

Novel

THE GARDEN

MALANCHIA

Rabindranath Tagore



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THE GARDEN 1

Pillows were propped up behind her. Neeraja lay half-reclined on her sickbed. A white silk sheet was drawn over her legs, resembling the pale moonlight of the third lunar night slipping beneath thin clouds. Her complexion was as pale as a conch shell, her bangles hung loose; fine blue veins traced her frail hands, and the shadows of prolonged illness clung to her thick eyelashes.

The floor was paved in white marble. A portrait of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa hung on the wall. Aside from a bedstead, a small teapoy, two cane stools, and a clothes rack in one corner, the room was bare of furniture. In another corner, a cluster of tuberose stood in a brass pitcher, their faint fragrance trapped within the room's stifled air.

The east-facing window was open. Down below, the garden's orchid house was visible—built of woven bamboo splits, with *Aparajita* vines clinging to its sides. Not far away, by the lake, a water pump hummed; water murmured as it coursed through the narrow channels along the borders of the flowerbeds. In the scent-heavy mango grove, a cuckoo called out with desperate persistence.

At the garden gates, the midday bell struck—*dong, dong*. Its resonant tone perfectly matched the blazing sun. The gardeners now had a break until three o'clock. The sound of that bell made Neeraja's heart ache; a profound wistfulness washed over her mind. The maid came to shut the door. "No, no, let it be," Neeru said. She kept staring at the dappled play of sunlight and shadow scattered beneath the trees.

Her husband, Aditya, had made quite a name for himself in the floriculture business. From the day after their wedding, Neeraja's love and her husband's love had merged through various streams—in the nurturing and the myriad chores of this very garden. Through the foliage and blooms here, their united joy had constantly taken on new shapes and fresh beauty. Just as an exile eagerly awaits letters from friends on mail-delivery days, season after season, they too had waited for the clustered greetings of newly blooming trees.

Today, Neeraja could only recall the pictures of those days. It had not been that long ago, yet it felt like the history of another epoch, lying far across an endless, desolate expanse.

On the western edge of the garden stood an ancient *Mahanim* tree. There used to be another neem tree paired with it; it had withered and fallen long ago, so its stump had been leveled off to fashion a small table. That was where the two of them would have their morning tea; sunlight, filtered through the green branches, would fall at their feet. Mynahs and squirrels would show up, begging for morsels. Afterward, the two would set about the garden's various chores. Neeraja would hold a floral silk parasol over her head, while Aditya wore a *sola topi*, a pair of pruning shears tucked into his waist.

When friends came visiting, social pleasantries mingled seamlessly with their gardening. Visitors would often remark, "I'm telling you honestly, brother, your dahlias make me jealous." Someone else might naively ask, "Are those sunflowers?" Immensely pleased, Neeraja would laugh and reply, "No, no, those are marigolds." A pragmatic elder had once remarked, "How did you grow such massive *Motia* jasmines, Neeraja Devi? You have magic in your hands. These look like *Tagar* flowers!" The connoisseur received his reward; utterly ignoring the gardener Hala's scowls, he walked away with five whole pots of jasmine plants.

How often had they led captivated friends on tours through their bowers—the flower garden, the orchard, the vegetable patch. At parting, Neeraja would fill their baskets with roses, magnolias, and carnations, along with papayas, limes, and wood apples—the famous wood apples of their garden. Finally, in the proper season, out came the green coconut water. The thirsty guests would say, "What sweet water!" The reply would be, "Coconuts from the trees in my garden." And everyone would chime in, "Ah, no wonder!"

The fragrant memories of changing seasons, mingling with the steam of Darjeeling tea beneath those dawn-lit trees, now merged with her heavy sighs, weeping in despair within her mind. She longed to tear back those golden, sunlit days from whichever bandit had stolen them. Why couldn't her rebellious mind find a tangible enemy to confront? She was not the sort of woman to quietly bow her head and accept her fate like a docile victim. Who was responsible for this? What cosmic

child? What colossal madman? Who could have so pointlessly and wantonly overturned such a perfectly complete creation?

Ten years had passed since their wedding in an uninterrupted stream of unalloyed happiness. Her female friends had secretly envied her; they thought she had secured far more than what her so-called "market value" warranted. Male friends would tell Aditya, "Lucky dog."

The first time the sails of Neeraja's domestic bliss hit a sudden snag and nearly ran aground involved their dog, 'Dolly'. Before the lady of the house arrived, Dolly had been her husband's sole companion in his bachelor days. Eventually, her devotion was divided between the couple, though the lion's share fell to Neeraja. The moment the dog saw a carriage pull up at the door, her mood would sour. With frantic wags of her tail, she would lodge her protest against the impending excursion. Her audacity to jump into the carriage uninvited was instantly quelled by a mere warning gesture of her mistress's index finger. Letting out a deep sigh, she would curl up with her tail wrapped around her disappointment, lying idle by the door. If they were late returning, she would wander about, lifting her head to sniff the air, throwing up a pitiful question to the heavens in the unspoken language of dogs. Ultimately, the dog was suddenly struck by an unknown illness, and in the end, maintaining a steady, agonized gaze at their faces, she died with her head resting in Neeraja's lap.

Neeraja's love possessed a fierce obstinacy. That even Providence could intervene against that love was beyond her imagination. Until now, she had unquestioningly trusted her favorable domestic life. There had been no reason for that trust to waver. But today, when the unthinkable happened and even Dolly could die, the first crack appeared in the walls of her fortress. It felt like the gateway for ill omens. She felt that the master of the universe was fickle-minded—that even His apparent blessings could no longer be trusted.

Everyone had given up hope of Neeraja ever having a child. Just as Neeraja's thwarted maternal instincts were swirling intensely around Ganesh, the son of a dependent, and just as the boy could no longer bear the restless brunt of her affections, the prospect of a child materialized. Inwardly, the mother's heart swelled to the brim; the horizon of the future flushed crimson with the dawn-light

of new life, and sitting beneath the trees, Neeraja devoted herself to sewing various little garments for the new arrival.

Finally, the time for delivery arrived. The midwife sensed an impending crisis. Aditya became so frantic that the doctor had to reprimand him and keep him at bay. Surgery was required; the child was sacrificed to save the mother.

From then on, Neeraja could never rise again. Like a dying summer river reduced to a bed of sand in the sweltering month of *Baisakh*, her anemic body lay utterly exhausted. Her once-boundless vitality was rendered completely bankrupt. The window facing her bed remained open; the hot breeze brought the fragrance of *Muchukunda* flowers, and sometimes the sigh of pomelo blossoms, as though the distant spring days of her past were softly whispering to her, "How are you?"

What struck her the hardest was seeing that Sarala, Aditya's distant cousin, had to be brought in to help manage the garden. Whenever she looked through the open window and saw Sarala—wearing a sun-hat embroidered with mica and silk—supervising the gardeners, she could not bear her own useless, crippled limbs. And yet, in her healthy days, it was this very Sarala she would invite season after season to celebrate the planting of new saplings. Work would begin at dawn. This was followed by a swimming bath in the lake, then eating off banana leaves beneath the trees, while a gramophone played tunes both local and foreign. The gardeners would be treated to yogurt, flattened rice, and sweet *sandesh*. Their cheerful chatter would echo from under the tamarind tree. Gradually, the sun would dip, the lake water shivering in the afternoon breeze; birds would call from the branches of the *Bakul* tree, and the day would conclude in a state of blissful exhaustion.

Why had the essence within her soul, once purely sweet, turned so bitter today? Just as her current frail body was alien to her, this harsh, unfeeling disposition was not her familiar nature either. There was no grace in this temperament. Now and then, this spiritual poverty became glaringly obvious to her, filling her mind with intense shame, yet she could not control it. She feared that Aditya was perhaps noticing this pettiness; that one day he might clearly see that Neeraja's present mind was like a fruit scarred by a bat's beak—unfit for any noble offering.

The midday bell struck again. The gardeners departed. The entire garden was completely deserted. Neeraja kept staring into the distance, where not even the

mirage of a false hope shimmered; where, under the shadowless sun, there was only the endless repetition of emptiness upon emptiness.

THE GARDEN 2

"Roshni!" Neeraja called out.

The *ayah* (maid) entered the room. She was a middle-aged woman with salt-and-pepper hair, wearing thick brass bangles on her strong wrists and an *odhni* draped over her *ghaghra*. The posture of her lean frame and the dry expression on her face carried a permanent, unyielding hardness. It was as if she sat in her own private courtroom, constantly passing judgment against the rest of the household. She had raised Neeraja; all her devotion was reserved solely for her. Toward anyone else who came near her mistress—even Neeraja's husband—she harbored a vigilant hostility.

Entering the room, she asked, "Shall I fetch you some water, *Khokhi*?"

"No, sit." The *ayah* sat on the floor, her knees drawn up.

Neeraja needed to talk, which was why she needed the *ayah*. Roshni was merely the vehicle for her soliloquies.

Neeraja said, "I heard the sound of the door opening early this morning."

The *ayah* said nothing, but her exasperated expression clearly meant, *When do we not?*

Neeraja asked an unnecessary question, "He must have gone to the garden with Sarala?"

She already knew the answer, yet she asked the same question every day. The *ayah* simply twisted her mouth, flipped her hand in dismissal, and remained silent.

Staring out the window, Neeraja began to speak as if to herself. "He used to wake me at dawn too, and I would go to work in the garden, right at that very hour. That wasn't so long ago."

No one expected the *ayah* to join this discussion, yet she couldn't hold back. "Would the garden dry up if he didn't take her along?" she muttered.

Neeraja went on murmuring to herself, "Not a single day passed without me dispatching the morning shipment of flowers to the New Market. The shipment went out today too; I heard the cart. Who oversees the shipments these days, Roshni?"

The ayah offered no reply to a question whose answer they both already knew. She sat there with her lips pressed tightly together.

Neeraja said to her, "Whatever else happened, as long as I was there, the gardeners could never slack off."

Roshni bristled and said, "Those days are gone. Now, they are looting with both hands."

"Is that really true?"

"Would I lie to you? Barely a handful of flowers actually reach the new market in Calcutta. The moment the son-in-law leaves the house, the gardeners set up their own flower market right at the back gate."

"Does no one see this?"

"Who cares enough to look?"

"Why don't you tell him?"

"Who am I to speak up? I have to keep my dignity, don't I? Why don't *you* tell him? It's all yours, after all."

"Let it be, let it be. It's fine. Let it go on like this for a while, and when everything is ruined, they'll get caught. The time will come when they'll realize that a stepmother's love is never greater than a mother's. Just keep quiet."

"But I must say, *Khokhi*, you can't get a lick of honest work out of that gardener of yours, Hala."

Hala's negligence wasn't the only reason for the ayah's irritation; the much graver issue was Neeraja's disproportionately growing affection for him.

Neeraja replied, "I don't blame the gardener. Why should he tolerate a new master? They've been gardeners for seven generations, and now your educated young lady comes waving her book-learning around to give orders—how is he

supposed to accept that? Hala refuses to follow these bizarre new rules; he comes and complains to me. I tell him to turn a deaf ear and keep quiet."

"The other day, the master was about to fire him."

"Why? What for?"

"He was sitting around smoking a *bidi* while a stray cow wandered in and started eating the plants right in front of him. When the master asked, 'Why aren't you chasing the cow away?', he talked back to his face: 'Why should I chase the cow? The cow is the one chasing me! I value my life!'"

Neeraja laughed upon hearing this. "That's just how he talks. Anyway, I trained him with my own hands."

"The master only tolerates him for your sake. Let cows or rhinos chase him, but indulging him this much isn't good, I'm telling you."

"Quiet, Roshni. Do you think I don't understand the sorrow that kept him from chasing away that cow? There's a fire burning in his chest. Look, there goes Hala with a towel wrapped around his head. Call him here."

At the ayah's summons, Haladhar the gardener entered the room. Neeraja asked, "So, are there any new orders today?"

Hala replied, "Of course there are. You'd laugh to hear them, but they'd bring tears to your eyes too."

"Let's hear it, then."

"You know that old Mallick house being torn down across the way? I've been ordered to fetch the broken brickbats from there and spread them under the trees. That's her command. I told her the trees will get too hot in the sun. She doesn't listen to a word I say."

"Why don't you tell the master?"

"I did tell the master. He just scolded me and told me to shut up. *Boudidi* (sister-in-law), just grant me leave. I can't bear it anymore." He began scratching his head. "A letter came from my village... my best plowing cow died."

Neeraja said, "No, it hasn't died, it's perfectly fine. Here, take these two rupees and stop your chattering." She took the money from a brass box on the teapoy and handed it to him.

"What now?"

"An old sari for my wife. She'd sing your praises." He smiled widely, revealing teeth stained black from chewing betel leaves.

Neeraja said, "Roshni, give him that sari from the rack."

Roshni shook her head vigorously. "What are you saying! That's your fine *Dhakai* sari!"

"Let it be a *Dhakai* sari. All saris are the same to me now. When will I ever wear it again?"

Her face set in stubborn lines, Roshni said, "No, absolutely not. I'll give him that red-bordered mill-cloth of yours. Listen here, Hala, if you keep pestering *Khokhi* like this, I'll tell the master and have you thrown out."

Hala grasped Neeraja's feet and whined tearfully, "My luck is broken, *Boudidi*."

"Why, what's happened to you?"

"I call Ayah-ji my aunt. I don't have a mother; all this time I thought Ayah-ji loved this wretched Hala. Today, *Boudidi*, when you showed me kindness, why does she have to interfere? It's not her fault, it's just my rotten luck. Otherwise, why would you be lying in this bed, leaving your Hala at the mercy of strangers!"

"Don't fear, your aunt really does love you. She was just singing your praises before you walked in. Roshni, give him that sari, or he'll just lie here and strike."

With an extremely sour face, the ayah brought the sari and threw it in front of him. Hala picked it up and offered a deep, reverent bow. Then he stood up and said, "Let me wrap it in this towel, *Boudidi*. My hands are dirty, they'll leave a stain." Without waiting for permission, he snatched a towel from the rack, wrapped the sari in it, and made a swift exit.

Neeraja asked the ayah, "Tell me, Ayah, are you certain the master has left?"

"Saw it with my own eyes. He was in such a rush, he even forgot to take his hat."

"This is the first time. For the very first time, I was cheated out of my morning flowers. Day by day, this deprivation will only grow. In the end, I'll be tossed into the ash heap of my own home, a place for burnt-out coals."

Seeing Sarala approaching, the ayah twisted her face and walked away.

Sarala entered the room. In her hand was an orchid. The flower was white, its petals tipped with streaks of purple. It looked like a giant butterfly with its wings spread wide. Sarala was tall and slender, with a dusky complexion. The first thing one noticed about her were her large, bright, yet sorrowful eyes. She wore a coarse *khadi* sari; her hair was tied carelessly, slipping loosely down her shoulders. Her unadorned body seemed to treat the arrival of her youth with total neglect.

Neeraja did not look at her face. Sarala gently placed the flower on the bed in front of her.

Making no effort to hide her irritation, Neeraja said, "Who asked you to bring this?"

"Adit-da."

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"He had to rush to the shop in New Market right after tea."

"What was the rush?"

"News came last night that the office locks were broken and money was stolen."

"Couldn't he have spared just five minutes, even if he was pressed for time?"

"Your pain was worse last night. You fell asleep at dawn. He came right up to the door and then turned back. He told me that if he couldn't make it back by noon, I should give this flower to you."

Every day, before starting his work, Aditya would leave a specially selected flower on his wife's bed. Neeraja waited for it every single day. Today's special flower had been handed over to Sarala. It never occurred to Aditya that the true value of the flower lay in the hands that offered it. Even water from the holy Ganges loses its sanctity if dispensed through a plumbing pipe.

Neeraja pushed the flower away with contempt. "Do you know how much this flower costs in the market? Send it there. What's the point of wasting it?" As she spoke, her voice grew heavy.

Sarala understood the situation perfectly. She knew that any reply would only increase the force of Neeraja's anguish, not lessen it. She stood there in silence.

A moment later, Neeraja abruptly asked, "Do you know the name of this flower?"

Sarala could have simply said, 'No, I don't', but perhaps her pride was slightly wounded. She said, "Amaryllis."

With unjustified fury, Neeraja snapped, "You think you know so much! Its name is Grandiflora."

Sarala replied softly, "Perhaps it is."

"What do you mean, 'perhaps it is'? It *certainly* is. Are you trying to say I don't know?"

Sarala knew that Neeraja had deliberately given the wrong name just to provoke an argument—tormenting someone else to soothe her own torment. She silently accepted defeat and was slowly walking out of the room when Neeraja called her back.

"Listen here. What were you doing all morning? Where were you?"

"In the orchid house."

Neeraja's voice rose in agitation. "What urgent need requires you to visit the orchid house so often?"

"Adit-da asked me to divide the old orchids and propagate new ones."

Neeraja scolded her sharply, "You'll ruin everything with your clumsy hands. I personally trained Hala the gardener; if you had just ordered him, couldn't he have done it?"

There was no answering this. The honest truth was that Hala worked perfectly well under Neeraja's command, but he absolutely refused to work under Sarala. He even went out of his way to insult her with his indifference. The gardener had figured out that the best way to please his former mistress was to do a terrible job under

the new one. It was as if boycotting the college and failing the exams had become more valuable than earning the degree.

Sarala could have gotten angry, but she didn't. She understood that her sister-in-law's heart was aching with phantom pain. The garden that had consumed the entirety of this childless mother's heart was now so close after ten years, yet she was exiled from it. A cruel separation playing out right before her eyes.

Neeraja said, "Go, shut that window."

Sarala closed it and asked, "Shall I bring you some orange juice now?"

"No, you don't need to bring anything. You can go now."

Sarala said timidly, "It's time for your *Makaradhwaj* medicine."

"No, I don't need the *Makaradhwaj*. Do you have any other orders for the garden?"

"I need to plant the rose cuttings."

Neeraja taunted her slightly, "And this is the time for it, is it? I'd like to know who gave him that brilliant idea."

Sarala said softly, "Seeing a sudden influx of orders from the districts, he is determined to produce as many plants as possible before the monsoon arrives. I tried to dissuade him."

"You tried to dissuade him, did you! Alright, alright, call Hala the gardener."

Hala arrived. Neeraja said, "Have you become a fine gentleman? Do your hands cramp at the thought of planting rose cuttings? Is the young lady supposed to be your assistant gardener now? You will plant as many cuttings as you can before the master returns from the city. I'm telling you, there is no break for you today. Mix sand with burnt grass and leaves, and prepare the soil on the right bank of the lake." In her mind, she resolved that even while lying in this bed, she would raise those rose plants herself. Hala the gardener would have no escape.

Suddenly, Hala's face broke into an indulgent smile. "*Boudidi*, look at this brass pot. Made by Harasundar Maiti of Cuttack. Only you would appreciate the craftsmanship of something like this. It'll make a fine flower vase for you."

Neeraja asked, "How much does it cost?"

Hala bit his tongue in mock horror. "Don't say such things! Would I take money for this pot? I may be poor, but I'm not a cheap man. I survive on your food and clothing."

He placed the pot on the teapoy, took flowers from another vase, and began to arrange them in it. Finally, turning back just as he was about to leave, he said, "I told you about my niece's wedding. Don't forget about the armlet, *Boudidi*. If I give her brass jewelry, it will only bring shame upon you. Being the gardener of such a grand house, marrying off a girl from my home—the whole village is watching."

Neeraja said, "Alright, don't worry, you can go now."

Hala left. Neeraja suddenly turned on her side, buried her face in her pillow, and let out a stifled sob. "Roshni, Roshni, I have become small. My mind has become just like that gardener Hala's."

The ayah said, "What are you saying, *Khokhi*! Shame on you!"

Neeraja went on talking to herself. "My cursed fate dragged me down from the outside, but why has it dragged me down from the inside too? Do I not know how Hala views me today? He played along, flattered me, laughed with me, took his tip, and left. Call him back. I'll give him a harsh scolding, I must put an end to his deviousness."

But as the ayah got up to call Hala, Neeraja said, "Let it be. Let it be for today."

THE GARDEN 3

A little while later, her cousin-in-law Ramen arrived and said, "Boudi, Dada sent me. He's swamped with work at the office today; he'll eat at a hotel and be late returning."

Neeraja smiled and said, "You've come running here using the message as an excuse, *Thakurpo*! Why, has the office peon died?"

"Why would I need any excuse other than you to come here, Boudi? What would that lowly peon understand of the passion of a messenger?"

"Oh, you're scattering your sweetness in the wrong place. What mistake brought you to this room? Your flower-maiden is all alone today in the lemon grove, go and see."

"Let me first pay my respects to the presiding goddess of the grove, then I shall go in search of my flower-maiden." Saying this, he took a novel out of his breast pocket and handed it to Neeraja.

Pleased, Neeraja said, "*Ashru-Shikal* (The Chain of Tears)... this is exactly the book I've been wanting. I bless you, may the flower-maiden of your garden remain forever bound to your heart by a chain of smiles. The one you call the companion of your imagination, the partner of your dreams! Such affection!"

Ramen suddenly said, "Tell me, Boudi, let me ask you something. Answer me truthfully."

"What is it?"

"Did you have a quarrel with Sarala today?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I saw her sitting quietly on the steps by the lake. Women don't have flighty, work-shirking minds like men do. I have never seen Sarala in such an idle state. I asked her, 'Where is your mind wandering?' She replied, 'In the direction the hot wind blows the dry leaves.' I told her, 'That's a riddle. Speak plainly.' She said, 'Do all

words have a language?' A riddle again. Then I remembered the lyrics of that song: '*Whose words have caused such pain?*'"

"Perhaps it was your Dada's words."

"Impossible. Dada is a man. He might roar at those gardeners of yours. But to be a fire consuming a heap of flowers—is that even possible for him?"

"Alright, enough of your nonsense. Let's talk about something practical. You must honor my request. For heaven's sake, marry Sarala. Rescuing a spinster girl will earn you great spiritual merit."

"I have no greed for merit, but I do covet the girl, I swear it to you."

"Then where is the obstacle? Is she not willing?"

"I haven't even asked her that. As I said, she will remain the companion of my imagination; she won't be a companion in my worldly life!"

Suddenly, with intense desperation, Neeraja grabbed Ramen's hand and said, "Why won't she? She must. I absolutely must see you two married before I die, otherwise, I am warning you, I will return as a ghost to torment you both."

Surprised by Neeraja's eagerness, Ramen stared at her face for a moment. Finally, he shook his head and said, "Boudi, I may be younger in relation, but I am older in years. The seeds of weeds drift in on errant winds; if indulged, they put down roots, and after that, who has the power to uproot them?"

"You don't need to lecture me. I am your elder, I am advising you—get married. Do not delay. There are auspicious days this very month of *Falgun*."

"In my almanac, all three hundred and sixty-five days are auspicious. But even if the days are right, there is no road. I've already been to prison once, and I'm still on a slippery slope heading straight back into its clutches. The messenger of the marriage god doesn't tread that path."

"Do you think modern girls are afraid of prison?"

"Perhaps not, but that is not the path for the seven sacred steps of marriage. On that road, keeping the bride in your mind rather than by your side gives you strength. She will remain in my mind forever."

Sarala was about to leave after placing a glass of Horlicks on the teapoy. Neeraja said, "Don't go, listen Sarala, whose photograph is this? Can you recognize it?"

Sarala said, "Why, that is mine."

"A picture of you from those old days. When the two of you used to work in the garden at your uncle's place. Looking at it, it seems you must have been around fifteen. You are wearing your sari tucked up tight like a Marathi girl."

"Where did you find this?"

"I saw it in one of his desks; I didn't pay much attention back then. I had it brought out from there today. *Thakurpo*, Sarala looks far more beautiful now than she did back then. What do you think?"

Ramen replied, "Did a Sarala even exist anywhere back then? At least, I did not know her. To me, the Sarala of today is the only truth. What could I possibly compare her to?"

Neeraja said, "Her present appearance has grown rich and heavy with some deep mystery of the heart—as if the clouds that were once white are now weeping the monsoon rains of *Shravan*—this is what you men call 'romantic', isn't it, *Thakurpo*?"

As Sarala turned to leave, Neeraja said to her, "Sit for a moment, Sarala. *Thakurpo*, let me see Sarala through the eyes of a man for once. Tell me, what catches the eye before anything else?"

Ramen said, "The entirety of her, all at once."

"It must be her two eyes; she knows how to look with such profound depth. No, don't get up, Sarala. Sit just a little longer. Her body, too, is so solid, so perfectly sculpted."

"Have you sat down to auction her off, Boudi? You already know I have no shortage of enthusiasm without all this."

With the zeal of a broker, Neeraja exclaimed, "*Thakurpo*, just look at Sarala's hands—as strong as they are shapely, so soft, so graceful. Have you ever seen anything like them?"

Ramen laughed and said, "Whether I have seen them elsewhere or not, answering that to your face would sound rude."

"Would you not stake a claim on two such hands?"

"I may not lay claim to them for eternity, but I do lay claim to them from moment to moment. Whenever I come to your house for tea, I receive something far greater than tea, simply by the grace of those hands. The slight connection that exists between savoring that flavor and the ritual of accepting a bride's hand—that is quite enough for this unfortunate soul."

Sarala rose from the cane stool. Just as she was about to leave the room, Ramen blocked the doorway and said, "Give me your word on something, only then will I clear the path."

"What is it, tell me."

"Today is the fourteenth day of the bright lunar fortnight. I will come as a traveler to your garden; even if we have things to say, there won't be any need to speak. There is a famine; I don't even get to feast my eyes fully. This sudden, fleeting glimpse in this room like receiving a handful of alms—this is unacceptable. Today, I want to take my time under your trees and fill my heart to the brim."

Sarala replied in an easy tone, "Alright, come then."

Stepping back toward the bed, Ramen said, "I'll take my leave then, Boudi."

"What need is there to stay any longer? The little task your Boudi had for you is quite finished."

Ramen left.

Translator's Notes on Cultural Adaptations:

- **Boudi / Thakurpo:** Maintained throughout the translation. *Boudi* is an affectionate and respectful term for an elder brother's wife. *Thakurpo* is the term a woman uses for her husband's younger brother or younger male cousin.
- **Seven sacred steps (সপ্তপদী গমন):** Translated contextually. The *Saptapadi* is the most crucial rite of a Hindu wedding, where the couple takes seven steps together around the sacred fire.

- **Accepting a bride's hand (পাণিগ্রহণ):** The original text uses a clever wordplay between *rasagrahan* (appreciating flavor/essence) and *panigrahan* (the formal Hindu wedding ritual of the groom taking the bride's hand). Translated to highlight the connection between enjoying the tea she makes and the marriage ritual.
- **Fourteenth day of the bright lunar fortnight (শুক্লাচতুর্দশী):** The night just before the full moon (*Purnima*), traditionally considered a highly romantic and brightly moonlit night in Bengali literature.

THE GARDEN 4

After Ramen left, Neeraja hid her face in her hands and collapsed onto the bed. She began to think: she too had such mind-intoxicating days. How many spring nights had she set astir! Was she just another piece of household furniture to her husband, like most ordinary women? Lying in bed, she kept recalling how often her husband would tug at her curls and murmur in a husky voice, "The *Saki* of my *Rangmahal*." In ten years, that color had not faded a bit; the cup had remained full. Her husband used to tell her, "In ancient times, the Ashoka tree would bloom at the touch of a woman's foot, and the Bakul would blossom from a spatter of wine from her lips. The era of Kalidasa has come alive in my garden. Along the paths where your feet tread, flowers of every hue have bloomed on both sides. You have scattered wine into the spring breeze, and its intoxication has caught the rose garden." He would often say, "If you weren't here, a merchant's shop would have seized this floral paradise like the demon Vritrasura. By my good fortune, you are the Indrani of my celestial garden."

Alas, her youth had not yet ended, but its glory had departed. That was why the Queen of Gods could no longer fill her throne today. Back then, was there even a trace of fear in her mind? Where she stood, there was no one else; in her sky, she was entirely alone, as supreme as the breaking dawn. Today, her heart pounded at the sight of even the slightest shadow; she had no confidence left in herself. Otherwise, who was this Sarala, and what was her pride worth? Yet today, her mind was swaying with suspicion over her too. Who knew such destitution would strike her fate before the day was even done? After showering her with so much happiness and endless glory for so long, the Creator had finally broken in like a thief and stolen back all His gifts.

"Roshni, listen to me."

"What is it, *Khokhi*?"

"Your master used to call me the 'Enchantress of the Pleasure Palace.' We've been married for ten years, and that color hasn't faded yet, but where is that pleasure palace?"

"Where would it go? Your palace is right here. You didn't sleep at all last night; sleep a little now, let me massage your legs."

"Roshni, it's almost the full moon today. How many such moonlit nights have I stayed awake! The two of us used to stroll in the garden. *That* staying awake, and *this* staying awake. Today, I'd give anything to sleep, but this wretched sleep refuses to come."

"Just stay quiet for a bit, sleep will come on its own."

"Tell me, do they stroll in the garden on moonlit nights?"

"I've seen them cutting flowers for the morning shipment. When would they stroll? Where is the time?"

"The gardeners are sleeping quite a lot these days. So they don't wake the gardeners on purpose?"

"You aren't there now; who has the power to lay a hand on them?"

"Wasn't that the sound of a carriage?"

"Yes, the master's carriage is here."

"Hand me the hand-mirror. Bring that large rose from the vase. Let me see where the safety-pin box is. My face looks so terribly pale today. Leave the room now."

"I'm going, but your milk and barley are sitting there, be a dear and drink it."

"Let it sit, I won't drink it."

"You haven't had two doses of your medicine today."

"You don't need to nag, I'm telling you to go, just open that window before you leave."

The ayah left.

The clock struck three—*dong, dong*. The color of the sunlight had turned a deep red; shadows slanted toward the east. The breeze blew in from the south, and the

lake water rippled. The gardeners set to work; Neeraja watched as much as she could from afar.

With quick steps, Aditya rushed into the room. His hands were full of bright yellow Indian laburnum clusters. He covered Neeraja's feet with them. Sitting on the bed, he grasped her hand and said, "It's been so long since I saw you today, Neeru."

Hearing this, Neeraja could no longer hold back; she burst into racking sobs. Aditya got off the bed, knelt on the floor, and wrapped his arms around Neeraja's neck. Kissing her wet cheek, he said, "In your heart, you must surely know it wasn't my fault."

"How can I know anything for sure? Are those days still mine?"

"What is the point of counting the days? You are still the exact same 'you' to me."

"Today I am afraid of everything. I find no strength in my heart."

"It feels good to be a little afraid, doesn't it? You want to provoke me a bit by picking faults. Such wiles are second nature to women."

"And forgetting, I suppose, is second nature to men?"

"But you don't give me the time to forget!"

"Don't say that, don't say that. Thanks to the curse of a wretched Providence, I've given you a very long time indeed."

"You've got it backward. One can forget in days of happiness, not in days of pain."

"Tell me the truth, didn't you just forget and leave this morning?"

"What are you saying? I had to leave, but I had no peace of mind until I returned."

"How awkwardly you're sitting. Lift your feet onto the bed."

"You want to put me in shackles, lest I run away!"

"Yes, I want to shackle you. In life and in death, your feet remain bound to me, without a doubt."

"Doubt me a little bit from time to time; it sweetens the taste of affection."

"No, not even a little doubt. Not the slightest bit. What woman has ever had a husband like you? To doubt you would be to curse myself!"

"Then I shall have to doubt you; otherwise the drama won't build up."

"Do it, I'm not afraid. It will turn into a farce."

"Say what you will, but you were angry with me today."

"Why bring that up again? You don't have to punish me—the sentence has been passed within myself."

"Punishment for what? If the heat of anger doesn't show itself now and then, I'll know the pulse of love has faded."

"If I ever mistakenly get angry at you, know for certain it isn't me, but some evil spirit possessing me."

"We all have an evil spirit inside us; they make themselves known without cause from time to time. If good sense prevails and we chant the name of Lord Rama, they run away."

The ayah entered the room. She said, "Master, *Khokhi* hasn't touched her milk since morning, hasn't taken her medicine, and hasn't let me massage her. If she acts like this, we won't be able to manage her." Saying this, she stomped out, swinging her arms.

Hearing this, Aditya stood up and said, "Shall I be the angry one now?"

"Yes, do it, get very angry, as angry as you can. I've done wrong, but please forgive me afterward."

Aditya walked to the door and called out, "Sarala, Sarala."

Hearing the name, Neeraja felt a jarring shock in her veins. She knew a finger had pressed on a buried thorn.

Sarala entered the room. Aditya asked in annoyance, "You didn't give Neeru her medicine today? She hasn't been given anything to eat all day?"

Neeraja spoke up, "Why are you scolding her? What is her fault? I was the one being naughty and refused to eat, don't scold me either. Sarala, you can go; why stand here and take a scolding for nothing."

"What do you mean, go? Let her fetch the medicine. Let her make the Horlicks and bring it."

"Ah, you work her to death as a gardener all day long, why make her play the nurse on top of that? Have you no pity? Why not call the ayah?"

"Can the ayah do these things properly?"

"It's hardly a tough job, of course she can. She'll do it even better."

"But—"

"But what? Ayah! Ayah!"

"Don't get so agitated. I can see you're going to cause an accident."

"I'll go call the ayah," Sarala said, and left. The words to protest against Neeraja didn't even come to her lips. Aditya too was inwardly surprised; he wondered if Sarala was indeed being overworked unfairly.

Once the medicine and food were dealt with, Aditya told the ayah, "Call Sarala-didi."

"You're constantly calling for Sarala-didi at the drop of a hat. I see you're going to drive the poor girl frantic."

"I have work to discuss."

"Let the work be for now."

"It won't take long."

"Sarala is a woman, what is all this work you need to discuss with her? Why not call Hala the gardener instead?"

"Ever since I married you, I've discovered one thing: women are the true workers, men are useless to the bone. We work out of obligation; you work with heartfelt enthusiasm. I'm thinking of writing a thesis on this. My diary will provide ample examples."

"And how should I condemn the Providence that has deprived that very woman of her life's work today? An earthquake sent the pinnacle of my work crashing down; that's why ghosts have nested in this ruined house."

Sarala arrived. Aditya asked, "Is the work in the orchid house done?"

"Yes, it is."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

"And the rose cuttings?"

"The gardener is preparing the soil for them."

"Soil! I prepared that already. You've left it to Hala the gardener? Well, we'll be cultivating twigs for toothbrushes then."

Interrupting quickly, Neeraja said, "Sarala, go and make some orange juice, put a drop of ginger juice in it, and some honey."

Sarala lowered her head and walked out of the room.

Neeraja asked, "Did you wake up at dawn today, just like we used to?"

"Yes, I did."

"Was the alarm clock wound up just like before?"

"Of course it was."

"Under that neem tree, that sawed-off tree stump. The tea set placed on top of it. Did Basu arrange everything correctly?"

"He did. Otherwise, I would have filed a suit for damages in your court."

"Both stools were laid out."

"They were, just like before. And there was the yellow tea-set with the blue border; the silver milk jug, the sugar in the small white marble bowl, and the Japanese tray painted with dragons."

"Why did you keep the other stool empty!"

"I didn't keep it empty by choice. The stars in the sky were all accounted for, only the moon of the fifth lunar night remained beyond the horizon. If I had the chance, I would have dragged it in."

"Why don't you invite Sarala to your tea table?"

To this, he could have just said, 'I don't have the heart to invite anyone else to your seat.' But being an honest man, instead of saying that, he said, "She probably does some prayers in the morning, she isn't a godless barbarian like me."

"So today, after tea, you took her to the orchid house?"

"Yes, there was some work. I had to rush to the shop right after explaining it to her."

"Listen, let me ask you something, why don't you arrange for Sarala to marry Ramen?"

"Is matchmaking my profession?"

"No, I'm not joking. She has to get married eventually, where will you find a groom like Ramen?"

"The groom is on one side, the bride is on the other, but I haven't had the time to find out if there's any feeling in the middle. From afar, it seems that's where the hitch lies."

With a bit of sharpness, Neeraja said, "There wouldn't be any hitch if you had genuine interest in it."

"The marriage involves two other parties, but the 'genuine interest' has to come entirely from me? How does that work? Why don't you try?"

"Give that girl's eyes a holiday from the plants and trees for a few days, and her gaze will naturally fall on the right place."

"In the light of the auspicious wedding-glance, trees, plants, mountains—everything becomes transparent. It's a kind of X-ray, you could say."

"You're talking nonsense. The truth is, you don't want this marriage to happen."

"Now you've caught me. If Sarala leaves, what will happen to my garden, tell me? One has to think of profit and loss. Oh, what's wrong, did your pain suddenly flare up?"

Aditya became anxious. In a harsh voice, Neeraja said, "Nothing has happened. You don't need to busy yourself so much over me."

Just as her husband was about to get up, she burst out, "That orchid house was founded right after our marriage, you haven't forgotten that, have you? Day by day, the two of us decorated that room together. Doesn't it hurt you even a little to let it be ruined?"

Astonished, Aditya said, "What do you mean? Where did you get the idea that I have any desire to let it be ruined?"

Agitated, Neeraja said, "What does Sarala know about flower gardens?"

"What are you saying! Sarala doesn't know? The uncle in whose house I was raised is Sarala's elder uncle. You know very well I learned my first lessons in his garden. Uncle used to say, flower gardening and milking cows are women's work. She was his companion in all his tasks."

"And you were his companion."

"I was, indeed. But I had to do my college studies, I couldn't devote as much time as she did. Uncle taught her himself."

"And your uncle was ruined because of that very garden. Such is that girl's luck. That's why I'm so afraid. Inauspicious girl. Just look at her—a forehead as wide as a field, a gait like a galloping horse! A masculine intellect in a woman is never good. It brings misfortune."

"What has gotten into you today, Neeru? What are you saying? Uncle knew how to garden, but he didn't know how to run a business. He was unparalleled in flower cultivation, and equally unmatched in making losses for himself. He earned praise from everyone, but no money. When he gave me the capital to start my garden, did I know his funds were already sinking? My only consolation is that I paid it all back before he died."

Sarala brought the orange juice. Neeraja said, "Leave it there." Sarala set it down and left. The glass sat there; Neeraja didn't even touch it.

"Why didn't you marry Sarala?"

"Listen to yourself! The thought of marriage never even crossed my mind."

"Never crossed your mind! Is this your poetic nature?"

"The affliction of poetry first appeared in my life the day I saw you. Before that, the two of us, like two wild creatures, spent our days in the shade of the forest. We were oblivious to ourselves. If we had been raised in modern civilization, who knows what would have happened."

"Why, what is the crime of civilization?"

"Modern civilization is like Dushasana; it seeks to strip the heart bare. It makes one cunning even before they have the chance to feel, by poking fingers in their eyes. The subtle hint of a fragrance is too delicate for it; it demands news by tearing the petals apart."

"Sarala is not bad to look at."

"I knew Sarala simply as Sarala. The question of whether she looked good or bad was entirely superfluous."

"Tell me the truth, didn't you love her?"

"Of course I loved her. Am I an inanimate object that I wouldn't love her? Uncle's son is a barrister in Rangoon, he had no worries about him. His life's desire was that Sarala would stay and tend to his garden. In fact, he believed this garden would occupy her entire heart and soul. She wouldn't feel the need to marry. Then he passed away, Sarala was orphaned, and the garden was sold off to creditors. My heart broke that day, didn't you see? She is someone worthy of love, why wouldn't I love her? I remember, once her face overflowed with radiant smiles. It seemed as if her footsteps were like the flight of a bird. Today, she walks carrying a chest full of burdens, yet she hasn't collapsed. She hasn't breathed a single sigh, not even to me, nor has she given herself the luxury to do so."

Cutting Aditya off, Neeraja said, "Stop, stop, I've heard enough about her from you, you don't have to say anymore. An extraordinary girl. That's why I've said, make her the headmistress of that girls' school in Barasat. They've requested it so many times."

"The girls' school in Barasat? Why, there's the Andamans too."

"No, it's no joke. Give Sarala any other work in your garden if you must, but you cannot give her the work of that orchid house."

"Why, what's happened?"

"I am telling you, Sarala doesn't understand orchids well."

"And I am telling you, Sarala understands them better than I do. Uncle's primary passion was orchids. He sent his own people to fetch orchids from Celebes, from Java, even from China; there was no one else back then who understood their worth like she did."

Neeraja knew this; that was precisely why the words were unbearable to her.

"Fine, fine, very well, perhaps she understands them much better than I do, even better than you. So be it, yet I say that orchid house belongs only to you and me, Sarala has no right there. Why don't you just give your entire garden to her if you really want to; just keep a very tiny portion that is dedicated solely to me. After all this time, I can at least claim this much. Through my doomed fate I may be stuck in this bed today, but that doesn't mean—" She couldn't finish the sentence; burying her face in the pillow, she began to weep uncontrollably.

Aditya was utterly stunned. It was as if he had been walking in a dream all these days, and had suddenly tripped and woken up with a start. What was this? He realized this was the accumulated weeping of many days. A whirlwind of agony had been gathering momentum deep within Neeraja's heart day by day, and Aditya hadn't known it for a single moment. He was such a fool that he thought Neeraja was happy that Sarala could take care of the garden. Especially since she was unparalleled in arranging the flowerbeds with selected blooms according to the seasons.

Today he suddenly remembered: one day when he had praised Sarala for some reason and said, "I could never have planted a *Kamini* hedge so perfectly," Neeraja had laughed sharply and said, "My dear sir, giving someone more credit than they deserve only ends up ruining them in the long run."

Aditya remembered today, if Neeraja could somehow catch a mistake of Sarala's regarding the plants, she would echo it repeatedly with loud laughter. He clearly remembered how Neeraja would scour English books and memorize the bizarre names of lesser-known flowers; she would innocently ask Sarala, and when Sarala made a mistake, Neeraja's peals of laughter would not stop: "Such a great scholar!

Who doesn't know its name is *Cassia Javanica*! My gardener Hala could have told you that."

Aditya sat and thought for a long time. Then he held her hand and said, "Don't cry, Neeru. Tell me what I should do. Do you want me to take Sarala off the garden duties?"

Snatching her hand away, Neeraja said, "I don't want anything, nothing at all. It is your garden after all. You can keep whoever you please, what is it to me?"

"Neeru, how could you say such a thing? My garden? Not yours? Since when did this division arise between us?"

"Since the day you got to keep everything else in the world, and I was left with only this corner of the room. With this broken life of mine, by what strength will I stand before your wonderful Sarala? Where do I have the strength today to serve you, or work in your garden?"

"Neeru, how many times before have you sent for Sarala yourself, asked for her advice? Don't you remember, just a few years ago, the two of you grafted a pomelo with a sweet lime, just to surprise me?"

"She didn't have such arrogance back then. God has cast me into darkness today, and that's why it's suddenly becoming apparent to you that she knows this, she knows that, that I am no match for her when it comes to recognizing orchids. I never heard all these things back then. So why did you come to compare the two of us today, on this day of my misfortune? Why would I be able to compete with her today? On what grounds will we measure equal?"

"Neeru, I was not at all prepared for all that I'm hearing from you today. It feels as though these are not my Neeru's words, as if it's someone else."

"No, no, it is that very Neeru. And even after all these days, you haven't understood her. That is my greatest punishment. The day after our wedding, when I learned that your garden is as dear to you as your life, from that day I kept not a shred of distinction between myself and that garden. Otherwise, I would have had a fierce feud with your garden, I wouldn't have been able to tolerate it. It would have been my co-wife. You know my day-and-night devotion. You know how I merged it into myself. I became entirely one with it."

"Of course I know. You encompass everything that is mine."

"Leave all those words. Today I saw someone else effortlessly enter that garden. And you didn't feel the slightest bit of pain anywhere. Could you even conceive of ripping my body apart just to force someone else's life into it? Is that garden not my own body? If it were me, could I have done such a thing?"

"What would you have done?"

"Shall I tell you what I would have done? The garden might have gone to ruin. The business might have gone bankrupt. I would have hired ten gardeners in place of one, but I would not have let any other woman in, especially someone who harbors the pride that she knows gardening better than I do. You will insult me every day with her arrogance, now when I am sitting on death's door, when I have no way left to prove my strength? Shall I tell you why this was allowed to happen?"

"Tell me."

"Because you love her more than me. You had kept that hidden all this time."

Aditya sat for a while with his fingers buried in his hair. Then, in a bewildered voice, he said, "Neeru, you have known me for ten years, in joy and sorrow, in various situations and through various deeds, and if after all that you can say such a thing today, then I will make no reply. I am leaving. Staying near me will only make your health worse. I'll be in the Japanese room next to the fernery. Send for me when you need me."

Translator's Notes on Cultural Adaptations:

- **Saki of my Rangmahal (রঙমহলের সাকী):** *Saki* refers to a female cupbearer or wine-server in Persian and Urdu poetry, often romanticized. *Rangmahal* is a pleasure palace. The translation preserves the original phrasing to highlight Aditya's poetic and slightly theatrical romanticism.
- **Indrani (ইন্দ্রাণী):** The Queen of the Gods in Hindu mythology, wife of Indra. Nandankanan is the celestial garden of the gods.
- **Dushasana (দুঃশাসন):** A major antagonist in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. Aditya compares modern civilization to Dushasana, referencing the infamous episode where Dushasana attempts to publicly

disrobe Queen Draupadi, drawing a parallel to how modernity "strips the heart bare" without grace or subtlety.

- **The Andamans (আণ্ডামান):** The Andaman Islands served as a notorious penal colony during British rule in India. Aditya uses it sarcastically, implying that banishing Sarala to Barasat is as cruel as exiling her to a prison island.

THE GARDEN 5

The moon was rising behind the *chalta* tree on the opposite bank of the lake, casting a deep, dark shadow over the water. On this side, the tender leaves of the *basanti* tree were as pink as a child's eyes just opened from sleep; its raw-gold flowers emitted a dense fragrance that hung heavy in the air, like a mist of scent. A swarm of fireflies sparkled on the branches of the *jarul* tree. Sarala sat motionless on the paved terrace of the bathing steps. There was no breeze anywhere, not a quiver in the leaves; the water was like a polished silver mirror framed in dark shadows.

A voice asked from behind, "May I come in?"

In a soft voice, Sarala replied, "Come."

Ramen sat on the steps of the *ghat*, near her feet. Startled, Sarala said, "Where have you sat down, Ramen-dada? Come up here."

Ramen replied, "Don't you know the poetic descriptions of goddesses always begin at their lotus feet? If there's room beside you, I'll sit there later. Give me your hand, let me begin the greetings in the English fashion."

He took Sarala's hand and kissed it. "Accept the homage of your subject, Empress."

Then he stood up, took a pinch of *abir* powder, and smeared it on her forehead.

"Now what is this?"

"Don't you know today is *Dol Purnima*, the festival of colors? There is a riot of colors on every tree and branch of your garden. In spring, colors don't just touch people's bodies, they touch their minds. You have to express that color outwardly; otherwise, my forest-goddess, you will remain exiled in your *Ashoka* grove."

"I don't have the skill to play word games with you."

"What need is there for words? The male bird sings, and if you female birds just listen quietly, that is answer enough. Now, let me sit beside you."

He came and sat beside her. They both remained silent for a long time. Suddenly, Sarala asked, "Ramen-da, give me some advice. How does one go to jail?"

"There are so many paths to going to jail these days, and it's so easy, that advising someone on how *not* to go to jail has become the harder task. In this era, the white man's batons don't let anyone sit peacefully at home."

"No, I'm not joking. I've thought about it a lot, and my only escape lies there."

"Tell me clearly what's on your mind."

"I will tell you everything. You would understand perfectly if you had seen Aditya-da's face."

"I have seen a glimpse."

"I was alone on the veranda this afternoon. A catalog with pictures of flowering plants had arrived from America, and I was turning its pages. Every afternoon by four-thirty, Aditya-da finishes his tea and calls me to work in the garden. Today, I saw him wandering around abstractedly; the gardeners were working, but he wasn't even looking at them. It seemed as though he was about to come toward my veranda, but then he hesitated and turned back. Such a strong, tall man, brisk in his walk, vigorous in his work, keeping a watchful eye on everything—a strict master, yet always with a forgiving smile on his face. Today, that man lacked his usual stride; his gaze wasn't on the outside world, he was sinking somewhere deep within his own mind.

"After a long time, he slowly came near. Any other day, he would immediately point to his wristwatch and say, 'It's time,' and I would get up. Today, instead of saying that, he quietly pulled up a chair beside me and sat down. He said, 'Looking at the catalog, I see?' He took the catalog from my hands and began turning the pages. I don't think he actually saw anything. Suddenly, he looked at my face, as if resolving that he simply had to say something right then without further delay. But instantly, dropping his eyes back to the page, he said, 'Have you seen, Sari, how large this nasturtium is?' His voice was filled with deep exhaustion. Then, for a long time, there were no words, only the turning of pages. Once more, he suddenly looked up

at my face, and right then, he snapped the book shut, dropped it on my lap, and stood up. I asked, 'Aren't you going to the garden?' Aditya-da said, 'No, brother, I have to go out, I have some work,' and saying this, he hurried away, as if tearing himself free."

"What do you guess Aditya-da had come to tell you?"

"He came to say: 'Once before, a garden of yours was ruined; now the decree has come, and another garden is destined to be ruined for you.'"

"If that happens, Sari, then I won't have the freedom to go to jail either."

Sarala smiled a pale smile and said, "Can I ever block your path to that? The Emperor himself will keep it clear for you."

"You will lie fallen on the street like a flower torn from its stem, while I march off to prison, dazzling everyone with the clanking of my chains—can that ever be allowed? So, I suppose I must learn to be a good boy at this age."

"What will you do?"

"I will declare war against your ill-omened stars. I will banish them from your horoscope. After that, I'll earn a long vacation, perhaps even across the black waters to the Andamans!"

"I can't hide anything from you. Something has been becoming clear to me for the past few days. I'm going to tell you, please don't take offense."

"If you don't tell me, I'll take offense."

"Since childhood, Aditya-da and I were raised together. Not like brother and sister, but like two brothers. We dug the soil side by side with our own hands, pruned the trees. My aunt and my mother died of typhoid within two or three days of each other; I was six then. My father died two years later. It was my uncle's great desire that I would keep his garden alive with my very life. He raised me exactly for that purpose. He didn't know how to distrust anyone. He had no doubt that the friends he had lent money to would repay it and free the garden from its debts. Only Aditya-da repaid him, no one else. You might know bits and pieces of this history, but today I feel like telling you everything from the very beginning."

"It all feels entirely new to me."

"Then, you know, suddenly everything went under. When I was dragged out of the flood onto dry land, my fate once again anchored itself beside Aditya-da's. We reunited just as before—as two brothers, two friends. Since then, it is as true that I am under his shelter as it is that I have given him shelter. I can say with certainty that my contribution has been no less. That is why I never had the slightest reason to feel hesitant. It was as if we had returned to the exact same age, the exact same relationship we shared when we lived together before. We could have gone on like that forever. What's the use of saying more?"

"Finish what you were saying."

"Suddenly, why did I have to be violently shoved and made to realize that I have grown up? The veil behind which we worked together all those days was blown away in an instant. You surely know everything, Ramen-da; nothing stays hidden from your eyes. At first, I was terribly surprised to see Boudi's anger towards me; I couldn't understand it at all. Until now, I hadn't looked at myself, but in the glaring light of Boudi's animosity, I finally saw myself; I was caught out by my own self. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"The submerged love of your childhood has been shaken and is floating to the surface."

"Tell me, what am I to do? How do I run away from myself?" As she spoke, she grasped Ramen's hand.

Ramen remained silent. She continued, "As long as I stay here, my offense keeps growing."

"Offense against whom?"

"Against Boudi."

"Look, Sarala, I don't believe in the morality of old textbooks. By what universal truth will you calculate the claims of the heart? How old is your bond with him; where was Boudi back then?"

"What are you saying, Ramen-da! Using one's own desires as an excuse—what kind of childish logic is that? One must think of Aditya-da too."

"Of course we must. Do you think the shock that startled you hasn't struck him just as hard?"

"Is that Ramen?" a voice was heard from behind.

"Yes, Dada." Ramen stood up.

"Your Boudi has sent for you; the ayah just came and told me."

Ramen left, and Sarala too immediately made to get up and leave.

Aditya said, "Don't go, Sari, sit for a bit." Looking at Aditya's face, Sarala felt her heart would break. It was as if this massive, continually toiling, self-forgetful man had spent all this time just spinning out of control like a rudderless boat battered by waves.

Aditya said, "The two of us began our lives in this world as entirely one entity. Our union was so natural that it was impossible to even imagine that any separation could ever occur between us for any reason. Isn't that so, Sari?"

"What is united in the sprout inevitably divides as it grows; there's no escaping that truth, Aditya-da."

"That division is only on the outside, a division only for the eyes to see. Inside the heart, the soul doesn't divide. Today, the blow has come to tear you away from me. I could never have imagined that it would hurt me this much. Sari, do you even know what a sudden blow has struck us?"

"I know, brother. Even before you knew."

"Will you be able to bear it, Sari?"

"I will have to bear it."

"I wonder if women have a greater capacity to endure than we do."

"You men fight against sorrow; women, through the ages, merely endure it. Tears and patience—they have no other capital but these."

"They will tear you away from me—I will not let this happen, I will not. This is unjust, a cruel injustice." Saying this, he clenched his fists, ready to battle some invisible enemy in the sky.

Sarala took Aditya's hand in her lap and gently stroked it. She spoke softly, as if to herself, "It is not a matter of justice or injustice, brother. When the bonds of a relationship tighten into a noose, its pain strikes many people, the pulling comes from many sides. Whom can we blame?"

"I know you will be able to bear it. I am remembering a day from the past. What hair you had—you still do. You were so proud of that hair. Everyone indulged that pride. One day, I had an argument with you. In the afternoon, you fell asleep with your hair spread out on the pillow. I took a pair of scissors and cut off at least half a cubit of it. You woke up immediately and stood up; those dark eyes of yours grew even darker. You merely said, 'You thought you could teach me a lesson?' And snatching the scissors from my hand, you relentlessly hacked off your own hair right up to the nape of your neck. Uncle was astonished to see you. He asked, 'What on earth is this?' With a calm face, you easily replied, 'I was feeling too hot.' He too smiled a little and readily accepted it. He didn't question you, didn't scold you; he just took the scissors and evened out your hair. He was your uncle, after all!"

Sarala laughed and said, "What logic! You think that was a display of my forgiveness? Not in the slightest. The lesson I taught you that day was far worse than the one you tried to teach me. Tell me if I'm right."

"Absolutely right. Seeing your chopped hair, I was on the verge of tears. I couldn't show my face to you the next day out of shame. I sat quietly in the study. The moment you entered the room, you grabbed my hand and dragged me off to work in the garden, as if nothing had happened. I remember another day, when an unseasonal storm in the month of *Falgun* blew the roof off the shed where I kept my seeds, you came and—"

"Let it be, you don't need to say anymore, Aditya-da," she said with a deep sigh. "Those days will never return." Saying this, she quickly stood up.

Aditya frantically grasped Sarala's hand and said, "No, don't go, don't go right now. Sometime, when the day comes for you to leave, then—"

As he spoke, he grew agitated and burst out, "Why should you ever have to go? What crime has been committed? Jealousy! Today, after ten years of domestic life, I am put to the test, and is this the result? Jealousy over what? To justify that, one

would have to erase the history of twenty-three years, from the moment I first met you."

"I can't speak for twenty-three years, brother, but in this final hour of those twenty-three years, is there truly no reason for jealousy? We must speak the truth. What is the use of deceiving ourselves? Let nothing remain ambiguous between you and me."

Aditya sat stunned for a moment, then cried out, "It is no longer ambiguous. I have understood it in the deepest core of my heart that without you, my world will be barren. The one from whom I received you in the morning of my life—no one but him can take you away from me."

"Don't speak, Aditya-da. Don't increase the pain. Give me a moment of peace to think."

"But thinking cannot take us backward. When we began our lives at uncle's feet, we didn't do it with calculated thoughts. Can any weeding tool uproot those days of ours now? I can't speak for you, Sari, but I don't have the power to do it."

"I fall at your feet, do not weaken me. The path to salvation is treacherous."

Gripping both of Sarala's hands, Aditya said, "There is no path to salvation, and I won't leave such a path open. I love you—the fact that I can say this truth so easily and genuinely today has filled my heart to the brim. What remained a closed bud for twenty-three years has blossomed today by the grace of destiny. I tell you, trying to suppress it now would be cowardice, it would be a sin."

"Hush, hush, don't say anymore. For tonight, forgive me, just forgive me."

"Sari, I am the one to be pitied. Until the last day of my life, I am the one who needs your forgiveness. Why was I so blind? Why didn't I recognize you? Why did I make the mistake of getting married? You didn't do it; so many suitors came desiring you, I know that well enough."

"Uncle had dedicated me entirely to the work of his garden, otherwise perhaps—"

"No, no—in the depths of your mind, your truth shone bright. Even without knowing it, you kept yourself bound to it. Why didn't you awaken me? Why did our paths diverge?"

"Let it be, let it be. Why are you fighting with someone who must ultimately be accepted? What good is this futile thrashing about? Tomorrow during the day, we will figure out some solution."

"Alright, I'll be quiet. But on a moonlit night like this, I must leave something with you that will speak for me."

While working in the garden, Aditya always wore a pouch tied to his waist; there was always a need to collect something or other. From that pouch, he brought out five *Nagkesar* flowers tied in a small bouquet. He said, "I know you love *Nagkesar*. Shall I pin it to the *anchal* on your shoulder? Here, I've brought a safety pin."

Sarala did not object. Taking his time, Aditya slowly pinned the flowers on her. Sarala stood up. Standing before her, holding her with both hands, Aditya gazed at her face just as one gazes at the moon in the sky. He said, "How wondrous you are, Sari. How wondrous."

Sarala snatched her hands away and ran off. Aditya did not follow her. He stood silently watching her for as long as she could be seen. Then he collapsed onto the steps of that bathing *ghat*. A servant came and announced, "Dinner is served."

Aditya said, "I won't eat today."

Translator's Notes on Cultural Adaptations:

- **Dol Purnima (দোলপূর্ণিমা) & Abir (আবির):** The Bengali spring festival of colors (Holi), celebrated on the full moon. *Abir* is the colored powder smeared on faces during this festival.
- **Exiled in your Ashoka grove (অশোকবনে তুমি নির্বাসিত হয়ে থাকবে):** A mythological reference to the *Ramayana*, where Sita was held captive by Ravana in the beautiful Ashoka grove (*Ashokavan*). *Ramen* implies that without color/joy, Sarala is a captive in her own beautiful garden.
- **Black waters (কালাপানি):** *Kalapani* refers to the infamous Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands where Indian political prisoners were exiled by the British.
- **Nagkesar (নাগকেশর):** The Indian Rose Chestnut or Ironwood flower (*Mesua ferrea*), known for its delicate fragrance and deeply revered in Indian botany and mythology.

THE GARDEN 6

Ramen asked from the doorway, "Boudi, did you call for me?"

Clearing her choked throat, Neeraja answered, "Come in."

All the lights in the room were turned off. The window was open; moonlight spilled onto the bed, illuminating Neeraja's face and the cluster of laburnum Aditya had placed near her head. The rest of the room was shrouded in shadows. Leaning against the pillows, Neeraja sat half-upright, gazing out the window. Past the orchid house, a row of betel-nut trees stood visible. A breeze had just sprung up, swaying the leaves and carrying in the scent of mango blossoms. From far away came the sound of *madal* drums and singing; the Holi festival was in full swing at the bullock-cart drivers' settlement. On the floor lay a plate of *barfi* and some *abir*. The gatekeeper had left the gift.

Fearing they might disturb the patient's rest, the entire house was dead silent today. From one tree to another, the *piyu-kaha* birds called back and forth, neither willing to admit defeat.

Ramen pulled up a cane stool and sat by the bed. Terrified that she would break down in tears, Neeraja did not speak for a long time. Her lips trembled; a storm of agony seemed to be churning in her throat. After a while she composed herself; two fallen laburnum petals were crushed tightly in her fist. Then, without a single word, she handed a letter to Ramen.

The letter was written by Aditya. It read:

"After knowing each other for so long, today it suddenly became apparent that it is possible for you to doubt my devotion. I feel ashamed to even argue about this. In your mind's current state, every word I say and every action I take will be perceived by you in the exact opposite way. That baseless torment will strike your frail body at every moment. It is better for me to stay away, at least until your mind heals.

I also understood that it is your wish that I dismiss Sarala from the work here. Perhaps I must. I have thought about it and see no other way. Yet I must state: my education, my training, my progress—all are due to the grace of Sarala's uncle; he was the one who showed me the path to success in life. Sarala, the treasure of his affection, is now utterly destitute and helpless. If I cast her adrift today, it will be a grave sin. Even for the sake of my love for you, I cannot do it.

After much thought, I have decided we will open a new branch of our business—a seed-producing division for flowers and vegetables. Land and a house can be acquired in Maniktala. I will set Sarala up with work there. I do not have the cash on hand to start this venture. I will have to mortgage this garden-house to raise the funds. I earnestly request you not to be angry at this proposal. Remember, Sarala's uncle lent me the capital for this garden interest-free; I heard he even had to borrow a portion of it himself. Not only that, he gave me seeds, grafted plants, rare saplings, orchids, a lawnmower, and many other tools free of cost to help me start. If he hadn't given me such a massive opportunity, today I would be slaving away as a clerk in a thirty-rupee rented house, and marrying you would not have been in my destiny.

After speaking with you, this question kept echoing in my mind: Did I give her shelter, or did Sarala give me shelter? I had forgotten this simple truth; you reminded me of it. Now you must remember it too. Never think Sarala is a burden on me. I can never repay their debt, and her claim on me will never end. I will try my best to ensure she never crosses paths with you. But that my bond with her is unbreakable—I understood this today as I never have before. I couldn't say everything; my sorrow today has gone beyond words. If you can guess it, you will; otherwise, for the first time in my life, my pain remains unexpressed to you."

Ramen read the letter twice. After reading it, he sat in silence.

Neeraja pleaded in a desperate voice, "Say something, Thakurpo."

Ramen still offered no reply.

"Thakurpo, your mind is strong, you will never understand my peril. I know very well that the more I thrash about, the deeper I sink into fathomless waters; I cannot save myself."

"Boudi, listen to me. As long as you believe someone is snatching your treasure away, your ribs will burn as if on fire. You won't find peace. But sit quietly and say just once—*I gave it. I gave the most precious thing to the one I love the most*—the entire burden will lift in an instant. Your mind will fill with joy. You don't need a guru; say it right now—*I gave it, I gave it, I kept nothing in my hands, I gave my everything. I am prepared to become completely free and pure, I am leaving no knot of sorrow entangled in this world.*"

"Ah, say it, say it Thakurpo, let me hear it over and over again. Whatever I have been able to give him until now has brought me joy; it is what I *cannot* give today that is killing me so brutally. I will give, I will give, I will give everything of mine—no more delays, right now. Go and bring him here."

"Not today, Boudi. Ready your mind for a few days, let your resolve become natural."

"No, no, I can't bear it anymore. Ever since he said he would leave this house and stay in the Japanese room, this bed has become a funeral pyre to me. If he doesn't return, I will not survive this night; my heart will burst and I will die. Bring Sarala here right away; I will uproot this spear from my chest, I won't be afraid—I am telling you this for certain."

"It isn't time yet, Boudi. Let it be for today."

"I am terrified the time will pass. Call them right now." Looking toward the portrait of Paramahamsadev, she folded her hands and prayed, "Give me strength, Lord, give me strength. Liberate this mindless, lowly woman. My sorrow has kept my God at bay; my prayers and worship are all gone. Thakurpo, let me ask one thing of you, please don't object."

"What is it?"

"Let me go to the prayer room for just ten minutes. Then I will find strength, I will have no fear."

"Alright, go. I won't object."

"Ayah."

"What is it, Khokhi?"

"Take me to the prayer room."

"What are you saying! The doctor..."

"Can the doctor hold back Death? And will he hold back my Lord?"

"Ayah, take her. Have no fear, it will be for the best," Ramen said.

Just as Neeraja left the room, leaning heavily on the ayah, Aditya entered.

Aditya asked, "What is this? Why isn't Neeru in the room?"

"She will be right back, she has gone to the prayer room."

"The prayer room! That isn't close. The doctor has strictly forbidden it."

"Listen to me, Dada. It will work better than the doctor's medicine. She will merely offer a handful of flowers, bow down, and come right back."

When Aditya had written and sent that letter to Neeraja, he hadn't clearly realized that the decree destiny had written on the canvas of his life in invisible ink would suddenly become so blindingly radiant when exposed to the heat of the outside world. At first, he had come to tell Sarala—*there is no other way, we must part*. But precisely when trying to speak those words, the exact opposite had tumbled from his mouth. Then, sitting on the steps by the lake in the moonlight, he had declared it over and over: he had discovered the ultimate truth of his life too late, but he could not deny it because of that. He was not guilty; there was nothing to be ashamed of. It would only be a sin if he tried to hide the truth. He would not hide it, that was certain; come what may. Aditya understood perfectly well that if he removed Sarala from the center of his life, from his field of work today, then in that isolation, in that barrenness, everything he had would be ruined; even his life's work would grind to a halt.

"If I hide that truth today, it will be a crime of deception. I will speak it with my head held high."

"Why would you hide it, and why would you make a grand show of declaring it either?" Ramen said. "Boudidi has already understood whatever she needed to know on her own. In just a few days, this tangled knot of ultimate sorrow will unravel itself. Don't pull at it unnecessarily. Listen to what Boudi wants to say, and what you ought to say in reply will naturally come to you."

Seeing Neeraja returning to the room, Ramen stepped out.

As soon as she entered and saw Aditya, Neeraja collapsed onto the floor, rested her head on his feet, and cried in a tear-choked voice, "Forgive me, forgive me, I have sinned. After all this time, don't abandon me, don't cast me away."

Aditya lifted her with both hands, held her to his chest, and gently laid her on the bed. He said, "Neeru, do you think I don't understand your pain?"

Neeraja's tears refused to stop. Aditya slowly stroked her hair. Neeraja pulled Aditya's hand down and pressed it tightly against her chest, saying, "Tell me truly that you have forgiven me. If you are not pleased, I won't find peace even after I die."

"You know, Neeru, we have had our disagreements from time to time, but did that ever shatter the unity of our hearts?"

"Before this, you never left the house. Why did you go this time? What made you so cruel?"

"I was wrong, Neeru, you must forgive me."

"You don't know what you're saying. All my peace, all my rewards come from you. I brought this condition upon myself by trying to judge you out of wounded pride—I told Thakurpo to call Sarala, why hasn't he brought her yet?"

The mention of bringing Sarala struck Aditya's mind like a physical blow. If he could somehow push the problem aside, at least for today, he would be relieved. He said, "It is late, let it be for now."

Just then, Neeraja spoke up, "Listen, I think they are waiting outside the door. Thakurpo, come into the room."

Ramen entered the room with Sarala. Neeraja got out of bed and stood up. Sarala touched Neeraja's feet in reverence. Neeraja said, "Come, sister, come to me."

She held Sarala's hand and made her sit on the bed. Pulling a jewelry case from under her pillow, she took out a pearl necklace and placed it around Sarala's neck. She said, "I had once wished that when I was cremated on the pyre, this necklace would be around my neck. But this is better. Wear this necklace for me until your

last day. Your Dada knows how many times I have worn this on special days. When it is around your neck, he will remember those days."

"I am unworthy, Didi, I am unworthy. Why are you shaming me?"

Neeraja had convinced herself that this too was a part of her great ritual of supreme sacrifice. But even she didn't clearly realize how fiercely the deeper, venomous burning of her soul manifested itself through this "gift." Aditya felt exactly how deeply this act wounded Sarala.

He said, "Give that necklace to me, Sarala. What its value is to me, it is to no one else. I cannot give it to anyone else."

Neeraja said, "My fate. Even after doing all this, I couldn't make you understand, I suppose. Sarala, I heard there was talk of you leaving this garden. I will never let that happen. I will bind you to everything in my household, this necklace is the symbol of that. I placed my binding ties in your hands so I could die in peace."

At this, Sarala practically ran out of the room. Aditya couldn't contain himself; he too left immediately.

"Thakurpo, what just happened, Thakurpo? Tell me, Thakurpo, say something."

"This is exactly why I told you not to call them tonight."

"Why? I opened my heart and gave everything away. Did he not understand even that?"

"Of course he understood. He understood that your heart hadn't truly opened. The tune rang utterly false."

"My mind didn't become pure, no matter what! Even after taking such a beating! Who will purify it? Oh ascetic, won't you save me? Thakurpo, who do I have, who will I go to?"

"I am here, Boudi. I will take your burden. Go to sleep now."

"How can I sleep? If he leaves this house again, I will have no sleep short of death."

"He won't be able to leave; he has neither the will nor the strength for it. Here, take your sleeping medicine. I will put you to sleep before I leave."

"Go, Thakurpo, you go and see where the two of them went, otherwise I will go myself, even if it breaks my body completely."

"Alright, alright, I am going."

Translator's Notes:

- **Abir & Barfi:** *Abir* is the colored powder used during the Holi festival. *Barfi* is a traditional Indian milk-based sweet.
- **Piyu-kaha (পিয়ুকাঁহা):** The Brainfever bird (Common Hawk-cuckoo). In Indian literature, its haunting call (which sounds like *piyu-kaha*, meaning "Where is my beloved?") is heavily associated with longing, separation, and spring nights.
- **Thakurpo & Boudi:** Re-emphasizing for context: *Thakurpo* is a woman's younger brother-in-law (or husband's younger cousin, like Ramen). *Boudi* is the elder brother's wife. Ramen acts as a philosophical anchor for both Neeraja and Sarala throughout the story.

THE GARDEN 7

Seeing that Aditya had followed her, Sarala said, "Why did you come? You shouldn't have. Go back. I won't let you get tangled up with me like this."

"Whether you let me or not is beside the point; we are already entangled. Whether that brings good or bad is out of our hands now."

"We will talk about all that later. Go back, go and calm the patient."

"That idea about adding another branch to our garden—"

"Let it be for today. Give me a few days to think; right now, I have no strength left to think at all."

Ramen arrived and said, "Go, Dada. Give Boudi her medicine and put her to sleep. Don't delay. Do not let her speak under any circumstances. It has gotten late."

After Aditya left, Sarala asked, "Don't you have a political gathering at Shraddhananda Park tomorrow?"

"We do."

"Aren't you going?"

"I was supposed to. But it won't happen this time."

"Why?"

"What is the use of telling you that?"

"Everyone will condemn you as a coward."

"Those who don't like me will certainly condemn me."

"Then listen to me: I will set you free. You absolutely must go to the gathering."

"Speak a little more clearly."

"I will go to the gathering too, holding a flag in my hand."

"I understand."

"I am willing to accept it if the police try to stop me, but if *you* try to stop me, I won't listen."

"Alright, I won't stop you."

"Do I have your word?"

"You do."

"The two of us will go together tomorrow at five in the afternoon."

"Yes, we will go. But those wicked men won't let us stay together after that."

Just then, Aditya returned. Sarala asked, "What is this, you're back so soon!"

"After speaking just a word or two, Neeraja grew exhausted and fell asleep. I quietly slipped away."

Ramen said, "I have work to do, I'll be leaving."

Sarala smiled and said, "Keep our lodgings ready, don't forget."

"No fear of that. It's a familiar place." Saying this, he left.

Translator's Notes on Cultural & Historical Context:

- **Political Gathering & the Flag (সভা / নিশেন):** The story is set against the backdrop of the Indian independence movement. Public gatherings at places like Shradhdhananda Park in Calcutta, especially holding the nationalist flag, were acts of civil disobedience actively suppressed by the British police.
- **"Those wicked men won't let us stay together" (ঐ দুর্জনরা তার পরে আমাদের আর একসঙ্গে থাকতে দেবে না):** Ramen is referring to the British police, implying that while they will march together and get arrested together, male and female political prisoners will be separated into different cells.
- **"Keep our lodgings ready" (বাসা ঠিক করে রেখো):** Sarala uses the word *basa* (temporary residence/lodgings) as a wry, euphemistic metaphor for the prison cell. Ramen, who mentioned earlier that he has already been to jail and is on a "slippery slope" back there, replies that it is a "familiar place."

Sarala chooses political imprisonment as her only honorable escape from the unbearable love triangle and Aditya's household.

THE GARDEN 8

Sarala had been sitting; she stood up and said, "I fall at your feet, do not say things to me today that should not be said."

"I won't say a word, do not fear."

"Alright, then I want to say something and you must listen. Promise me you will keep your word."

"I will certainly keep my word unless it is impossible to do so, you know that."

"There is no doubt left that my staying near will not do at all. I would have been happy to nurse Didi at a time like this, but my fate will not permit it. I must remain absent. Wait a moment, let me finish. You have heard the doctor say she does not have much time left. Within this short span, you absolutely must uproot the thorn in her mind. During these few days, do not let my shadow fall upon her life in any way."

"But what can I do if that shadow casts itself naturally from my own mind?"

"No, no, do not speak of yourself with such disrespect. Is your mind as soft and yielding as wet clay, like that of an ordinary Bengali boy? Never. I know you."

Taking Aditya's hand, she said, "Take up this vow for my sake. Fill the final days of Didi's life entirely with your grace. Make her completely forget that I ever arrived to shatter the brimming vessel of her good fortune."

Aditya stood there in silence.

"Give me your word, brother."

"I will, but you must give me your word on something too. Tell me you will keep it."

"The difference between you and me is that if I make you promise something, it is within your power; but if you make me promise something, it might be impossible."

"No, it won't be."

"Alright, tell me."

"There is no sin in speaking aloud to you the words I say in my mind. I will listen to what you are asking, and it will be possible to fulfill it without fail, only if I know for certain that one day you will fill all my emptiness. Why are you silent?"

"Because I do not know, brother, what obstacles might one day arise to prevent me from keeping that promise."

"Does the obstacle lie within your heart? Tell me that first."

"Why do you give me such pain? Do you not know there are truths whose light is extinguished the moment they are put into words?"

"Alright, I have heard it, and with this, I will go back to my duty."

"And you won't look back now?"

"No, but I wish to place the seal of this unspoken promise upon your face."

"Do not force what should be natural. Let it be for now."

"Alright, then let me ask you one thing: what will you do now? Where will you stay?"

"Ramen-da has taken that responsibility."

"Ramen will give you shelter! Does that vagabond even have a roof over his head?"

"Have no fear. It is a solid shelter. It isn't his own property, but there will be no hindrance."

"I will be able to know where you are, won't I?"

"You will certainly know, I leave you with that word; but promise me that in the meantime, you won't become anxious to see me."

"And your mind won't be anxious either?"

"If it is, no one but the All-Knowing will ever know."

"Very well. But as you leave, will you bid me farewell leaving my beggar's bowl entirely empty?"

The man's eyes brimmed with tears.

Sarala stepped close and silently lifted her face to him.

Translator's Notes on Cultural Adaptations:

- **Brimming vessel of her good fortune (সৌভাগ্যের ভরা ঘট):** In Bengali culture, a *purna kumbha* or *bhara ghat* (a fully filled earthen pitcher, often topped with mango leaves) is a powerful symbol of auspiciousness, abundance, and a complete, happy household. Sarala compares her arrival to the shattering of this sacred vessel.
- **Soft as wet clay (ভিজে মাটির তলতলে মন):** A brilliant Bengali idiom. To have a mind like "wet, squishy mud" implies being overly sentimental, weak-willed, and easily molded by circumstance. Sarala is urging Aditya to be strong and stoic.
- **Vagabond (লক্ষ্মীছাড়া):** Literally translates to "one forsaken by Lakshmi (the Goddess of Fortune)." It is a term used (sometimes affectionately, sometimes critically) for a reckless, wandering person with no worldly attachments or wealth, which perfectly describes Ramen's revolutionary lifestyle.
- **Solid shelter / Not his own property (পাকা আশ্রয় / নিজের সম্পত্তি নয়):** The tragic irony of this line shines here. Aditya thinks Ramen is finding her a sturdy house to rent. The reader (and Sarala) knows that the "solid shelter" that "isn't his property" refers to the stone walls of the British prison they are going to march into the next day.

THE GARDEN 9

"Roshni!"

"What is it, *Khokhi*?"

"Why haven't I seen Sarala since yesterday?"

"What are you saying, don't you know? The Government has packed her off to the police lock-up!"

"Why? What did she do?"

"She conspired with the gatekeeper and sneaked into the Viceroy's wife's room."

"To do what?"

"To steal the box that holds the Queen's seal. Such nerve!"

"What's the profit in that?"

"Just listen to you! Once you have that, you have everything. She could have had the Viceroy himself hanged. The whole empire runs on the stamp of that seal!"

"And Thakurpo?"

"They found a burglar's tool inside his turban. They've thrown him in Harinbari jail, making him break rocks for twenty-five years. But tell me, *Khokhi*, let me ask you one thing. When leaving the house, Sarala-didi gave me her expensive saffron-colored sari. She said, 'Give this to your daughter-in-law.' Tears came to my eyes. I certainly haven't given her any shortage of grief. If I keep this sari, the *Company Bahadur* won't come after me, will they?"

"You have nothing to fear. But go quickly. The newspaper is lying in the outer room, bring it here."

She read the paper. She was astonished. Aditya hadn't even given her such massive news. Was it out of disrespect? By going to jail, that girl had won. Couldn't I have gone too, if I had my health? I could have gone to the gallows laughing.

"Roshni, did you see the scandal your Sarala-didi has caused? A girl from a respectable family, right in front of the marketplace crowd—"

The ayah said, "It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it. Worse than thieves and dacoits. Shame, shame!"

"She has to show off her uncalled-for bravado in everything. The absolute limit of shamelessness, from the garden all the way to the jailhouse. Even at death's door, her arrogance doesn't fade."

The ayah remembered the saffron sari. She said, "But *Khokhi*, Didi does have a generous heart."

The words struck Neeraja like a massive blow. As if suddenly waking up, she said, "You are right, Roshni, you are absolutely right. I had forgotten. When the body is ill, the mind turns ill too. How low I have sunk from what I used to be. Shame on me, I feel like striking myself. Sarala is a pure girl; she doesn't know falsehood. You rarely see a girl like her. She is much better than me. Quickly, go call our Ganesh Sarkar."

Once the ayah left, Neeraja took a pencil and sat down to write a letter. Ganesh arrived. She asked him, "Can you deliver this letter to Sarala-didi in the jail?"

Ganesh Ganguly took pride in his resourcefulness. He said, "I can. It will cost a bit. But let me hear what you've written, Mother, because the letter will have to pass through the hands of the police."

Neeraja read it aloud to him: "*Blessed is your greatness. When you come out of the jail this time, you will see that my path has merged with your path.*"

Ganesh said, "That part you've written about the 'path' doesn't sound too good. We can have our lawyer look at it and fix it."

Ganesh left. Neeraja silently bowed to Ramen in her mind and said, "Thakurpo, you are my guru."

Translator's Notes on Cultural & Historical Context:

- **The Ayah's Misinterpretation:** The illiterate ayah completely misunderstands the nature of Sarala and Ramen's political arrest for protesting against the British. She interprets "breaking the law" in the most

literal, criminal sense—assuming Sarala broke in to steal the Queen's seal and Ramen was caught with a *sidhkathi* (a traditional Indian burglar's tool used to bore holes in mud walls).

- **Company Bahadur (কোম্পানি বাহাদুর):** The British East India Company. Although the British Crown had taken direct control of India long before this story takes place, rural people and older domestic workers still colloquially referred to the British government as the "Company."
- **Harinbari Jail:** A notorious colonial prison in Calcutta where many political prisoners and hardcore criminals were held and subjected to hard labor (like breaking rocks).
- **My path has merged with your path (তোমার পথের সঙ্গে আমার পথ মিলে গেছে):** A deeply poignant double meaning. On the surface, the lawyer might fear it sounds like Neeraja is confessing to joining the anti-British political conspiracy. In truth, Neeraja means she has finally achieved Sarala's path of selfless sacrifice and detachment, as taught by her "guru," Ramen.

THE GARDEN 10

Aditya entered the room holding medicine in a cup.

Neeraja said, "Now what is this?"

Aditya replied, "The doctor said you must take medicine every hour."

"Could you find no one else in the neighborhood to give me medicine? If you're so anxious, hire a nurse for the day."

"If I find a pretext to come near you and nurse you, why should I give it up?"

"I'd be far happier if you found a pretext to go and work in your garden. I am bedridden, and the garden is going to ruin day by day."

"Let it go to ruin. Get well first, and then we will work together just as we used to."

"Sarala has left, you are all alone, your mind is not in the work. But what's the use? You shouldn't let the business take a loss because of it."

"I am not thinking of the loss, Neeru. All this time, you had made me forget that the garden was my business; that's why there was joy in the work. Now, my mind refuses it."

"Why are you lamenting like this? You were working perfectly well until just the other day. Don't become so desperate just because there has been a temporary disruption."

"Shall I turn on the fan?"

"Don't fuss over me; these tasks aren't meant for you. It only makes me more anxious. If you want to pass the time somehow, you have your Horticulturalists' Club."

"You love colored lilies; I searched the garden thoroughly but couldn't find a single one. Because there hasn't been good rain this year, the plants have no vitality."

"Why are you babbling about nothing? Why don't you call Hala instead; I will manage the garden work while lying here. Do you mean to say that just because I

am bedridden, my garden must be bedridden too? Listen to me. Have the dried seasonal flower plants uprooted and prepare the soil there. There is a sack of mustard oil-cake in the room under the stairs. Hala has the key."

"Is that so? Hala never mentioned a thing all this time."

"Why would he care to tell you? Have you people humiliated him any less? It's exactly like a raw, newly arrived sahib disregarding a veteran clerk."

"If I were to speak the truth about Hala the gardener, it would be quite unpleasant."

"Very well, I will direct his work right from this bed; you'll see if the garden's appearance doesn't turn around in two days. Give me the map of the garden. And my garden diary. I will mark the arrangements on the map with a pencil."

"I won't have any hand in it?"

"No. Before I go, I will stamp this garden entirely as my own. I'm telling you now, I won't keep a single one of those bottle-palms by the roadside. I will plant a row of casuarina trees there. Don't shake your head like that. Wait until it's done, then you'll see. I won't keep that lawn of yours; I will have a marble pedestal built there."

"Will a pedestal suit that spot? It seems a bit—what you'd call cheap extravagance."

"Quiet. It will suit perfectly. You will not have a say. For a little while, this garden will be mine alone, entirely mine. After that, I will leave my garden to you. You thought my strength was gone. I will show you what I can do. I need three more gardeners, and about six laborers. Remember one day you told me I never had any formal training in landscaping? I will leave behind the proof of whether I did or not. You must remember that this is my garden, *my* garden, my claim over it will never fade."

"Alright, that is fine. What shall I do then?"

"You stay with your shop; the office work there is hardly insignificant."

"So staying with you is forbidden too?"

"Yes. I am no longer fit to be kept close all the time; now I can only serve as a reminder of someone else. What's the profit in that?"

"Very well. I will come only when you can tolerate me. Send for me. I brought some gardenias in a basket for you today, I'll leave them on your bed, please don't mind," Aditya said, standing up.

Neeraja caught his hand and said, "No, don't go, sit for a bit." Pointing to a flower in the vase, she asked, "Do you know the name of this flower?"

Aditya knew which answer would please her, so he lied and said, "No, I don't."

"I know. Shall I tell you? Petunia. You think I know nothing, that I'm an ignoramus!"

Aditya smiled and said, "You are my better half; if you are an ignoramus, you are at least equally as ignorant as I am. The business of ignorance in our lives is divided into equal shares."

"That business of mine is coming to an end this time around. Look at that gatekeeper sitting there chopping tobacco—he will remain at the gate; a few days from now, I will not. Look at that bullock-cart heading back empty after unloading coal—its comings and goings will continue every day; but the machinery of my heart will not."

Suddenly clutching Aditya's hand tightly, she said, "Will I cease to exist entirely? Will nothing of me remain? Tell me, you have read many books, tell me the truth."

"My knowledge only goes as far as the authors of those books! I've stopped at the threshold of Death's door; I haven't gone any further."

"Tell me, what do you think? Won't I remain at all? Not even a little bit?"

"If my existing right now is possible, then my existing *then* is possible too."

"It is definitely possible. That this garden is possible, but that *I* will become impossible—that can never happen, absolutely never. Crows will return to their nests in the dim light of the evening just as they do now; the branches of the betel-nut trees will sway exactly as they do now, right before my eyes. On that day, you must remember that I am here, I am here, I am present throughout the entire garden. When the breeze blows your hair, remember my fingers are touching it. Tell me, will you remember?"

Aditya had to say, "Yes, I will remember." But he couldn't say it with a tone that proved his conviction.

Neeraja grew agitated and exclaimed, "Those people who write your books, they think they're great scholars, but they know nothing! I know for certain, believe me. I will stay, I will stay right here, I will stay right beside you, I can see it absolutely clearly. I am telling you now, giving you my word—I will watch over all the plants and trees in your garden, I will watch over them much better than I used to. You won't need anyone. No one."

Neeraja had been lying down; she sat up leaning against the pillows and said, "Have mercy on me, have mercy on me. Remembering how much I love you, have mercy on me. Just as you have affectionately given me a place in your room all these days, give me a place on that day too. As your flowers bloom season by season, gather them in your mind and hand them to me just the same. If you are cruel, then I won't be able to stay here. If you snatch my garden away from me, into what emptiness will I drift, wandering from wind to wind?" Tears began to stream from Neeraja's eyes.

Aditya left the stool and sat on the bed. Pulling Neeraja's face to his chest, he slowly stroked her head. He said, "Neeru, don't ruin your health."

"Let my health go to ruin. I don't want anything else; I only want you, with all of this. Listen to me, don't be angry with me, don't be angry," her voice choked as she spoke. Calming down a little, she said, "I have wronged Sarala. I am holding your feet and telling you, I won't do it again. Forgive me for what has happened. But love me, you must love me; whatever you want, I will do it all."

Aditya said, "Your mind was ill along with your body, Neeru; that is why you tormented yourself for nothing."

"Listen to me. Since last night, I have resolved time and again—when I see her this time, I will pull her to my chest with a pure heart, like my own sister. You must help me keep this final promise. Tell me I will not be deprived of your love; then I will be able to leave all my love for everyone."

Without offering any reply, Aditya kissed her face and her forehead repeatedly. Neeraja's eyes closed. After a while, Neeraja asked, "I am counting the days until Sarala is released. I fear I might die before then. That I might not be able to tell her that my heart has become entirely clear. Light the lamp now. Read Akshay Boral's *Esha* to me." She pulled the book from under her pillow and handed it to him.

Aditya began to read aloud.

Just as she had drifted off to sleep while listening, the ayah entered the room and said, "A letter." Snapping out of her daze, Neeraja startled. Her heart began to pound.

A friend had informed Aditya: due to a lack of space in the jail, the prisoners whose terms were to end early were being released, and Sarala was one of them. Aditya's heart leapt. With all his might, he suppressed his inner jubilation.

Neeraja asked, "Whose letter? What is the news?"

Afraid that his voice might tremble if he read it, he handed the letter to Neeraja. Neeraja looked at Aditya's face. True, there were no words spoken, but words were not necessary. For a moment, no words came from Neeraja's mouth either. Then, with great effort, she said, "Then there is no more delay. She will come today. You must definitely bring her to me."

"What is this? What has happened? Neeru! Nurse, is the doctor here?"

"He is in the outer room."

"Bring him immediately. Doctor, come here! Just a moment ago she was speaking normally, and then she simply fainted."

The doctor checked her pulse and remained silent.

A little while later, the patient opened her eyes and said, "Doctor, you must save me. I cannot go without seeing Sarala; it won't be right. I will bless her—my final blessing."

Her eyes closed again. Her fists clenched tight, and she cried out, "Thakurpo, I will keep my word. I won't die like a miser."

Moments of fading consciousness blurred the world around her, and then the flame of her life would flare up again like a dying lamp. From time to time, she asked her husband, "When will Sarala arrive?"

From time to time, she called out, "Roshni!"

The ayah replied, "What is it, *Khokhi*?"

"Call Thakurpo right now."

Once she cried out to herself, "What will become of me, Thakurpo! I will give, I will give, I will give, I will give everything."

It was nine o'clock at night. A single wax candle burned dimly in the corner of Neeraja's room. The scent of the *Dolanchampa* flower was in the air. Through the open window, the massed darkness of the garden trees was visible, and in the sky above them, the constellation of Orion. Fearing the patient was asleep, Aditya left Sarala near the door and slowly approached Neeraja's bed.

Aditya saw her lips moving. As if she was silently chanting a prayer. A bewildered face, tangled between consciousness and unconsciousness. Lowering his head to her ear, Aditya said, "Sarala has come."

Opening her eyes slightly, Neeraja said, "You go"—and called out once, "Thakurpo!" There was no answer from anywhere.

As Sarala came forward and touched her feet to offer reverence, Neeraja's entire body convulsed as if struck by lightning. Her feet violently jerked away.

In a broken, ragged voice, she cried out, "I couldn't! I couldn't! I cannot give it! I cannot!"

As she spoke, an unnatural strength surged into her body—the pupils of her eyes dilated and blazed. Gripping Sarala's hand, her voice turned sharp as she hissed, "There will be no place for you, you demoness! No place! I will stay, I will stay, I will stay!"

Suddenly, the pale, emaciated figure in her loose chemise shot straight up from the bed and stood on her feet. In a grotesque, unearthly voice, she shrieked, "Run! Run! Run away right now, or day by day I will pierce your chest with a spear! I will suck your blood dry!"

With those words, she collapsed onto the floor.

Hearing the thud, Aditya rushed into the room, but having expelled the very last drop of her life's strength, Neeraja's final words had already been silenced forever.

Translator's Afterword:

This concludes the translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Malancha*. The ending is profoundly psychological. Despite her desperate efforts to embrace a spiritual

"renunciation" (guided by Ramen), Neeraja's human possessiveness ultimately overpowers her conscious will. Her final act is not one of peaceful sacrifice, but a terrifying, possessive fury that asserts her eternal claim over the garden and her husband, rejecting Sarala to her very last breath.