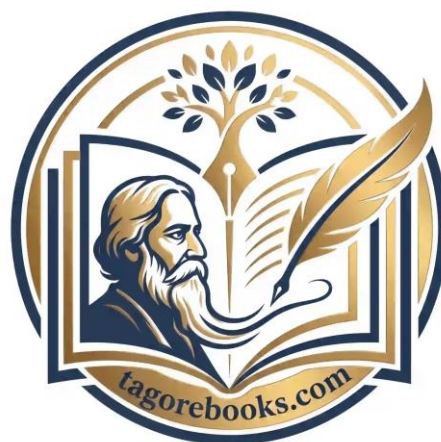


SHORT STORY

THE UNKNOWN ONE

Rabindranath Tagore



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Today, I am merely twenty-seven years old. This life of mine is neither great in its length, nor in its virtues. Yet, it holds a particular significance. It is like a flower upon whose breast a wandering bee once alighted, and the history of that single footstep has swelled like a fruit in the very core of its existence.

That history is small in measure, and I shall write it as a small tale. Those who do not make the mistake of equating 'small' with 'insignificant' will appreciate its essence.

I have cleared every examination there was to pass in college. In my childhood, taking advantage of my handsome appearance, my tutor used to mock me by comparing me to the *shimul* flower and the *makal* fruit—beautiful on the outside, but utterly useless within. It used to bring me great shame back then. But as I have grown older, I have thought to myself: if there is indeed a rebirth, may my face be blessed with the same beauty, and may the mouths of my tutors express their mockery in the exact same way.

My father was once a poor man. He amassed a great fortune practicing law, but never found a single moment to enjoy it. The final breath he exhaled in death was his very first respite.

I was quite young then. I was raised entirely by my mother. Coming from a poor family herself, she never forgets that we are wealthy now, nor does she let me forget it. I was constantly coddled and carried in arms during my childhood—perhaps that is why I never truly grew into a full adult. Even today, if you look at me, I appear to be the pampered younger brother of Lord Ganesha, forever nestled in the lap of the Mother Goddess Annapurna.

My actual guardian is my maternal uncle. He is, at most, six years older than me. But like the subterranean river Phalgu, he has absorbed the entire essence of our household deep into his own core. Without digging through him, one cannot extract even a drop of moisture from this house. For this reason, I never have to worry about a single thing.

Any father of a daughter will readily admit that I am an eligible bachelor. I do not even smoke tobacco. Being a "good boy" requires no effort, and so I am an exceedingly good boy. I possess the ability to obey my mother's commands—in truth, I lack the capacity to disobey them. I have been perfectly groomed to live under the gentle but absolute rule of the inner chambers. If any maiden intends to choose her own husband, she would do well to remember this highly auspicious trait of mine.

Proposals for my marriage came from many prominent families. But my uncle, who serves as the chief earthly agent of my god of destiny, had a very specific opinion regarding my marriage. He did not favor the daughters of wealthy men. He wanted a bride who would enter our house with her head bowed in submission. And yet, an intense lust for money was woven into his very bones. He desired an in-law who possessed no wealth, yet would never hesitate to part with money; someone who could be squeezed dry, yet wouldn't dare utter a word of complaint if offered a cheap earthen hookah instead of an aristocratic one upon visiting our home.

My friend Harish works in Kanpur. He came to Calcutta on vacation and made my heart utterly restless. He said, "Listen here, if it's a girl you're looking for, I know a truly excellent one."

I had passed my M.A. examinations only a few days prior. As far as the eye could see, a barren desert of endless holidays stretched out before me; no exams, no job-hunting, no employment. I had neither the responsibility, nor the training, nor the desire to look after my own estate. Within the house, there was my mother, and outside, my uncle.

In this vast desert of leisure, my heart began chasing a universal mirage of feminine beauty—seeing her gaze in the sky, feeling her breath in the wind, hearing her secret whispers in the rustling leaves.

It was at this precise moment that Harish arrived and said, "If it's a girl you're looking for, then—" My body and mind began to tremble, weaving light and shadow like the fresh new leaves of a *bakul* grove touched by the spring breeze. Harish was a witty fellow with a gift for colorful descriptions, and my heart was terribly thirsty.

I told Harish, "Why don't you bring the matter up with my uncle?"

Harish was unparalleled in holding an audience. Consequently, he was highly regarded everywhere. Even my uncle wouldn't let him leave once he got hold of him. The topic was raised in his drawing-room. To my uncle, the details about the girl's father were of far greater importance than the girl herself. The father's circumstances were exactly to his liking. Once upon a time, the goddess of wealth had kept their family's auspicious pot full to the brim. Now it was practically empty, save for a meager scraping at the bottom. Knowing it is difficult to maintain aristocratic prestige in one's native land without money, the father had moved to the West, living like an impoverished householder. He had no one in the world except this one daughter. Therefore, he would not hesitate to empty his remaining pot of wealth entirely for her sake.

All of this sounded wonderful. However, upon hearing that the girl was already fifteen, my uncle's mood soured. Was there a flaw in the family lineage? No, no flaw at all—the father simply hadn't been able to find a groom worthy of his daughter. On one hand, the groom market was exorbitantly expensive, and on the other, the father's standards were unbending. So he kept waiting, but the girl's age, alas, waited for no one.

Regardless, Harish's silver tongue worked its magic. My uncle's heart softened. The preliminary phase of the marriage negotiations was concluded without a hitch. My uncle firmly believes that the entire world outside Calcutta belongs to the penal colony of the Andaman Islands. Only once in his life, for a very specific errand, had he ventured as far as Konnagar. If my uncle had been the ancient lawgiver Manu, he would have strictly forbidden crossing the Howrah Bridge in his sacred scriptures. Deep in my heart, I harbored a desperate wish to go and see the girl with my own eyes. But I could not muster the courage to propose it.

The man sent to formally bless the bride on our behalf was Binu-dada, my older cousin. I can rely on his opinion, taste, and judgment with absolute, one-hundred-percent certainty. Binu-dada returned and said, "Not bad at all, my boy! Pure gold, I must say."

Binu-dada's language is incredibly reserved. Where we might burst out saying "Extraordinary!", he merely says "Not bad." Therefore, I understood that in my destiny, Prajapati, the god of marriage, and Panchashar, the five-arrowed god of love, were in perfect harmony.

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Needless to say, for the wedding, the bride's party had to travel to Calcutta. The proof of how deeply the bride's father, Shambhunath Babu, trusted Harish was that he laid eyes on me for the very first time just three days before the wedding to formally bless me. His age was somewhere around forty, give or take a little. His hair was completely dark, with only a hint of gray just beginning to show in his mustache. He was a genuinely handsome man. In a crowded room, his was the kind of face that would draw your attention before anyone else's.

I hope he was pleased upon seeing me. It was hard to tell, for he was a profoundly quiet man. The one or two sentences he did speak seemed to lack any forceful emphasis. My uncle's mouth, meanwhile, was running incessantly—he was broadcasting, through various conversational detours, that our standing in wealth and prestige was second to none in the city. Shambhunath Babu did not indulge this boastful talk in the slightest; not even a polite 'hmm' or 'yes' slipped through the cracks. Had it been me, I would have felt discouraged. But it is difficult to discourage my uncle. Seeing Shambhunath Babu's quiet demeanor, my uncle concluded that the man was utterly lifeless, possessing no spine at all. Whatever other qualities an in-law might possess, having a strong spine is considered a flaw, so my uncle was secretly delighted. When Shambhunath Babu stood up to leave, my uncle bid him a brief farewell from upstairs; he didn't even bother to escort him down to his carriage.

The negotiations regarding the dowry had been ironclad between both parties. My uncle prided himself on being exceptionally shrewd. He had left no loopholes in the discussions. The exact sum of cash was strictly fixed, and beyond that, the specific weight and purity of the gold jewelry were rigorously stipulated. I myself was kept out of all these discussions; I had no idea what had been agreed upon regarding the give-and-take. In my mind, I knew that this crude financial transaction was a major component of the wedding, and the man entrusted with it would not let himself be cheated out of a single penny. In truth, my uncle was the chief source of

pride for our entire household precisely because he was such an astoundingly shrewd operator. Wherever we had any dealings, it was a given that he would win the battle of wits. That is why, even if we were not in need and the other party was in dire straits, our family was stubbornly determined to win—no matter who lived or died as a consequence.

The *gaye-holud* (turmeric ceremony) was celebrated with a ridiculous amount of pomp. So many porters were sent carrying gifts that one would need to hire a clerk just to take a census of them. Imagining the sheer torment the bride's family would face in tipping and bidding farewell to such a massive horde, my mother and uncle shared a hearty, prolonged laugh together.

Blending together brass bands, flutes, amateur concert troupes, and every other conceivable loud noise, I arrived at the wedding venue, feeling as though I had let a maddened elephant of barbaric cacophony trample and crush the delicate lotus grove of Saraswati, the goddess of music. Adorned in rings, necklaces, *zari*, and jewels, my body felt like a jewelry store put up for auction. It was as if I was marching to confront my future father-in-law with my precise market value as a groom plastered vividly all over my body.

My uncle was not pleased upon entering the wedding venue. Firstly, the courtyard was barely large enough to accommodate the groom's procession, and on top of that, the arrangements were strictly mediocre. Furthermore, Shambhunath Babu's hospitality felt exceedingly cold. His humility was far from profuse. In fact, he barely spoke at all. If it hadn't been for one of his lawyer friends—a hoarse-voiced, bald, pitch-black, and heavily built man with a shawl tied around his waist—who continuously folded his hands, bowed his head, and showered everyone, from the cymbal players of the band to the elders of the groom's party, with obsequious smiles and sycophantic words, things would have blown up right at the start.

Shortly after I took my seat in the assembly, my uncle called Shambhunath Babu into the adjacent room. I do not know what was discussed, but a little while later, Shambhunath Babu came up to me and said, "My boy, I must ask you to come this way for a moment."

Here was the situation: Not everyone, but certainly some people have a singular driving goal in life. My uncle's only goal was that he would never, under any circumstances, be swindled by anyone. His fear was that his future in-law might

cheat him on the jewelry—and once the marriage rites were completed, there would be no remedy for such deception. Given the stringency already displayed regarding the venue rental, the gifts, and the tipping of the porters, my uncle had decided that he could not rely merely on this man's word concerning the dowry. Therefore, he had brought our family goldsmith along with him. Going into the next room, I saw my uncle sitting on a wooden divan, and the goldsmith sitting on the floor with his weighing scales, touchstone, and other tools.

Shambhunath Babu said to me, "Your uncle says that before the wedding ceremonies begin, he wants to appraise all the bride's jewelry. What do you have to say to this?"

I kept my head bowed and remained completely silent.

My uncle interjected, "What will he say? Whatever I say is what goes."

Looking directly at me, Shambhunath Babu asked, "Is that true then? Whatever he says, goes? You have absolutely nothing to say about this?"

With a slight shake of my head, I indicated that I had absolutely no authority in these matters.

"Very well, then sit down. I am going to have all the jewelry taken off the girl and brought here." Saying this, he stood up.

My uncle said, "What will Anupam do here? Let him go and sit in the gathering."

Shambhunath Babu replied, "No, not in the gathering. He must sit right here."

A short while later, he returned with a bundle of jewelry tied in a cotton towel and spread it open on the divan. They were all ancestral pieces from his grandmother's era—not the delicate, filigree work of modern fashions, but rather thick, solid, and incredibly heavy.

Taking the jewelry in his hands, the goldsmith said, "What is there to even test here? There is no alloy in this—such pure gold isn't even used these days."

Saying this, he applied a little pressure to a thick, traditional crocodile-headed bangle, demonstrating how easily it bent.

My uncle immediately noted down the inventory of the jewels in his notebook, just in case any of the pieces shown to him went missing later. Upon calculating, he

found that the jewelry far exceeded the agreed-upon amount in count, value, and weight.

Among the jewels was a pair of earrings. Shambhunath handed them to the goldsmith and said, "Test these ones, please."

The goldsmith said, "This is foreign-made merchandise; the gold content in this is negligible."

Handing the earrings to my uncle, Shambhu Babu said, "You can keep these for yourselves."

Taking them in his hand, my uncle realized that these were the very earrings with which they had formally blessed the bride.

My uncle's face turned crimson. He was deprived of the smug pleasure of catching a poor man trying to cheat him, and on top of that, he had received an unexpected slap in the face. With a deeply darkened expression, he ordered, "Anupam, go back and sit in the assembly."

Shambhunath Babu said, "No, there is no need to sit in the assembly right now. Come, let me feed you all first."

My uncle balked, "What are you saying? The auspicious hour for the wedding..."

Shambhunath Babu replied, "Do not worry about that—please get up now."

The man seemed to be of an exceedingly mild-mannered disposition, but it became apparent that he possessed an inner spine of steel. My uncle had no choice but to get up. The groom's party was served their meal. There was no grandiose display in the arrangements, but the cooking was excellent, and everything was so neat and impeccably clean that everyone felt deeply satisfied.

Once the groom's party had finished eating, Shambhunath Babu asked me to eat as well. My uncle objected, "What nonsense! How can the groom eat before the wedding rituals?"

Completely ignoring my uncle's opinion on the matter, he looked at me and asked, "What do you say? Is there any harm in sitting down for a meal?"

Standing there was my uncle, the very embodiment of my mother's supreme command; going against him was impossible for me. I could not sit down to eat.

Then, Shambhunath Babu turned to my uncle and said, "I have put you through a lot of trouble. We are not wealthy people, and we could not make arrangements worthy of your stature. Please forgive us. It has gotten late in the night, and I have no desire to increase your troubles any further. So, now..."

My uncle said, "Well then, let us go to the assembly. We are quite ready."

Shambhunath said, "Should I call for your carriages then?"

Shocked, my uncle asked, "Are you joking?"

Shambhunath replied, "You are the one who has already turned this into a joke. I have no intention of making this relationship of mockery a permanent one."

My uncle stared at him, his eyes as wide as saucers in sheer disbelief.

Shambhunath said, "I cannot hand my daughter over to people who suspect that I would steal my own daughter's jewelry."

He did not feel it necessary to say a single word to me. Because it had already been decisively proven that I was a nobody.

I do not wish to speak of what happened after that. Smashing the chandeliers to pieces, overturning the furniture, and leaving a trail of chaotic destruction like the mythological ruin of Daksha's sacrifice, the groom's party finally stormed out.

On the journey back home, the brass bands, the *shehnai*, and the concert troupes did not play together, and the glittering processional lights transferred their duty of illumination to the stars in the sky, disappearing into some unknown, great oblivion.

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Everyone in the house was absolutely furious. Such arrogance from a bride's father! It seemed the dark age of Kali had fully descended upon us! Everyone said, "Let's see how he manages to marry off his daughter now." But how do you punish a man who harbors no fear of his daughter remaining unmarried?

In all of Bengal, I was the only man whom the bride's father had personally turned away from the wedding altar. Which evil star had branded such a massive stain of disgrace upon the forehead of such an eligible bachelor, amidst so much light, music, and grand fanfare? The groom's party kept beating their foreheads in lamentation, saying, "The wedding didn't happen, yet he tricked us into eating his food! If only we could have ripped out our stomachs and thrown them back there along with all that rice—only then would our regrets be satisfied."

My uncle caused quite a commotion, declaring, "I will file a lawsuit for breach of contract and defamation." Well-wishers intervened and made him realize that doing so would only complete whatever mockery was still left unfinished.

Needless to say, I was exceedingly angry as well. I kept twirling the faint, youthful line of my mustache, wishing for only one thing: that somehow, Shambhunath would be severely taught a lesson and come begging at our feet.

But alongside this dark current of resentment, another stream flowed, and its color was not dark at all. My entire heart had rushed toward that unknown girl—and even now, I could not pull it back by any means. Alas, she remained hidden just behind that little wall. The sandalwood paste painted on her forehead, the red sari draped over her body, the flush of modesty on her face, and whatever lay deep within her heart—how can I ever describe it? The wish-fulfilling vine of my imagination had bowed down, ready to offer me the entire weight of spring's blossoms. The breeze blows, I catch the fragrance, I hear the rustling of leaves—it was waiting for just one more footstep—and at that very moment, the distance of that single footstep became infinite!

For days on end, I had gone to Binu-dada's house every evening and driven him to distraction. Precisely because Binu-dada's descriptive language was so incredibly sparse, every single word of his had struck the center of my mind like a spark, igniting a raging fire. I understood that the girl's beauty was truly wondrous, but having neither seen her with my own eyes nor seen a picture of her, everything remained shrouded in vagueness. Not only had she remained physically out of reach, but I could not even conjure a clear image of her in my mind—and so, my mind began to wander like a sighing ghost outside the wall of that wedding hall.

I had heard from Harish that the girl had been shown my photograph. And of course, she had liked it. There was absolutely no reason for her not to. My heart

tells me that the photograph is still hidden in one of her secret boxes. On quiet, lonely afternoons, locking the door to her solitary room, doesn't she take it out to look at it? When she leans over to gaze at the picture, doesn't her loose hair fall on either side of her face, cascading over the image? And if she suddenly hears footsteps outside, doesn't she hurriedly conceal the photograph within the fragrant folds of her sari's *pallu*?

Days passed. A whole year went by. Out of sheer shame, my uncle could not even bring up the topic of marriage. My mother's wish was to wait and try again only when society had forgotten the scandal of my humiliation.

Meanwhile, I heard rumors that a very good marriage proposal had come for the girl, but she had taken a solemn vow never to marry. Hearing this, my heart filled with an overwhelming trance of joy. In my imagination, I began to see her: she barely eats; evening falls, and she forgets to braid her hair. Her father looks at her face and wonders, 'Why is my daughter fading away day by day?' Suddenly, one day, he enters her room and finds his daughter's eyes brimming with tears. He asks, 'Tell me, my child, what is wrong?' The girl quickly wipes her tears and says, 'Why, nothing is wrong, Father.' She is a father's only daughter—his most beloved child. When he sees his daughter completely wilted like a flower bud in a severe drought, the father can bear it no longer. Throwing away all his pride, he comes rushing to our doorstep.

What then? Then, the dark current that flows in my mind rears its head, hissing like a black cobra, and says, 'Very well, let the wedding altar be decorated once more, let the lights shine brilliantly, let people from far and wide be invited, and then—crush the groom's ceremonial crown under your feet and walk out of the assembly with your entire party.' But the other current, the one as pure and white as tears, takes the form of a celestial swan and says, 'Just as I once flew into the floral groves of Princess Damayanti as a messenger of love, let me fly to her just once—let me go and whisper the joyous news into the ear of the sorrowful maiden.' What then? Then the night of sorrow ends, the fresh rains of the monsoon fall, the wilted flower lifts its face—and this time, the rest of the world remains outside that wall, while only one man steps inside. What then? Then, my tale comes to an end.

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But, the story did not end like that. Let me conclude this piece by sharing a brief account of the point where the tale became truly endless.

I was traveling on a pilgrimage with my mother. The responsibility of the journey was solely mine, for my uncle, true to form, had once again refused to cross the Howrah Bridge. I was sleeping in the train. With every jolt of the carriage, a rattle of disjointed dreams echoed in my head. Suddenly, I woke up at some unknown station. The mingling of light and shadow there felt like yet another dream; only the stars in the sky were intimately familiar—everything else was unknown and indistinct. The few upright lamps on the platform held up their dim lights, only to reveal just how alien this world was, and how terrifyingly distant everything around me felt. Inside the compartment, my mother was asleep; the green shade over the lamp was drawn. Trunks, boxes, and luggage lay haphazardly piled upon one another, looking like the upside-down furniture of a dreamscape, suspended in a strange limbo of existence and non-existence under the flickering green light.

At that moment, in the bizarre night of this bizarre world, a voice called out, "Come over here quickly, *there is room in this carriage.*"

It felt as though I had heard a song. One can only fully realize how unbearably sweet the Bengali language sounds in the voice of a Bengali girl when it is heard so unexpectedly, in an unfamiliar place, at an unearthly hour. Yet, this voice could not be simply categorized as just another 'female voice'; it belonged entirely and uniquely to one person. Hearing it, the soul instantly cried out, '*I have never heard anything like this before.*'

A human voice has always held a profound truth for me. Physical beauty is no small thing, but I have always felt that the voice is the true reflection of that which is most intimate and ineffable within a human being. I hurriedly threw open the window and leaned out, but saw nothing. Standing in the darkness of the platform, the guard waved his one-eyed lantern, and the train lurched forward. I sat by the window. There was no physical form before my eyes, yet within my heart, I began to see the shape of another heart. It was like this starry night—it envelops you completely, yet you cannot grasp it. *O melody, voice of an unknown soul*, in a single

heartbeat, you came and took your place on the seat of my lifelong familiarity. How wonderfully complete you are—blossoming like a serene flower upon the turbulent heart of restless time, yet not a single petal trembles from its waves, not a single blemish taints its immeasurable softness.

The train rolled on, beating a steady rhythm on its iron drums; and I traveled on, listening to a song playing within my mind. It had only one refrain: "*There is room.*" Is there? Is there truly room? In a world where space is so scarce, where no one knows anyone else. And yet, this unfamiliarity is but a mist, an illusion; once it dissipates, there is no end to knowing. *O nectar-sweet melody, you wondrous form of a soul*, are you not my eternal acquaintance? There is room, there is—you called me to come quickly, and I have come quickly, without a moment's delay.

I could not sleep properly that night. At nearly every station, I peered out the window, terrified that the one I had not yet seen might disembark in the middle of the night.

The next morning, we had to change trains at a major junction. We had first-class tickets, and I was hopeful it wouldn't be crowded. Upon alighting, I saw a horde of orderlies with luggage waiting on the platform. Some high-ranking British General was out on a tour. The train arrived two or three minutes later. I immediately realized I had to abandon all hopes of traveling first-class. I fell into a terrible panic about which carriage to board with my mother. Every compartment was packed. I ran desperately from door to door, peering inside.

Just then, a girl from a second-class compartment noticed my mother and called out, "Please come into our carriage—there is room here."

I startled. It was that astonishingly sweet voice, singing the very same refrain: "*There is room.*"

Without a moment's hesitation, I helped my mother into the carriage and climbed in. There was barely any time to load our belongings. There is no one as inept in this world as I am. It was the girl who quickly grabbed our bedding and luggage from the coolies' hands and pulled them into the moving train. My photography camera was left behind at the station—I did not care in the slightest.

After that—I do not know what to write. There is a picture of absolute, unblemished joy in my mind—where should I begin framing it, and where should I end? I have no desire to sit and painstakingly string words together.

This time, I saw the melody with my own eyes. And still, she felt like a melody to me. I looked at my mother's face; her eyes were fixed, unblinking. The girl must have been sixteen or seventeen, but her blooming youth had not burdened her body or mind with even the slightest heaviness. Her movements were effortless, her radiance pure, the sanctity of her beauty unparalleled; there was no trace of sluggishness in her anywhere.

I realize it is impossible for me to describe her in detail. I cannot even tell you exactly what color sari she wore or how she draped it. What is undeniably true is that there was nothing in her attire or adornment that overshadowed her and caught the eye. She was greater than everyone around her—standing upon a simple stem like a pristine white sprig of tuberose, she had entirely surpassed the very plant on which she bloomed. She had two or three little girls with her, and her laughter and chatter with them were endless. I sat with a book in my hand, keeping my ears entirely tuned in her direction. Whatever fragments reached my ears were just childish banter with children. Yet, the remarkable thing was that there was absolutely no barrier of age—she had effortlessly and joyously become a child with the children. They had some illustrated children's storybooks with them, and the girls insisted she read a very specific story to them. They had undoubtedly heard this story twenty or twenty-five times already. I understood why they were so eager. Touched by the golden wand of her nectar-sweet voice, every word turned into gold. The girl's entire body and mind were so brimming with life that vitality seemed to radiate from her every movement, word, and touch. So when the girls listened to a story from her lips, they weren't just listening to a story; they were listening to *her*, letting the waterfall of her vitality wash over their hearts. Her radiant life breathed fresh life into all the sunlight of my day; I felt as though the sky Nature had wrapped around me was nothing but the boundless extension of this young woman's tireless, unfading spirit.

As soon as we reached the next station, she called out to a vendor, bought a large portion of spiced roasted chickpeas, and, mingling with the little girls, began eating without the slightest hesitation, laughing merrily like a child. My own nature is

fenced in by an invisible net—why couldn't I just naturally, with a smile, ask this girl for a handful of those chickpeas? Why didn't I extend my hand and confess my craving?

My mother was torn between liking and disliking her. I, a grown man, was in the carriage, yet the girl had not the slightest shred of modesty or hesitation. Specifically, the way she was eating so greedily did not quite sit well with my mother; and yet, my mother could not mistakenly dismiss her as brazen. She felt that the girl had grown in age but lacked proper grooming. My mother cannot easily strike up conversations with strangers. It is her habit to keep her distance from people. She harbored a strong desire to inquire about the girl's identity, but could not overcome her natural reserve.

At that moment, the train stopped at a major station. The entourage of that British General was preparing to board from here. There was no room left on the train. They paced back and forth in front of our compartment several times. My mother was paralyzed with fear, and I, too, was losing my peace of mind.

Shortly before the train was due to leave, a native railway official hung two name-tags above the two benches in our compartment and said to me, "These two benches have been reserved in advance by two *Sahibs* (British officers). You will have to move to another carriage."

I nervously and hurriedly stood up.

The girl spoke up in Hindi, "No, we will not leave the carriage."

The official said aggressively, "You have no choice but to leave."

But seeing no sign of yielding from the girl, he stepped down and fetched the English station-master. The man arrived and said to me, "I am sorry, but—"

Hearing this, I began to anxiously shout, "Coolie! Coolie!"

The girl stood up, raining fire from her eyes, and declared, "No, you cannot leave. Sit right where you are."

Then, standing by the door, she addressed the station-master in fluent English, "It is a lie that this carriage was reserved in advance."

Saying this, she ripped down the name-tags and threw them out onto the platform.

Meanwhile, the uniformed British officer, accompanied by his orderly, had arrived at the door. He had initially gestured to his orderly to load his luggage. But then, looking at the girl's face, hearing her words, and observing her demeanor, he tapped the station-master and took him aside. I do not know what was discussed. Ultimately, the train departed only after its departure time had passed, and an extra carriage had been attached for them. The girl and her little entourage started on another round of roasted chickpeas, while I, utterly humiliated, leaned out the window and stared at the scenery.

The train finally arrived at Kanpur. The girl packed her belongings and got ready—a Hindustani servant rushed onto the station to help them alight.

My mother could hold back no longer. She asked, "What is your name, my child?"

The girl replied, "My name is Kalyani."

Hearing this, both my mother and I startled.

"And your father—"

"He is a doctor here. His name is Shambhunath Sen."

Right after that, they all disembarked.

Conclusion

Defying my uncle's strict prohibitions, and pushing past my mother's commands, I eventually came to Kanpur. I met with Kalyani's father, and I met with Kalyani. I folded my hands; I bowed my head. Shambhunath Babu's heart melted.

But Kalyani said, "I will not marry."

I asked, "Why?"

She replied, "Mother's command."

Good heavens! Was there a maternal uncle dictating terms on this side as well?

Later, I understood: she meant the *Motherland*. Ever since that broken engagement, Kalyani had taken up the sacred vow of educating girls.

But I could not give up hope. That melody still plays within my heart today—like a flute calling from the other shore—it came from outside the boundaries of my

domestic world, and called me far beyond it. And that voice which reached my ears in the darkness of the night—"*There is room*"—it remained the eternal refrain of my life's song. I was twenty-three then; I am twenty-seven now. I still haven't given up hope, though I have given up my uncle. Being her only son, my mother couldn't give me up.

Do you think I still harbor hopes of marriage? No, not at all. I only hold on to the hope of that sweet, unknown voice from that one night—*There is room*. There surely must be. Otherwise, where would I stand? And so, year after year passes—and I am still right here. We meet, I hear that voice, and whenever I get the chance, I do some of her work for her—and my heart says, *Ah, I have found my room*.

O unknown woman, knowing you has no end, and it never will; but my fate is blessed, for right here, I have finally found my place.