, "Speak thy mind, my lady!"

Then he broke into a spontaneous song in the *Jhinjhit* raga:

What thoughts stir within your mind, Speak them freely, maiden kind! What words, alas, seem to float In those tearful eyes afloat!

It must be mentioned here that Akshaykumar had a knack for improvising a couple of lines of song on the spot when the mood struck him. But he never actually finished a song. His friends would often get annoyed and say, "You have such remarkable talent, why don't you ever finish your songs?" Akshay would instantly strike a note and reply:

Is it wise, my friend, to reach the end? I extinguish the lamp before the oil is spent!

Annoyed by such behavior, everyone would concede that Akshay was simply incorrigible.

Exasperated, Purabala said, "Stop it, maestro! My proposal is that you fix a specific time of day when your joking will cease—when one can actually have a serious word with you!"

Akshay: "Being a poor man, I don't dare let my wife speak, lest she suddenly demands an expensive armlet."

He sang again:

Lest she ask for my very heart, In fear, I stay apart, Lest my eyes get caught in hers, My gaze, to the ground, defers.

Purabala: "Go away then!"

Akshay: "No, no, let's not fight! Alright, I will listen to whatever you say! I will officially sign up to become a member of your Anti-Joking Society! I won't show any disrespect in your presence! Now, what were we discussing? The marriage of my sisters-in-law! An excellent proposal!"

Purabala grew serious and melancholy. "Look, Father is no more. Mother depends entirely on you. It's only because of your encouragement that she's still letting the girls study at their age. Think how wrong it would be if you can't find suitable grooms for them now!"

Sensing trouble, Akshay became slightly more serious than before and said, "I have already told you not to worry. Your future brothers-in-law are secretly being groomed in Gokul." (*Translator's Note: A cultural reference to Lord Krishna being hidden away in Gokul until the right time*).

Purabala: "And where exactly is this Gokul?"

Akshay: "The very place from where you recruited this wretched soul into your herd. Our renowned Bachelors' Club."

Purabala expressed her doubt, "But they are at war with Prajapati, the God of Marriage!"

Akshay: "How can mortals win a war against a god? They only manage to provoke him. That's exactly why Lord Prajapati has a special vendetta against that club. Just as meat slowly simmers and tenderizes in a tightly sealed pot—those members, trapped under the heavy lid of their vows, have softened right down to the bone. They are perfectly ripe for marriage—ready to be served. After all, I was once the president of that very club!"

Delighted, Purabala smiled with a hint of triumphant pride and asked, "And what was your condition back then?"

Akshay: "What can I say! My vow was so strict I wouldn't even utter feminine nouns. But eventually, it got to the point where I felt that if Lord Krishna's sixteen hundred milkmaids were currently unavailable, I'd gladly settle for a hearty romance with even one of Goddess Kali's sixty-four thousand goblin-maids! And right at that critical juncture, I met you!"

Purabala: "So, your craving for the sixty-four thousand was satisfied?"

Akshay: "I dare not say that to your face! You'd get too arrogant. But I can hint that Mother Kali was indeed merciful!" Saying this, he lifted Purabala's chin and gazed into her eyes with playful, tender love.

Purabala pulled her face away in mock annoyance and said, "Then I must say, Lord Shiva had no shortage of ghosts and ghouls; it seems he took pity on me too!"

Akshay: "That might be true, which is exactly why you were blessed with a Kartikeya!" (*The handsome God of War*).

Purabala: "Are you starting your jokes again?"

Akshay: "You think comparing myself to Kartikeya is a joke? I swear, it's my deepest conviction!"

At this moment, Shailabala entered. She was the middle sister. Widowed within a month of her marriage, her hair was cropped short, giving her a boyish appearance. She was deeply eager to pass her B.A. with honors in Sanskrit.

Shaila came in and said, "Mr. Mukherjee, it is time to save your two younger sisters-in-law."

Akshay: "If they are in need of saving, I am here. What's the matter?"

Shailabala: "Scolded by Mother, Rasik-dada has dragged in a pair of Kulin boys from goodness knows where, and Mother has decided to marry her two daughters off to them."

Akshay: "Good heavens! It's a regular marriage epidemic! Like the plague! Attacking two daughters in the same house simultaneously! I fear I might catch it too." He broke into a *Kalangra* tune:

*Being the elder, I stay close by, Hence in dreadful fear am I. A glance, a word—
where they might strike, I know not if I'll live or die!*

Shailabala: "Is this the time for your songs?"

Akshay: "What can I do, dear sister! I never learned to play the wedding flutes, otherwise I'd have played that. What a prospect! An auspicious ceremony! The tying of the knot for two sisters! But why the sudden rush?"

Shailabala: "Next year, after the month of Baishakh, there's an inauspicious period, and there are no suitable dates for marriage."

Purabala was happy with her husband, and she firmly believed that as long as a woman got married somehow, happiness would follow. Secretly pleased, she said, "Why are you worrying so much in advance, Shaila? Let's see the grooms first."

It is the nature of disorganized people that when they suddenly make up their minds at an inopportune moment, they try to compensate for all their past lethargy in one fell swoop, without bothering to judge right from wrong. In such moments, they can't bear a second's delay. The lady of the house was in exactly such a state. She arrived and called out, "Akshay, my boy!"

Akshay: "Yes, Mother!"

Jagattarini: "Listening to you, I can no longer keep these girls at home!"

This carried a subtle implication that Akshay was entirely responsible for all the impending disasters befalling her daughters.

Shailabala: "Just because you can't keep them, Mother, does that mean you'll just throw them away?"

Jagattarini: "There you go! Listening to your talk just gives me a fever. Tell me, Akshay my son, Shaila is a widowed girl, what is the point of making her study so much and pass all these exams? What does she need so much education for?"

Akshay: "Mother, the scriptures say a woman must have at least one affliction—either a husband, or education, or hysteria. Look at Goddess Lakshmi, she has Vishnu, so she didn't need education; she's perfectly content with her husband and her pet owl. But Goddess Saraswati doesn't have a husband, so she's stuck with education!"

Jagattarini: "Say what you will, my boy, I am absolutely marrying the girls off this coming Baishakh!"

Purabala: "Yes, Mother, I agree. It's better for girls to marry early."

Hearing this, Akshay whispered to his wife in an aside, "Of course! Especially since having multiple husbands is forbidden by the scriptures, one must marry early to get one's money's worth of time."

Purabala: "Ugh, what nonsense are you babbling! Mother will hear."

Jagattarini: "Rasik-kaka is coming today to show us the grooms. Come, Purbi, let's go arrange some snacks for them."

With joyful enthusiasm, Purabala followed her mother towards the pantry.

A secret committee was then convened between Mr. Mukherjee and Shaila. This brother-in-law and sister-in-law duo were the best of friends. Shaila's personality was largely molded by Akshay's opinions and tastes. Akshay viewed this disciple of his almost like a brother of his own age—a bond of affection mixed with deep camaraderie. He would tease her like a sister-in-law, but he held a natural, friendly respect for her.

Shailabala: "We can't delay any longer, Mr. Mukherjee. It won't do unless we give Bipin Babu and Srish Babu from your Bachelors' Club a proper nudge right now. Oh, they are wonderful boys. They'd be a perfect match for our Nep and Niru. You'll be heading off to Simla with your office burdens before the month of Chaitra is out, and it'll be hard to hold Mother back this time."

Akshay: "But if you suddenly startle the club out of season, they'll panic. You can't just crack an eggshell and expect a bird to pop out. You have to incubate it properly, and that takes time."

Shaila remained silent for a moment, then suddenly burst into laughter and declared, "Very well, I'll take charge of the incubation, Mr. Mukherjee."

Akshay: "You'll have to explain that a bit more clearly."

Shailabala: "Their club is at number ten, isn't it? We can easily get there across our terrace, past Dekhan-hasi's house. I will join their club dressed as a man, and then we'll see just how long their club lasts."

Akshay stared wide-eyed, completely stunned for a moment, and then burst into loud laughter. "Ah, what a tragedy that I married your sister and lost the title of 'Bachelor' for life, otherwise my whole gang and I would have blindly walked right into your trap and died happily! To miss out on such a beautiful doom! Listen closely, my friend—" (He sang in the *Sindhu-Bhairavi* raga):

O hunter of the heart's deep woods! In vain your net for a willing beggar is cast; He who willingly dies a thousand times at your feet, Needs no piercing glance to be held fast.

Shailabala: "Shame on you, Mr. Mukherjee, you are getting terribly old-fashioned. Are 'piercing glances' and such things still in vogue? The art of warfare has changed quite a bit since then."

Meanwhile, the two sisters Nripabala and Nirabala—sixteen and fourteen—entered. Nripa was calm and gentle; Niru was her exact opposite, always bubbling with mischief and restless energy.

Throwing her arms around Shaila, Niru asked, "Tell me, Mejo-didi, who's coming over today?"

Nripabala: "Mr. Mukherjee, have your friends been invited today? Why are snacks being prepared?"

Akshay: "There you go! You've ruined your eyes reading books—you know exactly how gravity causes meteor showers millions of miles away, but you can't even guess whose gravitational pull is drawing whom into lane number 18, Madhu Mistry's alley today!"

Nirabala: "I understand, Sejo-didi!" She gave Nripa a playful slap on the back, leaned in close to her ear, lowered her voice slightly, and whispered, "Your groom is coming, dear! No wonder my left eye was twitching all morning."

Nripa shoved her away and said, "Why would my groom come if *your* left eye is twitching?"

Nirabala: "Well, sister, if my left eye dances a bit for your groom, I hardly mind. But Mr. Mukherjee, I saw snacks being prepared for only two people. Is Sejo-didi going to have a *Swayamvara* (a royal bride-choice ceremony)?"

Akshay: "Our youngest sister won't be left out either."

Nirabala: "Oh, Mr. Mukherjee, what glorious news! How shall I reward you? Here, take my necklace, take my bangles!"

Shailabala (anxiously): "Ugh, stop it, don't take off your jewelry."

Nirabala: "You must grant us a holiday from our studies today in honor of our grooms, Mr. Mukherjee."

Nripabala: "Ugh, why do you keep obsessing over grooms! Look at her, Mejo-didi!"

Akshay: "That's exactly why I named her 'Barbara' (the Barbarian). Oh barbarian, God has already blessed you sisters with an *Akshay* (imperishable) groom, and yet you are not satisfied?"

Nirabala: "That is precisely why the greed has grown even more."

Realizing it was impossible to control her younger sister, Nripa started dragging her away. As she was being pulled out, Niru turned her head from the doorway and called out, "Let us know when they arrive, Mr. Mukherjee, don't cheat us! You can see how restless Sejo-didi has become."

Looking affectionately at the two retreating sisters with a smile, Shaila said, "Mr. Mukherjee, I am not joking—I am going to become a member of the Bachelors' Club. But I need someone I know to go with me. I suppose there's no way you can become a member anymore?"

Akshay: "No, I am a sinner. Your sister shattered my penance and banished me from heaven."

Shailabala: "Then we'll have to catch hold of Rasik-dada. He has kept his vow of bachelorhood despite never joining any club."

Akshay: "If he joins now at this old age, he'll lose his vow. It's just like a Hilsa fish—it swims fine in the water, but the moment you catch it, it dies. Vows are exactly the same; the moment you bind them, their ruin is certain."

At that moment, Rasik-dada arrived—bald on the top of his head, with a white mustache, fair-skinned, and tall. Akshay charged at him, yelling, "You scoundrel, you hypocrite, you useless pumpkin!"

Rasik held him off with two outstretched hands and replied, "Why, O intoxicated, sluggish, elephant-of-the-grove, dark-as-a-mountain-of-kohl!"

Akshay: "You want to bring a forest fire into my garden of sisters-in-law?"

Shailabala: "Rasik-dada, what do you even stand to gain from this?"

Rasik: "I couldn't bear it anymore, sister, what could I do! Every year, your sisters are getting older, and the elder mother blames me. She says, 'You do nothing but sit and eat twice a day, can't you at least look out for two grooms for the girls?' Tell me, sister, I'm perfectly willing to stop eating—will that magically conjure up grooms, or make your sisters younger? Meanwhile, the two who can't find grooms are eating and drinking quite happily. Shaila, dear, you've read *Kumārasambhava*, haven't you? Remember?"

*Svayam visheernadrumaparnavrittita Para hi kashtha tapasastaya punah.
Tadapyapakeernamatah priyamvadam Vadantyaparneti cha tam puravidah.*

"You see, sister, Goddess Durga gave up eating entirely to perform penance to find her own groom, but just because my granddaughters haven't found grooms, I, an old man, should give up my meals! What kind of justice is this from elder mother? Ah, Shaila, you remember that line, don't you? '*Tadapyapakeernamatah priyamvadam*—'"

Shailabala: "I remember, Dada, but I'm not in the mood for Kalidasa right now."

Rasik: "Then these must be terribly dark times indeed."

Shailabala: "That's why I need your counsel."

Rasik: "I'm ready, my dear. I'll give you whatever counsel you want. If you want me to say 'yes,' I'll say 'yes'; if you want 'no,' I'll say 'no.' I possess that wonderful quality. Because I always agree with everyone's opinion, almost everyone thinks I'm as intelligent as they are."

Akshay: "You've protected your reputation with many clever tricks, and that bald patch of yours is one of them."

Rasik: "Another one is—'Yavat kinchinna bhashate' (As long as one says nothing). So, I rarely speak much in front of outsiders—"

Shailabala: "I suppose you make up for it when you're with us."

Rasik: "Well, you've caught me out."

Shailabala: "If you've been caught, then come along—you have to do exactly as I say."

Saying this, Shaila dragged him into another room for their strategy session.

Akshay called out, "Aha, Shaila! I see! So Rasik-da is the royal minister today, and I am left in the cold!"

Looking back as she walked away, Shaila smiled and said, "What relationship do I have with you regarding counsel, Mr. Mukherjee? One cannot be a wise counselor unless one is old."

"Then I formally withdraw my petition for the post of royal minister," Akshay declared. Standing in the empty room, he suddenly began to sing loudly in the *Khamaj* raga:

I shall only offer flowers To those rosy hands of thine; My brain possesses no powers For council or guard's design.

When the master of the house was alive, he used to call Rasik 'uncle'. Having lived under his shelter for a long time, Rasik was intimately bound up in the family's joys and sorrows. Because the mistress of the house was disorganized, after the master's passing, Rasik faced a certain lack of care and comfort, and finding time for himself became difficult due to Jagattarini's unreasonable demands. However, Shaila was the one who compensated for all these shortcomings. Because of Shaila, there was never any lapse in his diet or care during his occasional illnesses; and with her assistance, his study of Sanskrit literature continued in full swing.

Upon hearing Shailabala's bizarre proposal, Rasik-dada's mouth fell open in shock at first, then he began to laugh, and finally, he agreed. He said, "Lord Krishna, disguised as a woman, enchanted men. If you, Shaila, can enchant men disguised as a man, I'll toss my devotion to Krishna out the window and spend my remaining years worshipping you! But what if your mother finds out?"

Shailabala: "Mother gets so internally frantic just remembering her three daughters that she can't keep track of us anymore. Don't worry about her."

Rasik: "But I know absolutely nothing about how to behave as a member in a club."

Shailabala: "Oh, don't worry, I'll steer you through."

CHAPTER TWO

Srish and Bipin

Srish: Say what you will, back when Akshay Babu was our president, our Bachelors' Club was quite lively. The current president, Chandra Babu, is a bit too strict.

Bipin: When Akshay Babu was around, the romantic flavor got a bit too strong. In my opinion, an excess of romance isn't exactly suitable for a vow of lifelong bachelorhood.

Srish: I believe the exact opposite. Precisely because our vow is so rigid, we need that flavor even more. If you want to grow crops on parched soil, don't you need to water it? The pledge to never marry is enough in itself; does that mean we must wither away and dry up in every other aspect of life?

Bipin: Say what you will, by suddenly abandoning the Bachelors' Club to get married, Akshay Babu has somewhat weakened the foundation of our group. Deep down, the strength of everyone's resolve has wavered.

Srish: Not in the least. I can speak for myself; the strength of my vow has only increased. A vow that anyone can easily keep commands no respect.

Bipin: Let me give you some good news.

Srish: Has a marriage been arranged for you, by any chance?

Bipin: Oh, certainly—with your granddaughter! Put the jokes aside; Purna joined the Bachelors' Club yesterday.

Srish: Purna! You don't say! That's like a stone floating on water!

Bipin: Stones don't float on their own, my friend! Something else has set him adrift on the high seas. I have pieced together the history of it to the best of my deductive abilities.

Srish: Let's hear the extent of your deductive powers, then.

Bipin: You know how Purna goes to Chandra Babu in the evenings to take study notes. The other day, Purna and I went to Chandra Babu's house together a bit early. He had just returned from a meeting. The servant had lit the kerosene lamp—Purna was turning the pages of a book, and just then—how do I describe it, brother, it was straight out of a Bankim Chandra novel—a young maiden with a braid swaying down her back—

Srish: You don't say, Bipin!

Bipin: Just listen. She walked right into the room carrying a plate of snacks for Chandra Babu in one hand and a glass of water in the other. Upon seeing us, she was startled, taken aback, and her face flushed crimson with shyness. With both hands full, she couldn't even pull her veil over her head. She hurriedly set the food on the table and dashed away. She may belong to the reformist Brahmo sect, but along with discarding the thirty-three million Hindu gods, she certainly hasn't discarded her modesty—and, truth be told, she has held on to her beauty as well.

Srish: Really, Bipin? Is she quite a looker, then?

Bipin: Exquisitely so. She flashed in like a bolt of lightning and completely struck down our studies.

Srish: Alas! I haven't caught a glimpse of her even once! Who is this girl?

Bipin: Our president's niece. Her name is Nirmala.

Srish: Unmarried?

Bipin: Unmarried, of course. And right after that, Purna abruptly signed up for our Bachelors' Club.

Srish: Ah! Planning to steal the deity by masquerading as the priest, is he?

(Enter a middle-aged man)

Bipin: I say, sir, who are you?

The Man: If you please, my name is Sri Banamali Bhattacharya. My late father was Sri Kamal Nyaychunchu, and my residence is—

Srish: Our curiosity ends right there. Now, if you could just tell us the purpose of your visit—

Banamali: No specific purpose at all. You are gentlemen; I merely wished to make your acquaintance—

Srish: You might not have any work to do, but we certainly do. Now, if you would kindly go and make the acquaintance of some *other* gentlemen, it would give us a bit of a—

Banamali: Well then, let's get down to business.

Srish: That would be best.

Banamali: Mr. Nilmadhav Chowdhury of Kumartuli has two exceedingly beautiful daughters. They have reached marriageable age—

Srish: Good for them, but what connection is that to us?

Banamali: A connection could easily be formed if you just pay a little attention. It's not difficult at all. I can arrange everything.

Bipin: You are squandering so much kindness on entirely the wrong candidates.

Banamali: Wrong candidates! Nonsense! Where else would I find such worthy grooms? I am even more charmed by your modesty.

Srish: If you wish to preserve that charmed feeling, you had better slip away right now. Our modesty can't withstand much stretching.

Banamali: The bride's father is willing to offer a very handsome dowry.

Srish: Well, there is no shortage of beggars in the city. Hey Bipin, quicken your pace a bit—how long must we stand on the street bickering? You might find this amusing, but I have no taste for such pleasantries.

Bipin: Quicken our pace and flee where? God has blessed him with a long pair of legs too.

Srish: If he insists on tailing us, that divine gift is going to end up broken at human hands.

CHAPTER THREE

"Mr. Mukherjee!"

"Command me," Akshay replied.

Shaila said, "We have to figure out a trick to drive those two Kulin suitors away."

"Of course we do," Akshay said enthusiastically. He immediately broke into a song in the traditional *Ramprasadi* tune:

Let's see who dares come near you! You shall remain the sole goddess, and I alone shall stand beside you.

Shaila smiled and asked, "Sole goddess?"

Akshay replied, "Well, even if you four sisters become four goddesses, the scriptures say, 'Abundance is no fault'—the more the merrier."

"And you will remain 'alone'?" Shaila countered. "Doesn't 'the more the merrier' apply there too?"

"Ah, over there, another sacred scriptural verse applies," Akshay said. "'Excess of anything is highly deplorable.'"

Shaila: "But Mr. Mukherjee, that sacred verse won't hold up forever. More companions will inevitably gather."

Akshay: "What, are you saying this one brother-in-law will be replaced by a ten-year settlement of them? Well, we'll look into the new penal code when that happens. But until then, I am not letting these Kulin boys anywhere near here!"

Just then, a servant arrived to announce that two gentlemen had come.

Shaila said, "That must be them. Sister and Mother are busy in the pantry; try to get rid of them somehow before they are free."

"What will my reward be?" Akshay asked.

"All of us sisters-in-law will get together and bestow upon you the grand title of King Shalibahan—the Bearer of Sisters-in-law," Shaila declared. (*Translator's Note: A pun on the legendary King Shalibahan; 'shali' means sister-in-law, and 'bahan' means bearer*).

Akshay: "Shalibahan the Second?"

Shaila: "Why the second? The original Shalibahan's name will be completely wiped from history. You will be Shalibahan the Great."

Akshay: "You don't say! A new era will be named after my reign?" With great theatricality, he began to sing in the *Bhairavi* raga:

You will make me a man of great might! And crown me a king with your glances bright!

Shailabala exited. Following his orders, the servant brought the two gentlemen in. One was disproportionately tall, thin, wearing boots, with his *dhoti* pulled almost up to his knees; he had dark circles under his eyes and looked like a malaria patient—his age could have been anywhere from twenty-two to thirty-two. The other was short, plump, densely covered in a beard and mustache, with a nose shaped like a small pellet, a protruding forehead, and a dark complexion.

Akshay rose with overwhelming friendliness, rushed forward, and shook their hands so violently he nearly tore their arms off. "Come in, Mr. Nathaniel! Come in, Mr. Jeremiah! Sit, sit! Hey boy, bring some ice-water, prepare the hookah!"

Startled by this foreign greeting, the thin man shrank back and muttered softly, "Sir, my name is Mrityunjay Ganguly."

The short man said, "My name is Sri Darukeshwar Mukhopadhyay."

Akshay: "Shame on you, gentlemen! Are you still using those old names? What are your Christian names?"

Seeing the visitors completely dumbfounded and speechless, he added, "Haven't been baptized yet, I suppose? Well, it doesn't matter much, there's plenty of time for that."

Saying this, he offered the pipe of his own hookah to Mrityunjay. Seeing the man hesitate, Akshay said, "Nonsense! Why are you shy in front of me? I've been secretly smoking tobacco since I was seven and am thoroughly seasoned! The smoke has put a nice coat of soot on my intellect! If I were to start acting shy, I wouldn't be able to show my face in civilized society."

Taking courage, Darukeshwar snatched the pipe from Mrityunjay's hand and began puffing away with loud bubbling sounds. Akshay then pulled a strong Burma cigar from his pocket and handed it to Mrityunjay. Even though he wasn't used to smoking cigars, for the sake of their newly established camaraderie, Mrityunjay risked his life, took slow, tentative puffs, and somehow managed to suppress his cough.

Akshay: "Now, let's get down to business. What do you say?"

Mrityunjay remained quiet. Darukeshwar said, "Of course! Auspicious deeds should be done quickly!" He chuckled, thinking the banter was going swimmingly.

Akshay then put on a grave face and asked, "Chicken or Mutton?"

Mrityunjay scratched his head in bewilderment. Darukeshwar, understanding nothing, began to laugh excessively. Feeling humiliated and annoyed, Mrityunjay thought to himself, *These two are hitting it off brilliantly, and I am the only dense fool here!*

Akshay: "My dear sirs, you laugh just at the names! You'd probably faint at the smell and drop dead if it actually fell on your plates! Make up your minds and tell me—will it be chicken or mutton?"

Finally, both of them realized they were discussing food. The timid Mrityunjay remained silent, lost in thought. Darukeshwar licked his lips and glanced around the room.

Akshay: "What is there to fear, sir? Why wear a veil when you've stepped out to dance?"

Hearing this, Darukeshwar slapped his thighs and laughed uproariously. "Well, chicken is fine, perhaps a cutlet! What do you say?"

Encouraged, the greedy Mrityunjay chimed in, "Mutton isn't bad either, brother! A chop—" He couldn't even finish his sentence.

Akshay: "No fear, brother, we shall have both! Eating with a divided mind brings no joy."

He called out to the servant, "Hey, go call Kalimaddi the cook from the hotel at the corner of the street." (*Translator's Note: Kalimaddi is a Muslim name, making him an entirely taboo cook for orthodox Brahmin Hindus*).

Then, Akshay gently poked Mrityunjay with his thumb and whispered, "Beer or Sherry?"

Mrityunjay grimaced in embarrassment. Darukeshwar, inwardly cursing his companion for being a spoilsport, asked, "No arrangements for whiskey, I suppose?"

Akshay patted his back heavily. "Of course there is! How else am I still alive?" He burst into a theatrical tune:

Give me your word, I'll tell you my wish-key! In an ounce of soda water, I mix three-quarters of whiskey!

Even the frail Mrityunjay felt obligated to laugh with all his might, and Darukeshwar promptly pulled a book towards himself and started drumming on it like a tabla.

As soon as Akshay stopped after two lines, Darukeshwar said, "Finish it, brother!" and took up the tune himself, "*Give me your word, I'll tell you my wish-key.*" Mrityunjay silently applauded his friend's boldness.

Akshay nudged Mrityunjay, "Join in, man! You sing too!"

To protect his own reputation, the bashful Mrityunjay softly joined in. Akshay started drumming on the desk. Suddenly, he stopped, turned serious, and said, "Ah, I forgot to ask the most important question. Everything else is settled—but what are your conditions?"

Darukeshwar: "You must send us to England."

Akshay: "That goes without saying. Does a champagne cork pop without cutting the wire? The intellect of men like you is being suppressed in this country; once the bindings are cut, it will foam over from your eyes, nose, and mouth."

Overjoyed, Darukeshwar grabbed Akshay's hand. "Brother, you simply *must* arrange this for us. Understood?"

Akshay: "That is not difficult at all. But you will be baptized today, won't you?"

Darukeshwar thought this was a joke he wasn't quite getting. He laughed and asked, "How's that?"

Looking slightly surprised, Akshay said, "Why, it's already settled! Reverend Biswas is arriving tonight. You can't have a Christian wedding without being baptized first!"

Terrified, Mrityunjay stammered, "C-Christian wedding, sir?"

Akshay: "You act as if you've fallen from the sky! That won't do—the baptism must be completed tonight, no matter what. I won't let you off the hook."

Mrityunjay: "Are you people... Christians?"

Akshay: "Oh, stop playing the innocent, sir. As if you know nothing."

Trembling, Mrityunjay said, "Sir, we are Hindus, Brahmin boys, we cannot lose our caste."

Suddenly adopting an incredibly arrogant tone, Akshay snapped, "What caste, sir! You are going to eat chicken cooked by Kalimaddi, you want to go to England, and you still talk about caste!"

Frantic, Mrityunjay whispered, "Hush, hush, keep your voice down! Someone might hear us!"

At this point, Darukeshwar intervened. "Don't panic, sir, let me consult with him for a moment!"

He pulled Mrityunjay aside and whispered, "Look, we'll have to perform a purification penance when we return from England anyway—we'll just do a double penance and get our religion back entirely. If we let this opportunity go, we'll never

get to go to Bilet! You saw for yourself, no other father-in-law agreed to send us. And brother, we've already smoked a Christian's hookah, what is left of our caste anyway?"

He returned to Akshay and said, "So, the trip to England is absolutely guaranteed? In that case, I am willing to become a Christian."

Mrityunjay: "But let's put it off for tonight."

Darukeshwar: "If it has to be done, it's better to get it over with quickly and set sail—as I said from the start, auspicious deeds should be done quickly!"

Meanwhile, the women of the house had gathered behind the door. A servant entered carrying two plates of fruits, sweets, fried *luchis*, and ice-water.

Disappointed, Darukeshwar said, "What's this, sir? Has the chicken flown away from this wretched man's fate? Where is the cutlet?"

"Let's just make do with this for today," Akshay said softly.

Darukeshwar: "How can that be, sir! You raise my hopes only to dash them! I come to my father-in-law's house and I don't get to eat a mutton chop? And this ice-water, sir—I have a tendency to catch colds, my body can't tolerate plain water!" He began to sing again, "*Give me your word, I'll tell you my wish-key...*"

Akshay kept nudging Mrityunjay, muttering softly, "Join in, man, you too—why are you sitting quietly?" Torn between fear and embarrassment, the man began to hum along softly. When the song ended, Akshay pointed at the food and asked, "Will this absolutely not do?"

Darukeshwar waved it off dismissively. "No sir, we can't eat this invalid's diet! So much for India, couldn't even serve a decent chicken!" Saying this, he resumed vigorously puffing on the hookah.

Akshay leaned close to his ear and started singing a *Lucknow Thumri*:

How long will India survive, I say Just eating rice, dal, and water every day?

Hearing this, Darukeshwar enthusiastically picked up the tune, and Mrityunjay, spurred by Akshay's covert nudges, bashfully chimed in.

Akshay fed them another line:

Food and water are scarce in the nation, Take up whiskey, soda, and mutton for your ration.

Darukeshwar got completely carried away and belted out the line at the top of his voice, and with the vigorous encouragement of Akshay's thumb, Mrityunjay somehow managed to follow along.

Akshay fed them yet another verse:

Away with the Brahmin priest and his tuft of hair! Come, Kalimaddi Mian, shaking your beard with flair!

As the singing grew more fervent, rustling sounds could be heard from behind the door. Looking the picture of utter innocence, Akshay shot occasional side-glances in that direction.

Just then, Kalimaddi the cook appeared, holding a dirty kitchen towel, and offered a *salaam*.

Excited, Darukeshwar said, "Ah, Uncle! Tell us, what's cooking today?"

The cook rattled off a long list of dishes. Darukeshwar turned to Akshay, "None of that sounds bad, does it? What do you think, sir? Is there anything on there we should cross off?"

Glancing toward the door, Akshay said, "Whatever you gentlemen deem best!"

Darukeshwar: "My opinion is, we welcome every single dish with a reverent bow to the Brahmins!"

Akshay: "Indeed, they are all worthy of worship."

Kalimaddi saluted and left. Raising his voice slightly, Akshay asked, "So, gentlemen, do you wish to become Christians tonight?"

Elated by the promise of a feast, Darukeshwar said, "As I always say, auspicious deeds should be done quickly. I will become a Christian today—no, I will become a Christian right this minute! Only after becoming a Christian will we discuss anything

else. Sir, one cannot sustain life on spinach and lentil soup. Go on, bring your priest over." And he loudly resumed the song:

Away with the Brahmin priest and his tuft of hair! Come, Kalimaddi Mian, shaking your beard with flair!

The servant came in and whispered in Akshay's ear, "The mistress is calling for you."

When Akshay stepped out behind the door, Jagattarini demanded, "What is going on! What is all this?"

Putting on a grave face, Akshay said, "Mother, we can deal with all that later, right now they are demanding whiskey, what should I do? That brandy you bought to massage your legs, is there any of it left?"

Dumbfounded, Jagattarini gasped, "What are you saying, child? You're going to give them brandy to drink?"

"What can I do, Mother, you heard them," Akshay said. "One of the boys catches a cold if he drinks plain water, and the other can't even utter a word unless he has a drink."

Jagattarini: "And what is this they're saying about becoming Christians?"

Akshay: "They say being a Hindu makes eating very inconvenient; eating spinach and lentils makes them sick!"

Shocked, Jagattarini said, "Does that mean you are going to feed them chicken and convert them to Christianity tonight?"

Akshay: "Well, Mother, if they get angry and leave, we'll lose two grooms right now. So I have to listen to whatever they say. I see they are going to make a drunkard out of me too."

Purabala: "Get rid of them, get rid of them! Dismiss them right this instant!"

Jagattarini frantically agreed. "My son, there will be no chicken-eating or any such thing in this house. Please, bid them farewell. It was my own fault for asking Rasik-kaka to look for grooms. As if he could ever get anything done!"

The women departed. When Akshay returned to the room, he saw Mrityunjay preparing to bolt, while Darukeshwar was gripping his hand, trying to drag him back. In Akshay's absence, Mrityunjay had weighed the pros and cons and panicked.

As soon as Akshay entered, Mrityunjay said angrily, "No, sir, I cannot become a Christian. I have no need for marriage."

Akshay: "Well, sir, no one is falling at your feet begging you to."

Darukeshwar: "I am ready, sir."

Akshay: "If you are ready, go to a church, sir! Converting people hasn't been my family business for the last seven generations!"

Darukeshwar: "But what about that Reverend Biswas you mentioned—"

Akshay: "He lives in Tiretta Bazaar. I'll write down his address for you."

Darukeshwar: "And the marriage?"

Akshay: "Not in this family."

Darukeshwar: "So you were just joking this whole time, sir? And the food—"

Akshay: "Also not in this house."

Darukeshwar: "At least at the hotel—"

Akshay: "Now that's a good idea." Saying this, he took a few rupees from his wallet, handed it to them, and sent the duo packing.

At that moment, pulling Nripa by the hand, Nirabala burst into the room like a sudden gust of spring wind. She cried, "Mr. Mukherjee, Sister didn't want to leave out either of the two!"

Nripa lightly tapped her sister's cheek with two fingers and scolded, "Are you telling lies again?"

Akshay: "Don't fret, sister, I can somewhat tell the difference between truth and lies."

Nirabala: "Tell me, Mr. Mukherjee, were these two specimens a product of Rasik-dada's sense of humor, or was it our Sejo-didi's destined fate?"

Akshay: "Does every bullet fired hit the target? The God of Marriage was doing a bit of target practice, and these two missed. That usually happens a few times at first. Before this wretched soul was caught, many aquatic creatures had nibbled at your sister's bait; I was the only one whose fate it was to get hooked." He slapped his own forehead dramatically.

Nripabala: "Will this target practice by the God of Marriage continue every day now, Mr. Mukherjee? If so, we won't survive!"

Nirabala: "Why are you sad, sister? Will he miss every day? One of them is bound to land right on target eventually."

(Rasik enters)

Nirabala: "Rasik-dada, from now on, we're going to start looking for a bride for *you*."

Rasik: "Well, that's a happy thought."

Nirabala: "Oh, we'll show you happiness! You live in a thatched hut yourself, but you want to set fire to other people's mansions. Think we don't have matches in our hands? If you mess with us, we'll get you married twice over—you won't be able to save the few hairs you have left on your head!"

Rasik: "Look here, little sister, you should be thankful I brought two absolute beasts; if I had brought someone mediocre, you'd be in real danger. The beast that cannot be recognized as a beast is the most dangerous one."

Akshay: "That is true. I was a bit scared inwardly, but the moment I patted their backs, their tails started wagging with a loud thump. But what is Mother saying?"

Rasik: "What she is saying is not something one can call people over to hear. I have kept it locked inside my heart. Anyway, it has finally been decided that she will go

to her nephew in Kashi; she has found a lead on some grooms there, and it will serve as a pilgrimage too."

Nirabala: "What are you saying, Rasik-dada! Does that mean our daily viewing of new specimens here is cancelled?"

Nripabala: "Do you still have an appetite for it?"

Nirabala: "Is this about appetite? It's about education! By looking at multiple examples every day, the whole concept becomes much easier. Then you won't have any trouble understanding the particular creature you end up marrying."

Nripabala: "You figure out your own creature; you don't need to worry about mine."

Nirabala: "That's an excellent idea—you worry about yourself, I'll worry about myself, but we certainly won't let Rasik-dada worry about us anymore."

Nripa forcibly dragged Niru away.

As soon as she entered the room, Shailabala said, "Rasik-dada, you simply cannot go to Kashi with Mother. We are going to join the Bachelors' Club—I've already sent the application along with the ten-rupee entrance fee and am waiting."

"I will arrange for someone else to accompany Mother to Kashi, don't worry about that," Akshay assured her.

Shaila: "Look at you, Mr. Mukherjee! You made utter monkeys out of them and sent them away! In the end, I was actually feeling sorry for the poor fellows."

Akshay: "No one can make a monkey out of someone, Shaila; Mother Nature does that all by herself. It requires special divine grace. It's just like becoming a poet. Whether it's a tail or poetic talent, if it isn't inside you, you can't just drag it out by force."

Purabala entered, fiddling with the kerosene lamp. "Look at the light the servant left us, it's just flickering. I am tired of telling him."

Akshay: "The rascal knows that I look far handsomer in the dark."

Purabala: "You don't look handsome in the light? Are you being modest? This is a new development."

Akshay: "I was saying, the rascal servant mistook me for the moon."

Purabala: "Oh, is that so. Well, you should raise his salary!—But Rasik-dada, what a spectacle you caused today."

Rasik: "Sister, grooms are plentiful, but not all of them are fit for marriage—I merely provided a minor demonstration of that fact."

Purabala: "It would have been much better if, instead of demonstrating that, you had provided an example or two of a groom actually fit for marriage."

Shaila: "I have taken up that responsibility, Sister."

Purabala: "Yes, I figured as much. Seeing the way you and your Mr. Mukherjee have been conspiring for days, some great spectacle is bound to happen."

Akshay: "Well, the *Kishkindhya-kanda* (the Monkey Chapter) already happened today." (*Translator's Note: A reference to the Ramayana chapter featuring the monkey army.*)

Rasik: "And preparations are underway for the *Lanka-kanda* (the Arson Chapter). We are setting off to burn down the golden Lanka of the Bachelors' Club."

Purabala: "And who is Shaila in all this?"

Rasik: "Certainly not Hanuman."

Akshay: "She is the fire itself."

Rasik: "And a certain someone will carry her there on his tail."

Purabala: "I don't understand any of this. Shaila, are you going to the Bachelors' Club?"

Shaila: "I am going to become a member."

Purabala: "You speak utter nonsense! Since when do women become members?"

Shaila: "Women are becoming very civilized (members) these days! So I've decided to ditch the sari and put on a man's tunic."

Purabala: "I see, you're going to join in disguise. You've already chopped your hair off, this was the only thing left. Do whatever you please, I want no part in this."

Akshay: "No, no, please don't join this gang! Let whoever wants to become a man do so, but in my destiny, please remain a woman forever—otherwise it's a breach of contract, and that's a very dangerous lawsuit!"

With that, he started singing in the *Sindhu* raga:

O ever-ancient moon! Stay just as you are forever, this is my only boon. Your old familiar smile, your ancient nectar sweet, Quenches my ancient thirst, makes my life complete— Let no new Chakora bird ever share this treat!

Purabala stormed out in anger.

Reassuring Shailabala, Akshay said, "No fear. Once the anger passes, her mind will clear—there will even be a touch of repentance. That is the perfect window of opportunity."

Rasik:

Kopo yatra bhrukutirachana nigraho yatra maunam... (Where anger is but a frown, and punishment is but silence...)

Shaila: "You are quite happily reciting verses, Rasik-dada, but Mr. Mukherjee is the one who will find out exactly what 'anger' is."

Rasik: "Oh my dear, I am perfectly willing to swap places. If Mr. Mukherjee were the one reciting verses and the anger fell upon me instead, I would frame this wretched forehead of mine in gold! But tell me, sister, those two plates of snacks haven't been offended, have they? I suppose there's no objection if we sit down to them?"

Akshay: "I was thinking the exact same thing."

Both of them sat down to eat, while Shailabala picked up a hand-fan and gently fanned them.

CHAPTER FOUR

After the meal, Shailabala called out, "Mr. Mukherjee."

Feigning immense alarm, Akshay replied, "Mr. Mukherjee again! I want no part in this business of breaking the meditation of these young ascetics."

Shailabala: "We are the ones who will break their meditation. You just need to bring those ascetic boys to this house."

Akshay's eyes widened. "So the entire club has to be uprooted and transplanted here? And this single Mr. Mukherjee is expected to perform every impossible task?"

Smiling, Shailabala said, "That is the trouble with being a great hero. When the medicinal mountain of Gandhamadan was needed to be carried across the sea, no one even bothered to ask the other monkey-warriors; they all looked to the great Lord Hanuman!"

Akshay roared, "You wretched girl! Could you think of no other comparison than that burnt-faced monkey from the ancient epics? Such overwhelming love!"

Shailabala: "Indeed, such overwhelming love!"

Akshay broke into a song in the *Bhairavi* raga:

In my scorched heart, only your burnt face does reside! Though the world is full of people, my burnt eyes seek none beside!

"Alright, so be it! I shall herd those locusts toward the flame. Now, quickly, bring me a *paan* (betel leaf). One prepared by your own hands!"

Shaila: "Why not by my sister's hands—"

Akshay: "Oh, I have already secured your sister's hand in marriage, haven't I? That is precisely why I finally have the leisure to turn my gaze toward other lotus-hands."

Shaila: "Very well, sir! These lotus-hands will smear so much lime on your *paan* that your burnt face will burn all over again."

Akshay sang:

He who is caught in the jaws of doom, Dies a hundred deaths in the gloom. The burnt moth, despite the pain, Leaps into the fire again and again.

Shaila: "Mr. Mukherjee, what is that crumpled ball of paper?"

Akshay: "Your membership application and the ten-rupee entrance fee were in my pocket. That rascal washerman washed it so clean that I can't read a single letter. The scoundrel must be fiercely opposed to women's independence, which is why he thoroughly edited your letter from top to bottom."

Shaila: "Is that so!"

Akshay: "You four sisters have entirely monopolized my memory; have you left me any room to remember anything else?"

My forgetful mind forgets every place, It forgets nothing, nothing, save your moon-like face.

The Bachelors' Club held its sessions in a ground-floor room in an alley at 10 Madhu Mistry's Lane. The house belonged to the president, Chandramadhav Babu. He was a professor at a Brahmo college. Extremely zealous about social work, his head was constantly buzzing with various schemes for the upliftment of the motherland. His body was frail but tough, his head large, and his wide eyes were full of absent-minded whimsy.

At first, the club had many members. Recently, however, excluding the president, the number had dwindled to three. The straying flock had married, become family men, and busied themselves with earning a living. Nowadays, if they saw any subscription book for a cause, they would initially laugh it off; if the person holding the book stubbornly persisted, they would begin hurling insults. Remembering their own past ideals, they had developed a profound contempt for patriots.

The three remaining members—Bipin, Srish, and Purna—were still in college and had not yet entered worldly life. Bipin played football and possessed extraordinary

physical strength; no one ever saw him studying, yet he easily passed his exams. Srish was the son of a wealthy family, and his health was rather delicate, so his parents didn't pressure him to study—Srish mostly followed his own whims. Bipin and Srish were inseparable friends.

Purna was fair-skinned, slender, swift in his movements, quick to act, fast-talking, and deeply focused on everything he did. Looking at him, one would think him a resolute man of action.

He was a student of Chandramadhav Babu. His primary ambition was to pass his exams with flying colors and earn a handsome living through legal practice, for which he stayed awake late into the night studying. Sacrificing his own career for the sake of the country was never part of his plan. The vow of lifelong celibacy did not particularly appeal to him either. He would regularly visit Chandra Babu in the evenings just to get the study notes necessary to pass his exams. He knew perfectly well that because he hadn't taken the vow of celibacy and showed no eagerness to ruin his own future, Chandra Babu had no real respect for him. But he had never felt any unbearable sorrow over this fact. What happened next, however, is a story already known.

The club was in session that day. Chandramadhav Babu was saying, "The fact that our membership is small is no reason for anyone to lose hope—"

Before he could finish, the frail but passionate Srish burst out, "Lose hope! That is the very glory of our club! Are the noble ideals and strict rules of this society meant for the common masses? Ours is a society for the chosen few."

Chandramadhav Babu lifted the minute-book close to his eyes and said, "But precisely because our ideals are high and our rules strict, we must maintain our humility. We must always remember that we may not be worthy of achieving our resolve. Think about it: previously, we had many members who were perhaps superior to us in every way, yet they too fell from their mark one by one, drawn by the powerful allure of personal happiness and family life. None of us can say where temptation might be waiting for us on our path. Therefore, we shall abandon pride, and we do not wish to be bound by any oaths. Our philosophy is this: it is better to try and fail than to never harbor a noble endeavor in one's heart."

Behind the slightly open door of the adjoining room, an unseen female listener was slightly moved by these words. The bunch of keys tied to the end of her sari made a soft *clink*—a sound that escaped everyone's notice except Purna's.

Chandramadhav Babu continued, "Many people mock our club; they say, 'You are taking a vow of celibacy to serve the country, but if everyone takes this noble vow, fifty years from now, there will be no people left in the country who need serving!' I usually bear these taunts in polite silence; but is there no answer to this?"

Saying this, he looked at his three remaining members.

Keeping the listener behind the door in mind, Purna enthusiastically spoke up, "Of course there is. In every country, there is a small group of people who were simply not born to be family men; their numbers are few. This club is meant to draw those few together and bind them with a singular purpose, not to initiate the entire population of the world into a vow of celibacy. Our net will catch many people and eventually let most of them go; in the end, after a long period of testing, only two or four will remain. If someone asks, 'Are you those two or four people?' who among us can arrogantly claim that with certainty? All we can say is, yes, we have been drawn into the net, but whether we will survive the test until the end is known only to God. But whether we survive or not, whether we stumble one by one or not, no one has the right to mock our club. Even if our esteemed president is the only one left standing, this abandoned gathering place will remain pure and radiant through the power of that lone ascetic's penance, and the fruits of his lifelong devotion will never be in vain for this country."

Slightly embarrassed, the president brought the minute-book very close to his eyes again and began looking through it absentmindedly. But Purna's speech reached its intended destination with full force. Hearing of Chandramadhav Babu's solitary penance, Nirmala's eyes welled with tears, and the sudden jingling of the moved girl's keys thoroughly rewarded an attentive Purna.

Bipin had been quiet until now. Finally, in his deep, thunderous voice, he said, "Whether we are worthy or unworthy of this club will be proven in due time. But if doing actual work is our goal, we should start at some point. My question is this—what is to be done?"

Chandramadhav Babu's face lit up with excitement. "This is the question we have been waiting for all this time! *What is to be done?* This question should sting each

of us and make us restless! *What is to be done?* Friends, work is the only bond of unity. Those who work together are one. Until we all engage in a collective task in this club, we cannot truly be united. Therefore, the question Bipin Babu has raised today—*what is to be done?*—must not be allowed to die out. Gentlemen, please answer: what is to be done?"

The frail-bodied Srish grew agitated and declared, "If you ask me what is to be done, I say we should all become wandering ascetics, traveling from village to village across India with the vow of national service. We must grow our ranks and use our club like a fine thread to stitch the whole of India together."

Bipin laughed and said, "There is plenty of time for all that. Suggest something practical that can be started tomorrow. If you vow to 'hunt a rhino and loot a treasury,' both the rhino and the treasury will be perfectly safe, and you will remain as comfortable as you are now. I propose that we each take charge of raising two foreign students; their education and the entire development of their minds and bodies will be our responsibility."

Srish: "This is your great work! Is this why we embraced asceticism? If we end up raising children anyway, what crime would our *own* children have committed?"

Annoyed, Bipin retorted, "If you look at it that way, ascetics don't do any real work anyway; their only 'work' consists of begging, wandering, and hypocrisy."

Srish (angrily): "I see there are certain individuals among us who have absolutely no respect for the noble goals of this club! The sooner they leave this society and busy themselves with raising children, the better for us!"

Flushing red, Bipin replied, "I don't wish to speak about myself, but there are certain people in this club who are equally unfit for the hardships of asceticism and the sacrifices of child-rearing, they—"

Lowering the minute-book from his eyes, Chandramadhav Babu interjected, "If I could hear Purna Babu's opinion on the proposed ideas, I might find an opportunity to express my own thoughts."

Purna said, "Today, a proposal was made to undertake a task specifically to unify the club. But I don't need to point out to anyone how wonderfully the signs of 'unity' have manifested themselves over these proposals. If I were to introduce a

third opinion now, it would simply be adding a third log to the fire of conflict. Therefore, my proposal is this: our president should assign us a task, and we shall accept it as our supreme duty and execute it without debate. This is the only way to achieve both our work and our unity."

In the adjoining room, a certain person shifted her position once again, and her keys gave a sharp *clink*!

When it came to practical worldly matters, no one was as inept as Chandramadhav Babu, but his mind constantly drifted towards commerce. He said, "Our first duty is to eradicate the poverty of India, and the immediate means to do that is commerce. The few of us cannot run a massive business, but we can lay the groundwork. Imagine if we all started experimenting with matches. If we can invent a matchstick that lights easily, doesn't blow out quickly, and is available in abundance all over the country, then there will be no obstacle to manufacturing cheap indigenous matches."

With that, Chandramadhav Babu launched into a detailed lecture on how many matches were produced in Japan and Europe, what kinds of wood were used for the sticks, what combustible chemicals were mixed in, how many matches were exported from where, how many arrived in India, and what their market value was.

Bipin and Srish sat in stunned silence.

Purna said, "I will begin experimenting with jute stalks and broom twigs right away."

Srish turned his face away and smirked.

At that moment, Akshay entered the room. He said, "Gentlemen, may I enter?"

Having weak eyesight, Chandramadhav Babu couldn't recognize him immediately. He frowned and stared in bewilderment.

Akshay said, "Sir, do not be frightened, and please don't frighten me by frowning like that. I am not an unprecedented apparition—in fact, I am a ghost of your past... My name is—"

Chandramadhav Babu hastily stood up and said, "You don't need to say your name—come in, come in, Akshay Babu—"

The three young members greeted Akshay. Bipin and Srish, the two friends, sat looking sullen due to their recent argument.

Purna said, "Sir, a ghost of the past is far more terrifying than an unprecedented apparition."

Akshay replied, "Purna Babu has spoken like a wise man. The fear of ghosts is quite common in this world. People imagine ghosts to be terrifying, assuming that a creature who is itself a ghost could never tolerate the enjoyment of life by others. Therefore, Mr. President, please do not exorcise the ghost of the Bachelors' Club from your meeting; offer him a chair out of your past affection, and do it quickly."

"A chair it is, then," Chandra Babu said, pushing a chair forward.

"I accept this seat by unanimous consent," Akshay Babu said as he sat down. "Just because you were incredibly polite and asked me to sit, please don't think me so uncivilized that I'll impolitely overstay my welcome. Especially since *paan*, tobacco, and wives are against the rules of your club, and those three bad habits have entirely ruined me. So, I must finish my business quickly and head home."

Chandra Babu laughed. "Since you are not a member, we won't apply the club's rules to you. I suppose I can arrange for *paan* and tobacco, but your third addiction—"

Akshay: "Please don't try to transport that one here! That particular addiction of mine is not for public display!"

Chandra Babu was about to call the old servant for *paan* and tobacco when Purna jumped up. "I will call him," he said. As he rushed out, the sound of keys, bangles, and someone suddenly fleeing could be heard simultaneously from the next room.

Akshay stopped him, saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do. As long as I am here, I am your fellow bachelor—there is no difference. Now, listen to my proposal."

Chandra Babu leaned heavily over his minute-book on the table and listened intently.

Akshay said, "A wealthy friend of mine from the provinces wishes to enroll his son as a member of your Bachelors' Club."

Surprised, Chandra Babu asked, "The father doesn't want to marry the boy off?"

Akshay: "Rest assured on that front—he will under no circumstances get married. I am his guarantor. Furthermore, a distant grandfather of his will also become a member. You can be entirely worry-free about him as well, because although he may not be a tender youth like yourselves, he is more of a bachelor than anyone else; he has crossed the age of sixty. Therefore, he is no longer in the 'age of doubt' regarding marriage—an age which, fortunately, you all are still in."

The Bachelors' Club brightened up at Akshay Babu's proposal. The president asked, "The names, addresses, and details of the prospective members—"

Akshay: "Of course they have names, addresses, and details—the club won't be deprived of them. When you receive the members, you will receive them complete with their names, addresses, and details. However, this damp ground-floor room of yours is not conducive to good health; you must pay some attention to ensuring that the longevity of your lifelong bachelors is not compromised."

Looking slightly embarrassed, Chandra Babu lifted the minute-book to his nose and said, "Akshay Babu, you know our income—"

Akshay: "Please, do not make your income public. I know discussing it is not a cheerful endeavor. Arrangements for a very fine house have already been made, so you needn't trouble your treasurer. Come, let me take you all there today to see it for yourselves."

The gloomy faces of Bipin and Srish lit up. The president too became so cheerful that he repeatedly ran his fingers through his hair, leaving it a messy tangle. Only Purna became terribly depressed.

He said, "Changing the club's location is unnecessary."

Akshay: "Why? Will moving from this house to that one blow out the lamp of your lifelong celibacy?"

Purna: "This room doesn't seem bad to us."

Akshay: "It's not bad. But you'll be hard-pressed to find a better room than the other one in this whole city."

Purna: "I feel that rather than focusing on luxury, it is better for us to practice enduring hardship."

Srish: "We can practice that outside the club, rather than during the meetings."

Bipin: "Once we actually engage in work, there will be so many opportunities to endure hardship that wasting our strength unnecessarily now is mere foolishness."

Akshay: "Friends, listen to my advice: do not compound the darkness of your vow of celibacy with the darkness of this meeting room. Light and air are not feminine nouns, therefore do not bar them from entering your club. Consider this too: this place is extremely damp, which doesn't suit your vow. You may be cultivating eccentricities, but cultivating rheumatism is certainly not part of your pledge. What do you say? What is Srish Babu and Bipin Babu's opinion?"

The two friends said, "He is absolutely right. Let us at least go and take a look at the house."

Purna remained despondent and silent. In the adjoining room, the keys gave another *clink*, but this time with a highly displeased ring.

CHAPTER FIVE

Akshay said, "A husband is a wife's sole place of pilgrimage. Do you agree or not?"

Purabala: "Have I come to a great scholar to learn the decrees of the scriptures? I merely came to inform you that I am leaving for Kashi with Mother today."

Akshay: "That is not good news—I certainly don't feel the urge to reward you with expensive shawls upon hearing it."

Purabala: "My, my, your heart is breaking, isn't it? You simply can't bear it?"

Akshay: "I am not merely thinking of this temporary separation—if you are gone for a few days now, there are others here, and this wretched soul will somehow manage to get by. But what will happen after this? Look, do not overtake your husband in matters of religion—while you will be getting double promotions in heaven, I will be lagging far behind! You will be carried away on a celestial chariot by the messengers of Vishnu, while the terrifying guards of Yama (the God of Death) will drag me by the ear and make me run!"

He sang in the *Paraj* raga:

*They'll fly you away to the heavens on high, While I go limping behind with a sigh.
I'll wish I could grab your braid as you soar—*

Purabala: "Alright, alright, stop it."

Akshay: "I'll stop, and you will be the only one moving. Is this a suitable arrangement for the nineteenth century? Are you really leaving?"

Purabala: "I am leaving."

Akshay: "Whose hands are you leaving me in?"

Purabala: "In Rasik-dada's hands."

Akshay: "You're a woman, you know nothing about the laws of transfer of property. That is exactly why, in times of separation, one must find a suitable hand oneself and surrender to it."

Purabala: "Well, you won't have to search very hard."

Akshay: "No, I won't."

He sang in the *Kafi* raga:

*In whose hands shall I surrender my heart? Thinking of this, the day does depart.
When I look right, my heart weeps for the left, When I turn left, I feel of the right
bereft!*

"Well, I suppose I have a few good consolations, but what about you?"

*How will you pass the lonely night? Burning in the pain of separation's blight, You'll
toss and turn, measuring the bed, Cursing the God of Love, wishing you were dead—*

Purabala: "Spare me, end that rhyme right there."

Akshay: "I cannot stop in times of sorrow—poetry simply flows out of me. If you don't like rhymes, there's always blank verse. When you are abroad, I will write an epic poem called *The Slaying of the Cry of Anguish*. Listen to the beginning of it, my dear—"

(With grand theatricality):

*Riding the vapor-driven carriage, O jewel among women, When thou, Purabala,
departed for the holy city of Kashi In the afternoon, tell me, O sweet-tongued
goddess, Which fair maiden did Sri Akshay, the possessor of three sisters-in-law,
Choose with a garland of matrimony, To pass the months of separation?*

Purabala: (With a hint of pride) "I swear on my head, no more jokes, why don't you write a real poem for once?"

Akshay: "Since you mentioned 'swearing on your head,' ever since I ruined my own head over this, I've realized it doesn't count as a delicacy. As for writing that poetry, I don't consider it an easy task either. There's a hole somewhere in my intellect; poetry can't accumulate there—it just leaks out instantly."

*You know why no fruits grow upon my tree! The moment a flower blooms, I bring it
to your knee.*

"But I haven't received an answer to my question. I'm dying of curiosity. Why all this sudden enthusiasm for going to Kashi? For now, I have mentally forgiven Vishnu's messengers, but I am highly suspicious of the followers of Lord Shiva, the Master of Ghosts. I've heard his attendants Nandi and Bhiringi resemble me in many ways; when he returns, he might not like the ghost he has chosen!"

Purabala had long understood the slight sting of hurt hidden beneath Akshay's joking. Moreover, the enthusiasm she had initially felt about the proposal to go to Kashi had been fading as the time of departure drew nearer.

She said, "I won't go to Kashi."

Akshay: "What are you saying! Those servants of the Lord of Ghosts died once to become ghosts; now they'll die a second time!"

(Rasik enters)

Purabala: "Rasik-dada's face looks unusually cheerful today."

Rasik: "My dear, the disease of cheerfulness on your Rasik-dada's face never seems to go away. Without rhyme or reason, it just stays cheerful—married men look at it and secretly burn with anger."

Purabala: "Did you hear that, married man? Give him a fitting reply before you go."

Akshay: "How would that old man know anything about our cheerfulness? It is so mysterious that no one has been able to decipher it to this day—it is so deep that even we can't find it when we grope for it; sometimes we suddenly doubt if it even exists."

Purabala: "Is that so!" She made as if to leave in a huff.

Akshay grabbed her, pulled her back, and said, "For heaven's sake, don't throw a tantrum in front of this man—it will only increase his audacity! Look, you old man, ignorant in the science of matrimony: when we are angry, our voices naturally grow louder, and that is what reaches your ears. But when our voices choke with passion, when we try to bring our lips to their ears but repeatedly miss the mark—you never hear about that!"

Purabala: "Ugh—shut up."

Akshay: "When a list of jewelry is drawn up, everyone from the house manager to the goldsmith knows about it. But on a spring night, when the beloved—"

Purabala: "Ugh—stop it."

Akshay: "On a spring night, the beloved—"

Purabala: "Ugh—you just babble endlessly!"

Akshay: "On a spring night, when the beloved roars, *'I will go to my father's house tomorrow! I don't wish to stay here for another second—my bones have turned to ash—my—'*"

Purabala: "Excuse me, sir! When exactly did your beloved ever roar on a spring night about going to her father's house?"

Akshay: "Is this a history exam? It's not enough to invent the event? Now I have to fabricate the exact year and date on the spot? Do I look like such a great genius?"

Rasik: (To Purabala) "Do you understand, sister? He can't say a sweet thing directly—he doesn't have the capacity for it—so he says it backward. When affection falls short, one has to show affection through insults."

Purabala: "Alright, Mallinath-ji (a famous commentator), you don't need to explain any further. It seems Mother has finally decided to take *you* to Kashi."

Rasik: "Well, that's perfectly fine. What's there to fear in that? I've certainly reached the age for pilgrimages. Now, with your seductive side-glances, you can do absolutely nothing to this old man—now my mind rests at the feet of Lord Shiva—"

Mugdha-snigdha-vidagdha-madhurairlalahi katakshairalam Chetah samprati chandrachuda-charana-dhyanamrite vartate. (Enough with these enchanting, tender, clever, and sweet side-glances, My mind now dwells in the nectar of meditating upon the feet of the moon-crowned Lord Shiva).

Purabala: "That is very good news—we don't want to waste any more side-glances on you anyway. Now, off you go to the feet of the moon-crested Lord—I'll call Mother!"

Rasik: (With folded hands) "Eldest sister, your mother is trying very hard to reform me, but she has started this reform work at a slightly inopportune time—her discipline will have no effect now. You see, there is an age for being ruined, and by God's grace, that age lasts a very long time; seductive side-glances work right until the end. But the age for salvation has passed. She is going to Kashi now; let her abandon the vain hope of improving this old child's intellect for a while and live in peace—why will you cause her trouble?"

(Jagattarini enters)

Jagattarini: "My boy, I shall take my leave then."

Akshay: "Are you leaving, Mother? Rasik-dada was just lamenting that you—"

Rasik: (Anxiously) "Everything this brother says is a joke! Mother, I have no lamentations—why would I lament?"

Akshay: "Weren't you just saying that the elder mother is going to Kashi all alone and didn't take you along?"

Rasik: "Yes, that is true. One can naturally feel a bit hurt—but if Mother is absolutely determined—"

Jagattarini: "No, my boy, who will manage your Rasik-dada in a foreign place? I can't travel with him."

Purabala: "Why, Mother? If you took Rasik-dada along, he could look after you."

Jagattarini: "Spare me, I have no need of being looked after. I have seen more than enough proof of your Rasik-dada's intellect."

Rasik: (Rubbing his bald head) "Well, Mother, I am constantly providing proof of whatever little intellect I have—it's impossible to keep it hidden—it's bound to be discovered. The broken wheel always rattles the most—the whole neighborhood

knows it's broken. That is why I want to stay perfectly quiet, but you insist on making me run."

People whose own disorganization means nothing ever goes according to their wishes always need a scapegoat to scold constantly. Rasik-dada was Jagattarini's externalized guilty conscience.

Jagattarini: "I'm heading to Haran's house then; I'll get into the carriage straight from there. There's no more time to travel after this. Purbi, you people don't believe in auspicious days and times; just make sure you reach the station on time."

The mother was well aware of her daughter and son-in-law's extraordinary attachment to each other. She knew it was futile to try to separate them before the very last minute for the sake of the almanac.

But when Purabala had said, "Mother, I won't go to Kashi," she thought it was going too far. She relied heavily on Purabala. Knowing Purabala was going with her gave her peace of mind. Purabala had become an experienced traveler from her trips to Simla with her husband; the mother depended on Purabala more than any male guardian to navigate the troubles of travel. Flustered by her sudden refusal, Jagattarini looked toward her son-in-law.

Understanding his mother-in-law's anxiety, Akshay said, "How could that be? It will be very inconvenient for Mother if you don't go with her. Go ahead, Mother; I will take her to the station right on time."

Reassured, Jagattarini departed. Rubbing his bald head, Rasik-dada tried to force an appropriately mournful farewell expression onto his face.

Akshay: "Who are you, sir! Who are you?"

"If you please, sir, I have a very special relationship with your wife," said a person dressed in men's clothing, shaking hands with Akshay.

Shaila: "Mr. Mukherjee, you couldn't recognize me?"

Purabala: "You're unbelievable! Have you no shame?"

Shaila: "Sister, modesty is a woman's ornament—if you're going to put on a man's attire, you have to discard it. Similarly, if Mr. Mukherjee were to dress up as a woman, he wouldn't be able to show his face out of shame. Rasik-dada, why are you so quiet?"

Rasik: "Ah, Shaila! Like the young God of Love! Like the warrior god Kartikeya, stepping right out of Goddess Parvati's lap! I've always seen her as Shaila; my eyes had grown accustomed to her. The thought of whether she was beautiful, average, or merely passable never even crossed my mind. But today, simply by changing her attire, her true beauty has revealed itself! Purbi my dear, what are you saying about shame? I just want to pull her close, place my hand on her head, and bless her!"

Purabala was secretly captivated by Shaila's youthful, handsome, tender masculine form. With a deep ache, she kept thinking: *Ah, if only Shaila had been our brother instead of our sister. God wasted all her beauty and intelligence!* Purabala's gentle eyes welled with tears.

Gazing at the disguised girl for a moment with affectionate seriousness, Akshay said, "I tell you truly, Shaila, if you had been my younger brother instead of my sister-in-law, I wouldn't have objected."

Slightly moved, Shaila replied, "Neither would I have, Mr. Mukherjee."

In truth, they were very much like two brothers. Only, that brotherly affection was mixed with the playful banter of peers, making their relationship all the more radiant.

Pulling Shaila to her chest, Purabala asked, "Are you going to become a member of the Bachelors' Club in this attire?"

Shaila: "If I tried in any other attire, it would be a grammatical error, Sister! What do you say, Rasik-dada?"

Rasik: "Absolutely, one must preserve grammar at all costs. What else were the great grammarians Panini and Vopadeva born for? But brother, simply adding a tunic as a suffix to Srimati Shailabala—does that really save the grammar?"

Akshay: "That's what the new grammar book says. I can give it to you in writing: just as Shaila will convince the 'bachelors' of the Bachelors' Club, they will be thoroughly convinced. Don't I know the roots of these bachelors?"

With a small sigh, Purabala said to Shaila, "You carry on with your games with your Mr. Mukherjee and this old peer of yours—I am leaving for Kashi with Mother."

Purabala secretly disapproved of these unconventional antics. Yet, she didn't have the heart to constantly obstruct the bizarre, playful games of her husband and sister. Remembering her own marital happiness, her pity and indulgence for her widowed sister knew no bounds. She thought, *Let the poor girl forget her sorrow however she can*. Purabala went to pack her things.

Just then, Nripabala and Nirabala entered the room and immediately prepared to flee. Peeking from behind the door, Niru took a closer look, yelled "Mejo-didi!" and came running in. She said, "Mejo-didi, I want to hug you, brother, but this tunic is getting in the way! You look just like a prince from a fairy tale, come riding across the desolate plains to rescue us!"

Reassured by Niru's loud voice, Nripa also entered and stood staring in mesmerized wonder. Niru pulled her forward and said, "Why are you staring like a greedy person? It's not what you think; that's not your King Dushyanta—it's our Mejo-didi."

Rasik:

Iyamadhikamanojna chapakanenapi tanvi. Kimiva hi madhuranam mandanam nakritinam. (This slender girl is even more enchanting in a tunic. What indeed cannot serve as an ornament for a sweet figure?)

Akshay: "You fools! You are mesmerized merely by seeing a tunic! So much adoration for gold-plating? While pure gold stands right here weeping in despair!"

Nirabala: "The price of pure gold is too high these days; this gold-plating is perfectly fine for us! What do you say, Mejo-didi!" With that, she gave Shaila's fake mustache a little twirl.

Rasik: (Pointing to himself) "This piece of pure gold is going very cheap, sister—it hasn't even been stamped by the Queen at any mint yet!"

Nirabala: "Very well, I donate it to Sejo-didi." (Saying this, she grabbed Rasik-dada's hand and placed it in Nripa's). "Do you agree, sister?"

Nripabala: "Yes, I agree." With that, she made Rasik-dada sit on a chair and began plucking out his white hairs.

Niru started trying to twirl and point the ends of Shaila's fake mustache. Shaila complained, "Ugh, what are you doing, my mustache will fall off."

Rasik: "Why bother with that, come over here, sister—this mustache won't fall off no matter what."

Nirabala: "There you go again! What did I hand you over to Sejo-didi for? But tell me, Rasik-dada, you still have a few black hairs left on your head, but how did your mustache turn completely white from end to end?"

Rasik: "For some people, the mouth matures before the head."

Nirabala: "Which room will the sisters' club meet in, Mr. Mukherjee?"

Akshay: "In my sitting room."

Nirabala: "Then I'll go and tidy up that room a bit."

Akshay: "In all the days I've been using that room, you've never once felt the urge to tidy it up?"

Nirabala: "You have your sweeper-servant for that, yet your hopes remain unfulfilled?"

(Purabala enters)

Purabala: "What are you all up to?"

Nirabala: "I came to ask Mr. Mukherjee to help me with my studies, Sister. But he says he won't teach me unless his outer room is thoroughly dusted and decorated. So Sejo-didi and I are going to decorate his room. Come on, sister."

Nripabala: "If you want to decorate the room, you go—I'm not going."

Nirabala: "Oh no! I will toil and sweat alone, and you'll reap the benefits of it? That won't do."

Arresting Nripa, Niru dragged her away.

Purabala: "I've packed everything. I suppose there's still time before the train leaves."

Akshay: "If you want to miss it, there's plenty of time."

Purabala: "Then come, drop me off at the station. I am leaving, Rasik-dada—you are staying here, please keep an eye on these children."

[She bows in respect]

Rasik: "Don't worry about a thing, sister. They are all so terribly frightened of me, they won't dare make a peep."

Shaila: "Sister dear, wait a moment. Let me go change out of these clothes and come bow to you."

Purabala: "Why? Why the sudden urge to change?"

Shaila: "No, sister, wearing these clothes, I feel like someone else entirely; I don't feel like touching you! Rasik-dada, here, keep my mustache safe, don't lose it."

CHAPTER SIX

It was a moonlit evening. Srish was sitting quietly on the south-facing verandah of his house, smoking a cigarette, his legs propped up on the two arms of a large armchair. On a small table beside him sat a glass of iced lemonade and a heap of jasmine garlands.

Bipin entered from behind and called out in his naturally loud, deep voice, "What's going on, Lord Ascetic?"

Srish immediately took his legs off the armrests, sat up, and burst into loud laughter. He asked, "Haven't forgotten our argument yet, I see?"

Just moments earlier, Srish had been thinking about going over to Bipin's house. But entranced by the clear moonlight of the autumn evening, he couldn't bring himself to move. He had ordered a glass of ice-cold lemonade and jasmine garlands, and was now weaving bizarre coils of imagination in the moon-whitened sky with the smoke from his cigarette.

Srish: "Tell me, brother, you babysitter, do you honestly think I cannot become an ascetic?"

Bipin: "Why wouldn't you be able to! But you'd need a whole retinue of disciples to carry your baggage."

Srish: "Meaning, someone to weave my jasmine garlands, and someone else to beg for lemonade and ice from the market, right? What's the harm in that? If a vow of asceticism breeds an aversion to jasmine flowers and a distaste for cold lemonade, is it really a very high-class asceticism?"

Bipin: "In common parlance, that is exactly what asceticism means."

Srish: "Listen to him! Do you think a word in a language has only one meaning? If the word 'ascetic' means the exact same thing to me as it does to another person, then what is the point of having an independent entity called a mind?"

Bipin: "My mind is eager to hear what meaning *your* mind assigns to the word 'ascetic'."

Srish: "My ascetic's attire is this—a garland of flowers around the neck, sandalwood paste on the body, earrings in the ears, and a smile on the face. My ascetic's task is to captivate people's hearts. Good looks, a sweet voice, a command over public speaking—without these, one cannot reap the proper fruits of becoming an ascetic. In taste, intellect, capability, and cheerfulness, my sect of ascetics must serve as an ideal for householders in every respect."

Bipin: "In other words, a gang of handsome Kartikeyans needs to ride out onto the streets on peacocks."

Srish: "If peacocks aren't available, there are trams; I wouldn't even mind walking. The Bachelors' Club essentially *is* Kartikeya's club. But was Kartikeya merely handsome? He was also the commander of the celestial army."

Bipin: "He had only two hands for fighting, but for giving speeches, he had three pairs of mouths!" (*Translator's Note: The God Kartikeya is depicted with six heads.*)

Srish: "This only proves that our Aryan ancestors knew the power of speech to be three times greater than physical strength. I, too, do not accept mere muscle-flexing as the ideal of heroism."

Bipin: "I suppose that was aimed at me?"

Srish: "Look at that! See how pride ruins a man! You've already assumed that the mention of muscle means I'm talking about you! You are the mighty Bhimasena of the Kali Yuga! Alright then, come at me! Let us test our heroism right now."

Saying this, the two friends began playfully grappling with each other for a moment. Suddenly, declaring, "And now falls Bhimasena!" Bipin flopped down and commandeered Srish's armchair, propping his feet up on it. Then, exclaiming, "Oh, unbearable thirst!" he drained the glass of lemonade in one gulp.

Srish hastily grabbed the jasmine garland, said, "But the garland of victory is mine!" and wrapped it around his head. Sitting on a cane stool, he asked, "Alright, brother, tell me honestly: if a group of educated men renounced worldly life like this, and went around the four corners of India spreading education through song and speech with cheerful faces and elegant attire, wouldn't it be beneficial?"

Bipin had no desire to argue with his friend over this. He said, "The idea is certainly good."

Srish: "In other words, it sounds beautiful but is impossible to execute! I say it is *not* impossible, and I will prove it by example. Asceticism is a massive force in India; to dust off its ashes, snatch away its begging bowl, shave off its matted locks, and establish it in beauty and devotion to work—that is the sole purpose of the Bachelors' Club. Men like us haven't taken a lifelong vow just to tutor kids and manufacture matchsticks! Tell me, Bipin, are you on board with my proposal or not?"

Bipin: "I don't possess the looks, the voice, or the accessories your ascetic requires. But I am perfectly willing to tag along behind you as your baggage-carrier. If you wander around everywhere wearing gold earrings, or at least gold-rimmed spectacles, you'll need a bodyguard—I can somewhat manage that job."

Srish: "Joking again!"

Bipin: "No brother, I'm not joking. I say this truly: if you can make your proposal a reality, it would be wonderful. However, in such a community, not everyone's work can be the same; each person can contribute according to their natural abilities."

Srish: "That is true. There is only one rule on which we must be absolutely firm: we will have no association whatsoever with the female sex."

Bipin: "You want to keep the garlands, sandalwood, armlets, and earrings, yet you are so exceptionally firm about this one particular thing. Why?"

Srish: "My firmness is *precisely* because I am keeping those things. It's the same reason Sri Chaitanya strictly kept his followers away from the company of women. His religion was one of passion and beauty, which is exactly why it held so many traps of temptation."

Bipin: "So, you do have a little fear then!"

Srish: "For myself? Not in the least. I keep my mind diffused across the diverse beauties of the world; who has the power to catch me in a single trap? But you people, who spend day and night with football, tennis, and cricket—if you fall, you'll come crashing down headfirst, dragging your bats, balls, and wickets with you!"

Bipin: "Well, brother, we shall see when the time comes."

Srish: "That is a bad thing to say. The time will not come; I will not *let* the time come. Time doesn't arrive riding a chariot; we carry it in on our own shoulders—but the 'time' you speak of will have to turn back for lack of a carrier."

(Purna enters)

Both: "Welcome, Purna Babu!"

Bipin gave up the armchair for him and pulled up a stool for himself. Since Srish and Bipin weren't extremely close to Purna, both treated him with a bit of extra courtesy.

Purna: "You haven't composed a bad moonlight on this verandah of yours—arranging it by casting the shadows of the pillars here and there."

Srish: "I have possessed several highly miraculous powers, such as composing moonlight on rooftops, since long before I was born. But look here, Purna Babu, this business of making matches and all that—I just don't have the knack for it."

Purna: (Glancing at the flower garland) "Do you have an extraordinary knack for asceticism instead?"

Srish: "That is exactly what we were discussing. Tell me, what do you consider asceticism to be?"

Purna: "A religion where one requires no help from a tailor, washerman, or barber, where the weaver is entirely ignored, and where one doesn't even glance at Pears Soap advertisements—"

Srish: "Ugh, nonsense! That kind of asceticism grew old and died long ago. Now we have to build a new sect called the 'Modern Ascetics'—"

Purna: "The modern ascetic featured in the *Vidyasundar* folk theater isn't a bad example, but he certainly didn't abide by the rules of the Bachelors' Club."

Srish: "If he had, he would have been the perfect example. One must be beautiful and skilled in attire, speech, and behavior—"

Purna: "Only he must avert his gaze from the princess, right? He must weave a garland without thread, but whose neck will he place it around?"

Srish: "Around the motherland's. That sounded a bit high-brow. What can I say—both the flower-selling aunt and the princess are strictly forbidden. But jokes apart, Purna Babu—"

Purna: "It doesn't sound like a joke at all. It's terribly rigid, the words are completely dry and hard."

Srish: "From our Bachelors' Club, we must forge a sect of ascetics who will be the ideal for all householders in taste, education, and action. They will be unparalleled in music and other fine arts, and at the same time, experts in stick-fighting, swordplay, horseback riding, and marksmanship—"

Purna: "In other words, equally adept at stealing hearts and taking lives. A male version of Devi Chaudhurani's bandit gang." (*Translator's Note: A reference to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel 'Devi Chaudhurani'*).

Srish: "Bankim Babu has already stolen my idea beforehand, but we must put it into practice and make it our own."

Purna: "What does the president have to say?"

Srish: "I've spent days explaining it to him and have finally drawn him over to my side. But he hasn't let go of his matchsticks. He says the ascetics will learn agriculture and manufacturing to teach the farmers village by village; they will open a bank with one-rupee shares and set up stores in large villages under new regulations—spreading a network of commerce across India. He has become very enthusiastic."

Purna: "And what is Bipin Babu's opinion?"

In Bipin's view, Srish's fantasy was entirely impractical. But he looked upon all of Srish's eccentricities with affectionate eyes; he couldn't bear the thought of crushing Srish's enthusiasm by contradicting him. He said, "Although I do not consider myself the ideal man for Srish's sect of modern ascetics, if the group is formed, I am willing to dress up as an ascetic too."

Purna: "But dressing up requires money, sir. It's not just a loincloth—you'll need armlets, earrings, jewelry, Kuntalin hair oil, Delkhosh perfume—"

Srish: "Purna Babu, joke all you want, but the Bachelors' Club *will* become an ascetic society. On one hand, we will practice rigorous self-sacrifice, and on the other, we will not deprive ourselves of any element of humanity. We will embrace hard valor and delicate beauty with equal reverence. Through that arduous devotion, a new age will dawn in India—"

Purna: "I understand, Srish Babu! But isn't woman considered one of the foremost elements of humanity? And if we ignore her, how can we maintain our reverence for delicate beauty? What is your solution for that?"

Srish: "Women have one flaw: they entwine the male race like vines. If there were no fear of being entangled by them, if one could protect them while also preserving one's own independence, then there would be no issue. But when one has to dedicate one's life to a cause, one must remove all obstacles to that work. Taking a wife's hand means binding your own hands; that simply won't do, Purna Babu!"

Purna: "Don't panic, brother, I haven't come to invite you to my auspicious wedding. But think about it: it is doubtful whether we will get another human birth—and yet, as compensation for depriving the heart of the water of its thirst for a lifetime, will we find anything else anywhere? The Muslim heaven has houris, the Hindu heaven has no shortage of apsaras—will we find anything more delightful in the heaven of the Bachelors' Club than our president and fellow members?"

Srish: "Purna Babu, what are you saying? You—"

Purna: "No fear, brother, I haven't gone desperate yet. But was this roof-full of moonlight and the scent of these flowers created to help us keep our vow of celibacy? Occasionally, when steam builds up in the mind, I think it's better to let it vent. If I try to suppress it and fool myself, one day the iron boiler of this lifelong vow will explode. Anyway, if you've decided to become ascetics, I'll join too, but for now, we must at least save the club."

Srish: "Why? What happened?"

Purna: "The arrangements Akshay Babu is making to relocate our club—it doesn't sit well with me."

Srish: "Doubt is the shadow of atheism. 'It will be bad, it will break, it will be ruined'—I never allow such thoughts into my mind under any circumstances. It will be good, whatever is happening is for the best—I can see the broad, expansive future of the Bachelors' Club right before my eyes! What harm can Akshay Babu do by inviting the club from one house to another? We won't just be moving from lane number one to lane number two; we are destined to wander the streets and villages across the nation. Banish these doubts, fears, and anxieties from your mind, Purna Babu! Without faith and joy, no great work can be accomplished."

Purna sat in silence.

Bipin said, "Let's just see how it goes for a few days. If any inconvenience arises, we can always return to our old place. No one is snatching our dark little cave away from us."

Alas, who could understand the ache in Purna's heart?

(Suddenly, Chandramadhav Babu enters hurriedly)

(The three stand up respectfully)

Chandra: "Listen, I was thinking about that matter—"

Srish: "Please, sit down."

Chandra: "No, no, I won't sit, I'm leaving right now. I was saying, we must start preparing for our ascetic vow from now on. We need to learn how to provide medical treatment in case of sudden accidents or common fevers. I've arranged for Doctor Ramratan Babu to give us a two-hour lecture every Sunday."

Srish: "But won't that cause a lot of delay?"

Chandra: "Of course there will be a delay; the task is not easy. Not only that—we also need to study some law. It will be our job to protect the peasants from injustice and oppression, and to explain their rights to them."

Srish: "Chandra Babu, please sit—"

Chandra: "No, Srish Babu, I can't sit, I have some work. We must also do something else: we need to try and slightly improve our essential indigenous tools like the bullock cart, the husking pedal, the loom, etc., to make them cheaper, sturdier, or more useful in some way. This summer vacation, we must go to Kedar Babu's workshop and conduct a series of experiments every day."

Srish: "Chandra Babu, you've been standing for a long time—" (*He pushes a chair forward*)

Chandra: "No, no, I'm leaving right away. Look, my opinion is this: if we can make even a small improvement in the common tools used by the villages, it will stir the minds of the farmers in a way that no grand reform movement ever could. Only if we can change their age-old husking pedals and oil presses will their minds truly awaken; they will realize that the world hasn't just stood still in one place—"

Srish: "Chandra Babu, won't you sit?"

Chandra: "Let it be. Just think about it: we've been receiving an education for so long, we should have started proving its worth beginning with the husking pedal and the winnowing fan. Forget large factories, we didn't even cast a watchful eye inside our own homes! We neither looked closely at what was right in front of us, nor gave it a moment's thought. Everything has remained exactly as it was. Man progresses, while his tools lag behind—that is simply impossible. We have fallen behind—the British are carrying us on their shoulders; that is not called progress. The petty, mundane village life is stuck, immobilized in the muddy roads of the countryside. Our ascetic sect must push the wheels of that bullock cart—let us abandon the vain hope of becoming drivers of steam engines for now. What time is it, Srish Babu?"

Srish: "It's past eight-thirty."

Chandra: "Then I must go. But the agreement stands: we must leave all other discussions aside for now and regularly engage in our educational tasks, and—"

Purna: "If you could sit for just a moment, Chandra Babu, I have a few things to say—"

Chandra: "No, there's no time today."

Purna: "It's nothing much, I was just saying about our club—"

Chandra: "We'll talk about that tomorrow, Purna Babu—"

Purna: "But the club meets tomorrow—"

Chandra: "Alright, the day after tomorrow then. I have no time—"

Purna: "Look, this Akshay Babu who—"

Chandra: "Purna Babu, you must excuse me, I am already late today. But look, a thought occurred to me: if the Bachelors' Club gradually expands, all our members won't be able to just wander off as ascetics. Therefore, it will be necessary to keep two divisions within it—"

Purna: "The stationary and the mobile."

Chandra: "Well, whatever you name it. Besides, something Akshay Babu said the other day didn't sound too bad to me either. He said we should have another society affiliated with the Bachelors' Club where married men and those planning to marry can be admitted. After all, householders have duties towards the country too. Everyone must engage in some beneficial work according to their abilities—this is the common vow. One group of ours will take the vow of celibacy and travel across the country; another group will take the vow of celibacy but stay and work in one place; and a third group of householders will take up some necessary task according to their tastes and abilities and fulfill their duty to the nation. Those in the traveling division will have to learn map-making, surveying, geology, botany, zoology, etc. They will meticulously collect all the data of the regions they visit—only then can the foundation be laid for a true account of India written by Indians! We won't have to spend our lives relying solely on Hunter Sahib's reports—" *(Translator's Note: A reference to W.W. Hunter, a British administrator who compiled the Imperial Gazetteer of India).*

Purna: "If Chandra Babu would just sit, I have one thing to—"

Chandra: "No—I was saying—wherever we go, it will be our job to collect local historical legends and ancient manuscripts. We must also search for stone inscriptions and copper plates—therefore, we must practice reading ancient scripts for a while."

Purna: "All that is for later, right now—"

Chandra: "No, no, I'm not saying everyone has to learn every subject; if that were the case, it would never end! According to our inclinations, some of us will learn one thing, some two or three—"

Srish: "But even then—"

Chandra: "Say, five years. We can prepare ourselves and set out in five years. For those who are taking a lifelong vow, five years is nothing. Besides, we will be tested within these five years; there will be no doubt regarding those who manage to survive it."

Purna: "But look, about our club being relocated—"

Chandra: "No, Purna Babu, absolutely not today. I have extremely urgent work. Purna Babu, think carefully about what I've said. It might seem impossible right now—but it's not. It is difficult, certainly, but every good work is difficult. If we can find five resolute men, the work we do will cover India for eternity."

Srish: "But you were saying, the wheels of a bullock cart and such small things—"

Chandra: "That's correct. I don't ignore it considering it too small, nor do I fear a great task considering it impossible—"

Purna: "But regarding the club's meeting—"

Chandra: "We will discuss all that tomorrow, Purna Babu! I am off now."

(He exits hurriedly)

Bipin: "Srish, my friend, why so quiet? Seeing the antics of one drunkard cures another drunkard of his intoxication. Chandra Babu's enthusiasm has managed to dampen even yours!"

Srish: "No, my friend, there's a lot to think about. Does enthusiasm only mean babbling all the time? Sometimes it falls completely silent, and that is its most dangerous state."

Bipin: "Purna Babu, why are you fleeing so suddenly?"

Purna: "I'm going to catch the president on the street—if by chance he lends an ear to a word or two of mine while walking."

Bipin: "The exact opposite will happen. He will be so busy telling you the rest of the things he had to say that he will completely forget where he was going."

(Banamali enters)

Banamali: "Are you well, Srish Babu? Is Bipin Babu well? Ah, I see Purna Babu is here too! Well, that's excellent. I've managed to hold off those two brides from Kumartuli with great difficulty."

Srish: "But you won't be able to hold us off anymore. We are about to do something terribly serious."

Purna: "Please have a seat, Srish Babu! I have some work."

Bipin: "Why don't *you* sit down, Purna Babu! The two of us will go and finish your work for you."

Purna: "It would be better if all three of us finished it together."

Banamali: "I see you gentlemen are busy. Alright then, I'll come back another time."

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Chandramadhav Babu called out, "Nirmal," he did receive an answer—"Yes, Uncle"—but the tone didn't ring quite right. Anyone other than Chandra Babu would have realized there was a slight disturbance in that quarter.

"Nirmal, I can't find my collar-stud."

"It must be somewhere around there."

Such unnecessary and vague information is of no use to anyone, especially not to someone with poor eyesight. However, while this information failed to shed any new light on the invisible stud, it illuminated quite a bit about Nirmala's mental state. But Professor Chandramadhav Babu's vision wasn't sharp enough in that direction either. With his usual carefree dependence, he said, "Just take a look, Feni."

Nirmala retorted, "How am I supposed to find whatever you drop wherever?"

By now, a slight suspicion crept into Chandra Babu's naturally unquestioning mind. In a gentle voice, he said, "Only you can, Nirmal! Who else has so much patience for all my faults?"

At Chandra Babu's affectionate tone, Nirmala's pent-up hurt suddenly threatened to melt into tears; she tried silently to compose herself.

Seeing her quiet, Chandramadhav Babu came closer. Pinching Nirmala's chin between two fingers, just as one might hold a doubtful gold coin very close to the eyes to examine it, he looked at her face for a moment. With a grave but gentle smile, he said, "I see a slight cloud in the clear sky (Nirmal)! Tell me, what happened?"

Nirmala knew Chandramadhav Babu would not even attempt to guess. He never gave space in his mind to anything that wasn't clearly expressed. Just as his own mind was transparent to the very end, he expected absolute transparency from others.

In a hurt voice, Nirmala said, "Why are you banishing me from your Bachelors' Club after all this time? What have I done?"

Surprised, Chandramadhav Babu asked, "Banishing you from the Bachelors' Club? What connection do you have with that club?"

Nirmala: "Does hiding behind a door mean there is no connection? Why should I lose even that little bit of connection?"

Chandra Babu: "Nirmal, you won't be doing the club's work—it was out of consideration for the convenience of those who will be working that—"

Nirmala: "Why won't I work? Just because I was born your niece instead of your nephew, does that mean I cannot participate in your noble work? Why did you educate me all these years then? Why awaken my mind and soul with your own hands, only to block my path of action now?"

Chandramadhav Babu was completely unprepared for this outburst; he himself didn't know how he had molded Nirmala. He said slowly, "Nirmal, eventually you will have to marry and engage in household duties—the work of the Bachelors' Club—"

"I will not marry."

"Then what will you do?"

"I will help you in your work for the country."

"But we are preparing to take a vow of asceticism."

"Has no woman in India ever become an ascetic?"

Stunned, Chandramadhav Babu completely forgot about his lost collar-stud. He stood there, speechless.

Her face flushed bright with excitement, Nirmala said, "Uncle, if a girl is truly ready in her heart to take up your vow, why wouldn't you accept her publicly into your society? Why shouldn't I become a member of your Bachelors' Club?"

The pure-hearted Chandramadhav had no answer to this. Yet, hesitatingly, he began, "The other members who are there—"

Before he could finish, Nirmala burst out, "The members who are there, those who will take the vow of serving India, those who are about to become ascetics—can they not unhesitatingly accept a woman who has taken the vow into their group? If that is the case, then they should become householders and stay locked up at home; they will never achieve anything."

Chandramadhav Babu repeatedly ran his five fingers through his hair, making it terribly disheveled. Just then, the lost stud suddenly fell from inside his sleeve onto the floor. Smiling, Nirmala picked it up and fastened it to the collar of Chandramadhav Babu's shirt. Chandra Babu didn't even notice; continuing to run his fingers through his hair, he further agitated the thoughts nesting in his brain.

A servant came in to announce that Purna Babu had arrived. Nirmala left the room before he entered.

Purna said, "Chandra Babu, have you thought about that matter? In my opinion, relocating our club is not a good idea."

Chandra: "Another matter has come up today, Purna Babu, and I wish to discuss it with you properly. You know I have a niece, I believe?"

Purna: (Feigning innocence) "Your niece?"

Chandra: "Yes, her name is Nirmala. Her heart is deeply connected with our Bachelors' Club."

Purna: (Feigning surprise) "You don't say!"

Chandra: "I believe her devotion and enthusiasm are no less than any of ours."

Purna: (Excitedly) "Hearing this only increases our own enthusiasm. For her, as a woman—"

Chandra: "I was thinking the exact same thing; the simple enthusiasm of a woman can breathe new life into the enthusiasm of men—I felt it myself today."

Purna: (Passionately) "I can well imagine it."

Chandra: "Purna Babu, do you share this opinion too?"

Purna: "Which opinion are you referring to?"

Chandra: "That is, a truly devoted woman, rather than being an obstacle to our difficult duties, can be a genuine helper?"

Purna: (Loudly, aiming his voice towards the adjacent room) "I have not the slightest doubt about it! The devotion of the female sex is the only living support for the devotion of men—only a woman's enthusiasm can nurture a man's enthusiasm like a newborn child."

(Srish and Bipin enter)

Srish: "That may well be, Purna Babu, but is it the lack of that enthusiasm causing the delay in going to the meeting today?"

Purna had spoken so loudly that the two newcomers had heard everything from the stairs.

Chandra Babu said, "No, no, the reason for the delay is that I couldn't find my collar-stud."

Srish: "I can see a stud already fastened to your collar—do you need another one? And even if you do, where will you find another buttonhole?"

Chandra Babu put a hand to his collar and said, "Ah, so it is!" and began to laugh, slightly embarrassed.

Chandra: "Since we are all present here, it is better we discuss that matter now. What do you say, Purna Babu?"

Suddenly, Purna Babu's enthusiasm dropped significantly. Raising a discussion in front of everyone by naming Nirmala didn't seem tasteful to him. He said somewhat hesitantly, "That is a fine idea, but aren't we getting late?"

Chandra: "No, there is still time. Srish Babu, please sit down for a bit; this is a matter worth serious consideration. I have a niece, her name is Nirmala—"

Purna suddenly coughed and turned red. He thought, *Chandra Babu has absolutely no common sense! What need is there to introduce his own niece to the whole*

world? We could easily discuss the topic while leaving Nirmala out of it. But leaving out any part of a story was simply not in Chandra Babu's nature.

Chandra: "Her mind is in complete alignment with all the goals of our Bachelors' Club."

Srish and Bipin continued to listen to this grand news with unmoved indifference. Purna kept wondering: *Why mention her name to those who are as indifferent as cold stone regarding Nirmala, to those who view her no differently than any ordinary woman in the world?*

Chandra: "I can confidently say that her enthusiasm is no less than any of ours."

Failing to get a reaction from Srish and Bipin, Chandra Babu himself seemed to be getting a bit agitated internally.

Chandra: "Having considered this matter deeply, I have concluded that a woman's enthusiasm is a noble support for all the great deeds of men. What do you say, Purna Babu?"

Purna had no desire to speak at all, but he said limply, "Yes, of course."

Seeing that his sails were catching no wind from any direction, Chandra Babu suddenly gave a forceful tug and declared, "If Nirmala wishes to become a member of the Bachelors' Club, why shouldn't we make her a member?"

Purna was absolutely thunderstruck! He cried out, "What are you saying, Chandra Babu?"

Not showing as fierce a shock as Purna, Srish said, "We never imagined that any woman would express the desire to become a member of our club, hence we have no rules regarding this—"

The fair-minded Bipin said in a grave voice, "Nor is there any prohibition."

An impatient Srish argued, "There may not be a clear prohibition, but the objectives of our club are not such that they can be achieved by women."

It wasn't that Bipin was particularly enthusiastic about taking a female member into the Bachelors' Club, but possessing a natural restraint in his mental constitution,

he could never tolerate one-sided arguments against a specific group. So he spoke up: "The goals of our club are not narrow, and to achieve grand objectives, we need the varied efforts of people with varied backgrounds and varied powers. A woman can serve the country in ways you cannot, and you can in ways a woman cannot. Therefore, if you wish to achieve the club's objectives comprehensively, you need female members just as much as you need male ones."

Bipin spoke in a calm, grave tone without showing the slightest excitement. But Srish, growing a little heated, said, "Only those who don't want to work actually inflate the objectives! When it comes to real work, one must limit the goals. You are quite comfortable considering our club's objectives to be vast; I do not consider them to be that vast."

With a calm face, Bipin replied, "The scope of our club's work is at least vast enough that accepting you didn't mean having to reject me, and accepting me didn't mean having to reject you. If there is space for both you and me here, if both of us have utility and necessity here, then what is so difficult about making room for one more person of a different nature?"

Annoyed, Srish said, "Broad-mindedness is an excellent thing, I've read about it in ethics books. I do not wish to destroy your broad-mindedness, merely to compartmentalize it. Let women form a separate society for the work they can do; we will not seek membership there, and let our society remain ours. Otherwise, we will only become obstacles to each other's work. Let the brain worry about thinking, and let the stomach worry about digesting—as long as the digestive tract doesn't try to enter the head and the brain doesn't try to enter the stomach, we are fine."

Bipin: "But chopping off the head and keeping it in one place, while keeping the digestive tract in another, doesn't make the work any easier."

Extremely irritated, Srish retorted, "An analogy is not an argument; breaking my analogy does not mean you have refuted my point! An analogy only stretches so far—"

Bipin: "Meaning, it only stretches as far as it suits your argument."

Such disputes frequently occurred between these two best friends. Purna had been sitting looking highly distracted; he said, "Bipin Babu, my opinion is that if women step forward into such work, their sweetness is destroyed."

Holding a book very close to his eyes, Chandra Babu said, "The sweetness that is destroyed by a noble deed is a sweetness not worth preserving."

Srish burst out, "No, Chandra Babu, I'm not even bringing up all this talk of beauty and sweetness! We must move with the unison of an army; if we are burdened by those who are likely to fall behind due to lack of practice or natural weakness, our entire endeavor will fail."

At that moment, Nirmala entered the room with unhesitating dignity, offered a respectful bow, and stood before them. Suddenly, everyone was stunned into silence. Even though her voice was thick with tearful indignation, she spoke firmly: "I know nothing of what your objectives are or how far you are prepared to go in your service to the country. But I know my uncle; why are you preventing me from following him on the path he has set out upon?"

Srish was speechless, Purna looked embarrassed and repentant, Bipin remained calm and grave, and Chandra Babu was lost in deep thought.

Casting a tear-washed glance at Purna and Srish like a sunbeam through rain, Nirmala said, "If I want to work—if I wish to follow the man who has been my teacher since childhood in all his noble endeavors until death—why do you merely argue to prove my incompetence? What do you even know of me?"

Srish sat paralyzed. Purna was sweating.

Nirmala: "I know nothing of your Bachelors' Club or any other club. But when the man under whose guidance I have grown up has centered all his life's purposes around this Bachelors' Club, you cannot keep me away from it." (Turning to Chandra Babu) "If *you* tell me I am unfit for your work, I will take my leave. But what do *they* know of me? Why are they all arguing together to sever me from your mission?"

Srish then said in a polite, soft voice, "Please forgive me, I was not arguing about *you*; I was speaking about the female sex in general—"

Nirmala: "I don't want to debate the differences between the male and female sexes. I know my own heart, and I know the heart of the man whose noble example I rely upon; I need to know nothing more to engage in work."

Chandra Babu brought his right palm very close to his eyes and began examining it closely. Purna intensely desired to say something absolutely brilliant, but not a single word escaped his lips. When Nirmala was behind the door, Purna's eloquence was robust, but today it was nowhere to be found.

Still, rehearsing it many times in his head, he managed to say, "O Goddess, why do you wish to employ your two pure hands in the work of this muddy world?"

The phrase didn't sound as good aloud as it had in his head. The moment he said it, Purna realized it sounded awkwardly poetic in the middle of plain prose. His ears burned red with embarrassment.

In his naturally deep and calm voice, Bipin said, "The muddier the world is, the more sacred the task of cleansing it."

Noticing the grateful expression on Nirmala's face at these words, Purna thought, *Ah, I should have been the one to say that!* Because Bipin had said it, he felt terribly angry with him.

Srish: "We will officially raise a proposal regarding the admission of female members at the club meeting, and whatever is decided will be communicated to you."

Without waiting a moment longer, Nirmala turned to leave silently, like a sailboat catching the wind. Suddenly, the professor snapped back to reality and called out, "Feni, what about my collar-stud?"

With a shy smile, Nirmala pointed and said softly, "It is already on your collar."

Chandra Babu put his hand to his collar, said, "Ah, yes, so it is!" and smiled at his three students.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nripabala: Tell me, Neeru, why do you look so incredibly serious these days?

Neerabala: Do you hold a monopoly on all the seriousness in this house? I'll be serious if I please.

Nripabala: I know exactly what you're thinking about.

Neerabala: What is the need for all this guessing, sister? It's high time you started worrying about yourself.

Nripa threw her arms around Neeru's neck and said, "You're thinking, 'Good heavens, what a burden we are! So much worry and hassle just to get rid of us.'"

Neerabala: Well, it's not as if we are throwaway items that can just be tossed aside. The fact that there's so much fuss over us is actually a matter of pride. You've read in the *Kumarsambhava*, haven't you, how an entire god was burnt to ashes just to arrange Gauri's marriage? If a poet catches wind of this, our weddings might just inspire an epic of their own.

Nripabala: No, really, I feel terribly embarrassed.

Neerabala: And you think I don't? Am I completely shameless? But what can we do? The first time I went to get a prize at school, I felt shy too; yet the very next year, I stayed up all night memorizing my lessons just to win another one. I may feel shy, but I won't give up the prize either—that's just my nature.

Nripabala: Tell me, Neeru, are you very eager for the 'prize' they are discussing this time around?

Neerabala: Which one do you mean? The two members of the Bachelors' Club?

Nripabala: Whoever it is, you know exactly what I mean.

Neerabala: Shall I tell you the truth, sister? (*Embracing Nripa and whispering in her ear*) I've heard those two members of the club are very close friends. If the two of us fall into the hands of those two friends, we won't be separated even after marriage—otherwise, who knows where we would both end up! That's exactly why

I've arranged all this worship for those twin gods, sister! With folded hands, I'm praying in my heart: 'O twin Ashwini Kumars of the Bachelors' Club, please accept us two sisters together, like two flowers on a single stem.'

At the mere mention of possible separation, the two sisters embraced each other, and Nripa could barely hold back her tears.

Nripabala: But Neeru, how could we ever leave Mejdidi? If we both go, who will she have left?

Neerabala: I've thought about that a lot. If they let us stay, do you think I'd leave? Listen, she doesn't have a husband; so be it if we don't have husbands either. Why do we need more happiness than Mejdidi?

Enter Shailabala, dressed in men's attire.

Neeru picked up a floral garland from a plate on the table. Placing it around Shailabala's neck, she said, "We, two maidens choosing our own destiny, accept you as our husband."

Saying this, she bowed in reverence to Shailabala.

Shaila: What is this now?

Neerabala: Don't worry, we won't fight over you like rival wives. And even if we do, Sejdidi won't stand a chance against me—I can handle her all by myself, you won't have to suffer. No, honestly, Mejdidi, will we ever find the kind of love and pampering anywhere else that we get from you? Why do you want to hand us over to strangers?

Tears began streaming down Nripa's eyes once again. "What's this, Nripa? Shame on you!" Shaila said, wiping her sister's eyes. "Do you even know what will truly make you happy? If my company alone could fulfill your lives, would I ever hand you over to anyone else?"

The three of them were just about to descend into a full-blown tearful episode when Rasik-dada entered, saying in a pitiful voice, "Sisters, you've turned a savage like me into a civilized man. The club meeting is going to be held here today—teach me how I should behave!"

Neerabala: The same old joke again? You've been harping on about this civilized-savage thing since the day before yesterday.

Rasik: Doesn't one feel affection for what they've given birth to? Just because a joke slips out of the mouth once, must it be strangled to death like a newborn Rajput daughter? The fact is—as long as the Bachelors' Club survives, you'll have to hear this joke morning and evening.

Neerabala: Then we had better finish it off nice and early. No more mercy, Mejdidi—we won't let Rasik-dada's joke get old. We will swiftly put an end to the 'forever' part of the Forever Bachelors' Club; only then will our title as world-conquering women be justified. Have you figured out a plan of attack?

Shaila: None at all. I'll just step onto the battlefield and improvise as things come to mind.

Neerabala: Whenever you need me, just sound the battle horn and I shall appear. *"Do I fear the Bachelors' Club, my friend? Is there no strength in these lotus-stem arms?"*

Akshay entered the room and said, "I wish to ask this assembly of learned ladies a historical question today."

Shaila: I am ready.

Akshay: Tell me, who tried to chop off the very two branches he was standing on?

Nripa answered quickly, "I know, Mr. Mukherjee! It was Kalidasa."

Akshay: No, an even greater man. Sri Akshaykumar Mukhopadhyay.

Neerabala: And who are the two branches?

Pulling Neeru to his left, Akshay said, "This is one," and pulling Nripa to his right, he added, "And this is the other."

Neerabala: And the axe is arriving today, I presume?

Akshay: Why say arriving? It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say it has already arrived. You can hear the footsteps on the stairs right now.

Hearing this, they bolted. While fleeing, Shaila dragged Rasik-dada along with her. Before the jingling of bangles and the rapid patter of panicked, delicate footsteps could completely fade, Srish and Bipin entered. A faint ringing—*jham jham jham jham*—echoed further and further away. The stirred air in the room, carrying the blended, mild fragrance of essence and scented hair oil, seemed to wander among the abandoned furniture, sighing as it searched for its former occupants.

Science says energy is never destroyed; it merely changes form. The fragrant ripple in the air, suddenly created by the three sisters' hasty retreat—did it not first translate into a secret tremor within the delicate nervous systems of the twin bachelors, and immediately after, momentarily transform into an indescribable thrill at the very edges of their hearts? But the history of the world is usually written from chapters that occur long after a story actually begins—the initial touches, tremors, ripples, and sparks of lightning are beyond expression.

After exchanging greetings, Akshay asked, “Purna-babu didn’t come?”

Srish: I met him at Chandra-babu’s house, but he suddenly felt unwell, so he couldn't make it today.

Akshay: (*Looking toward the road*) Please sit for a moment—I’ll go stand by the door and wait for Chandra-babu. He’s a blind man; there's no telling where he might wander off to. There are places nearby where a Bachelors' Club meeting is by no means desirable.

Saying this, Akshay went downstairs.

Nirmala's sudden appearance at Chandra-babu’s house earlier that day had churned the calm waters of the bachelors' minds, and the impact of it was probably still spinning in Srish’s head. The scene had been extraordinary, the event unimaginable. The glow on Nirmala's lovely face and the sincere passion in her words had astonished him, throwing his usual train of thought completely off track. He was not in the least bit prepared, and this sudden blow had left him thoroughly overwhelmed. He had never dreamt that right in the middle of a debate, such an answer would come from such a place and in such a manner—which was why her reply felt so overpowering to him. An argument can be countered, but what is the counter-argument to the radiant flash of large, dark eyes brimming with hidden, compassionate tears, or to that sweet voice trembling with emotion? A man might hold excellent logic in his head, but what does he have in his arsenal to stand

against those rosy lips quivering as they speak, or those soft cheeks flushing with the tender glow of deep feeling?

The two friends had not exchanged a single word on their way here. Upon arriving, even before entering the room, the sounds they heard—perhaps Srish wouldn't have noticed them on any other day, but today, nothing escaped him. As soon as he stepped inside, he knew a group of ladies had been there just moments ago.

Once Akshay left, Srish took a good look around the room. Flowers were arranged in a vase in the center of the table. For a fleeting second, it seemed to unsettle him. One reason was that Srish loved flowers deeply; the other was that his mind's eye could clearly see the deft, graceful hands that had arranged them just moments before fleeing the room in a panic.

Bipin smiled faintly and said, "Say what you will, brother, this room is hardly suitable for the Bachelors' Club."

Breaking his silence suddenly, Srish started and asked, "Why not?"

Bipin: The decor seems a bit too much even for modern ascetics like you.

Srish: Nothing can be 'too much' for my vows of asceticism.

Bipin: Except women!

Srish: Yes, just that one exception! —This might just be the author's guess, but his words didn't seem to carry their usual conviction today.

Bipin: Between the pictures on the walls and a dozen other things, this room bears quite a few traces of womankind.

Srish: The traces of womankind are everywhere in this world.

Bipin: True enough. If poets are to be believed, from the moon and flowers to vines and leaves, nowhere is there an escape for the wretched male from the presence of women.

Srish laughed and said, "I just used to think that the ground-floor room at Chandra-babu's house had absolutely no female connection. That illusion was shattered rather suddenly today. No, they really have spread all over the earth."

Bipin: They haven't left a single corner empty for a few poor, lifelong bachelors. It's hard enough just finding a place to hold a meeting.

“Look at this,” Srish said, picking up a couple of hairpins from a corner teapoy and showing them to him.

Bipin inspected the pins and said, “Well, brother, this place certainly isn't free of thorns for us bachelors.”

Srish: There are flowers, and there are thorns.

Bipin: That's exactly the danger. If it were just thorns, one could avoid them.

Srish went to the small bookshelf in the other corner and began looking through the books. A few novels, a few collections of English poetry. He opened Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and saw notes written in the margins in feminine handwriting—then he flipped to the title page. He stared at it, turned it over a bit, and held it up to Bipin.

Bipin read it and said, “Nripabala! I firmly believe this is not a man's name. What do you think?”

Srish: I believe the same. This name definitely feels like it belongs to the opposite camp!

Saying this, he held up another book.

Bipin: Neerabala! This name might fly in a poetry book, but in a Bachelors' Club...

Srish: Even if the bearers of these names waltzed right into the Bachelors' Club, I don't see anyone among us strong enough to bar the door.

Bipin: Purna has already fallen wounded from a single strike—it's doubtful whether he'll survive.

Srish: How so?

Bipin: Didn't you notice?

Looking at the calm and quiet Bipin, one wouldn't think he observed much; but nothing escaped his eyes. He had thoroughly assessed Purna in his highly weakened state.

Srish: No, no, that's just your assumption.

Bipin: The heart is a matter of assumption anyway—it can neither be seen nor caught.

Srish stopped in his tracks and thought for a moment; then he said, “So Purna’s illness isn't really a medical condition?”

Bipin: No, they don't give lectures on these kinds of ailments at the Medical College.

Srish burst into loud laughter, while the serious Bipin remained quietly smiling.

Chandra-babu entered and said, “Seeing that Purna-babu suddenly felt unwell from the excitement of today’s debates, I thought it best to drop him off at his house.”

Srish looked at Bipin’s face and smiled slightly. Bipin said with a straight face, “Given how weak Purna-babu's condition seems, he really should have been more careful beforehand.”

Chandramadhab answered innocently, “Purna-babu doesn't strike me as a particularly careless person.”

Just before Chandramadhab-babu took the President's seat, Akshay entered the room bringing Rasik-dada along. He said, “Excuse me, I'll be leaving this new member in your hands before I depart.”

Rasik: My 'newness' isn't particularly visible from the outside—

Akshay: He has modestly cloaked it in outward antiquity, you'll get to know him gradually. This is the aptly named Sri Rasik Chakraborty.

Hearing this, Srish and Bipin looked at Rasik's face with smiles. Rasik-dada said, “My father named me Rasik long before he had any proof of my sense of humor. Now, just to honor my father's word, I have to attempt to be witty. After that, 'If despite sincere efforts one fails, whose fault is it?'”

Akshay took his leave. Two kerosene lamps were burning in the room, shaded by turquoise silk covers. Piercing through that veil, the light in the room became soft and colorful.

Shaila, in men's clothing, came in and greeted everyone. The weak-sighted Chandramadhab-babu saw her vaguely—Bipin and Srish kept staring at her.

Behind Shaila, two servants arrived carrying several plates of food. Shaila took the small silver plates and began arranging them on the white marble table. She tried to hide the unavoidable awkwardness of a first meeting through this act of hospitality.

Rasik: This is another new member of your club. There is no debating his youth. He is my exact opposite. He has hidden his mature intellect behind an outward appearance of youth. I see you are a bit surprised—which is understandable. Looking at him, you might think he is a mere boy, but I stand as guarantor for him—he is no boy.

Chandra: His name?

Rasik: Sri Abalakanta Chattopadhyay.

Srish blurted out, "Abalakanta?"

Rasik: I admit, the name isn't exactly fitting for our club. I don't have much attachment to it either—if you want to change it to Vikramsingha, Bhimsen, or some other suitable name, he won't object. Although the scriptures say 'Blessed is the man who lives up to his name,' he isn't desperate to achieve manliness in this world solely through the name Abalakanta.

Srish: What are you saying, sir! A name isn't a piece of clothing that you can just change at will.

Rasik: That is your modern prejudice, Srish-babu. The ancients considered names to be just another layer of clothing. Just look at Arjuna—it's hard to tell what his father originally named him. Partha, Dhananjay, Sabyasachi; people called him whatever came to mind. You see, don't take names too literally. Even if you forget and don't call him Abalakanta, he won't file a libel suit against you.

Srish laughed and said, "Since you offer such reassurance, I am quite relieved. But there will be no need to test his capacity for forgiveness—I won't forget the name, sir."

Rasik: You might not, but I certainly do, sir. He is my grandson by relation—which is why my tongue is a bit loose around him. If I ever call him one thing instead of another, please forgive me.

Srish stood up and asked, "Abalakanta-babu, what are all these arrangements you've made? Sweets were never on our club's agenda."

Rasik: (*Standing up*) I thank him on behalf of the club for correcting that glaring oversight.

Without looking up at Srish's face, Shaila continued arranging the plates and said, "Srish-babu, is eating also against your rules?"

Srish noted that the voice, too, was fitting for the name 'Abala'. He said, "If you just examine the physical form of this particular member, you will have no doubts on that matter."

Saying this, he pulled the heavily-built Bipin forward.

Bipin: If you talk about rules, Abalakanta-babu, the finest things in life create their own rules. A powerful writer follows his own rules; an exquisite poem ignores the critics' rules. Even the sweets you've gathered here cannot be bound by any club's rules—their only rule is to sit down and finish them off. As long as these are present, all other rules of the world must wait at the door.

Srish: What's gotten into you, Bipin? I've seen you eat, sure, but I've never heard you speak so many words in one breath.

Bipin: The palate has been stimulated; speaking plain truth has now become exceedingly easy for me. Alas, where is the person who will write my biography at a moment like this?

Rasik, stroking his bald spot, said, "Don't expect me to do it; I won't be able to wait that long."

Coming into the luxurious setting of this new room, Chandramadhab-babu's mind had become distracted. His stream of enthusiasm was not flowing in its usual channel. Every now and then, he was aimlessly checking the club's minute-book or absentmindedly staring at the lines on his own palms. Shaila approached him and said politely, "Please forgive me, Chandra-babu, if I've disrupted the club's proceedings with these refreshments—"

Having Shaila up close, Chandra-babu studied her face and said, "There's no doubt that all these social pleasantries disrupt the club's work."

Rasik: Well, test it out and see—if the sweets bring the club's work to a halt, then—

Bipin muttered softly, "Then, in the future, we can just suspend the meetings and keep the sweets coming."

Observing her closely, Chandra-babu somewhat absorbed Shaila's beautiful, delicate appearance. After that, he no longer had the heart to upset her.

It must be mentioned that Bipin had eaten just before leaving his house. He had absolutely no desire for food. But seeing this pleasant-looking youth, and especially noticing the exceedingly tender, gentle smile on his face, the powerfully built Bipin suddenly felt so drawn with affection that, with unnatural talkativeness, he feigned an exaggerated greed for the sweets. The health-conscious Srish didn't dare eat at odd hours, but he too felt that refusing to sit down to eat would be a harsh rudeness to this young boy.

Srish: Come, Rasik-babu, why aren't you getting up?

Rasik: Every other day I invite myself over and occasionally snatch food from them, so today, as a member of the Bachelors' Club, I was hoping for a little coaxing out of respect for your distinguished company, but—

Shaila: But what, Rasik-dada? Since you always fast on Sundays, are you going to eat today?

Rasik: Do you see, gentlemen! Rules apply to no one else but Rasik-dada! No, absolutely not—might is right! I'm not waiting for any coaxing or pleading.

Bipin: (*Seeing only four plates*) Aren't you going to sit with us?

Shaila: No, I will serve you.

Srish stood up and said, "How can that be!"

Shaila: You have tolerated many broken rules for me; now please grant me just one more wish. Let me serve you; I will be much happier doing that than eating.

Srish: Rasik-babu, is this right?

Rasik: *Bhinna ruchirhi lokah* (People have different tastes). He loves to serve, and we love to eat. With such a difference in tastes, I suppose there is mutual benefit.

The meal began.

Shaila: Chandra-babu, that one is sweet, don't eat it first, the savory items are over here. Looking for a glass of water? Here it is.

Saying this, she pushed the glass forward.

Chandra-babu was reminded of Nirmala. He felt as if this boy was Nirmala's brother. Seeing him so inept at serving himself, Shaila felt a special surge of affection for Chandra-babu. There was a mango on Chandra-babu's plate, which he was struggling to manage—feeling sorry for him, Shaila quickly cut it up and made it easy to eat. Quietly supplying whatever was needed right to his fingertips at the exact right moment, she made his dining experience completely hassle-free.

Chandra: Srish-babu, have you given any thought to the matter of admitting female members?

Srish: Come to think of it, there aren't many strong reasons to object, but I worry about society's objections.

Bipin's argumentative spirit flared up. He said, "Society should often be treated like a child. If you cater to all of a child's objections, the child will never grow; the exact same applies to society."

Today, Srish was quite soft regarding the proposal at hand. Otherwise, just as heat leads to vapor and vapor to rain, this argument would have inevitably led to a quarrel, and the quarrel back to a reconciliation.

In fact, Srish said with some enthusiasm, “I feel the main reason so many committees and initiatives in our country fail prematurely is that women have no part in them. What do you say, Rasik-babu?”

Rasik: Although, due to my circumstances, I have no significant ties with womankind, I have learned this much: women either participate or obstruct, they either create or destroy. Therefore, even if pulling them into our camp doesn't bring any other advantage, it at least saves us from their obstruction. Consider this—if you accepted women into the Bachelors' Club, they wouldn't have the motivation to secretly ruin it. But in the current situation—

Shaila: Where did you get the news of women's grudge against the Bachelors' Club, Rasik-dada?

Rasik: Shouldn't one issue a warning even before the danger arrives? The one-eyed deer was shot from the very side it was blind on. If the Bachelors' Club remains blind toward women, that is exactly where the sudden blow will come from.

Srish: (*Softly to Bipin*) A one-eyed deer has indeed taken an arrow today; one member has already bitten the dust.

Chandra: Those who want to do good for society using only men are trying to walk on one leg. That's why they have to sit down exhausted after going only a short distance. Because we have kept women away from all noble endeavors, the work in our country lacks a soul. Our hearts, our work, our hopes are fractured between the outside world and the inner quarters. That is why we go out and give speeches, and come home and forget it all. Listen, Abalakanta-babu, you are still young; remember this well—do not neglect womankind. If we keep women down, they will pull us downwards too; the weight of them will make it impossible for us to move forward on the path of progress, and after just two steps, we'll be stuck back in the corner of our homes. If we elevate them, we will feel ashamed to compromise our own ideals when we come back indoors. In our country, there is shame outside, but none within the home; that is exactly why all our progress merely turns into superficial pomp.

Shaila listened to Chandra-babu's words with her head bowed; then she said, “Bless me so that your teachings do not go in vain; so that I may make myself worthy of your ideals.”

Hearing these words uttered with such absolute devotion, Chandra-babu was somewhat surprised. He remembered Nirmala's unquestioning, humble reverence for all his teachings. With a heart softened by affection, he thought again, *He is just like Nirmala's brother.*

Chandra: So, you gentlemen have no objection to enrolling my niece Nirmala into the membership of the Bachelors' Club?

Rasik: No other objections, except perhaps a grammatical one. If someone comes to the Bachelors' Club dressed as a maiden, it invites Vopadeva's curse.

Shaila: Vopadeva's curses don't apply in this modern age.

Rasik: Well, we at least have to save face with Loharam. I suppose if the female members change their attire and names and enter without the male members' knowledge, the issue is easily resolved.

Srish: Then the funny thing would be, the doubt about who is male and who is female would remain among us—

Bipin: I think I, for one, might be exempt from that suspicion.

Rasik: I suppose no one would suddenly mistake me for my own granddaughter either.

Srish: But a certain doubt remains regarding Abalakanta-babu.

At that moment, Shaila walked away to fetch a plate of sweets from a nearby teapoy.

Chandra: Look here, Rasik-babu, in linguistics we see that through constant use, the original meaning of a word can be lost and it can take on the exact opposite meaning. If accepting female members changes the meaning of the 'Bachelors' Club', what's the harm?

Rasik: None at all. I am not opposed to change. Be it a change in name, a change in dress, or a change in meaning—whatever happens, I accept it without resistance, which is exactly why my soul remains so youthful.

The sweets were finished, and no one had any further objections to taking in female members.

After the meal, Rasik said, "I hope the club's work wasn't hindered."

Srish: Not at all. On other days, only the mouth did the work; today, the right hand joined in too.

Bipin: And the internal satisfaction has been rather greater because of it.

Hearing this, Shaila was delighted and rewarded them all with her natural, soothingly gentle smile.

CHAPTER NINE

Akshay: Tell me, what's going on? This room of mine, which has remained spotless all this time solely due to the thrashings of the sweeper's duster, is suddenly fluttering morning and evening with the breezes of your saree pallus!

Neerabala: Didi isn't here, and seeing you all alone, we drop by out of pity to check on you, and for this we have to answer to you?

Akshay: *(Sings in the Bhairavi raga) O compassionate thief, such pity in your heart! With great mercy, you wrap the silken cord of illusion 'round my neck! With great mercy, you steal my empty heart!*

Neerabala: Sir, your efforts at breaking and entering are wasted here; we aren't such foolish thieves! Where is this 'heart' of yours that we would come to steal it?

Akshay: Tell me exactly, how far has this wretched heart of mine gone?

Nripabala: I know, Mr. Mukherjee. Shall I say? Four hundred and seventy-five miles.

Neerabala: Sejdidi, you amaze me! Did you run behind Mr. Mukherjee's heart, counting the miles all the way?

Nripabala: No, sister. When Didi was leaving for Kashi, I checked the mileage in the railway timetable.

Akshay: *(Sings in the Bahar raga) The fugitive heart flees, blood rushing through the veins— Alas, alas, to catch it, the lady chases behind. Her pallu flies in the wind, her restless braid swings— What a spectacle, the fawn-gaited maiden running with disheveled grace!*

Neerabala: Oh great poet, bravo, bravo! But I seem to spot the shadow of some modern poets in your composition!

Akshay: That's because I am also extremely modern! Do you think your Mr. Mukherjee is the twin brother of the ancient poet Krittibas Ojha? You can count the geographical miles, but you get your historical dates wrong? What was the use of having such a learned sister-in-law, then? You mistake such a spectacularly modern man for an ancient relic?

Neerabala: Mr. Mukherjee, when Lord Shiva went to his wedding assembly, his sisters-in-law made a similar mistake—but to Uma's eyes, it seemed quite different! What are you worried about? Didi knows perfectly well how 'modern' you are!

Akshay: You fool, if Shiva had sisters-in-law around, would they have needed the God of Love to break his meditation? How dare you compare me to him!

Nripabala: Anyway, Mr. Mukherjee, what have you been doing sitting here all this time?

Akshay: I was writing out the accounts for your milkman.

Neerabala: (*Picking up an unfinished letter from the desk*) Is this your milkman's account? It seems the portion of cream and butter far outweighs the actual numbers.

Akshay: (*Flustered*) No, no, don't make a fuss over that, ah, give it back—

Nripabala: Neeru, don't tease him, give him the letter back. He can't handle the torment of a sister-in-law right now. But Mr. Mukherjee, tell us, how do you address Didi in your letters?

Akshay: I use a new address every day—

Nripabala: Tell us what you wrote today.

Akshay: You want to hear it? Then listen, my friend. *Captivating, celestial, constant moon, whose charming moonlight is kissed by the thieving beak of the startled, restless chakora bird.*

Neerabala: What charming, cunning cajolery!

Akshay: There is no plagiarism here, it is completely free of cliché.

Nripabala: (*In wonder*) Really, Mr. Mukherjee, do you compose such long, elaborate addresses every single day? Is that why it takes you so long to write a letter to Didi?

Akshay: This is exactly why I can't lie to Nripa. I see you won't let me exercise the extraordinary, spontaneous talent for making things up that God has blessed me with. In which scripture is it written that a brother-in-law's words must be trusted as gospel truth?

Neerabala: Don't be angry, calm down, Mr. Mukherjee, calm down. Never mind Sejdidi, but think about this—I don't believe even a quarter of half the things you say. Doesn't that bring you some comfort?

Nripabala: Honestly, Mr. Mukherjee, have you ever composed a poem in Didi's name?

Akshay: Once, when she was exceptionally angry with me, I composed a hymn of praise and sang it to her—

Nripabala: And then?

Akshay: And then I saw it had the exact opposite effect; it was like fanning the flames. I've given up composing hymns of praise ever since.

Nripabala: You gave it up just to write the milkman's accounts! What kind of hymn did you write, Mr. Mukherjee? Won't you sing it for us?

Akshay: I don't dare. You might just go and report me to my superior!

Nripabala: No, we won't tell Didi.

Akshay: Then lend me your ears.—

(Sings in the Sindhu-Kafi raga) O beauty of my mind's temple, Your jeweled anklets jingling, Your garment slipping, oh restless one, Like a beautiful blossoming vine. Flushed with the red hue of anger, Your curved eyebrows knitting, With a hidden smile on your enchanting face, Scolding me in a feigned quarrel. Your body bowing in shy grace, A posture trembling with fear, Like a startled, swift young fawn, Roaming the forest of youth. O wicked one, veiled in deceit, Hesitant beneath the bee's weight, A fallen jasmine flower, Coveted by the greedy, restless wind. O denier of the wealth of kisses, Standing upon a pedestal of unyielding pride, Storing honey in a closed bud, My rigid, golden lotus.

But that's enough. Now, ladies, please take your leave.

Neerabala: Why, why such an insult? Are you taking out the frustration of Didi's scoldings on us?

Akshay: I see they won't let me keep my sacred privacy anymore. Oh, you wicked girls! Someone is going to show up any minute.

Nripabala: Rather, just say that you need to finish Didi's letter.

Neerabala: So what if we stay, you can just write your letter! It's not as if we're going to snatch the words right out of your pen.

Akshay: When you two are hovering around, my mind dies right here in this room; it can't reach the one who is far away. No, no jokes now, run along. Someone will be here any second—there is only one open door, you won't find a way to escape then.

Nripabala: Who would come to visit you this late in the evening?

Akshay: Not the ones you are dreaming of, my dear, certainly not them.

Neerabala: The ones we dream of don't always appear, you're realizing that quite well these days, aren't you, Mr. Mukherjee? You meditate on a goddess, and end up being haunted by poltergeists.

"Is Abalakanta-babu here?" Srish suddenly entered the room, and immediately stepping back, said, "Please excuse me," as he prepared to retreat.

(Nripa and Neeru hastily fled the room.)

Akshay: Come in, come in, Srish-babu!

Srish: *(Looking embarrassed)* Please forgive me.

Akshay: I am perfectly willing to, but first tell me what your crime is.

Srish: Coming in without any prior notice—

Akshay: Since I don't have to get a budget sanctioned from the Municipality to welcome you, coming without notice is perfectly fine, Srish-babu.

Srish: As long as you say my unannounced entry wasn't an intrusion, that is enough for me.

Akshay: That is exactly what I am saying. Whenever you arrive, it is the perfect time, and wherever you step foot, you belong—Srish-babu, the Creator himself has granted you a universal passport. Sit down for a moment, I'll send word to Abalakanta-babu. *(To himself)* If I don't make my escape now, I'll never finish that letter.

(Akshay exits)

Srish: A pair of illusory golden deer just dashed away before my very eyes; oh, you unarmed hunter, you have no power to give chase! The startled glance of their eyes remains painted on my vision like a streak of gold on a touchstone!

Enter Rasik.

Srish: I haven't disturbed you by arriving this evening, have I, Rasik-babu?

Rasik: Can sugarcane tossed to a beggar ever be tasteless? Srish-babu, am I so unfortunate that I would be annoyed to see you?

Srish: Is Abalakanta-babu at home?

Rasik: Of course he is, he'll be here shortly.

Srish: No, no, if he's busy, there's no need to bother him. I am a lazy man, wandering around looking for other idle people.

Rasik: The finest people in the world are lazy, and the idle ones are truly blessed. When the two meet, it is a flawless union of gold and gems. The evening was created exactly for this meeting of the lazy and the idle. Mornings are for ascetics, nights are for the sick, ten-to-four is for the working folk, and the evening—I'll be honest—the Creator certainly didn't design it for the meetings of the Bachelors' Club. What do you say, Srish-babu?

Srish: I have to agree with you. The evening was created long before the Bachelors' Club, it doesn't abide by the rules of our President, Chandra-babu—

Rasik: Well, the one who follows the rules of the moon (*Chandra*) operates on an entirely different set of laws! Let me be frank with you—don't laugh, Srish-babu—a tiny sliver of moonlight manages to sneak through a single window into my ground-floor room. On moonlit evenings, when that pale beam falls across my chest, I wonder, who has sent me a message? It feels as if a white swan-messenger is whispering into the ear of this eternal bachelor on behalf of some lovelorn maiden—

(Recites in Sanskrit) Alinde kalindīkamalasurabhau kuñjivasater- vasantīm vāsantīnavaparimalodgāracikurām. tvadutsaṅge līnām madamukulitākṣīm punarimām kadāhaṁ seviṣye kisalayakalāpavyajaninī.

Srish: Excellent, excellent, Rasik-babu, wonderful! But you must explain the meaning. The rhythm carries a hint of the emotion, but it's entirely locked away behind all those Sanskrit conjugations.

Rasik: I've done a Bengali translation too. I've kept it hidden, lest editors get wind of it and start a stampede—would you like to hear it, Srish-babu?

On the cool balconies of the bower, so grand, The scent of the Yamuna's lotuses will expand. Resting in your lap, the wine-eyed maiden fair, With the fragrance of spring blowing through her hair. When, oh when, will I serve her there, And fan her with soft leaves in the gentle air?

Srish: Bravo, Rasik-babu! I had no idea you had so much inside you.

Rasik: How could you know, tell me? Nobody suspects that the Goddess of Poetry occasionally visits this bald head of mine to catch some fresh air from her lotus pond. *(Stroking his head)* You won't find a more wide-open space anywhere else!

Srish: Ah, Rasik-babu, that little bower with the cool balcony on the banks of the Yamuna has really caught my fancy. If I ever see an ad in the *Pioneer* that it's being auctioned off for debts, I'll buy it right away.

Rasik: What are you saying, Srish-babu? What will you do with just the balcony? Think about that wine-eyed maiden. She is quite difficult to procure at an auction.

Srish: Whose handkerchief is this lying here?

Rasik: Let me see, let me see! Good heavens! It seems you've laid your hands on a rare treasure! Ah, what a divine fragrance! I'll have to change a line in my poem, sir, let the meter break if it must—*vāsantīnavaparimalodgārarumālām!* (With the fragrance of spring blowing through her handkerchief!) Srish-babu, we certainly can't use this handkerchief to stitch a flag for our Bachelors' Club. Do you see the tiny letter 'N' embroidered in the corner?

Srish: What name could it be, tell me? Nalini? No, that's too common. Nilambuja? Terribly heavy. Niharika? Too extravagant. Tell me, Rasik-babu, what do you think?

Rasik: Names aren't coming to mind, sir, only poetry. Every 'N' word in the dictionary is trying to pile up in my head; I want to string a garland of 'N's and place it around the neck of a lotus-eyed maiden—*Nirmala-nabanita-nindita-nabina...* (The youthful one who puts pure, fresh butter to shame...) Go on, Srish-babu, finish it for me—

Srish: *Nabamallika* (New jasmine flower).

Rasik: Excellent, excellent—*Nirmala-nabanita-nindita-nabina-nabamallika!* It absolutely ruins the *Gita Govinda*. Many other fine 'N' words are echoing in my head, crying out to be matched, but I can't seem to piece them together—*Nibhrita-nikunja-nilaya* (Secret bower dwelling), *Nipuna-nupura-nikkana* (Skilled tinkling of anklets), *Nibida-nirada-nirmukta* (Freed from dense clouds)... If Akshay-dada were here, I wouldn't have to think. Just as boys line up in their places on the bench the moment they see their teacher, words come running and arrange themselves the moment they sense Akshay-dada. Srish-babu, don't cheat an old man and quietly slip that handkerchief into your pocket—

Srish: The discoverer holds the ultimate right—

Rasik: I have a slight need for that handkerchief, Srish-babu! I told you, only a tiny sliver of moonlight enters the single window of my lonely room. It reminds me of a poem—

(Recites in Sanskrit) *Bīthīṣu bīthīṣu vilāsinīnām Mukhāni saṁvīkṣya śucismitāni Jāleṣu jāleṣu karaṁ prasārya Lāvaṇyabhikṣāmaṭatīva candraḥ.*

Through the paths of the grove the moon peeks in, To see the bright smiles the maidens spin, Reaching its hands out, it stays awake, Begging for beauty at every window's break.

When that wretched beggar comes to my window, what am I supposed to console him with, tell me? I recite every juicy romantic verse that comes to mind, but mere words don't satisfy his hunger. During such a famine, that handkerchief would be of great use. It has a significant trace of beauty attached to it.

Srish: Have you ever chanced upon this beauty yourself, Rasik-babu?

Rasik: Of course I have, otherwise why would I fight so hard for this handkerchief? And those 'N' words that are still buzzing in my head like a swarm of bees—do you think there isn't an imaginary image of a lotus-dwelling maiden standing right before them?

Srish: Rasik-babu, your brain is nothing short of a honeycomb, with poetic nectar dripping from every pore. You're going to make me utterly intoxicated too, I see.

(Lets out a deep sigh)

Enter Shailabala in men's attire.

Shaila: I am very late, please forgive me, Srish-babu!

Srish: I came to cause a nuisance this evening, so please forgive me too, Abalakanta-babu!

Shaila: If you cause this kind of nuisance every evening, then I'll forgive you; otherwise, I won't.

Srish: I agree to that. But later, when the regret sets in, remember your promise.

Shaila: Don't worry about me. But if *you* ever feel regret, I'll release you from it.

Srish: If you are waiting in that hope, you will have to wait for eternity.

Shaila: Rasik-dada, why are you reaching toward Srish-babu's pocket? Are you taking up the pickpocketing trade in your old age?

Rasik: No, brother, that trade suits people of your age. Srish-babu and I are having a dispute over a handkerchief; you'll have to settle it for us.

Shaila: How so?

Rasik: I don't have the grand capital to run a major money-lending business in the marketplace of love; I am but a petty trader of loose goods. A dropped handkerchief, a hair ribbon, a few lines of handwriting on a scrap of paper—I have to be content scraping these little things together. With the kind of capital Srish-babu possesses, he could buy out the entire market at wholesale rates. Why just a handkerchief? He could claim half the territory of the blue heavens! While we long to wrap a hair ribbon around our necks and die, he can completely set like the sun into the fragrant, thick darkness of ankle-length tresses. Why does he come here to beg for scraps?

Srish: Abalakanta-babu, you are a neutral party. Let the handkerchief remain in your hands for now. Once both sides have finished their arguments, you can award it to the rightful owner through a fair judgment.

Shaila: (*Slipping the handkerchief into her pocket*) Do you really think I am a neutral party? Just as an 'N' is embroidered in red thread in the corner of this handkerchief, if you search a corner of my heart, you'll find that same letter written in the color of blood. I will not give this handkerchief to either of you.

Srish: Rasik-babu, what kind of high-handedness is this? And this letter 'N' seems to be quite a formidable letter!

Rasik: I've heard from foreign scriptures that Justice is blind, and Love is blind too. Let the two blind ones fight it out now; whoever has more strength will win.

Shaila: Srish-babu, you haven't even seen the owner of the handkerchief, so why are you fighting based purely on imagination?

Srish: Who says I haven't seen her?

Shaila: You've seen her? Who did you see? There are two 'N's, after all—

Srish: I've seen both of them. Well, whoever among the two this handkerchief belongs to, I cannot relinquish my claim.

Rasik: Srish-babu, listen to an old man's advice, do not make room for two moons in the sky of your heart—*ekaschandra stamo hanti* (one moon is enough to dispel the darkness).

Enter a servant.

Servant: *(To Srish)* Someone was looking for your house with a letter from Chandra-babu, and finally ended up here.

Srish: *(Reading the letter)* Could you wait a moment? Chandra-babu's house is nearby—I'll just pop over and see him quickly.

Shaila: You aren't running away, are you?

Srish: No, my handkerchief is held hostage; I am not leaving without redeeming it.

(Srish exits)

Rasik: Listen, brother Shaila, the members of this Bachelors' Club are nothing like the terrifying ascetics I had imagined. It doesn't take celestial nymphs like Menaka or Rambha, or the Gods of Love and Spring to break their meditation—this old Rasik is quite enough.

Shaila: So I see.

Rasik: You know what the real issue is? When someone who lives in Darjeeling steps foot into a malaria-prone region, the disease immediately seizes him. These boys have been living in the immensely healthy environment of Chandra-babu's house all this time, but this house is swarming with the germs of the disease! From the handkerchiefs here, the books, the chairs, the tables—wherever they touch, the infection is entering straight through their noses and mouths. Ah, Srish-babu is a goner.

Shaila: Rasik-dada, I suppose you've built an immunity to these germs?

Rasik: Leave me out of it! Whatever was going to happen to my spleen and liver has already happened.

Enter Neerabala.

Neerabala: Didi, we were right in the next room.

Rasik: The fishermen are dying dragging their nets, while the kite sits waiting to swoop in.

Neerabala: What a scene Srish-babu created over Sejdidi's handkerchief! Sejdidi turned bright red from embarrassment and ran away. I'm such a fool, I didn't even leave anything behind by mistake. I've brought twelve handkerchiefs; I'm thinking of scattering them around the room like offerings.

Shaila: What is that notebook in your hand, Neeru?

Neerabala: I write down the songs I like in it, Didi.

Rasik: Chhotodidi, could we see a sample of the kind of spiritual songs you're favoring these days?

Neerabala: *The day is done, call the ferryman for the crossing, Settle your accounts, balance what you owe and are owed.*

Rasik: Didi seems to be in a terrible hurry! I'll call the ferryman to take you across, sister! Settle whatever you have to give or take face-to-face.

"Is Abalakanta-babu here?" Saying this, Bipin entered the room, and looking startled, stood rooted to the spot. Neerabala, dumbfounded for a split second, swiftly ran out of the room.

Shaila: Come in, Bipin-babu!

Bipin: Tell me honestly, should I come in? You won't suffer any kind of loss from my arrival?

Rasik: You can't make a profit without sacrificing something from the house, Bipin-babu—that's the rule of business. What was lost might return doubled, what do you say, Abalakanta?

Shaila: Rasik-dada's jokes are getting a bit tough to swallow these days!

Rasik: Just as molasses thickens and hardens as it sets. But Bipin-babu, tell us, what are you thinking about?

Bipin: I am thinking about what excuse I could use to take my leave without offending your politeness in bidding me farewell.

Shaila: And if friendship were to be offended?

Bipin: Then there's no need to look for an excuse at all.

Shaila: Then abandon the search, and please, sit down comfortably.

Rasik: Brighten your face, Bipin-babu! Do not envy us. I am old, entirely unworthy of a young man's envy. And no woman even considers our delicate-looking Abalakanta-babu to be a man at all. If a beautiful young girl fled like a startled doe upon seeing you, console your heart with the thought that she paid you the massive compliment of recognizing you as a true man. Alas for wretched Rasik, no young maiden ever flees in shyness at the sight of me!

Bipin: You are pulling Abalakanta-babu into your team as well, Rasik-babu! How did that happen?

Shaila: Who knows, Bipin-babu. This name 'Abalakanta' (Beloved of Women) of mine is a sham—no woman has yet claimed me as her beloved.

Bipin: Don't despair, there's still time.

Shaila: If I had that hope and that time, I wouldn't have gone and enrolled in the Bachelors' Club.

Bipin: *(To himself)* There is some deep sorrow hidden in his mind, otherwise there wouldn't be such a soothing, gentle, melancholic expression on such a young, tender face. —What notebook is this? I see songs written in it. Neerabala Devi!

(He reads)

Shaila: What are you reading, Bipin-babu?

Bipin: I am committing an offense against a stranger. Perhaps I won't get the chance to beg her for forgiveness, and perhaps I won't even have the good fortune of being punished by her, but these songs are gems, and the handwriting is like pearls! If I succumb to temptation and steal it, may the Divine Judge forgive me!

Shaila: The Divine Judge might forgive you, but I won't. I have my eyes on that notebook, Bipin-babu!

Rasik: And here I am, supposed to have conquered all greed and illusion? Ah, is there anything quite like handwriting? The emotions of the mind take form and flow out through the fingertips—when you run your eyes over the letters, it's as if the heart itself touches your vision. Abalakanta, don't let go of that notebook, brother! Your restless Neerabala Devi cascades day and night like a playful waterfall; you can't hold onto her, but a handful of her essence has gathered in the folded leaves of this notebook—this is a precious thing! Bipin-babu, you don't even know Neerabala, what will you do with this notebook?

Bipin: You know her in person—what do you need the notebook for? Why are you eyeing the little acquaintance I hope to gain from these pages?

Enter Srish.

Srish: I just remembered, sir—the other day I saw names in a book here, Nripabala, Neerabala... Wait, Bipin, it's you! You're here so suddenly?

Bipin: The exact same question could be applied to you.

Srish: I came to discuss my ascetic community with Abalakanta-babu. With his appearance, his voice, his facial expressions, he could perfectly model my ideal ascetic. If he were to enter a village in the morning with a mark of sandalwood paste on his crescent-moon-like forehead, a garland around his neck, and a veena in his hands, whose heart wouldn't he melt?

Rasik: I don't quite understand, sir, is there a terribly urgent need to melt hearts?

Srish: The Bachelors' Club is a club dedicated to melting hearts.

Rasik: What are you saying? In that case, what use will you have for me?

Srish: With the kind of heat you generate, if you went to the North Pole, you could melt the ice and cause a flood. Bipin, are you leaving?

Bipin: Yes, I must go. I have some studying to do tonight.

Rasik: (*Aside*) Abalakanta is asking if the book will be returned once you're done 'studying' it?

Bipin: (*Aside*) We can discuss that once the reading is done; let it be for today.

Shaila: (*Softly*) Srish-babu, why are you hesitating? Did you lose something?

Srish: (*Softly*) Let it be for today, I'll come look for it another day.

(Srish and Bipin exit)

Neerabala: (*Rushing in*) What kind of highway robbery is this, Didi! He took away my songbook! I am so incredibly angry.

Rasik: The dictionary lists many meanings for the word 'anger'.

Neerabala: Alright, Mr. Scholar, no need to flaunt your dictionary—bring my notebook back.

Rasik: Call the police, sister, catching thieves is not my profession.

Neerabala: Didi, why did you let him take my notebook?

Shaila: Why did you leave such a priceless treasure lying around?

Neerabala: Do you think I left it on purpose?

Rasik: That is precisely what people are suspecting.

Neerabala: No, Rasik-dada, I don't like these jokes of yours.

Rasik: Then the situation is terribly grim!

(Neerabala exits in anger)

Enter a shy Nripabala.

Rasik: What is it, Nripa, looking for your lost treasure?

Nripabala: No, I haven't lost anything.

Rasik: That is very happy news indeed. Shaila-didi, then there's no point keeping it. Since the owner of the handkerchief can't be found, just return it to the person who found it. (*Taking the handkerchief from Shaila's hand*) Whose is this, dear?

Nripabala: That's not mine.

(*She tries to flee*)

Rasik: (*Catching Nripa*) Nripa refuses to lay any claim to the thing that has been lost.

Nripabala: Rasik-dada, let me go—I have work to do.

CHAPTER TEN

Upon walking out onto the street, Srish said, "Look here, Bipin, the first spring breeze of late Magh has arrived today, the moonlight is splendid; if we were to go sleep or memorize lessons right now, the gods themselves would condemn us."

Bipin: Their condemnation is very easy to bear, but the shock of an illness or—

Srish: You know, this is exactly why we argue. I know perfectly well that your soul also becomes restless in the south wind, but simply for fear that someone might accuse you of poetic sentimentality, you refuse to acknowledge the Malaya breeze at all. May I ask what glory there is in this? I freely admit to you today, I love flowers, I love the moonlight, I love the south wind—

Bipin: And—

Srish: And I love everything that is lovely.

Bipin: I see the Creator has molded you in a very peculiar cast.

Srish: Your cast is even more peculiar. You feel the same way, but you say something entirely different—just like the clock in my bedroom. It runs perfectly on time, but strikes the wrong hour.

Bipin: But Srish, if you find every lovely thing lovely, then danger is imminent.

Srish: I don't feel any danger at all.

Bipin: That symptom is the worst of all. When the pain of a disease disappears, there is no longer any route for treatment. Brother, I clearly confess that the female sex has a certain magnetism—if the Bachelors' Club wishes to avoid that magnetism, they must keep a very wide distance.

Srish: Wrong, wrong, terribly wrong! What does it matter if you stay away? They certainly won't stay away. The Creator had to fashion so many women to maintain the world that avoiding them is impossible. Therefore, if you wish to protect your celibacy, you must gradually accustom yourself to the female sex. This new rule of admitting female members is finally the way to make the Bachelors' Club permanent. But just one female member won't do, Bipin; we need many female

members. Opening a single window in a closed room and letting the cold in causes a cold; if you stay out in the open air, there's no such danger.

Bipin: I don't understand this open air and closed air business of yours, brother! For someone who has a disposition to catch colds, neither god nor man can protect them from it.

Srish: And what does your disposition say?

Bipin: If I say it openly, you'll see it matches your disposition wonderfully. I can't boast that my pulse always beats exactly like that of an eternal bachelor.

Srish: That's another mistake of yours. Let the dance of the forty-nine winds play upon the bachelor's pulse—there's no fear—don't try to restrict or suppress it. Can those of us who have taken such a vow wrap our hearts in cotton wool? Let it loose like the horse of the Ashvamedha sacrifice, and fight whoever tries to tie it down.

Bipin: Who's that! It looks like Purna. The poor fellow can't seem to find his way out of this alley. That brave man's Ashvamedha horse is limping terribly. Shall I call out to him?

Srish: Call him. But it doesn't look like he's wandering these alleys searching for the two of us.

Bipin: Purna-babu, what's the news?

Purna: Extremely old. The news from yesterday and the day before is the same news today.

Srish: The winter wind was blowing yesterday and the day before, today the spring breeze has arrived—we can hope for a couple of pieces of new news from this.

Purna: The news created by the south wind finds no place in the newspaper of the Bachelors' Club. Once, an untimely spring breeze blew in a hermitage, and that inspired Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava* (The Birth of the War God)—with our luck, the spring breeze turns into an epic of *Kumara-asambhava* (The Impossibility of the Bachelor).

Bipin: So let it be, Purna-babu. The god who was incinerated in that epic, let us give him new life in this one.

Purna: In this epic, let the Bachelors' Club burn to ashes. Let the god who burned, do the burning. No, I'm not joking, Srish-babu, our Bachelors' Club is a veritable house of lac. Once it catches fire, there's no saving it. It's better to establish a Married Men's Club, you'll be safe concerning women. If you build a house with bricks already baked in a kiln, there's no fear of it burning down.

Srish: Any Tom, Dick, or Harry gets married, and the whole institution of marriage has been ruined, Purna-babu! That's exactly why the Bachelors' Club exists. As long as I have breath in my body, the entry of Prajapati (the god of marriage) is forbidden in this club.

Bipin: And Panchashar (the five-arrowed god of love)?

Srish: Let him come. Once we become intimate with him, that's it, there's no more fear.

Purna: Take a look, Srish-babu!

Srish: What is there to look at? I'm searching for him. I'll let out a sigh, recite poetry, my wrists will become bare from bracelets slipping off, only then can I become a proper ascetic. Our poet has written—

Before the night fades, O beloved, Come, light the lamp of my life, With your own fire. When will you walk down the path ahead, Carrying that radiant flame? That is why I watch the road! In the hope that I will burn, My silent heart waits, In its own darkness. Before the night fades, O beloved, Come, light the lamp of my life!

Purna: My dear Srish-babu, your poet hasn't written badly at all!—

Before the night fades, O beloved, Come, light the lamp of my life!

The room is decorated—garlands on a tray, a bed of flowers, only the lamp of life is unlit, and evening is steadily turning into night!—Ah, beautifully written! Which book is this in, tell me?

Srish: The book is called *Abahan* (Invocation).

Purna: The name is well-chosen too. *(To himself)*—

Before the night fades, O beloved, Come, light the lamp of my life!

(Sighs)

Are you heading home?

Srish: I've forgotten which way home is, brother!

Purna: Tonight is indeed a night to forget one's way. What do you say, Bipin-babu?

Srish: Bipin-babu won't utter a word on these matters, for fear his inner poetic soul might be exposed. A miser buries underground the very thing he values most.

Bipin: I don't want to squander it in the wrong place, brother, I'm searching for the right spot. If one must die, it's better to die right at the steps of the Ganges.

Purna: That is an excellent thought, completely in accordance with the scriptures. Bipin-babu is hoarding his poetry right up to the final moment, when others will speak but he will remain silent. I bless him that those words from others will be coated in honey—

Srish: And let there be a little touch of spice with it too—

Bipin: And let the mere showering of words not be the end of all oral duties—

Purna: Let the pauses between the words become even sweeter than the words themselves.

Srish: Let sleep not come that night—

Purna: Let the night never end—

Bipin: Let the moon become a full moon—

Purna: Let Bipin blossom like a spring flower—

Srish: And let the unfortunate Srish not come peeking at the door of the bower.

Purna: Go to hell, Srish-babu, recite another poem from your *Abahan*. He has written wonderfully—

Before the night fades, O beloved, Come, light the lamp of my life!

Ah! Just touching the flame of one life's lamp to the wick of another life's lamp, that's all, nothing more—tilting the lamp with two delicate fingers, a brief touch, and then in a flash, everything is illuminated. (*To himself*)—

Before the night fades, O beloved, Come, light the lamp of my life!

Srish: Purna-babu, where are you off to?

Purna: I left a book behind at Chandra-babu's lodgings; I'm going to look for it.

Bipin: Will you find it if you look? Chandra-babu's place is very messy—whatever gets lost there is never found again.

(*Purna exits*)

Srish: (*Sighing*) Purna is well-off, brother Bipin!

Bipin: I just hope the pressure of the steam inside doesn't make his head pop off like a soda-water cork!

Srish: Let it pop, if it must. Is keeping the head tightly wired in place the ultimate goal of human existence? If our heads don't get a little unhinged from time to time, why are we carrying them around day and night like a porter's burden? Let it go, brother, cut the wire, let it fly for once.—I was reciting this to you the other day—

*O cautious traveler, just once, Lose your way and return. Blind those two open eyes
With the tears of a desperate heart. At the end of that forgotten path lies The bower
of the lost heart, Scattered beneath the thorny trees Are clusters of blood-red
flowers— There, day and night, the game of breaking and building goes on, On the
shore of a boundless sea. O cautious traveler, just once, Lose your way and return.*

Bipin: You've started reading a lot of poetry lately; I see you'll soon be in trouble!

Srish: No one needs to worry about a man who deliberately seeks out a difficult path. The danger lies in trying to avoid trouble and suddenly stepping right into it.—Come in, come in, Rasik-babu, out on the street so late at night?

Enter Rasik.

Rasik: What is night to me, and what is day!

(Recites in Sanskrit) Varamasau divaso na punarniśā Nanu niśaiva varam na punardinam. Ubhayametadupaitvathavā kṣayam Priyajanena na yatra samāgamaḥ.

Srish: Meaning?

Rasik: The meaning is—

Let the night come, or let the day come, Let them pass endlessly. What does their coming and going matter, If my beloved does not come to me.

Many days and nights have come and gone so far, but she hasn't arrived to this day—so, call it day or call it night, I have no respect left for either of them.

Srish: Well, Rasik-babu, what if the beloved suddenly arrived right now?

Rasik: Then she wouldn't look at me; she would fall to the lot of one of you two!

Srish: Then she would instantly reveal herself to be utterly devoid of taste.

Rasik: And the very next moment, you would be spending your time in supreme bliss. Well, I have no desire to be jealous, Srish-babu! The one who delayed so long in coming to my lot, I dedicate her to you both. O Goddess, weave your garland of choosing. Today is the moonlit night of spring; come forth on your tryst today!

(Recites in Sanskrit) Mandam nidhehi caraṇau paridhehi nīlam Vāsaḥ pidhehi valayāvalimañcalena. Mā jalpa sāhasini śāradacandrakānta- Dantāmśuvastava tamāṁsi samāpayanti.

Tread softly, slender one, wear a blue garment, Hide your jingling bangles within your pallu. Do not speak, lest the radiant gleam of your teeth, Like the autumn moon, sweeps away the darkness of the path.

Srish: Rasik-babu, your bag is absolutely full. How many such translations have you prepared?

Rasik: A great many—since the Goddess of Wealth didn't arrive, I am spending my days solely with the Goddess of Speech.

Srish: I say, Bipin, imagining a lover's tryst is quite pleasant.

Bipin: Why don't you try bringing a proposal to the Bachelors' Club to reinstate the practice?

Srish: There are some things whose idea is so beautiful that one doesn't dare implement them in reality. The street where a tryst can happen, where pearls tear and scatter from the necklaces of lovely women, is that street your Pataldanga Street? That street doesn't exist anywhere in the world. A lovelorn maiden dressed in a blue saree sets out like that only on the paths of the mind's kingdom—pearls tear and fall from her chest, she doesn't even look—if they were real pearls, she would have picked them up. What do you say, Rasik-babu?

Rasik: I must agree—a tryst is better left to the imagination; it's extremely unsuited to a street full of carriages and horses. I bless you, Srish-babu, that on a spring moonlit night like this, the anxious heart of some maiden from a window might set out on a tryst toward your lodgings.

Srish: It will, Rasik-babu, your blessing will come true. I am feeling that news in my heart from today's breeze. Just as the bandit Bishe used to send word before he robbed, my unknown lady of the tryst has sent me news of her arrival beforehand.

Bipin: Get that balcony on your roof decorated and ready.

Srish: Well, I'll sit on one chair on my south-facing balcony, and another chair will be kept ready.

Bipin: And I'll come and sit on that one.

Srish: *Madhwabhābe guḍaṁ dadyāt* (If honey is lacking, give molasses), in case of need, you will have to do.

Bipin: When the honey-sweet maiden arrives, this unfortunate soul will receive *laguḍam dadyāt* (a thrashing with a stick).

Rasik: (*Aside*) Srish-babu, the flag that is required to mark your south-facing roof seems to have been left behind!

Srish: Could that handkerchief be retrieved now if I try?

Rasik: What's the harm in trying?

Srish: Bipin, brother, you chat with Rasik-babu for a bit, I'll be right back.

(*Srish exits*)

Bipin: Look here, Rasik-babu, please don't be angry.

Rasik: Even if I am, you have no reason to be afraid—I am very weak.

Bipin: I will ask you a couple of questions, I hope you won't be annoyed.

Rasik: No questions about my age, I hope?

Bipin: No.

Rasik: Then ask, you will get a straight answer.

Bipin: The lady I saw the other day, she—

Rasik: She is a worthy subject of discussion, do not hesitate, Bipin-babu—if you think and talk about her from time to time, it does not prove you are extraordinary; we do the exact same thing.

Bipin: Abalakanta-babu seems—

Rasik: Don't speak of him—he has no other topic on his lips.

Bipin: Is he—

Rasik: Yes, indeed he is. But the thing is, he can't decide who he loves more, Nripabala or Neerabala—he is constantly swinging between the two.

Bipin: But neither of them towards him—

Rasik: No, they don't have the kind of feeling that they could marry him. If that were the case, there would be no trouble at all!

Bipin: So Abalakanta-babu is somewhat—

Rasik: He seems somewhat anxious.

Bipin: Srimati Neerabala seems to love music?

Rasik: She does indeed, the evidence of that is right in your pocket.

Bipin: (*Taking the songbook out of his pocket*) It was extremely ungentlemanly of me to bring this away—

Rasik: If you hadn't committed that ungentlemanly act, one of us would have.

Bipin: If you had done it, she would have forgiven you, but I—it was truly wrong, but if I return it now—

Rasik: The fundamental wrong remains wrong.

Bipin: Therefore—

Rasik: As the saying goes, whether it's fifty-two or fifty-three. Whatever slight fault occurred in stealing it, a little more can be added in keeping it.

Bipin: Did she say anything to you about the notebook?

Rasik: She said very little, but what she didn't say was a lot.

Bipin: How so?

Rasik: She turned quite red with shame.

Bipin: Good heavens, the shame is mine.

Rasik: She shared your shame, just as the dawn reddens at the blushing of the sun.

Bipin: Don't drive me crazy anymore, Rasik-babu!

Rasik: I am drawing you into my team, sir!

Bipin: (*Putting the notebook back in his pocket*) They say in English, 'to err is human, to forgive divine.'

Rasik: So you have decided to follow human nature!

Bipin: The Goddess will do what her nature dictates!

Enter Srish.

Srish: I couldn't meet Abalakanta-babu.

Bipin: Do you want to turn him into an ascetic overnight?

Srish: Anyway, I took my leave of Akshay-babu.

Bipin: Ah, yes, I forgot to tell him I was leaving—I'll go see him for a moment.

Rasik: (*Aside*) Trying to collect something else again, I see? Human nature is getting a tighter grip on you!

(Bipin exits)

Srish: Rasik-babu, I need some advice from you.

Rasik: I have reached the age for giving advice, though I may lack the wisdom.

Srish: The two ladies I saw at your place the other day, I found both of them beautiful.

Rasik: Your perception cannot be faulted. Everyone says the same thing.

Srish: If I discuss and chat about them with you from time to time, would that—

Rasik: I would be happy, you might enjoy it, and it will cause them no particular harm.

Srish: None at all. If the cricket chatters about the stars—

Rasik: It does not disturb the stars' slumber.

Srish: It might only cause insomnia for the cricket, but I have no objection to that.

Rasik: That is exactly what it looks like today.

Srish: You must tell me the name of the one whose handkerchief I found.

Rasik: Her name is Nripabala.

Srish: Which one is she?

Rasik: You guess and tell me.

Srish: The one who was wearing that red silk saree?

Rasik: Go on.

Srish: The one who wanted to flee in shyness, but felt too shy to even flee—so she stopped for a moment like a startled doe, a few locks of hair falling over her eyes—when she picked up the slipping end of her saree tied to a bunch of keys with her left hand and left swiftly, her back covered in black hair danced across my vision like a dark shooting star.

Rasik: That is Nripabala indeed! Her feet are shy, her hands hesitant, her eyes startled, her hair curled; it's a pity you didn't get to see her heart—it is as sweet as the hidden honey inside a flower, as tender as a drop of dew.

Srish: Rasik-babu, I have finally discovered the source of the immense reservoir of poetry within you.

Rasik: I've been caught, Srish-babu—

*(Recites in Sanskrit) Kavīndrāṇām cetaḥkamaḥkavalavanamālātāparucaṁ Bhajante ye
santaḥ katicidaruṇāmeva bhavatīm Viriñcipreyasyāstaruṇataraśṛṅgāralaḥarīm
Gabhīrābhirvāgbhirvidadhāti sabhārañjanamayīm.*

*O Goddess of Dawn, who art a ray of light to the lotus-forest of the hearts of great
poets, the few wise men who worship even a fraction of thee can, through profound
words, express the youthful waves of love that delight the assembly of Saraswati. I
have found that ray of light for the lotus-forest of the poet's heart.*

Srish: I too have found a little of it recently; since then, poetry has become effortless for me.

Enter Akshay.

Akshay: *(To himself)* No, these two young men absolutely won't let me stay in my room. One of them was groping around my room like a thief—caught in the act, he couldn't come up with a decent excuse, and finally started bothering me. A little while later, I see the second fellow going in and turning the books in my room upside down, inspecting them. I saw it from a distance and ran away. They haven't let me write the letter exactly the way I wanted. Ah, what wonderful moonlight.

Srish: Ah, here is Akshay-babu!

Akshay: Oh no! One bandit in the room, another at the corner of the alley. O beloved, if those who are distracting my mind from meditating on you were Menaka, Urvashi, or Rambha, I would have no regrets—but a pleasant interruption to meditation isn't in Akshay's destiny—in this Kali Yuga, Lord Indra has grown old and lost his taste!

Enter Bipin.

Bipin: Ah, Akshay-babu, I was looking for you!

Akshay: Alas, wretched me, was such a night created only for me to be hunted down?—

In such a night as this, When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees, And they did make no noise, in such a night Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls and sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents, Where Cressid lay that night.

Srish: *In such a night*, what have you set out to do, Akshay-babu?

Rasik:

(Recites in Sanskrit) Apasaranti na cakṣuṣo mṛgākṣī Rajaniriyam ca na yāti naiti nidrā.

The fawn-eyed maiden's image does not fade from my eyes— The night does not end, and sleep does not come.

I understand Akshay-babu's condition, sir!

Akshay: Who are you, friend?

Rasik: I am Rasikchandra—floating on the sea of youth, supported by two young men on either side.

Akshay: At this age, you won't be able to handle youth, Rasik-dada!

Rasik: I don't know at what age one *can* handle it; it is an unbearable affair. Srish-babu, how do you feel about it?

Srish: I haven't been able to feel it entirely yet.

Rasik: Waiting for a mature age like mine, are you? Akshay-da, you look very distracted today.

Akshay: Of course I look distracted to you; my mind isn't focused on you at all.—Bipin-babu, you said you were looking for me, but it doesn't seem like an urgent matter, so I will take my leave now—I have some particular work to do.

(Akshay exits)

Rasik: The lovelorn husband is off to write his letter.

Srish: Akshay-babu has it good.—Rasik-babu, is his wife the eldest sister? What is her name?

Rasik: Purabala.

Bipin: *(Coming closer)* What did you say her name was?

Rasik: Purabala.

Bipin: She is the eldest?

Rasik: Yes.

Bipin: And the name of the youngest?

Rasik: Neerabala.

Srish: And which one is Nripabala?

Rasik: She is older than Neerabala.

Srish: So Nripabala is the middle one.

Bipin: And Neerabala is the youngest.

Srish: Nripabala is younger than Purabala.

Bipin: Neerabala is younger than her.

Rasik: *(To himself)* They've started chanting names like mantras. This is troublesome. I can't tolerate the cold dew anymore, I must figure out a way to escape.

Enter Banamali.

Banamali: Ah, here you are! I went to your house.

Srish: Now you stay here, we're going home.

Banamali: I always see you folks so busy.

Bipin: Well, you've never seen us healthy—we do get a bit particularly busy.

Banamali: If you just wait five minutes.

Srish: Rasik-babu, don't you feel a bit chilly?

Rasik: You are feeling it just now; I've been feeling it for a long time.

Banamali: Please come, step inside!

Srish: Sir, if I enter my room this late at night, then—

Banamali: As you command, I see you are somewhat busy, we shall do this another time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rasik: Brother Shailo!

Shailo: What is it, Rasik-dada?

Rasik: Is this a job for me? To break Mahadeva's meditation, the God of Love himself was present, and I am an old man—

Shailo: You may be an old man, but those two youths aren't exactly twin Mahadevas either!

Rasik: They are not, I have deduced that quite well. That is exactly why I came fearlessly. But I simply do not have the warmth in my body to stand out in the winter dew on the street and make romantic conversation with them until midnight!

Shailo: You can absorb some warmth from their company.

Rasik: A living tree blooms in the heat of the sun, but dead wood simply cracks—the heat of youth does not seem quite suitable for an old man.

Shailo: Well, looking at you, it doesn't seem like you are about to crack.

Rasik: If you could see my heart, you would understand, brother!

Shailo: What are you saying, Rasik-da! You are at the safest age right now. What harm can the fire of youth do to you?

Rasik: *Shushkendhane bahnirupaiti vridddhim.* When the fire of youth finds an old man, it blazes up with a roar—like fire to dry wood! That is exactly why "an old man's young wife" is a cause for disaster. What more can I say, brother!

[Enter Neerabala]

Rasik: *Agachchha barade devi!* (Come, O Goddess who grants boons!) But whether you grant me a boon or not, I do not know. I am working myself to death to grant

you one. Shiva does nothing, yet he receives your worship; and this old man who is working himself to the bone, will he get nothing?

Neerabala: Shiva gets flowers; you will get the fruit of it—I will give the garland of victory to you, Rasik-dada!

Rasik: The advantage of offering food to an earthen idol is that you get it entirely back. You can fearlessly give me the garland of victory; you will get it back whenever you need it. Instead, brother, knit me a muffler; it will be of much more use to an old man than a garland of victory.

Neerabala: I will do that. I have knitted a pair of woolen socks; I will place them at your reverend feet.

Rasik: Ah, this is what they call gratitude. But, Neeru, a muffler is enough for me—I don't need to be covered from head to toe. You will find a suitable person for those; save the socks for him.

Neerabala: Alright, you can save your speeches too.

Rasik: Do you see, brother Shailo, lately Neeru has started showing shyness—it's a bad sign.

Shailo: Neeru, what are you doing! You've come into this room again! Our meeting is about to take place here—someone might walk in at any moment, and you'll be in trouble.

Rasik: She got a taste of that trouble once, and now she is restless to get into trouble again and again.

Neerabala: Look, Rasik-dada, if you annoy me, I'm telling you, you won't get that muffler. And look at you, Didi, if you laugh at Rasik-da's words like that, his audacity will only grow.

Rasik: Do you see, Shailo, Neeru can't even take a joke these days; her mind has become so weak. Sister Neeru, the scriptures say that sometimes the call of the cuckoo sounds harsh to the ears; have you started mistaking your Rasik-dada's jokes for a cuckoo's song?

Neerabala: That is exactly why I want to wrap a muffler around your neck—so the tune might diminish a little.

Shailo: Neeru, don't argue anymore—come, everyone will be arriving shortly.

[Both exit]

[Enter Purna]

Rasik: Come in, Purna-babu—

Purna: Has no one else arrived yet?

Rasik: I suppose you are disappointed to see only this old man. The others will be arriving soon, Purna-babu!

Purna: Why would I be disappointed, Rasik-babu?

Rasik: How can I say? But the moment you walked into the room, looking at your two eyes, I realized that the person they are begging to see is not me.

Purna: How did you gain such mastery over the science of the eyes?

Rasik: No one ever looked my way, Purna-babu. Therefore, up to this ripe old age, I have had ample leisure to observe the eyes of others. If I had your good fortune, instead of acquiring the *theory* of sight, I could have acquired many *sights*. But whatever you say, Purna-babu, there is no creation as wondrous as a pair of eyes. If the mind resides anywhere visibly within the body, it is right there in the eyes.

Purna: *(Enthusiastically)* You are absolutely right, Rasik-babu! If there is any comparison to the endless sky or the endless ocean within this small body, it is in those two eyes.

Rasik: *Nihseemashobhasaubhagyam natangya nayanadwayam Anyohanyalokananandabirahadiba chanchalam—* Did you understand, Purna-babu?

Purna: No, but I have the desire to.

Rasik: *The two eyes of the slender maiden, the essence of boundless beauty and grace, Are they restless because they suffer the pain of separation, unable to see each other?*

Purna: No, Rasik-babu, that's not quite right. That is mere wordplay. Two eyes do not want to see each other.

Rasik: They want to see *another* pair of eyes, don't they? Then interpret it that way! Let's change the last two lines— *Are they restless, seeking the joy of locking gazes with the eyes of the beloved?*

Purna: That is wonderful, Rasik-babu! *Are they restless, seeking the joy of locking gazes with the eyes of the beloved?* Yet the poor things flutter about this way and that like captive birds in a cage—they cannot spread their wings and fly to where the beloved's eyes are.

Rasik: The scriptures also describe how severe this business of exchanging glances can be— *Hatwa lochanabishikhairgatwa katichit padani padmakshi Jibati yuba na ba kim bhuyo bhuyo bilokayati.*

Piercing with the arrows of her eyes, She walks toward her home, Full of sudden remorse— To see if he survived or not, The lotus-eyed maiden Turns to look back again and again!

Purna: Rasik-babu, she only turns to look back again and again in poetry.

Rasik: That is because, in poetry, there is no inconvenience in looking back. If the world were structured in such meter, she would look back here too, Purna-babu— here the mind looks back, but the eyes do not turn.

Purna: *(Sighing)* It's a very ugly place, Rasik-babu! But you phrased that beautifully—*Are they restless, seeking the joy of locking gazes with the eyes of the beloved?*

Rasik: Ah, Purna-babu, once the topic of eyes comes up, one doesn't feel like ending it— *Lochane harinagarbamochane Ma bidushaya natangi kajjalaih. Sayakah sapadi jibaharakah Kim punarhi garalena lepitah?*

*To your eyes, which humble the pride of the deer, Do not apply kohl, innocent one!
The arrow already takes a life instantly, What need is there to coat it in poison?*

Purna: Stop, Rasik-babu, stop. Someone is coming.

[Enter Chandra-babu and Nirmala]

Chandra: Ah, Akshay-babu—

Rasik: If Akshay-babu and his relatives hear that I resemble him, they will be devastated. I am Rasik.

Chandra: Please forgive me, Rasik-babu—I made a sudden mistake.

Rasik: What is there to forgive, sir! You haven't disrespected me in the slightest by mistaking me for Akshay-babu. You should ask *him* for forgiveness. Purna-babu and I were discussing science all this time, Chandra-babu!

Chandra: We had decided to dedicate one day a month to scientific discussions in our Bachelors' Club. What was the topic of discussion today, Purna-babu?

Purna: No, it was nothing at all, Chandra-babu!

Rasik: We were exchanging a few words on the vision of the eyes.

Chandra: The mystery of vision is very difficult, Rasik-babu!

Rasik: Difficult indeed—Purna-babu shares that opinion.

Chandra: The image of every object falls upside down on our retina; no theory seems satisfactory to me regarding how we perceive it right-side up.

Rasik: How could it be satisfactory? Seeing straight, seeing upside down—these things make a man's head spin. It's a very critical subject.

Chandra: Rasik-babu hasn't been introduced to Nirmala? She is the first female member of our Bachelors' Club.

Rasik: *(Bowing)* She is the presiding goddess of our assembly. Thanks to you, our club never lacked intellect or learning; she has come to bestow grace upon us.

Chandra: Not just grace, but strength.

Rasik: It is the same thing, Chandra-babu—when strength manifests as grace, its power knows no bounds. What do you say, Purna-babu?

[Enter Shailo, disguised as a man]

Shailo: Forgive me, Chandra-babu, am I late?

Chandra: *(Looking at his watch)* No, it is not time yet. Abalakanta-babu, my niece Nirmala has become a member of our club today.

Shailo: *(Sitting near Nirmala)* You see, men are selfish; they want to keep women strictly confined solely for their own service. The fact that Chandra-babu has offered you for the benefit of our club reveals his greatness.

Nirmala: To my uncle, working for the country and working for oneself are the same. If I can be of any use to your club, it will be a service to him.

Shailo: You are blessed that you have fortuitously gained the worthiness to truly know Chandra-babu.

Nirmala: If I don't know him, who will?

Shailo: Relatives do not always know relatives. While kinship certainly elevates the small, it also diminishes the great. The fact that you have known Chandra-babu truly reveals your own capacity.

Nirmala: But knowing my uncle truly is very easy. There is such a transparency within him!

Shailo: You see, that is exactly why it is hard to know him properly. Duryodhana couldn't even see the wall of crystal as a wall. Can everyone understand the greatness of simple transparency? They neglect it. People's eyes are drawn only to grand displays.

Nirmala: You have spoken the truth. Outsiders don't know my uncle at all. I cannot express my joy in finally hearing an outsider speak of my uncle like this after so long.

Shailo: Your devotion gives me exactly the same joy.

Chandra: (*Approaching them both*) Abalakanta-babu, have you read the book I gave you?

Shailo: I have, and I have prepared all the notes from it for your use.

Chandra: That will be of immense help to me. I am very pleased, Abalakanta-babu! Purna himself had borrowed that book from me. But because his health wasn't good, he couldn't get anything done. Do you have the notebook with you?

Shailo: I'll bring it right away.

[Exit Shailo]

Rasik: Purna-babu, you look pale. Are you unwell?

Purna: No, nothing at all. Rasik-babu, the person who just left, is his name Abalakanta?

Rasik: Yes.

Purna: His behavior doesn't seem quite right to me.

Rasik: Perhaps because of his young age—

Purna: He badly needs to learn how to behave with ladies.

Rasik: I have noticed that too; he doesn't quite know how to behave in a properly masculine way with women—he's a bit too forward. Perhaps it's just the nature of youth.

Purna: We are not terribly old either, but we don't—

Rasik: I see that; you keep a very respectful distance, but perhaps he doesn't consider that true politeness. He might mistakenly think you are ignoring him.

Purna: What are you saying, Rasik-babu? Tell me, what should I do? I can't even think of a single thing to say to approach her.

Rasik: If you try to think, you won't find anything. Approach her without thinking; the words will come out on their own.

Purna: No, Rasik-babu, not a single word comes out of me. You tell me what I should say.

Rasik: Don't say anything that will cause a revolution in the world. Just go and say, "It has suddenly gotten quite warm these days."

Purna: If she says, "Yes, it has gotten warm," what do I say after that?

[Enter Bipin and Srish]

Srish: *(Bowing to Chandra-babu and Nirmala, then to Nirmala)* Your enthusiasm is running ahead of the clock—look, it isn't even half-past six yet.

Nirmala: Today is my first day in your club, which is why I came before the meeting started—it takes a little time to break the initial hesitation of becoming a member.

Bipin: But our request to you is that you do not feel the slightest hesitation around us. From today, you have taken charge of us—please look after these wretched male members with kindness, and order us around.

Rasik: Go on, Purna-babu, you go say something too.

Purna: What should I say?

Nirmala: I do not have the capacity to lead.

Srish: Do you consider us so immovable?

Bipin: What is more immovable than iron, yet fire moves iron—to make heavy things like us movable, we need the radiance of someone like you.

Rasik: Are you listening, Purna-babu?

Purna: Tell me what I should say!

Rasik: Say, whether you want to move iron or melt it, you need fire!

Bipin: Well, Purna-babu, have you been introduced to Rasik-babu?

Purna: Yes.

Bipin: Is your health alright today?

Purna: Yes.

Bipin: Have you been here long?

Purna: No.

Bipin: Have you noticed?—This time the winter galloped in like a racehorse and then came to a sudden halt right in the middle of Magh.

Purna: Yes.

Srish: By the way, Purna-babu, you were unwell last time—you are feeling quite well this time, aren't you?

Purna: Yes.

Srish: The great thing that the Bachelors' Club has been lacking all this time, I realized the moment I stepped into the room; the golden crown was only waiting for a diamond to be set in its center—today it has been set. What do you say, Purna-babu?

Purna: I don't possess a creative capacity like yours—I can't fabricate and distribute words like that—especially regarding ladies.

Srish: I am sorry to hear of your incapacity, Purna-babu—I hope you will gradually improve.

Bipin: (*Pulling Rasik aside*) Let the two heroes battle it out. Come here now, Rasik-babu, I have a word or two for you. Tell me, was there any further mention of that notebook?

Rasik: To err is human, to forgive divine—I brought that up in passing—

Bipin: What did she say to that?

Rasik: She left like a flash of lightning without saying a word.

Bipin: She left?

Rasik: But there was no thunderbolt in that lightning.

Bipin: Any thunderous roar?

Rasik: None of that either.

Bipin: Then?

Rasik: Perhaps there was a hint of rain at one edge or the other.

Bipin: And the meaning of that?

Rasik: Who knows, sir! It could mean something, or it could mean disaster.

Bipin: Rasik-babu, I can't understand a word you're saying.

Rasik: How could you—it's a very difficult matter.

Srish: (*Approaching*) What is a difficult matter, sir?

Rasik: This talk of rain, lightning, and thunderbolts!

Srish: Hey Bipin, if you want to hear an even more difficult matter, go to Purna.

Bipin: I don't have much of a taste for difficult matters, brother!

Srish: The art of making peace is far more complex than the art of making war—you are good at that. For goodness' sake, go and cool Purna down a bit. I would rather discuss rain, lightning, and thunderbolts with Rasik-babu in the meantime. (*Bipin exits*) Rasik-babu, that lady whose name you said the other day was Nripabala, she... she... tell me something about her in detail. I saw such a gentle expression on her face in that brief moment; I simply cannot quell my curiosity about her.

Rasik: If I go into detail, your curiosity will only grow. This kind of curiosity '*habisha krishnabartmeba bhuyo ebabhibardhate*' (grows ever stronger like fire fed with

ghee). I have known her for so long, yet the gentle, sweet nature of that tender heart appears '*kshane kshane tannabatamupaiti*' (new to me at every moment).

Srish: Well, she... I am asking about Nripabala—

Rasik: I understand that perfectly well.

Srish: So, she... what else should I ask? Just tell me anything about her. What did she say yesterday, what did she do this morning, no matter how trivial, tell me and I will listen.

Rasik: (*Holding Srish's hand*) I am very pleased, Srish-babu, you are a true romantic—how could you grasp from just a fleeting glance that there is nothing trivial about her? If she says, "Rasik-da, turn up the wick of that kerosene lamp a little," it sounds to me like I've heard a profound new truth—like the first *Anushtubh* meter of the original poet. What can I say, Srish-babu, you might laugh if you hear this: the other day I walked into the room and saw Nripabala threading a needle, with pillow covers resting on her lap. It struck me as a wondrous sight. How many times have I walked past tailor shops, never even glancing up, but—

Srish: Tell me, Rasik-babu, does she do all the household chores with her own hands?

[*Enter Shailo*]

Shailo: What are you conspiring about with Rasik-da?

Rasik: Nothing at all. We are discussing an utterly trivial matter, as trivial as can be.

Chandra: It is time for the meeting to begin; we shouldn't delay any longer. Purna-babu, please begin the proposal regarding the agricultural school that you mentioned you would bring up today.

Purna: (*Standing up and fiddling with his watch chain*) Today... Today... (*Coughs*)

Rasik: (*Sitting nearby, in a low voice*) Today this assembly...

Purna: Today this assembly...

Rasik: Which has attained a new beauty and glory...

Purna: Which has attained a new beauty and glory...

Rasik: I cannot help but express my congratulations for it first and foremost.

Purna: I cannot help but express my congratulations for it first and foremost.

Rasik: (*In a low voice*) Go on, Purna-babu!

Purna: I cannot help but express my congratulations for it.

Rasik: What is there to fear, Purna-babu? Go on.

Purna: That new beauty and glory... (*Coughs*) That new beauty... (*Coughs again*) Congratulations...

Rasik: (*Standing up*) Mr. President, I have a submission. Today, Purna-babu arrived at the meeting before all the other members. He is extremely unwell, yet he could not contain his enthusiasm. Today is the first sunrise in our assembly, so the bird left its nest at the crack of dawn to witness it—but the body is sickly, so the voice lacks the strength to express the emotion of a full heart. Therefore, we must grant him exemption today. And to the radiant dawn he stood up to praise this morning, I beg forgiveness on behalf of this choked-up devotee. Purna-babu, it would be better if the proceedings of our meeting were suspended today, yet under the present circumstances, we cannot let you put forward any proposal today. Mr. President, please forgive him, and it is the natural virtue of the compassionate hearts of the gender of the one who has come to bestow success upon our assembly today with her radiance, to forgive.

Chandra: I know Purna-babu hasn't been well for some time. Under these conditions, we cannot cause him distress. Furthermore, Abalakanta-babu has advanced the work of our club significantly just by sitting at home. I had given him all the reports published by the government regarding Indian agriculture so far—from those, he has briefly compiled the section on fertilizing the land. Based on that, he is also prepared to write a booklet in simple, accessible Bengali for the general public. Because he has participated in the club's work with such enthusiasm and skill, we offer him our profound thanks, and today's meeting is adjourned until next Sunday. Bipin-babu had taken the responsibility of compiling the rules and procedures of European student hostels, and Srish-babu had promised to collect a list of the various philanthropic institutions initiated in London through voluntary

donations and write an essay on it; it seems they have not yet been able to complete those tasks. I am currently engaged in an experiment—everyone knows that the bullock carts in our country are built in such a way that if weight falls on the back, the cart tips up and the bullocks are choked by the yoke, and if for some reason the bullocks fall, the loaded cart crashes down on their necks. I am busy devising a remedy for this, and I hope to be successful. We express pity for cows in words, yet we indifferently observe the thousand unnecessary tortures inflicted on them every day—to me, there is nothing more shameful in the world than such false and hollow sentimentality. If our club can remedy this in any way, it will be a blessed achievement. I went to the carters' neighborhood at night and discussed the condition of the bullocks—I don't think it will be too difficult to explain to Hindu carters that senseless cruelty to cows is contrary to both their self-interest and their religion. I am trying to organize a panchayat among the carters for this purpose. Srimati Nirmala is receiving regular instruction from Dr. Ramratan regarding immediate first aid for sudden accidents and nursing the sick—she is engaged in teaching this in a couple of households to spread this knowledge among gentlefolk. Thus, through the independent and specific efforts of each member, I have no doubt that our little Bachelors' Club will gradually achieve diverse successes, unknown to the general public.

Srish: Hey Bipin, I haven't even started my work.

Bipin: I am in exactly the same situation.

Srish: But it must be done.

Bipin: I have to do it too.

Srish: We have to abandon all other discussions for a few days.

Bipin: I am thinking the exact same thing.

Srish: But one must praise Abalakanta-babu; there is no telling when he manages to get all his work done.

Bipin: It's true, very surprising! And yet it seems as though he has particular reason to be distracted.

Srish: Let me go and have a word with him.

[Approaches Shailo]

Purna: Rasik-babu, how can I ever thank you?

Rasik: Don't say a word, I will understand automatically. But not everyone is like me, Purna-babu; they won't understand by guessing. Words are necessary.

Purna: You have understood the words of my heart, Rasik-babu; you have saved my life. I feel too shy to even utter what is on my mind. Please advise me on what I should do.

Rasik: First, just go up to her and start talking about something, anything.

Purna: But look, Abalakanta-babu has gone and sat near her again—

Rasik: So what? He hasn't surrounded her on all sides. You don't have to breach Abalakanta like a military formation. You can go stand on one side.

Purna: Alright, let me see.

Shailo: *(To Nirmala)* Please don't say so much about me—you have done far more work than I have. But I feel very sorry for poor Purna-babu. He came with special enthusiasm today precisely because you were coming, yet he seems extremely dejected at not being able to express it. If you were to—

Nirmala: I feel very awkward that you are distinguishing me so particularly from the other members of your club; please consider me a member among yourselves, do not isolate me because I am a woman.

Shailo: Our club cannot forego the advantage that you were born a woman. If you become one with us, a certain amount of work will be done; if you remain distinct from us, much more work will be done. The person who propels a boat forward with a towline must stay somewhat distant from the boat. Chandra-babu holds the helm of our boat; he too is somewhat distant and elevated from us. You must pull us with the towline of your virtues, so you must remain apart. We have taken our seats among the oarsmen.

Nirmala: You too seem distinct from all of them in your actions and thoughts. After seeing you for just one day, I have a firm belief that you will be my chief ally in this assembly.

Shailo: That is my good fortune. Ah, here comes Purna-babu! We were just talking about you. Please sit.

Srish: Abalakanta-babu, please come, I have many things to discuss with you. *(Taking Shailo aside)* You two have put the three old members of the club to shame today. Well, it is only right—the new is needed to breathe life into the old.

Shailo: And to light the fire in the new logs, the old kindling is needed.

Srish: Well, we can judge that later. But what about that handkerchief of mine? I have lost my salvation by stealing it; I cannot afford to lose the handkerchief as well. *(Taking it out of his pocket)* Look here, I have brought a dozen silk handkerchiefs; you must exchange them. I cannot say this is its true price—to pay its proper price, one would have to empty out China and Japan.

Shailo: Sir, the Creator has given me enough brains to see through this little trick. These gifts did not come for me; they are meant for the one whose handkerchief you stole, using me as an excuse—

Srish: Abalakanta-babu, I see God has given you plenty of brains, but it seems the share of compassion is somewhat lacking—if you just return the handkerchief to this unfortunate man, that stain of disgrace will be wiped away entirely.

Shailo: Alright, I will show some compassion, but you must write the essay you promised for the club.

Srish: I certainly will—once the handkerchief is returned, I will be able to focus on my work. Then I will abandon all other searches and pursue only the search for truth.

[Elsewhere in the room]

Bipin: Do you understand, Rasik-babu, I was amazed by her skill in selecting songs. The one who composed the song might have poetic talent, but the poetic sensibility revealed in *selecting* this particular song possesses a profound delicacy.

Rasik: You are quite right—the power of selection is a real power. Flowers bloom on the vine on their own, but the skill and good taste belong to the one who weaves the garland.

Bipin: Do you remember that song?—

My boat suddenly sinks, In what ocean, struck by what rock. The boat was new, its journey new, I hadn't ventured into deep waters, I rowed it playfully near the shores. My boat suddenly sinks. It was drifting with the current, I was alone, holding the rudder— A sweet, gentle breeze blew against the sail. I was happy in my own mind, There was no cloud in the corner of the sky— I hoped the boat would touch the flower-grove. My boat suddenly sinks.

Rasik: Let it sink, what do you say, Bipin-babu!

Bipin: Let it go. But one must keep track of *where* it sank. Tell me, Rasik-babu, why did she write this song in her notebook?

Rasik: There is a saying that even the Creator does not understand the mystery of a woman's heart; Rasik-babu is but a trifling creature.

Srish: (*Approaching*) Bipin, go see Chandra-babu for a moment. Truthfully, we have slacked off on our duties—he will be pleased if you discuss things with him a bit!

Bipin: Alright.

[Exits]

Srish: Yes, so you were talking about the sewing—she does all the household chores with her own hands, does she?

Rasik: Everything.

Srish: So you went in the other day and saw pillow covers resting on her lap, and she—

Rasik: Was sitting with her head bowed, threading a needle.

Srish: Threading a needle! She had just come from her bath then, I presume?

Rasik: It must have been around three in the afternoon.

Srish: Three in the afternoon—she was perhaps sitting on her bed—

Rasik: No, not on the bed, sitting on a mat spread out on the balcony—

Srish: Sitting on a mat on the balcony, threading a needle—

Rasik: Yes, threading a needle. *(To himself)* I can't take this anymore.

Srish: I can see it as clearly as a picture—legs outstretched, head bowed, unbound hair falling over her face—the afternoon light—

Bipin: *(Approaching)* Chandra-babu wants to speak with you regarding that essay of yours. *(Srish exits)* Rasik-babu—

Rasik: *(To himself)* How much more of this prattle must I endure?

[At the other end]

Nirmala: *(To Purna)* Your health is perhaps not so good today.

Purna: No, it is quite fine—well, it is a little, you know... nothing much... still a little, you know, not quite... *(Coughs)* Is your health quite fine?

Nirmala: Yes.

Purna: You... I was asking if you... you... how do you find that, you know... Milton's *Areopagitica*—it's in our M.A. syllabus, you see. Don't you find it quite, you know...?

Nirmala: I haven't read it.

Purna: You haven't read it? *(Silence)* It's, you know... you... how warm it has gotten this time... I just need to see Rasik-babu... I have some business with Rasik-babu.

[He steps away from Nirmala]

[Elsewhere in the room]

Bipin: Rasik-babu, tell me, do you think she wrote that song with something specific in mind?

Rasik: It is possible. You have completely confused me now! I hadn't thought of that before.

Bipin: *My boat suddenly sinks, In what ocean, struck by what rock.* Tell me, Rasik-babu, what exactly does the 'boat' signify here?

Rasik: It signifies the heart, there is no doubt about that. But where that 'ocean' is and who that 'rock' is, that is the matter to ponder.

Purna: (*Approaching*) Bipin-babu, please forgive me—I have a word with Rasik-babu—if you...

Bipin: Very well, speak, I am leaving.

[Exits]

Purna: There is no one as foolish as I am in this world, Rasik-babu!

Rasik: There are far more foolish people who consider themselves intelligent—such as myself.

Purna: If we could find some privacy, I have much to say to you. Could you make some time tonight after the meeting breaks up?

Rasik: Very well.

Purna: There is beautiful moonlight today; by the edge of Goldighi—what do you say?

Rasik: (*To himself*) What a disaster!

Srish: (*Approaching*) Oh, Purna-babu is talking, I see. Well, let it be for now. Will you be free tonight, Rasik-babu?

Rasik: I might be.

Srish: Then like yesterday—what do you say? You saw yesterday, didn't you, it's much more enjoyable to gather on the street than indoors.

Rasik: Enjoyable indeed! *(To himself)* The cold gathers, the cough gathers, and the voice curdles like yogurt.

[Srish exits]

Purna: Tell me, Rasik-babu, if it were you, how would you have started the conversation?

Rasik: Perhaps I would have said—A balloon flew the other day, were you able to see it from the roof of your house?

Purna: If she had said, yes—

Rasik: I would have said, because He gave the mind the right to fly, God did not give wings to the human body—by keeping the body bound, the Creator has only increased the mind's yearning—

Purna: I understand, Rasik-babu—wonderful—many conversations can be born from this.

Bipin: *(Approaching)* You are talking with Purna-babu. Let it be, then. We had something to discuss, let's do it tonight, what do you say?

Rasik: That sounds good.

Bipin: Strolling on the street in the moonlight, in absolute comfort—what do you say?

Rasik: Absolute comfort. *(To himself)* But the discomfort comes after.

[Elsewhere]

Shailo: *(To Nirmala)* That is fine, if you wish, I will also look into studying that subject. I have studied a little medicine, not much, but if my joining encourages you, I am ready.

Purna: (*Approaching*) A balloon flew the other day; were you able to see it from the roof?

Nirmala: A balloon?

Purna: Yes, that balloon. (*Everyone is silent*) Rasik-babu was saying you might have seen it—please forgive me—I have interrupted your discussion—I am extremely unfortunate.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Purabala had returned from Kashi with her mother the previous day. Akshay said, "My Goddess, if you grant me immunity, I have a question to ask."

Purabala: "Let's hear it."

Akshay: "I see no signs of wasting away on your graceful figure."

Purabala: "This graceful figure didn't travel to the West just to waste away."

Akshay: "Then did the so-called 'agony of separation' die on the funeral pyre alongside the great poet Kalidasa?"

Purabala: "You are the living proof of that. I see your health hasn't suffered much either."

Akshay: "Did they let it? Your three sisters constantly prevented my emaciation—they absolutely refused to let me understand what separation even means."

He sang in the *Pilu* raga:

I had vowed to perish from the pain of parting, Who bound me in their arms, my resolve thwarting? I thought I would drown in a shoreless sea of tears, Whose golden boat rescued me from my fears?

"My darling, perhaps the five-armed God of Love dares not step into the holy city of Kashi out of fear of the three-eyed Lord Shiva?"

Purabala: "That may be so, but he certainly frequents Kolkata."

Akshay: "He does indeed—he pays no heed to the British Company's rule; I've received proof of that."

(Enter Nripabala and Nirabala)

Nirabala: "Sister!"

Akshay: "Now it's nothing but 'Sister!' Ungrateful wretches! While your sister was glowing increasingly like molten gold in the fire of separation, who kept you lot cool and comforted?"

Nirabala: "Do you hear him, Sister! What a lie! All the time you were gone, he didn't call for us even once to ask how we were—he just wrote letters and read books with his feet propped up on the table. Now that you're here, songs will be sung about us, jokes will be cracked, just to put on a show as if—"

Nripabala: "And you too, Sister, you didn't write us a single letter all these days?"

Purabala: "Did I have the time, dear? I was busy day and night looking after Mother."

Akshay: "If you had told them, 'I was deeply absorbed in meditating on your brother-in-law,' would people have criticized you?"

Nirabala: "That would have only inflated the brother-in-law's arrogance further. Mr. Mukherjee, why don't you go to your drawing-room? Sister has come back after so long, can't we chat with her for a bit?"

Akshay: "Cruel girl, do you wish to burn your sister, already scorched by the forest-fire of separation, with the agony of parting once again? The dark raincloud of your brother-in-law, through the torrential downpour of reunion, brings forth the tender shoots of joy in the vine-bower of his beloved's heart, and in this monsoon of love, the lightning of her glances—"

Nirabala: "And the croaking of frogs in the form of your endless babbling—"

(Enter Shaila)

Akshay: "Come, come! Without these three sisters-in-law—the best, the worst, and the middle one—my..."

Nirabala: "You don't get to dish out your 'best-and-middle' thrashings here!"

Shaila: (To Nripa and Niru) "Could you two leave for a bit, dears? We need to talk."

Akshay: "Do you understand what the talk is about, Niru? It's certainly no religious sermon."

Nirabala: "Alright, you don't need to babble anymore."

(Exeunt Nripa and Niru)

Shaila: "Sister, has Mother really finalized two grooms for Nripa and Niru?"

Purabala: "Yes, it's more or less settled. I've heard the boys aren't bad—if they see the girls and like them, it'll be finalized."

Shaila: "And if they don't like them?"

Purabala: "Then it's their bad luck."

Akshay: "And my two sisters-in-law's good luck."

Shaila: "What if Nripa and Niru don't like them?"

Akshay: "Then I will praise their taste."

Purabala: "Why wouldn't they like them? You people exaggerate everything. The days of royal bride-choosing ceremonies are over; girls don't need to choose—once a man becomes her husband, she will naturally love him."

Akshay: "Otherwise, what a terrible fate your current brother-in-law would have suffered, Shaila!"

(Enter Jagattarini)

Jagattarini: "Akshay, my boy, we must send word to those two boys then. They don't know our home address."

Akshay: "Very well, Mother, let's send Rasik-dada."

Jagattarini: "Woe is me! With the kind of brains your Rasik-dada has, who knows who he'll end up bringing instead of them!"

Purabala: "Don't worry about it, Mother. I'll make arrangements to have the boys brought over."

Jagattarini: "Puri my dear, it won't work unless you pay a little attention to this. Boys these days—I have no idea how one is supposed to behave with them."

Akshay: (Aside) "Puri has a magic touch. The son-in-law she snagged for her mother has seen his market value skyrocket! The science of taming modern boys—"

Purabala: (Aside) "And you consider yourself a modern boy, sir?"

Jagattarini: "My dears, you discuss the matter. Kayet-didi has come and is waiting inside, let me go and see her off!"

Shaila: "Mother, just think it over a bit—none of you have even seen the boys yet, and suddenly—"

Jagattarini: "I have spent my whole life thinking things over—I can't do it anymore—"

Akshay: "We can do the thinking later at a suitable time; let's get the deed done first."

Jagattarini: "Tell her, my boy, explain it to Shaila."

(She exits)

Purabala: "You're worrying for nothing, Shaila. Once Mother makes up her mind, no one can budge her. I believe in the decree of the God of Marriage, sister— whoever is destined for whoever, no matter how much you overthink it to death, it will happen."

Akshay: "That is absolutely true. Otherwise, the person who gets married to someone would have married someone else instead."

Purabala: "What nonsense you argue! Half the things you say make no sense at all."

Akshay: "That is because I am a fool."

Purabala: "Go on, go take a bath now, and come back with a cooler head."

(She exits)

(Enter Rasik)

Shaila: "Rasik-dada, have you heard everything? We're in a bit of trouble."

Rasik: "What trouble? The Bachelors' Club kept its bachelorhood, Nripa and Niru were spared, all sides are protected."

Shaila: "No side has been protected."

Rasik: "At least this old man's side has been protected—I won't have to stand on the street at night reciting verses in the company of two foolish youths."

Shaila: "Mr. Mukherjee, nobody can discipline Rasik-dada except you—he doesn't listen to us."

Akshay: "He has crossed the age where he would accept your words as gospel truth, that's why the man dares to rebel. Alright, I'll sort him out. Come along, Rasik-da, let's sit in my outer room and tackle the hookah."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The music teacher was seated. With a *tanpura* in his hands, Bipin was practicing the musical notes "Sa Re Ga Ma" in a terribly out-of-tune voice.

A servant came in and announced, "A gentleman has arrived, sir."

Bipin: "A gentleman? What kind of gentleman?"

Servant: "An old man, sir."

Bipin: "Is he bald on top?"

Servant: "Yes, sir."

Bipin: (Setting the *tanpura* down) "Bring him in, bring him in right now! Hey, go and prepare the hookah. And where did the punkah-puller go? Tell him to pull the fan! And listen, run out quickly and buy a few sweet betel leaves (*paan*). Don't delay, and bring half a seer of ice as well, understood?" (Hearing footsteps) "Come in, Rasik Babu, come in!"

(*Banamali enters*)

Bipin: "Rasik Babu—wait, this is that Banamali!"

The Old Man: "Yes, sir, my name is Banamali Bhattacharya."

Bipin: "That introduction is unnecessary. I am a bit busy with some important work."

Banamali: "We can't keep the two girls waiting much longer—many suitors are coming—"

Bipin: "I'm delighted to hear it—marry them off, marry them off by all means—"

Banamali: "But you two would have been the perfect match—"

Bipin: "Look here, Banamali Babu, you haven't yet gotten a complete picture of who I am. If you ever did, you'd have terrible doubts about my 'perfectness'."

Banamali: "Well then, I shall take my leave. You are busy, I'll come back another time."

(He exits)

Bipin: (Picking up the *tanpura* again) "Sa re ga, re ga ma, ga ma pa—"

(Srish enters)

Srish: "What is this, Bipin? You've given up wrestling and taken up singing?"

Bipin: (To the teacher) "Maestro, you are dismissed for today. Come back tomorrow afternoon."

(The teacher exits)

"What else can I do, tell me? If I don't learn how to sing, I won't be accepted into your sect of ascetics."

Srish: "Alright, so you sat down to practice 'Sa Re Ga Ma', but have you managed to put your hand to that draft for the Bachelors' Club?"

Bipin: "No, brother, I haven't been able to get around to it yet. Have you finished yours?"

Srish: "No, I haven't touched it either." (He remained silent for a moment) "No, brother, this is terribly wrong. It seems we are gradually straying further and further from our resolve."

Bipin: "Many resolves are like a tadpole's tail; as maturity sets in, they naturally disappear. But what if the tail remained while the frog dried up and died? Just because we made a resolve at some point, does that mean we must starve ourselves to death for its sake? I don't see the logic in that."

Srish: "I see it. There are many resolves for which starving oneself to death is the better path. Like a barren tree, it seems an excessive amount of sap is flowing through our branches and leaves every day, while the hope of bearing fruit recedes further and further away. I made a mistake, brother Bipin! Every great deed requires penance; unless one deprives oneself of various worldly pleasures and withdraws from all directions, one cannot fully dedicate one's mind to a noble

cause. From now on, I have resolved to completely abandon all romantic indulgence and dedicate myself to hard work."

Bipin: "I agree with you. But rice doesn't grow on every blade of grass; if you try to dry it out, you'll only end up drying it for nothing—it won't bear fruit. For a while now, I've been feeling that the resolve we've taken won't be successfully fulfilled by us. Therefore, it's better we adopt some other path suited to our nature."

Srish: "That is utter nonsense. Bipin, put down your *tanpura*—"

Bipin: "Alright, I've put it down. The world won't suffer any great loss from it."

Srish: "Let's relocate our club to Chandra Babu's house—"

Bipin: "An excellent idea."

Srish: "Together, the two of us will keep Rasik Babu somewhat restrained."

Bipin: "Let's hope he doesn't single-handedly make the two of us unrestrained."

(A second servant enters)

Servant: "An old gentleman has arrived, sir."

Bipin: "An old gentleman? This is getting annoying! Banamali is back."

Srish: "Banamali? Why, he just came to my place a little while ago!"

Bipin: "Hey, go send the old man away."

Srish: "If you send him away, he'll just end up on my neck again. Better have him brought in, and we can both get rid of him together." (To the servant) "Bring the old man in."

(Rasik enters)

Bipin: "What's this! This isn't Banamali, this is Rasik Babu!"

Rasik: "Yes, indeed—your power of recognition is astounding—I am not Banamali. *'The wearer of the forest garland (Banamali) dwells in the woods by the gentle*

breeze on the banks of the Yamuna'—" (Translator's Note: A poetic reference to Lord Krishna).

Srish: "No, Rasik Babu, none of that now. We have put an end to all romantic banter."

Rasik: "Ah, what a relief!"

Srish: "Abandoning all other discussions, from now on we will dedicate ourselves single-mindedly to the work of the Bachelors' Club."

Rasik: "That is exactly my wish too."

Srish: "An old man named Banamali showed up with a proposal for our marriage to the two daughters of Nilmadhav Chowdhury from Kumartuli. We dismissed him in short order—we consider all such topics highly inappropriate."

Rasik: "I feel exactly the same way. If Banamali had approached me with a proposal of marriage for two or more daughters, he would probably have had to return empty-handed."

Bipin: "Rasik Babu, you must have some refreshments before you go."

Rasik: "No, sir, let it be for today. I had a specific matter to discuss with you both, but hearing about your strict vows, I lack the courage."

Bipin: (Eagerly) "No, no, why wouldn't you speak if you have something to say?"

Srish: "We are not as terrifying as you're making us out to be. Is the matter specifically with me?"

Bipin: "No, the other day Rasik Babu was saying he had a topic or two to discuss with *me*."

Rasik: "Never mind, let it be."

Srish: "If you'd like, tonight by the banks of the Goldighi—"

Rasik: "No, Srish Babu, please excuse me."

Srish: "Brother Bipin, why don't you go into that room for a bit? Perhaps Rasik Babu would prefer to speak in my presence—"

Rasik: "No, no, what is the need—"

Bipin: "Better yet, Rasik Babu, let's go up to the third-floor room—Srish will wait here for a bit."

Rasik: "No, you both sit—I should be going."

Bipin: "How can that be! You must eat something before you leave."

Srish: "No, we absolutely won't let you leave. That's out of the question."

Rasik: "Then I shall speak. You must have already heard about Nripabala and Nirabala—"

Srish: "Of course we have—so if there's anything regarding Nripabala—"

Bipin: "Any special news about Nirabala—"

Rasik: "There is cause for deep concern regarding both of them."

Both: "They're not ill, are they?"

Rasik: "Worse than that. Their marriage negotiations—"

Srish: "What are you saying, Rasik Babu? There wasn't any talk of marriage—"

Rasik: "Absolutely nothing—Mother suddenly returned from Kashi and finalized the girls' marriage to two utterly useless pumpkins—"

Bipin: "This cannot happen under any circumstances, Rasik Babu!"

Rasik: "Sir, in this world, whatever is unpleasant is highly probable. Weeds are much more likely to grow than flowering plants."

Bipin: "But sir, the weeds must be uprooted—"

Srish: "And flowering plants must be planted—"

Rasik: "That is true, but who will do it, sir?"

Srish: "We will do it. What do you say, Bipin?"

Bipin: "Absolutely."

Rasik: "But what will you do?"

Bipin: "If you say the word, we can intercept those two boys on the street and—"

Rasik: "I understand, just the thought of it thrills the body. But by God's blessing, unworthy suitors are immortal—if you get rid of two, ten more will take their place."

Bipin: "If we can somehow hold these two off for a while through trickery or force, it will give us time to think."

Rasik: "The time for thinking has grown very narrow. They are coming to see the girls this Friday."

Bipin: "This Friday!"

Srish: "That's the day after tomorrow!"

Rasik: "Yes, sir, the day after tomorrow indeed—you can't intercept Friday on the street."

Srish: "Wait, a plan has come to my mind."

Rasik: "What is it, let's hear it!"

Srish: "Does anyone know these two boys?"

Rasik: "No one."

Srish: "Do they know the house?"

Rasik: "No."

Srish: "In that case, if Bipin can somehow manage to keep them delayed that day, I will take their names and go to Nripabala—"

Bipin: "You know me, brother, no clever tricks ever come to my mind. If you want, you can use your cunning to keep those two boys distracted—instead, I'll pass myself off as them and go to Nirabala—"

Rasik: "But gentlemen, the plural form won't work in this situation! Two boys are expected to arrive; it will be very difficult for me to pass one of you off as two people—"

Srish: "Oh, that's true."

Bipin: "Yes, I forgot about that."

Srish: "Then both of us will have to go. But—"

Rasik: "I can manage to send those two off in the wrong direction. But you two—"

Bipin: "Don't worry about us, Rasik Babu!"

Srish: "We are prepared for anything."

Rasik: "You are noble men—such a great sacrifice—"

Srish: "Nonsense! There is no sacrifice in this at all."

Bipin: "This is a matter of joy."

Rasik: "No, no, one might still fear getting caught in one's own trap."

Srish: "Not at all, sir, we fear nothing."

Bipin: "Whatever happens to us, we shall be happy with it."

Rasik: "These are words of your nobility, but it is my duty to protect you. So I give you my word: somehow rescue us this Friday—after that, I will never bother you again—you will be completely free—and in the meantime, we will search for and secure two worthy grooms."

Srish: "I am deeply saddened to hear that you won't bother us anymore, Rasik Babu!"

Rasik: "Alright, then I will."

Bipin: "Are we only busy preserving our own freedom? Do you think us to be so selfish?"

Rasik: "Please forgive me—I had the wrong impression."

Srish: "Say what you will, it is very hard to suddenly find good grooms!"

Rasik: "That is exactly why we waited so long, only to land in this disaster. The very topic of marriage is unpleasant to you, yet look, even you—"

Bipin: "Please don't hesitate on our account for that—"

Srish: "We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for coming straight to us without going to anyone else."

Rasik: "I won't thank you anymore. The lifelong gratitude of those two girls will be your reward."

Bipin: "Hey, pull the fan!"

Srish: "Didn't you say you ordered snacks for Rasik Babu—"

Bipin: "They're on their way! In the meantime, have a glass of ice-water—"

Srish: "Why water, order him a lemonade!" (Taking a tin box from his pocket) "Here you go, Rasik Babu, have some *paan*."

Bipin: "Are you getting any breeze over there? Here, lean on this bolster."

Srish: "Tell me, Rasik Babu, Nripabala must have become very depressed—"

Bipin: "Nirabala too, of course, must be very—"

Rasik: "That goes without saying."

Srish: "Is Nripabala crying a lot?"

Bipin: "Tell me, why doesn't Nirabala try explaining it properly to her mother—"

Rasik: (To himself) *Oh no, it has started. I don't need any lemonade.* (Aloud) "Excuse me, but I must take my leave right now."

Srish: "What are you saying?"

Bipin: "How can that be?"

Rasik: "I have to go give those two boys the wrong address, otherwise—"

Srish: "I understand, in that case, go right now!"

Bipin: "Yes, don't delay any further!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nirmala was sitting by the window. Chandramadhav Babu entered.

Chandra: (To himself) *Poor Nirmal has taken up a very difficult vow. I've noticed she has been deep in thought for the past few days. Being a woman, will she be able to bear so much weight on her mind?* (Aloud) "Nirmal!"

Nirmala: (Startled) "Yes, Uncle!"

Chandra: "Are you thinking about that piece of writing? I think if you rest your mind for a day or two instead of thinking so much, it might help your writing."

Nirmala: (Embarrassed) "I wasn't exactly thinking, Uncle. I should have started writing it by now, but for the past few days, the weather has grown warm and the south wind has started blowing... I just can't seem to concentrate. It's very wrong of me, but today, no matter what—"

Chandra: "No, no, don't force yourself. I think, Nirmal, since you have no female companion at home, working completely alone makes you feel weary. In any work, if one doesn't have the company and assistance of a person or two—"

Nirmala: "Abalakanta Babu said he would help me somewhat. I gave him that English book on nursing patients, and he promised to write and send me a chapter today. It should be arriving any minute now—that's why I'm sitting here waiting."

Chandra: "That boy is very good—"

Nirmala: "Very good—wonderful—"

Chandra: "Such perseverance, such dedication to work—"

Nirmala: "And such a beautiful, modest nature—"

Chandra: "I have been amazed to see his enthusiasm for every good proposal."

Nirmala: "Besides, the moment you look at him, the sweetness of his mind is so clearly visible on his face and appearance."

Chandra: "I never imagined one could develop such deep affection for someone in such a short time. I wish I could keep that boy with me and assist him in all his studies and work!"

Nirmala: "That would be a great help to me too, I could get so much work done! Why don't you propose it to him and see! Ah, here comes the servant! He must have sent the writing."

"Ramdin, is there a letter? Bring it here."

(The servant enters and hands a letter to Chandra Babu)

"Uncle, he must have sent that essay to me, give it here."

Chandra: "No, Feni, this letter is for me."

Nirmala: "Your letter! Did Abalakanta Babu write to you? What did he write?"

Chandra: "No, it's from Purna."

Nirmala: "Purna Babu's writing? Oh—"

Chandra: "Purna writes— '*Respected Teacher, your character is noble, your mental strength extraordinary; only a strong-natured person like you can look upon human weakness with forgiving eyes. Thinking this, I make bold to write you this letter today.*'"

Nirmala: "What has happened? Perhaps Purna Babu wants to leave the Bachelors' Club, that's why he's making such a long preamble. You must have noticed, Purna Babu hasn't been able to do any work for the club lately."

Chandra: " '*Sir, the ideal you have held up before us is immensely high, the goal you have placed upon our heads is a heavy burden. Not for a single moment has my devotion to that ideal and that goal wavered. But I humbly confess before your revered feet that occasionally I feel a poverty of strength.*'"

Nirmala: "I suppose in any great endeavor, a person occasionally feels their inability and gets disheartened, the tired mind sometimes gets distracted—but does that last forever?"

Chandra: "*'Returning home from the club, when I try to put my hand to the work, I suddenly feel all alone; my enthusiasm feels like an unsupported vine, ready to collapse to the ground.'* Nirmal, we were just talking about this very thing!"

Nirmala: "What Purna Babu has written is true; without human companionship, it is difficult to keep enthusiasm alive solely on resolve."

Chandra: "*'Please forgive my audacity, but after much thought, I have realized this for certain: the vow of celibacy is not for ordinary people—it does not impart strength, it drains it. Men and women are each other's right hands; only when they are united can they become fully capable of all the duties of worldly life.'* What do you think, Nirmal?"

(Nirmala remains silent).

"Akshay Babu was arguing with me about this very thing the other day, and I couldn't answer many of his points."

Nirmala: "That may be so. Perhaps there is a lot of truth in what he says."

Chandra: "*'Instead of initiating the children of householders into the religion of asceticism, molding household life itself into a higher ideal is, in my opinion, the supreme duty.'*"

Nirmala: "Now that, Purna Babu has said quite well."

Chandra: "I too have been thinking for a few days now that I should abolish the rule of taking the vow of celibacy."

Nirmala: "I also think it wouldn't be a bad idea to abolish it. What do you say, Uncle? Will anyone else object? Abalakanta Babu, Srish Babu—"

Chandra: "There is no reason for any objection."

Nirmala: "Still, we should at least seek the opinions of Abalakanta Babu and the others."

Chandra: "Opinions must certainly be sought." (Reading the letter) "*'What I have written so far, I wrote easily; but what I wish to say now, my pen refuses to write.'*"

Nirmala: "Uncle, perhaps Purna Babu is writing something confidential, why are you reading it aloud?"

Chandra: "You are right, Feni!" (Reads to himself). "How astonishing! Am I blind in every respect? I didn't realize a thing all this time. Nirmal, has any behavior of Purna Babu ever seemed to you—"

Nirmala: "Yes, Purna Babu's behavior has occasionally seemed extremely foolish to me."

Chandra: "Yet Purna Babu is very intelligent. In that case, let me tell you plainly—Purna Babu has sent a proposal of marriage—"

Nirmala: "You are not his guardian—why send a proposal to you—"

Chandra: "Because I am *your* guardian—read this."

Nirmala: (Reading the letter, her face flushed red) "This is absolutely impossible."

Chandra: "What shall I tell him?"

Nirmala: "Tell him it is absolutely impossible in every way."

Chandra: "Why, Nirmal? You were just saying you had no objection to abolishing the rule of celibacy from the club."

Nirmala: "Does that mean I have to accept whoever proposes—"

Chandra: "Purna Babu is not just anyone, he is such a good boy—"

Nirmala: "Uncle, you understand nothing of these matters, and I won't be able to explain them to you either—I have work to do."

(She prepares to leave)

"Uncle, what is that bulging in your pocket?"

Chandra: (Startled) "Ah yes, I completely forgot—the servant handed me a paper addressed to you this morning—"

Nirmala: (Quickly taking the paper) "Look at this, Uncle, how unfair! Abalakanta Babu's writing arrived in the morning, and you didn't give it to me? I was sitting here thinking he had forgotten—how very unfair!"

Chandra: "It is unfair indeed. But I make far more unfair mistakes every single day, Feni, and it is you who smilingly forgive and indulge me every time."

Nirmala: "No, not exactly unfair—I was the one being unfair to Abalakanta Babu in my mind, thinking... Ah, here comes Rasik Babu. Come in, Rasik Babu, Uncle is right here."

(Rasik enters)

Chandra: "It is very good that Rasik Babu has arrived."

Rasik: "If my arrival brings any good, Chandra Babu, then 'good' is very cheaply available to you. I will come whenever you call, and I am willing to come even if you don't call."

Chandra: "We are thinking of abolishing the rule of lifelong celibacy from our club—what is your advice?"

Rasik: "I can give advice very selflessly, because whether you keep the vow or abolish it, it is all the same to me. My advice is: abolish it—otherwise, one day it will abolish itself. Ramhari, the drunkard from our neighborhood, once stood in the middle of the street, called everyone, and declared, 'Fathers, I have decided to fall right here.' He would have fallen even if he hadn't decided to, therefore 'deciding' to do it was a good move for him."

Chandra: "You are quite right, Rasik Babu. Whatever is bound to come by force, it is better to let it come without forcing it to use its strength. I want to raise this proposal before everyone before this coming Sunday."

Rasik: "Very well, you people come over to our place on Friday evening; I will inform everyone and bring them there."

Chandra: "Rasik Babu, if you have the time, I would like to present a proposal to you regarding the improvement of the bovine species in our country—"

Rasik: "Hearing the subject arouses great curiosity, but the time is a bit—"

Nirmala: "No, Rasik Babu, please come to the other room, I have many things to discuss with you. Uncle, you finish your writing, our presence will only disturb you."

Rasik: "Let us go, then."

Nirmala: (As she walks away) "Abalakanta Babu has sent me that piece of writing—please give him my thanks for remembering my request."

Rasik: "Even without your thanks, he considers himself blessed simply to fulfill your request."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jagattarini: "Oh Akshay, my boy! See what I am to do with these girls! Nep is sitting around crying, Niru is furious and says she won't come out under any circumstances. The boys from the respectable family will be arriving at any moment—what am I supposed to tell them now to send them away? You are the one who pampered them and turned them into fine ladies, now you handle them."

Purabala: "Really, I am shocked by their behavior! Who do they think they are—"

Akshay: "I suppose they can't bring themselves to like anyone but me; they are your sisters, after all, their taste is just like yours."

Purabala: "Stop joking, this is no time for jokes—can you please try and reason with them? If you don't talk to them, they won't listen."

Akshay: "So obedient! That's what you call sisters-in-law utterly devoted to their brother-in-law. Alright, send them to me for a bit—let's see!"

(Jagattarini and Purabala exit)

(Enter Nripabala and Nirabala)

Nirabala: "No, Mr. Mukherjee, that will absolutely not happen."

Nripabala: "Mr. Mukherjee, I fall at your feet, please don't parade us in front of just anybody like this."

Akshay: "When a man was sentenced to be hanged, he said, 'Please don't hoist me too high, I suffer from vertigo'—that's exactly what has happened to you. You're going to get married, what good is it to act shy about showing yourselves now?"

Nirabala: "Who said we are going to get married?"

Akshay: "Oho! My body tingles with thrill! But the heart is weak and fate is strong—if by chance the vow has to be broken—"

Nirabala: "No, it will not be broken."

Akshay: "It won't, eh? Then come out fearlessly; show yourselves to the two youths, scorch them half-dead, and let the wretched fellows go back home and suffer."

Nirabala: "We don't have that much enthusiasm for killing living creatures without reason."

Akshay: "Such compassion for living beings! But what is the need to cause a rift in the family over such a trivial matter? Since your mother and sister have pleaded with you, and since those two gentlemen are coming all the way in a hired carriage, just show your faces for about five minutes. After that, I am here—I will absolutely not let you be married against your will."

Nirabala: "Under no circumstances?"

Akshay: "Under no circumstances."

(Purabala enters)

Purabala: "Come, let me get you two dressed."

Nirabala: "We will not dress up!"

Purabala: "Are you going to appear before respectable gentlemen looking like this? Won't you feel ashamed?"

Nirabala: "Of course we'll feel ashamed, Sister, but we'll feel even more ashamed to go out all dressed up."

Akshay: "The Goddess Uma captivated the heart of the Great Lord Shiva dressed in the garb of an ascetic; when Shakuntala conquered King Dushyanta's heart, she was wearing a garment of tree bark—even the poet Kalidasa notes it was tied a bit too tight! Your sisters have read all this and grown wise; they don't want to dress up!"

Purabala: "Those are tales from the golden age of mythology. The great King Dushyantas of the modern age are only swayed by fine clothes and ornaments."

Akshay: "For instance—"

Purabala: "For instance, you. On the day you came to see me, did Mother not dress me up?"

Akshay: "I thought to myself: if she looks this stunning when she's dressed up, who knows how magnificent her beauty must be unadorned!"

Purabala: "Alright, you be quiet. Come on, Niru!"

Nirabala: "No, Sister—"

Purabala: "Alright, even if you don't wear jewelry, you at least have to tie your hair!"

Akshay: (Singing)

Place no flowers in her hair, Let her braid be loose and bare. With tearful eyes, devoid of kohl, Let her knock upon his soul. With the restless flutter of her sari's hem, Lay a deadly trap for the weary traveler's steps. Without a fight, fulfill the heart's delight, Oh merciless one, in silence, conquer the night.

Purabala: "You've started singing again? Tell me, when am I supposed to get anything done? It's time for them to arrive, and I haven't even finished preparing the snacks."

(She exits, taking Nripa and Niru with her)

(Rasik enters)

Akshay: "Grandfather Bhishma, are all the preparations for battle complete?"

Rasik: "Everything is ready—the two brave warriors have also arrived."

Akshay: "Now the two divine weapons have gone to get polished. You take charge as the commander-in-chief then; I'd like to stay behind the scenes for a bit."

Rasik: "I think I'll stay out of sight at first too."

(Both exit)

(Enter Srish and Bipin)

Srish: "Bipin, lately you've been committing daylight robbery on the art of music with your shouting—managed to steal anything yet?"

Bipin: "Nothing. The seven musical notes are constantly guarding the gates of music; do you think I stand a chance of getting in? But why did this question pop into your mind?"

Srish: "Lately, I sometimes feel the urge to set poems to music. The other day, I was reading in a book—"

Why do you play with the sand on the shore All day long, forevermore! The day is gone, leave this vain play, Leap into the dark waters right away. Churn the boundless deep, take what you find, Laughing and weeping, leave this shore behind.

"I felt as though I knew the tune for it, but I just couldn't sing it!"

Bipin: "That's not bad at all—your poet writes well. Hey, is there more to it? If you've started, you might as well finish it!"

Srish:

I know not what stirs in my mind, Or who waits on the path behind. What floral scent in the spring breeze, Makes my heart ache with such unease? Come, let us walk in this wild air, With that restless wanderer, beyond repair.

Bipin: "Ah, wonderful! But Srish, what are you searching for near the bookshelf?"

Srish: "That book I saw the other day, the one with the two names written in it—"

Bipin: "No brother, none of that today!"

Srish: "None of what?"

Bipin: "No discussions involving them in any way—"

Srish: "How surprising, Bipin! Am I likely to discuss them in a way that—"

Bipin: "Don't be angry, brother—I'm speaking for myself too. In this very room, I've often spoken about them with Rasik Babu in a manner that today makes me hesitate to even utter a single word—don't you see—"

Srish: "Why wouldn't I see? I merely wanted to open a book and look at it—I wouldn't have uttered a single word!"

Bipin: "No, not even that today. Today they will appear before us; let us try to be worthy of it."

Srish: "Bipin, with you—"

Bipin: "No brother, don't argue with me, I concede defeat—but put the book down."

(Rasik enters)

Rasik: "Ah, here you are, sitting all alone, please don't mind—"

Srish: "Not at all. This room welcomed us with a warm greeting."

Rasik: "We have put you through so much trouble!"

Srish: "What trouble did you put us through? I would consider myself blessed if I got the opportunity to endure a hardship that actually felt like a hardship."

Rasik: "Anyway, the one advantage is that this will be over very soon, and after that, you will be free. Just think, if this had been a real marriage arrangement, there would be the terrifying prospect of lifelong bondage at the end! Marriage always begins with sweets, but it doesn't always end sweetly. But tell me, why are you both sitting here so quietly and sadly today? I tell you, you have nothing to fear. You are birds of the forest; you'll eat a couple of sweets and fly right back to the forest, no one will bind you. *'Here, no hunter's arrows fall, nor does any forest fire rage.'* Instead of a forest fire, you'll get fresh coconut water."

Srish: "That is not our sorrow, Rasik Babu. We are thinking about how little help we are actually being. We aren't able to remove all your future anxieties."

Rasik: "Nonsense! By doing this, you are binding two helpless women in lifelong gratitude—while remaining completely unbound yourselves."

Jagattarini: (From the next room, in a hushed voice) "Ugh, Nep, stop being so childish! Quickly, wipe your tears and go into the room! My sweet girl—just think how awful you'll look if you cry and make your eyes red!—Niru, go on! I can't deal

with you two anymore! How long are you going to keep respectable gentlemen waiting? What will they think?"

Srish: "Do you hear that, Rasik Babu? This is unbearable! The Rajput custom of female infanticide is better than this."

Bipin: "Rasik Babu, whatever you ask us to do to save them completely from this crisis, we are ready to do it."

Rasik: "Nothing at all, I won't trouble you any further! Just get through today—after that, you won't have to worry about a thing."

Srish: "We won't have to worry? What are you saying, Rasik Babu! Are we made of stone? From today onwards, we will earn the special right to worry about them."

Bipin: "If we remain indifferent towards them after an incident like this, we are cowards."

Srish: "Worrying about them from now on is a matter of pride for us—a matter of honor."

Rasik: "Well, that's fine, you may worry, but I suppose you won't have to endure any actual hardship besides worrying."

Srish: "Tell me, Rasik Babu, why are you so opposed to letting us endure any hardship?"

Bipin: "If we have to endure any hardship for their sake, we will consider it an honor."

Srish: "For two days now, Rasik Babu, you have been constantly reassuring us that we won't have to suffer much. We are genuinely hurt by this."

Rasik: "Please forgive me—I will never do something so inconsiderate again; you may endure as much hardship as you please!"

Srish: "Have you still not recognized who we are?"

Rasik: "Of course I have, and that is why you needn't worry in the slightest."

(Nripabala and Nirabala enter, looking hesitant and shy)

Srish: (Bowing respectfully) "Rasik Babu, please ask them to forgive us."

Bipin: "If, even by mistake, we become the cause of their shame or fear, nothing could be more sorrowful for us. Therefore, if they do not forgive us, then—"

Rasik: "Nonsense! Don't increase the guilt of these offenders by asking for their forgiveness. They are young; if they have suddenly forgotten how to greet honored guests and are standing with their heads bowed, please don't imagine any ill-will on their part and make them even more embarrassed. Sister Nripa, Sister Niru—what do you say, my dears! Even though your eyelashes haven't dried yet, may I let them know that your hearts are not averse to them?"

(Nripa and Niru remain shy and silent).

"No, I need to ask them privately." (Aside to the girls) "What should I tell the gentlemen now, my dears? Shall I say, 'Please leave as quickly as you can'?"

Nirabala: (Softly) "Rasik-dada, you babble endlessly! Did we say that? Did we even know they were coming?"

Rasik: (To Srish and Bipin) "They are saying—"

Oh friend, what is written in my fate! Fearing the heat of the scorching sun, I trembled at the sight of the moon's gentle light!

"Do you have anything to add to this?"

Nirabala: (Aside) "Ugh, Rasik-dada, you just say whatever comes to mind! When did we ever say that?"

Rasik: (To Srish and Bipin) "They are reprimanding me because I haven't been able to fully express their feelings. They wish to say that calling it 'the moon's gentle light' is not enough—if only it were even more—"

Nirabala: (Aside) "If you keep doing this, we will leave."

Rasik: "My dear friends, *'It is not proper to depart at will, leaving a special guest unhonored!'* (To Srish and Bipin) They are saying that if I express their true feelings to you, they will have to leave the room out of sheer shyness."

(Nripa and Niru make a move to leave)

Srish: "Why would you punish the innocent for Rasik Babu's crimes? We certainly haven't shown any impertinence."

(Nripa and Niru pause, caught in a state of 'neither going nor staying')

Bipin: (Addressing Niru) "If there has been any past offense, will you not even give me an opportunity to ask for forgiveness?"

Rasik: (Aside) "The poor fellow has been waiting a long time for an opportunity just to get this bit of forgiveness—"

Nirabala: (Aside) "What offense has been committed that I should need to forgive him?"

Rasik: (To Bipin) "She is saying that your offense was so charming that she didn't even notice it as an offense! But if I had dared to steal that notebook, it would have been a crime—the law has a special section for that sort of thing."

Bipin: "Do not be jealous, Rasik Babu! You constantly get opportunities to commit offenses and consider yourself blessed to suffer the punishment for them. I, by a stroke of luck, got the chance to commit an offense, but I am so lowly that I wasn't even deemed worthy of punishment, nor did I earn the qualification to be forgiven!"

Rasik: "Bipin Babu, do not despair entirely. Punishment often arrives late, but it arrives for certain. You might not get off the hook so easily."

(A servant enters)

Servant: "The snacks are ready."

(Nripa and Niru exit)

Srish: "Have we arrived from a famine-struck country, Rasik Babu? Why this sudden rush for snacks!"

Rasik: "All things must end on a sweet note."

Srish: (Sighing) "But the ending is not sweet at all." (Aside to Bipin) "But Bipin, we cannot leave after deceiving them!"

Bipin: (Aside) "If we do that, we are scoundrels."

Srish: (Aside) "What is our duty now?"

Bipin: (Aside) "Does that even need to be asked?"

Rasik: "I see you gentlemen have gotten scared! Have no fear, in the end, no matter what it takes, I will rescue you."

(All exit)

(Enter Akshay and Jagattarini)

Jagattarini: "Did you see, my boy, what fine young men they are?"

Akshay: "Mother, your taste is excellent, I cannot deny that."

Jagattarini: "Did you see the girls' behavior, my boy! Now all that crying and wailing has completely vanished into thin air!"

Akshay: "That is exactly their fault. But Mother, you must go and bless the two boys and see them for yourself."

Jagattarini: "Will that be proper, Akshay? Have they expressed their approval?"

Akshay: "They have expressed it very clearly. Now, if you just go in and bless them, it will be finalized in an instant!"

Jagattarini: "Very well, if you say so, I will go. I am the age of their mother, what do I have to be shy about."

(Purabala enters)

Purabala: "I've arranged the food and come back. I couldn't even see which room they were seated in."

Jagattarini: "What can I say, Puri, they are boys like the golden moon!"

Purabala: "I knew it. Could Niru and Nripa be destined for bad boys?"

Akshay: "They've caught a bit of the good luck of their eldest sister, that's all."

Purabala: "Alright, stop it. Go on, go and chat with them a bit.—But where did Shaila go?"

Akshay: "She's so happy that she has locked her door and sat down to pray."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Akshay: "What is the matter? Rasik-da, you seem to be feeding people quite lavishly these days. Have you suddenly forgotten the man you see twice a day?"

Rasik: "They are enjoying the affection of new guests; they are happy with whatever is served to them. Your novelty has worn off; I no longer have the power to delight you anew, my brother!"

Akshay: "But I heard that two obscure young men were supposed to appear today to empty out all the sweets and the un-tasted honey of this family—are these gentlemen usurping their share? I say, Rasik-da, you haven't made a mistake, have you?"

Rasik: "I am famous precisely for making mistakes. Elder Mother knows that whatever her old Rasik-kaka touches will surely go wrong."

Akshay: "What are you saying, Rasik-dada? What have you done? Where did you send those two boys?"

Rasik: "By mistake, I gave them the wrong address!"

Akshay: "What will become of those poor fellows?"

Rasik: "No great harm will come to them. By now, they are probably finishing their snacks at Nilmadhav Chowdhury's house in Kumartuli. Banamali Bhattacharya has taken charge of looking after them."

Akshay: "I see. It seems the sweets have landed on everyone's plates, but your own 'snack' is going to be rather bitter. Better correct your mistake while you still can. Srish Babu, Bipin Babu, please don't mind; there is a bit of a family secret involved here."

Srish: "The simple-hearted Rasik Babu has already revealed that secret to us. He hasn't brought us here under false pretenses."

Bipin: "We haven't made an unauthorized attack on the platter of sweets; we are prepared to provide proof of that until the very end."

Akshay: "What are you saying, Bipin Babu? Does that mean you've come here to make the Bachelors' Club weep for the rest of its life? Knowingly? Willingly?"

Rasik: "No, no, you are mistaken, Akshay!"

Akshay: "Another mistake? Is today the designated day for everyone to make mistakes?"

(He sings)

Through mistake after mistake, the day is full of errors! On the vine of blunders, blown by the mistaken breeze, May flower upon flower bloom in error's ease! Let the waves of joy in the sea of mistakes, Overflow and flood the shores, for goodness' sake!

Rasik: "Oh my, Elder Mother is coming!"

Akshay: "As she should. She certainly isn't going to the Kumartuli address."

(Jagattarini enters)

Srish and Bipin bow down to the ground to touch her feet. Jagattarini blesses them both, giving them each a gold coin. She then converses quietly with Akshay.

Akshay: "Mother says you haven't eaten well today; everything has been left on your plates."

Srish: "We asked for second helpings and ate them."

Bipin: "What's left on the plate is the third installment."

Srish: "If that hadn't been left on the plates, we would have been left lying on the floor."

Jagattarini: (Aside to Akshay) "In that case, you sit with them and talk, my boy, I shall take my leave."

(She exits)

Rasik: "No, this is highly unfair."

Akshay: "What is unfair?"

Rasik: "I repeatedly assured them that they would merely have their meal today and then be free to go, that there was no fear of being bound by any ties. But—"

Srish: "Where is the 'but' in this, Rasik Babu? Why are you so worried?"

Rasik: "What are you saying, Srish Babu? When I have given you my word—"

Bipin: "Well, it's fine, have you really put us in such terrible danger!"

Srish: "May we be worthy of the blessing Mother just bestowed upon us."

Rasik: "No, no, Srish Babu, that won't do at all. The fact that you felt obligated out of politeness—"

Bipin: "Rasik Babu, do not do us an injustice—obligated?"

Rasik: "If not an obligation, what is it, sir! That absolutely will not do. I would rather go and rescue those two boys from Banamali's clutches in Kumartuli and bring them back right now, yet—"

Srish: "What offense have we committed against you, Rasik Babu?"

Rasik: "No, no, this isn't about offense. You are gentlemen who have taken a vow of celibacy; coming to help others at my request, only to finally—"

Bipin: "Only to finally help ourselves—you just can't bear that, can you? What a benevolent friend!"

Srish: "Why are you trying to deprive us of what we are accepting as our good fortune?"

Rasik: "Do not blame me in the end."

Bipin: "We certainly will, if you don't calm down and assist in this auspicious event."

Rasik: "I am still warning you—"

Gatam tadgambhīryam tatamapi chitam jālikashataih. Sakhe hamsottishtha, tvaritamamuto gaccha sarasah.

(Where has that gravity gone? The shores are surrounded by a hundred net-casters. Rise, O swan, my friend, and quickly depart from this lake).

Srish: "Absolutely not. Even if you hurl Sanskrit verses at us, the friend-swans are not moving from here."

Rasik: "The place is dangerous, true. No way to move. I am sitting here immobilized, alas, alas—"

Ayi kuranga tapovanavibhramāt Upagatāsi kirātapurīmimām. (O deer, mistaking it for a hermit's grove, You have wandered into this city of hunters).

(A servant enters)

Servant: "Chandra Babu has arrived."

Akshay: "Bring him right here."

(The servant exits)

Rasik: "Let the two thieves be handed over straight to the police inspector."

(Chandra Babu enters)

Chandra: "Ah, you are all here. I see Purna Babu as well."

Akshay: "No, sir, I am not Purna, though I am indeed Akshay."

Chandra: "Akshay Babu! Well, that's excellent, we needed you too."

Akshay: "If you can put a useless man like me to use, then I'm at your service—tell me what needs to be done."

Chandra: "I have thought it over; if we do not abolish the rule of celibacy from our club, we will be keeping the society far too narrow. We need to explain this properly to Srish Babu and Bipin Babu."

Akshay: "A very difficult task, I doubt I'll be able to manage it."

Chandra: "Just because we once accepted an idea as good doesn't mean we should throw away our power to abandon it. The power of judgment is greater than a mere opinion. Srish Babu, Bipin Babu—"

Srish: "It is unnecessary to tell us any more—"

Chandra: "Why unnecessary? Will you not even listen to reason?"

Bipin: "We are entirely of your opinion—"

Chandra: "I admit my opinion was once flawed, and you are still holding onto that old—"

Rasik: "Ah, here comes Purna Babu. Come in, come in."

(Purna enters)

Chandra: "Purna Babu, we have gathered here today specifically to abolish the vow of celibacy from our club, just as you proposed. But Srish Babu and Bipin Babu are incredibly resolute; if only we can make them understand—"

Rasik: "I have spared no effort in trying to make them understand, Chandra Babu—"

Chandra: "If an orator like you has yielded no results, then—"

Rasik: "The results I have yielded are 'known by their fruits' (*phalena parichiyate*)."

Chandra: "I don't quite understand what you are saying."

Akshay: "I say, Rasik-da, it is necessary to explain this very clearly to Chandra Babu. I am bringing two pieces of direct, tangible proof right now."

(He exits)

Srish: "Purna Babu, are you well?"

Purna: "Yes."

Bipin: "You look a bit pale."

Purna: "No, it's nothing."

Srish: "Your exams aren't far off now."

Purna: "No."

(Akshay enters, leading Nripabala and Nirabala)

Akshay: (To Nripa and Niru) "This is Chandra Babu, he is your elder, bow to him." (Nripa and Niru bow). "Chandra Babu, under the new rules, these two members have been added to your club."

Chandra: "I am very glad. Who are they?"

Akshay: "My relationship with them is very close. They are my two sisters-in-law. Their relationship with Srish Babu and Bipin Babu will become even closer at an auspicious hour. Just looking at them, you will understand that Rasik Babu changed the minds of these two youths using something more than mere eloquence."

Chandra: "This is a matter of great joy."

Purna: "Srish Babu, I am so happy! Bipin Babu, you are very fortunate! I hope Abalakanta Babu hasn't been deprived either, I hope he too has a—"

(Nirmala enters)

Chandra: "Nirmala, you'll be happy to hear that a marriage alliance has been finalized between Srish Babu, Bipin Babu, and these young ladies. Therefore, it is entirely unnecessary to even raise the proposal about abolishing the vow of celibacy."

Nirmala: "But Abalakanta Babu's opinion hasn't been taken—I don't see him here—"

Chandra: "That's true, I had completely forgotten about that. Why hasn't he arrived yet today?"

Rasik: "Do not worry; seeing his transformation will surprise you even more."

Akshay: "Chandra Babu, this time you must take me into the group as well. The club has become so desirable, you won't be able to keep me away now."

Chandra: "Having you is our good fortune."

Akshay: "Along with me, you will get one more member. I absolutely could not get her to attend today's meeting. She won't make herself so easily available now—after she has offered her final oblations to the ghost of the former Bachelors' Club in the bridal chamber, perhaps she'll make an appearance. Once the remaining member arrives, our Bachelors' Club will be completely finished!"

(Shaila enters)

Shaila: (Bowing to Chandra Babu) "Please forgive me."

Srish: "What is this, Abalakanta Babu—"

Akshay: "You have merely changed your opinions; she has merely changed her attire."

Rasik: "Just as the Goddess Bhavani (Shaila-ja) took on the guise of a hunter-woman for a time, today she has once again taken up the garb of an ascetic woman."

Chandra: "Nirmala, I don't understand any of this."

Nirmala: "Unfair! Highly unfair! Abalakanta Babu—"

Akshay: "Nirmala Devi has spoken truly—it is unfair! But that is the Creator's unfairness. She really ought to have been Abalakanta, but what divine good God is achieving by making her the widowed Shailabala is a mystery beyond our understanding."

Shaila: (To Nirmala) "I have done a wrong, how can I ever make amends for it? I hope, in time, everything will be rectified."

Purna: (Approaching Nirmala) "Taking this opportunity, I ask for your forgiveness. The audacity I expressed in my letter to Chandra Babu was wrong of me—someone as unworthy as I—"

Chandra: "It wasn't wrong at all, Purna Babu. If Nirmala cannot understand your worth, then it is Nirmala's lack of judgment."

(Nirmala stands silently with her head bowed)

Rasik: (Aside to Purna) "Fear not, Purna Babu, your petition has been approved; you've received the decree from the Court of Marriage—you can go out and execute it first thing tomorrow morning."

Srish: (To Shailabala) "You tricked us grandly."

Bipin: "You had your fun with us before the ties were even made."

Shaila: "That doesn't mean you'll be let off the hook later."

Bipin: "We don't want to be let off."

Rasik: "And so the play concludes—let us pronounce the final benediction right here—"

Sarvastaratu durgāṇi sarvo bhadraṇi paśyatu.

Sarvaḥ kāmānavāpnotu sarvaḥ sarvatra nandatu.

(May everyone overcome all difficulties, may everyone see goodness. May everyone attain their desires, may everyone rejoice everywhere).