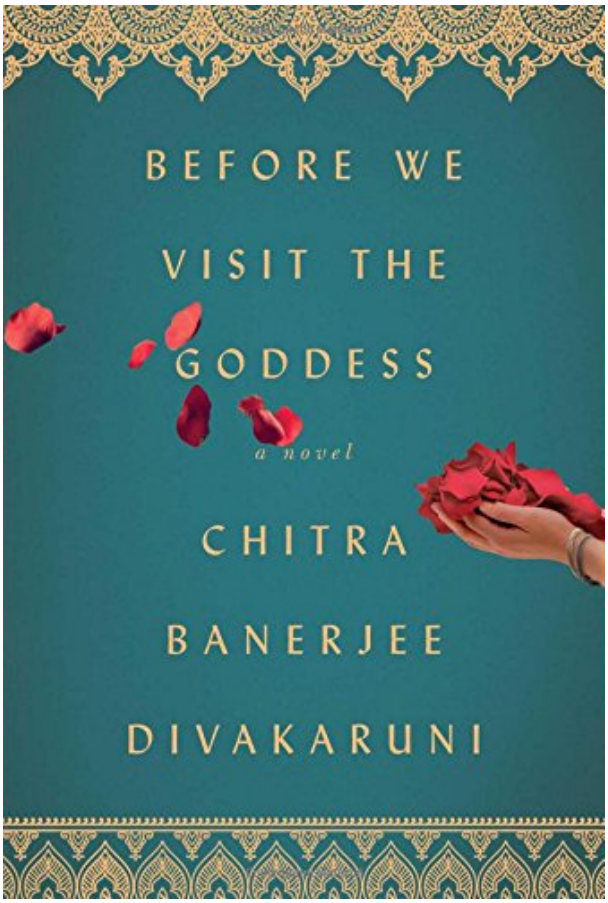
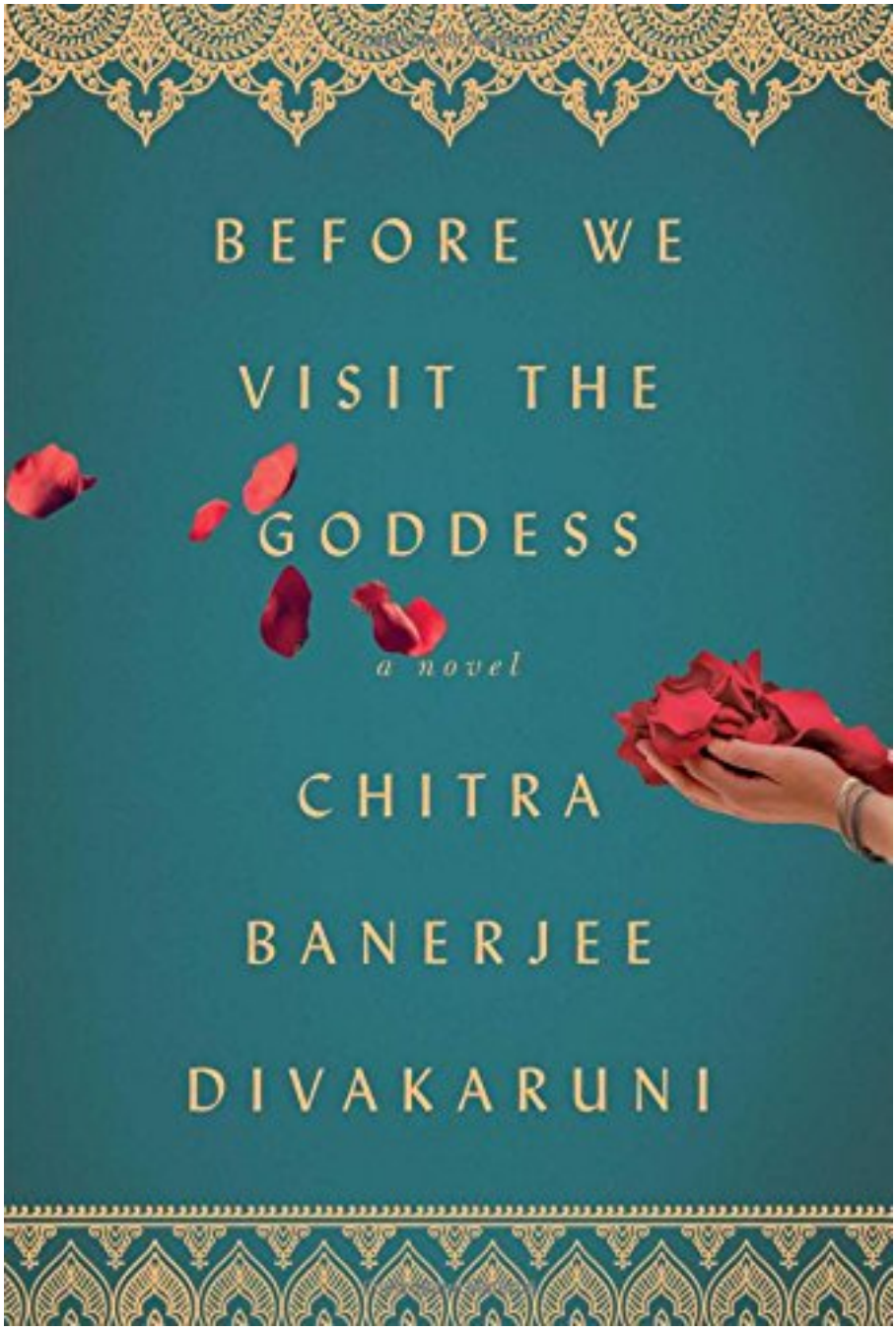
BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS: A NOVEL BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI





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Review
“Affecting.” (The New York Times)

“Emotionally accessible…[Divakaruni] balances the ache of separation with the thrills of independence and self-discovery…her characteristic passion, nerve and insight into the troubled soul are here in full.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“Divakaruni proves herself adept with all the tools in the writer’s toolbox…Divakaruni makes use of two major writerly tools that seldom go together — tragic drama, and screwball comedy. What’s more, she finds entirely fresh ways to mete out the tropes of the South Asian immigrant story…hilarity deepens and clarifies the story’s dark tones…an heirloom tapestry.” (The Miami Herald)

“Before We Visit the Goddess is full of different voices, going back and forth in time, with beautifully written chapters that could stand on their own as short stories but add layer upon layer of complication, wonder, humanity and empathy when joined together…Divakaruni builds her female characters as multidimensional — highly complex, intelligent and nobody’s doormat… Divakaruni guides us along their journeys with beautiful writing, surprising laughter and a truly memorable ending…I can’t recommend this book enough. When it comes to fiction, Divakaruni is a new goddess on the Texas landscape.” (The Austin American Statesman)

“Divakaruni elegantly leads the reader through the twists and turns of life given the complications of culture, family expectations, and words left unsaid…the writing was crisp and clear. The characters were realistic and the dialogue believable. The story explores the dynamics of mothers and daughters caught in the cross-hairs of cultural and generation differences, as well as the complications of expectations, believed or real…Before We Visit the Goddess will leave the reader wondering about the relationship they have with their parents and what should be said before it is too late.” (The Portland Book Review)

“A novel about female strength and ambition and how one mother’s decision can affect the lives of her family for generations to come.” (Bustle)

“Takes readers on an exotic, visceral journey beginning in the mango and saffron-scented kitchens of 1950s India and ending in present day Houston, Texas.” (The Santa Cruz Sentinel)

"Three generations of headstrong Bengali women, their passions, secrets, regrets and mysteries, come to life through Divakaruni’s storytelling wizardry… Divakaruni brings us from the poor villages to the upper crust urban families, from India to Texas, to show how three courageous women struggle toward independence.” (BBC.com)

"The best storytellers always keep you coming back. They have their unique signatures, a unique voice, that enchants the reader and draws them back to listen to one story, then the next and then the one after that. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such masterful story smith. I am done with reading Before We Visit The Goddess for now, but I keep thinking about the characters, and I know that a re-reading is in store for the future.” (The Reading Desk)

“Divakaruni has created characters to be embraced despite their difficulties with each other; learned from when they stumble and fall; and celebrated as the picked themselves up again. There is grace and compassion in her writing as emotions spike and subside. Life-changing disappointments are tempered with kindness, and at no time does the author chastise a character for her imperfections.” (India Currents)

“[Divakaruni is] one of my favorite recent discoveries. Before We Visit the Goddess is full of different voices, going back and forth in time, with beautifully written chapters that could stand on their own as short stories but add layer upon layer of complication, wonder, humanity and empathy when joined together.” (Austin 360)

“The always enchanting and enlightening Divakaruni spins another silken yet tensile saga about the lives of women in India and as immigrants in America…Divakaruni’s gracefully insightful, dazzlingly descriptive, and covertly stinging tale illuminates the opposition women must confront, generation by generation, as they seek both independence and connection." (Booklist (Starred Review))

“Richly drawn characters…a novel of quiet but deeply affecting moments.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“An extraordinary journey told through a sparkling symphony of male and female voices." (Indo American News)

"There are few writers who get the setting, characters and story pitch perfect, like Divakaruni does, every single time. Before We Visit the Goddess is no exception. Brilliantly magical, lyrical and powerful, it is in keeping with the tradition Divakaruni has made of capturing the Kolkata spirit and the strength of its women. A richly woven tapestry of three generations of ancestresses, goddesses and women… Divakaruni's finest work yet, given its polished writing and intense, passionate characters.” (India Today)

"This book turned out to be the perfect palate cleanser…for the burgeoning bright glory of summer.The greatest strength of the book is Divakaruni’s three unapologetically complicated, fierce female protagonists.” (Hyphen Magazine)

“Masterful.” (ReadItForward.com)

“I will never forget Sabitri, Bela, and Tara: grandmother, mother, and daughter after my own heart. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni cycles through generations of time, until we come to know our ancestresses—and the goddess. A lovely book.”

(Maxine Hong Kingston, author of I Love a Broad Margin to My Life)

“Tender, bittersweet, beautifully wrought tales about love and longing, exile and loneliness. I was reminded of the songs of separation sung by Bhojpuri women: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni discovers new nuances in the ‘biraha’ that creeps into the lives of migrants.” (Amitav Ghosh, author of The Glass Palace)

About the Author
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the author of sixteen books, including Oleander Girl, The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, Palace of Illusions, One Amazing Thing, and Before We Visit the Goddess. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, and The New York Times, and has won, among other prizes, an American Book Award. Born in India, she currently lives in Texas and is the McDavid professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Before We Visit the Goddess Fortunate Lamps: 1995
Somewhere in the dark, jackals are howling. They like it when storms bring down the electric lines in the village, leaving only broken bits of moonlight. Maybe they have a blood-memory of how it was before humans came and pushed them to the edges.

By now Sabitri is usually asleep. The doctor has warned her that she needs to keep regular hours. Her heart isn’t doing too well, and there’s the blood pressure, too. Did she want to be bedridden and force-fed barley water? Did she want him to phone her daughter in Houston? Or Bipin Bihari Ghatak, her business manager who lived in Kolkata?

No, she did not. Bela would rant, which was her default state when besieged by guilt, and Bipin Bihari, who was her oldest friend, would go silent with worry because he hadn’t ever wanted Sabitri to move back to her ancestral village, so far from Kolkata, in her retirement. The savage lands, he termed it.

She sets out pen and paper on the rickety dining table next to the kerosene lamp. She takes care not to wake Rekha, snoring on her coir mat in the alcove, because then she’ll start scolding, the way longtime servants feel they’re entitled to.

The evening had started well, with her perched on the windowsill, watching sheets of rain blotting out the world. Gashes of lightning tore open the sky. Behind her Rekha wrung her hands. Let me shut the window. The rain will make all the bedclothes damp, the quilts will turn moldy, you’ll get the pneumonia again, and then what will we do? But Sabitri refused. She loved the smell of night rain: wet earth, darkness, but also something else, nameless and a little frightening. When she was young, no one could keep her indoors at times like this. Even now, after she had grown brittle and creaky, the storm tugged at her insides. Ah, but Bipin Bihari should have seen her tonight!

The phone rang. She wasn’t going to pick it up. That’s what she had bought that fancy expensive answering machine for. But then there was Bela’s voice, ragged. She’d been crying. What is it about children? An old need twisted in Sabitri’s chest. Protect, protect. She lunged unwisely across the dark and banged her knee; pain shot down her leg like a fire.

“What happened?” she called into the receiver, her voice sounding rough and angry, though she had not meant it to come out like that. Even now Bela had this effect on her.

But Bela, preoccupied as she often was by her own drama, didn’t seem to notice. She rushed into her tale. Tara was thinking of dropping out of college, they had to stop her, she’d only completed one semester, it

would be the worst mistake of her life, the girl refused to listen to Bela, she never listened to anything her mother said nowadays.

Sabitri hid her concern. Sympathy would only make Bela cry more.

“I’m sorry to hear this.” But how cold and unfeeling she sounded.

“You’ve got to write to her, Ma! You’re the grandmother. If you stress the right things, point out the dangers of her stupid choice, perhaps it’ll stop Tara from ruining her life!”

Sabitri wanted to remind Bela that she had tried all of the above with her. What good had it done? Besides, Tara had never even seen Sabitri. Every time Sabitri had asked Bela to bring her to India, Bela had an excuse ready. Almost as though she—or maybe that husband of hers, that Sanjay—felt Sabitri would be a bad influence.

The years had taught Sabitri to keep such thoughts to herself. She said, instead, “What made Tara want to drop out? She’s such a good student.”

When she didn’t receive an answer, she continued, “Has Tara’s father talked to her about this? There’s a better chance of her listening to him than to me. Aren’t they really close?”

Silence at the other end, more distressing than any amount of weeping. Then Bela said, “Tara isn’t talking to Sanjay at the moment.”

Something else was wrong, something worse than Tara aborting her studies, which in America, Sabitri had heard, could easily be picked up again. Sabitri suddenly felt much older than her sixty-seven years. She didn’t have the strength to question Bela. What was the use of questions, anyway? Already she knew the most important thing: if her daughter—proud, stubborn, so like herself—had had anyone else to turn to, she would never have called Sabitri for help.

She wrote down, carefully, the college dorm address that Bela dictated. She promised to take a rickshaw to the post office early tomorrow morning. She promised to send the letter by express delivery.

Now she sits at the table that has been with her for decades, running her fingers over a gouge that Bela had hacked into the wood after they’d had a fight. What can she write in her rusty English to change Tara’s mind? She cannot even imagine her granddaughter’s life, the whirlwind foreign world she lives in. All Sabitri has is a handful of photos. The child Tara in a costume, brandishing a broomstick, celebrating some odd American festival, the point of which Sabitri could not figure out. A teenage Tara at a special party called a prom, alien and glamorous in a strapless dress. Sabitri had been intimidated by her glittery cheekbones, the sophistication of her plucked eyebrows. How different from the photo she kept in her drawer, under her sari-blouses: baby Tara in Bela’s arms, peering from under a woolly blue hood, a foggy orange bridge floating in the distance.

That had been the first photo. Sabitri still remembers the pang she felt on receiving it because she had so wanted to be present at Tara’s birth. But she hadn’t been invited.

Push away the past, that vessel in which all emotions curdle to regret. Start the letter.

Dearest Granddaughter Tara,

I am sure you are surprised to receive this, since customarily we write to each other only to send Bijoya greetings. Your mother informs me that you do not wish to continue with college. I am very sorry to hear this and hope you will reconsider. Without education, a woman has little chance of standing on her own feet. She will be forced to watch from the sidelines while others enjoy the life she has dreamed about—

Wrong, wrong, all wrong. An entire hour wasted. She balls up the sheet and throws it to the floor.

Dearest Granddaughter Tara,

You do not know how lucky you are to be sent to college. So many families are too poor to be able to afford such an expense. It would be a criminal waste if you do not avail yourself of the opportunity life has given you.

She hates what she has written, prissy, stilted, schoolmarmish. Tears it up. Her mind wanders, again, to the photos. Her favorite one, which she keeps on her dresser, is of Tara at the swimming pool, taken when she was nine. Dressed in a pink two-piece swimsuit, she balances on the edge of a board, about to leap into the water. Her face is filled with terror and elation.

How well Sabitri knows that feeling.

Sabitri's own leap began, as so many things in Bengal do, with a platter of sweets. She has forgotten many things from that time—just a few years after Independence; she was only seventeen then—but the platter she remembers clearly: heavy, made of solid silver, with a sharp, raised edge that cut into her fingers as she carried it down a mud path behind her mother, Durga, who held a similar platter. Durga's back was bent. As she walked, the knobs of her backbone bobbed up and down under her worn sari-blouse. She was the hardest worker Sabitri knew. But for her, their household would have fallen apart long ago, for her father was the kind of man the world routinely took advantage of. Sabitri felt a churning inside her as she watched her mother, a mix of sadness and anger and love.

The platters belonged to the Mittirs, the wealthiest family in the village. Their names were etched on the rims to discourage theft, or perhaps as a kind of proclamation. Mittir's wife Leelamoyi had ordered the sweets from Durga for a luncheon. The Mittirs had their own cook, a brahmin imported from Kolkata, but Durga's sweets, famous throughout the village, were far superior to anything he could have concocted. And Leelamoyi had to have the best.

Sabitri hadn't wanted to come. Leelamoyi, who lived in Kolkata and only visited the village under duress during festival time, was known to have a sharp tongue, unpredictable moods, and an elevated notion of her own importance. She would surely remark on how tall Sabitri had grown and how, if her parents didn't act fast, they wouldn't be able to marry her off. But there was no one else to help Durga. Sabitri's sister was too young. Her father was at the temple, where he was a part-time priest. And even if he had been home, he would have reminded them in his mild, surprised way that this wasn't a man's job. So here was Sabitri, sweating and irritated and trying not to step in cow dung.

Inside the Mittir home it was cool and misty, the windows covered with damp rushes. Two maids wielded large palm-leaf fans. Leelamoyi, surrounded by a gaggle of gossips, had spread her considerable bulk over a

flowery silken sofa. She must have been in an expansive mood, because she tasted the desserts, pronounced them satisfactory, and handed Durga a stack of rupees without counting them. Then she looked Sabitri up and down.

“What’s your daughter’s name again?” she asked Durga.

“Sabitri, Rani Ma.”

“Ha! Ambitious, aren’t you, naming her after the mythic heroine who snatched her husband from the clutches of Death himself. Well, you’d better find her a match fast, else she won’t have a husband at all.”

Sabitri hid her fury and tugged at Durga’s sari, trying to get her to leave, but Durga said, “Sabi doesn’t want to get married, Rani Ma. She wants to go to college. Wants to become a teacher. She’s smart. Stood first in the matric exams in the Girls School. But we don’t have the money.”

Sabitri’s face burned. Go through life with your head held high, Durga had taught her. Why, then, would she humiliate herself—and Sabitri—by exposing to a rich, spoiled woman the tender dreams that Sabitri had entrusted to her? Dreams as impossible as sprouting wings. She would never confide in her mother again!

Sabitri thinks: If only one could erase the years—just long enough to say, I understand. But by the time she realized how much it had cost her mother to speak those words—Sabitri was a mother herself then, and alone—Durga was dead, beyond the reach of all apologies.

“Really?” Leelamoyi raised disbelieving eyebrows. Gold weighed down her arms. Just her bracelets would have paid for Sabitri’s college twice over.

Sometimes the unfairness of the world made Sabitri feel like she might burst. She pushed her way through the entourage toward the door.

Behind her Leelamoyi spoke sharply. “Girl, did I say you could leave?”

Sabitri considered disobedience, but an angry Leelamoyi could make their lives more miserable than they already were. She couldn’t do that to her family. She stopped, though she did not turn around.

“Tell you what, Durga,” Leelamoyi said, her voice indolent once more, “if your impatient daughter is as smart as you claim, if she manages to get into a Kolkata college, I’ll pay her fees and let her stay in our home while she studies.”

The sycophants jostled around Leelamoyi, jealously exclaiming at this goddesslike generosity, so much more than Sabitri deserved. Sabitri stood frozen in disbelief until Durga pulled her forward and told her to touch the Rani Ma’s feet in thanks.

The pure chill of marble against her forehead. Her thoughts whirling like a flock of startled birds. The drab dead-end wall of her future had just become a golden door. Thank you, she thought fervently, ashamed of her misjudgment. Leelamoyi’s voice, booming from above, did sound like a goddess’s. Sabitri could not decipher the words, though she heard the women titter in response.

A lifetime's worth of impatience, days slow as cattle grazing in a parched summer field. Then she was in front of the Mittirs' Kolkata home, peering through the wrought-iron gate, clutching a painted tin suitcase in a sweaty hand. She had expected grandeur. Still, she was taken aback by the hugeness of the mansion, three stories tall, the shuttered windows like heavy-lidded eyes. Under an enormous portico gleamed a motorcar. The brick walls surrounding the compound were topped with broken glass to keep out intruders. A gatekeeper, thick-mustachioed as a bandit, banged his lathi on the paved driveway and shouted in his terrifying voice for her to move along. When she said that Leelamoyi had invited her to live here, he sneered in disbelief and tried to snatch away the letter of confirmation the Mittirs' manager, Sarkar Moshai, had sent her.

How the matter would have ended she did not know, but right then a young man emerged from the house. "What's all the commotion?" he asked.

His shirt blazed in the sun, blinding her. She had never seen anything so white. Later she would ask him what kind of soap the Mittirs used. But his life had not taken him anywhere near the washing area of the house, so he did not know.

She gathered her courage, pushed past the gatekeeper, and held out the note with desperate, trembling fingers. The young man gave it a brief glance and ordered the gateman to send her in to Sarkar Moshai. "Make sure someone gives her food and water," he added. "Can't you see she's exhausted?"

Before Sabitri could thank him, he stepped into the waiting car.

Later she would say, "You didn't even read that note, did you?"

"No," he said. "But I read your eyes."

"Eyes can lie."

"Not yours," he said.

Useless, these rambling memories. Focus on the letter, the one thing that might make a difference in the future.

Granddaughter, people look down on a woman without education. She has few options. To survive, she is forced to put up with ill-treatment. She must depend on the kindness of strangers, an unsure thing. I do not want that for you—

Even the most startling adventure, sooner or later, must become routine. So it was with Sabitri. Each morning she took the tram to the women's college, where most of her classes were held. For science and mathematics, she walked to a nearby men's college with a small group of girls. They sat in a nervous clump on a back bench because they had never had male classmates. The professors addressed only the men. Sabitri was mostly grateful to be ignored. The village school had not prepared her adequately; it was only with frantic effort that she managed to keep up.

After classes, she studied in the library with two girls who were also from distant villages, sharing textbooks since none of them had enough money to buy them all. Sabitri received a monthly stipend from Sarkar Moshai, but it was barely enough to pay her fees and her tram fare, and she was too shy to ask for more. In between homework, they spoke of their families, how much they missed them. The girls stayed in a run-down women's hostel, six to a room. Once they went with Sabitri to see where she lived and stood staring at the mansion. Struck dumb by their amazement, Sabitri couldn't tell them how unhappy she was there.

So many things run together in her head nowadays. But this she remembers: On the day of her arrival, Paro, Leelamoyi's favorite maid, had taken her to the second floor. Leelamoyi sat on a four-poster bed carved with massive lion paws, playing cards with three friends. Sunlight dazzled an oval vanity mirror that stood, tilted, on a mahogany stand. On the wall was a clock unlike anything Sabitri had seen. Even as she stared, it struck the hour, and a little wooden bird popped out with a series of squawks, startling her so that she jumped. And the windows—with their shutters thrown wide, they were as big as doors. Through the bars, she could see hosts of treetops dancing in the breeze. It was like living in a leafy ocean. If this was Sabitri's room, she would have sat on the windowsill all day, staring into the sky. But these women didn't even glance out.

Paro gave a small, apologetic cough and Leelamoyi looked up, frowning.

"Who's this?" she said.

Sabitri had prepared a careful speech about appreciation and gratitude, but when she realized Leelamoyi had forgotten her, she grew flustered. Her words ran into each other as she tried to explain her presence.

Leelamoyi raised her hand to cut her off. "Ah, yes, you're that sweet-maker's daughter. Study hard now, and stay out of trouble." She turned back to her cards, and Paro pinched Sabitri's arm, indicating that she had been dismissed.

Paro showed her where she would stay, a musty ground-floor room with a tiny, barred window set too high for Sabitri to look out. A weight pressed down on her chest—she can feel it even today. Their mud hut in the village had been rudimentary, but there was dappled light, the bright emerald of lau vines climbing up a wall. She knows now that Paro could easily have given her a better room—many lay empty in that mansion. But Paro had taken a dislike to her. Perhaps she resented her because she did no housework and yet received food and lodging. Sabitri wept that night for her mother, for the lost moon. For her own folly in believing that Leelamoyi's benevolence had been something more than a moment's caprice.

It took her some time to understand her complicated position in the household's hierarchy: neither servant nor master. She was of a higher caste than the servants, but they made the important decisions: what she would eat, where she would bathe and hang her clothes to dry. They hesitated to ill-treat her because she was the daughter of a temple priest; but it was a small temple in a faraway village, so they did not feel compelled to treat her well. Someone would put her morning meal, a thala of rice with a dollop of dal thrown over it, a grudging piece of fish dumped on the side, in the passageway outside the kitchen in the mornings. She sat on the floor by herself and ate before leaving for college. The aroma of the dishes being cooked for the Mittirs—jackfruit curry, mutton kurma, biryani—assailed her. She hungered also for the bits of conversation floating from the kitchen: a moment of laughter, a raucous fight between the cook and the bazaar-servant. Her stomach ached with the longing to be included. At night she was afraid to arrive too soon for dinner; she didn't want the servants to think she was greedy. By the time she sat down to her meal, the rutis were leathery, the vegetables dry. Dinner was when she missed her mother the most. At home they had eaten together, Durga listening with fascinated admiration to Sabitri's recital of her day.

One evening, gathering her sari from the clothesline at the far end of the backyard, she noticed a narrow winding staircase, rusted in places. She climbed it—perhaps from a desire to escape. It led to a terrace, empty except for water tanks marked with pigeon droppings, a place where no one came. She made it hers. Each night after dinner she escaped to it, careful to ensure no one saw her. She looked at the stars and imagined them shining on her family. She finger-traced words onto the twinkling vastness of the sky, the things she would have written to her mother had Durga been able to read. Sometimes she wrote things she needed to believe: I'm lucky to be in Kolkata, getting an education. How many girls get this opportunity? Soon I'll get a great job. I'll earn enough money so my family will never be hungry again. Sometimes she whispered into the dark the saying Durga had quoted before bidding her goodbye: Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. There was a second part to the saying, but Durga had left that out. When she said goodbye to her daughter, her eyes had glittered like broken glass. To send Sabitri to Kolkata, she'd had to fight all their relatives, who warned her that she was sending the girl to her ruination. Remembering that gave Sabitri the strength to go down to her cheerless room for another long night of study.

Granddaughter, this is the truth: if you are uneducated, people look down on you. To survive, you are forced to accept crumbs thrown from a rich man's table. How can such a woman ever brighten the family name?

One morning when Sabitri came to the passageway, there was no food. She ventured through the door to find out why. The kitchen was in an uproar. Leelamoyi had ordered the cook to make rasogollas for a luncheon, and so he had. But something had gone wrong. The soft round balls that should have been floating in syrup had exploded into hundreds of pieces. There was no time to make another batch. How shamed Leelamoyi would be if the guests had to be served store-bought sweets! Cooks had been fired for less.

"I won't be going alone," the cook was shouting. "I'll make sure you all come with me." He transfixed Sabitri with a terrifying frown. "What do you want?"

Don't meddle, her wiser side warned. But she heard herself saying, in a small voice, that maybe she could fix the problem. The cook glared at her effrontery, but then he waved her in. Her hands shook as she boiled milk, sweetening it with jaggery syrup. She shredded the exploded balls into tiny pieces, remembering how her mother did it. She added them to the milk, along with ground cardamom and chopped pistachios. She was late for college already. But the mixture needed to be stirred, constantly, gently, so it would not stick to the bottom of the pan. She could not abandon it.

By the time she got to the college, she had missed her first three classes. Even in the others, she was distracted. Her friends joked that it was because of the new Maths professor. Their regular professor was in the hospital with a lung infection, and the university had found a substitute, a recent college graduate, a lanky young man with an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down when he got excited about what he was teaching. Sabitri didn't pay her friends—or him—much attention. Was Leelamoyi angry because her menu had been changed? Or did she like the new dessert? If she did, the cook would probably take full credit for it.

But how Sabitri had enjoyed cooking! At home she would grumble while helping Durga. This morning, though, when the milk had thickened perfectly, no ugly skin forming on top, she found herself smiling as she had not done since coming to Kolkata.

"Look at her grinning," her friends whispered. "Ei, Sabi, are you in love or what?"

Upon her return, she was summoned by Leelamoyi. She climbed the stairs with some trepidation. One never knew what pleased the rich, what affronted them. But Leelamoyi, reclined on her bed—did she ever do anything else?—chewing on betel leaves, was all smiles. The guests had loved the dessert. Even her husband and son had asked for second helpings.

“From now on when I have company,” she said, with the air of conferring a great favor, “I want you to make the dessert.”

Though she hated herself for it, Sabitri’s heart ballooned at Leelamoyi’s approval. But what about her studies? She had copied her classmates’ notes today, but she had not understood them well. If this happened often, how would she pass her classes?

Leelamoyi gestured to Paro, who walked over to the mahogany almirah with a face like she’d just bitten into a bitter melon. From the bottom shelf she removed two saris and handed them to Sabitri. Sabitri held her breath, marveling at the slip-shiny feel of the silk, trying not to show her excitement. She had never owned a silk sari. And these, though not new, were far more expensive than anything her family could afford to buy her.

“Rani Ma wants you to have them,” Paro said with her bitter-melon mouth.

In her room, Sabitri tried on the saris, wishing she had a mirror. The first was pomegranate-red with a border of green parrots. She would wear it to college tomorrow, even though she knew it was too showy. The second sari was more expensive, evening-sky-blue with a thin gold border. Where could she wear it? Certainly not to the kitchen, where no doubt Paro was fanning the waves of resentment by telling everyone of these undeserved gifts. But she couldn’t bear to take it off. It was smooth as water against her skin, lighter than she had imagined a sari could be. She decided to go to the terrace.

Once there, she walked up and down the way she imagined a great lady would, steps tiny and elegant, the sunset breeze rustling the silk. She became a rich heiress who possessed two entire almirahs of saris like this. Her diamond nose ring sparkled as she promenaded.

But she was not alone! In a corner behind a water tank stood the young man who had helped her upon her arrival at the Mittirs’, smoking and watching. Leelamoyi’s son. From overheard kitchen gossip she knew his name: Rajiv. He was studying to be a doctor so that he could take over the family business, a hospital. There was a smile on his face—derision, no doubt. She rushed back to the staircase.

“Please don’t run away!” said the young man, and when she didn’t listen, “Stop, I insist!”

Granddaughter, at that, I stopped. Perhaps a part of me believed that, charity case that I was, he had the right to command me. But a part of me wanted to stay because he was young and handsome and had been chivalrous. My heart beat unevenly as I turned to face him, and not just out of fear.

She looks down at the page. What made her write this foolishness? She crushes the sheet in her fist, as though to crush the memory. Then she smooths the paper out again. She is not equipped to advise Tara, she knows this. But perhaps, if she shares her life, the girl might see something there. For the first time, she feels hopeful.

How long did they speak that time, and the next, and the next? And of what? Later she would only remember fragments, torn clouds drifting in front of the moon. When she told him, shyly, why she was in Kolkata, he listened with careful attention. Then he talked about himself, disarming her with his self-deprecating honesty. He hated medical school: the stink of illness, the pus and the vomit, the dark, jaundiced urine of the patients. But it wasn't something he could tell his parents, who were counting on him. The terrace was his escape, too. He loved playing the flute. Would she like him to play for her one night? But already she knew he would never do that. They could not risk anyone finding out.

Days passed. How many? It is hard to keep track of such mundanities when one is balanced inside a fairy tale. After some time, he brought up an old red quilt, so they could sit in comfort as they spoke. One moonless night, he lay down on it so he could point out the constellations to her. Here is Kalpurush with his shining, here are the seven wise rishis. She was impressed. She hadn't thought a city boy would know the names of stars. Maybe that was what made her lie down next to him on the worn malmal, though her mother's warnings buzzed in her ears like mosquitoes. She told him her dreams: she would dress in a starched sari and teach history to schoolchildren, stories of conquerors and despots. Her students would be obedient; she would never need to cane anyone. She would become a principal with tortoiseshell glasses, the entire school standing at attention when she entered the assembly hall.

He nodded. She would make a great principal, he said with conviction. He wound a finger softly around a lock of her hair, which he had persuaded her to unbraid. That was what made her fall in love, finally: his belief in her, and his gentleness.

But even as she confessed her dreams, they were changing.

That first night, their conversation, so hard to break off, had continued beyond safety. She rushed to her room to change the magical sari that had summoned her prince for an old cotton one. She was frighteningly late for her meal. But no one noticed. They were chattering about how the young master had been tardy to dinner. Leelamoyi had scolded him severely when he finally showed up. She demanded to know where he'd been. He wouldn't tell her, though. The servants guessed it was at some nightclub with his no-good friends. Didn't he look like he'd had one too many to drink? The older retainers decried today's youth, their lack of filial respect. The younger ones grumbled because now everyone would have to stay up late. Sabitri could barely swallow her food as she listened, her throat dry with guilty excitement, her heart hot and swollen with a secret power.

Granddaughter, when you are poor and ill-educated, how unequipped you are to read the world. All you know is your place in it: down near the bottom. You believe you are meant for better things, but how will you ever climb out to get them? The first opportunity that appears, you grasp at it to pull yourself up. You don't check to see if it can bear your weight.

She wore her red sari to college and was roundly teased by her friends, especially when, in Maths class, the young professor dropped his books while setting them on the table. You're distracting him, Sabi! She laughed it off, but as he was leaving, in a spirit of mischief she looked him in the eye, with what she considered a sultry smile. He dropped his books again. Later her friends said they thought they would die from holding in their laughter.

It was as though she had entered a golden time. She woke early and heavy-eyed and rushed to the kitchen to prepare desserts: mihidana and malpua, pithay made from sweet potatoes, fried and dipped in thick syrup. Leelamoyi's friends loved them all. Even the young master—who had never had a sweet tooth, Leelamoyi told Sabitri—asked for two helpings of rice pudding. He told his mother that whoever had prepared it was a treasure. Make sure you don't let her go, he said.

Sabitri wrote all this in a letter to Durga, along with elaborate descriptions of the sweets, which she had adapted to Leelamoyi's citified taste. She did not mention her missed classes, how she was falling behind in her schoolwork. On the envelope, she wrote a line asking her father to please read the letter to her mother. Perhaps the letter was lost, because she never received a reply.

Late at night, after the terrace (they had decided it was best to meet post-dinner, when everyone assumed they had gone to bed), she tossed and turned on her pallet, longing to tell her mother about Rajiv. Her secret cramped her belly like indigestion. If there had been a chance to see Durga face-to-face, she would have done it. Durga would have been shocked. Maybe she would have slapped her. But because she loved her daughter, she would have finally come around.

On the terrace, Rajiv told her how in the operating theater he felt he was drowning in the blood, horrifyingly bright, that sometimes pulsed out over his hands. She shuddered and held him close, her lips in his hair.

"Thank God I have you to talk to," he said against her collarbone. "Otherwise I would kill myself."

This, then, was why he loved her. She was his confessional, his absolution.

Yes, she thought. She had never felt so necessary.

He took her face in his hands and looked into it as though it were the moon. When he buried his own face in her breasts, desire, dangerous as a sparking wire, traveled down her body into the pit of herself until she thought she would break apart.

"I wish this moment would last forever, Tri. That it would become my whole life."

Yes, yes.

She loved the way he shortened her name, made it unique. But a moment cannot become a whole life. She knew that. She was hungry for more.

One of Leelamoyi's card-playing friends had become a grandmother. She would be gone to her daughter's home for a whole month. But how would they play Twenty-Nine without her? Sabitri was summoned to Leelamoyi's airy bedroom, told the rules of the game. She found them simple enough.

"Smart girl!" Leelamoyi said, smiling with her brilliant, betel-stained lips. "Can you come home right after your classes, then?"

It wasn't really a question.

Sabitri no longer had time to study in the library. She rushed home and changed into one of her good

saris—she had four now, given to her for this purpose—and went to the upstairs room, where, because she was better at strategy than the other women, Leelamoyi insisted that she be her partner. In order to play, Sabitri had to sit across from Leelamoyi, on her bed. At first she was uncomfortable. The people in her village, her parents included, would have flinched at such presumption. But Leelamoyi didn't seem to mind. All she cared about was winning. Paro brought tea and crisp kachuris stuffed with spicy green peas. "Eat, eat," Leelamoyi said. She addressed Sabitri as meye, a word that could mean either "girl" or "daughter." Sabitri could see the rage behind the crust of politeness that was Paro's face.

But, Granddaughter, I found it impossible to worry. How soft the mattress was, how fine and silken the bedcover. How sweet the sandesh I had made that morning. And Leelamoyi calling me "daughter"—surely that was a sign.

At school she told her friends she had to help in the house. It was only a half lie, wasn't it? She felt guilty at the disappointment on their faces, for they counted on her to explain their English texts: Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Hardy. But as soon as she stepped out of the college gates, she forgot everything: her friends, her upcoming exams, the eyes of the young Maths professor searching her out during class. It was like being bewitched.

This was what Sabitri dreamed as she rode on the tram, dozing because she didn't get enough sleep nowadays: She's in a wedding mandap, dressed in bridal red. She lifts a garland high and slips it over Rajiv's head. Under the bright Petromax lanterns, she sees her face reflected, tiny and shining and perfect, in his eyes. The auspicious sound of conches accompany them to the third floor of the Mittir home, where Rajiv has told her his room is. In the bed the years pass with swift pleasure. A baby joins them. Two. She pushes back the gold bangles on her arms to nurse them. At her waist, the cool heft of the household keys that Leelamoyi has handed over. In the kitchen the cook nods docile agreement, Yes, Boudimoni, when she tells him to make jackfruit curry. Paro washes the children's soiled nappies. No. She deletes Paro from her world.

Perfect, a perfect dream, granddaughter. Why, then, waking with a start as the conductor jangled the bell for my stop, did I feel a constriction in my chest, a sense that I had misplaced something?

Summer had descended upon Kolkata with epic vengeance. Sabitri came back from college bedraggled with sweat, craving a bath, cold water cascading over her body in the maids' bathroom. But a servant was waiting. Leelamoyi wanted to see her. Sabitri was surprised. There were no card games today—or had she made a mistake? Let me drink some water, she said. Change my sari. The woman scrunched up her face and shook her head. Rani Ma's waiting. Better come right now.

The first thing she saw when she entered the room was the red quilt from the terrace, crumpled on the floor like the pelt of a dead animal. The blood rushed to her head and then away; she had to hold on to the doorframe. When her vision cleared she looked around for Rajiv, who would defend her. But there was only Leelamoyi, and behind her Paro, hands on her hips, swollen with satisfaction.

From across the years, Sabitri remembers Leelamoyi's contorted mouth, spitting out invectives: conniving slut, harlot's daughter, poisonous snake in my bosom. Her own mouth frozen, so that when she tried to say she had done nothing wrong, the words would not obey. She learned that Rajiv had been sent away already to his uncle's home in another city. He would continue his studies there. So don't be thinking that you can

sink your witch-claws into him again. As for Sabitri, she was to leave the house right now. No, Leelamoyi didn't care where she went, or what happened to her. If it wasn't for the fact that your father's a priest, I would have you whipped. Now get out of my sight before I change my mind.

Sabitri stood at the tram stop for a long while in the oppressive dusk, carrying her small painted trunk. Finally, she boarded a tram that would take her to the men's college. She could think of no other place. She opened her handbag—so light—and looked down at the frighteningly few rupee notes in there. Her trunk was light, too. Paro had followed her to her room and rummaged through it—Let's see what you're stealing—and taken the silk saris. She'd taken some of Sabitri's own things as well. A buffalo-horn comb that Durga had given her. A tiny bottle of rosewater Sabitri had saved up for months to buy. Sabitri had been too heartsick to protest.

The men's college loomed eerily in the gloom. She slipped through the gate, thankful that the gateman wasn't there to stop her, and ran up the stairs. On the second story, at the end of a corridor, there was a small room with a plaque on it, WOMEN'S COMMON ROOM. She had gone there once, exploring, with her friends. It was piled with dusty furniture and smelled of mice droppings. But there was a bolt on the inside, and a small toilet. She could stay there for the night. Tomorrow—ah, she couldn't handle the thought of tomorrow yet.

When she reached it, the door to the common room was padlocked.

The strength went out of her and she slid to the floor, unable to hold in her sobs any longer. Terror and rage. But foremost was the fear of what might happen to her tonight when the night watchman came by. Would he throw her out on the street? Would he do worse? Beneath it all roiled the humiliation. What would her parents, her relatives, her village, say if they knew that she had been kicked out of the Mittir home like a dog? No one would care that the love she and Rajiv had felt for each other was pure and beautiful. Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. Could she have strayed any farther from that?

The second half of the saying, the part her mother had left unspoken, struck her like a slap:

Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name.

Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame.

She had been weeping too hard to hear the footsteps. When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she flinched and cried out, throwing up her arms to protect herself. But it wasn't the night watchman, as she had feared. It was her Maths professor.

He'd been working on his research, he said, in one of the classrooms—something he often did, since the hostel where he stayed was very noisy. On his way out, he heard a woman weeping and came to see what the matter was. He was shocked to see her in such a state. What had happened?

She hid her face. How mortifying, that he who had always looked at her with admiration should see her like this. She made a vague gesture—please go away. But he lowered himself to the floor beside her, his lanky knees drawn up. The unexpectedness of it made her look up. His eyes were distressed. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Clearly, he had never been in such a situation before. She felt a hysterical laugh spiraling up and had to hide her face in her sari.

His hand—tentative, nervous—touched her shoulder. "Don't cry like that, please. Maybe I can help—"

Something in his voice, in those awkward, patting motions. A plan formed in my head. I held on to it like a drowning woman. I did not allow myself to think of anything, of anyone else. Tara, can you blame me? I lifted my face to him and smiled my prettiest, saddest, falsest smile.

He took her to a cousin's house, his only family in Kolkata. "Here's a student of mine," he said, "homeless because of a rich woman's selfish whim. Please keep her until the end of the college year. I'll pay—"

"An unknown girl, Bijan?" His cousin was dubious. "Who knows why those people forced her to leave their house? Maybe she's a thief—"

"I told you—she lost an important card game where she was the rich woman's partner. The woman was furious because she had to hand over a lot of money. She threw Sabitri out into the night. If I hadn't found her, anything might have happened! I can't force you to help her, but if you don't, understand this: we will never speak again."

The inflexibility in his voice surprised me and frightened his cousin. She gave in.

He came by each evening to help with my studies, for I was dreadfully behind. When he was not around, the cousin was cold to me. Perhaps, with a woman's instinct, she saw into my crooked core. She warned him, but he would not listen. Granddaughter, he had love enough for the both of us.

Each day Sabitri checked the papers surreptitiously. One morning she saw it: "Mittirs of Shyambazar Celebrate Wedding of Their Only Son to Beautiful Coal Mine Heiress." There were photographs. The heiress was beautiful indeed. With a gritted heart Sabitri threw herself into her studies. She made herself meek and helpful in the house until she won the cousin over. Everything happened as she had planned: she passed her classes; Bijan asked her to marry him; the cousin urged her to agree. When Sabitri wept, they thought it was from grateful joy.

The newlyweds went to the village to pay their respects. Sabitri's parents were astonished but not displeased. Her father was relieved that they had had a quiet temple wedding in Kalighat for which he did not have to pay. The relatives swung between respect for the professor son-in-law and envy at Sabitri's good luck, once again undeserved. Durga was delighted that Bijan wanted Sabitri to continue her studies.

But Tara, I didn't do that. Within a year I was expecting a child. I dropped out of college, and though Bijan encouraged me to go back once the child was born, I no longer wanted to. Once again, I had been seduced by a different dream.

Bijan had published his research in a journal, something very intellectual that Sabitri didn't understand. What she did understand was that several companies wanted to hire him. They were willing to pay him highly. Give him a prestigious title. Bijan would have preferred to live in their one-bedroom flat and continue teaching. Sabitri set to persuading him otherwise.

Her strategy lacked originality, but she was aided by the fact that he had never been with a woman before. Additionally, he was in love. She cooked him the dishes he most enjoyed, the comfort foods of a man who had grown up poor—rice, yellow mung dal, fried brinjal. From her own life, she knew them well. After

dinner she put on a thin cotton night-chemise, which showed off her figure—she had recently taken on this Westernized habit—and laid their daughter, Bela, freshly changed and powdered, in his lap. How he loved that child! He could play toe-games with her all evening, making funny noises that set her giggling. Sabitri sat next to them, leaning her head on his shoulder. It was so peaceful that she almost forgot what she was there to do.

A sentence here, a phrase there, a small, plaintive smile, the slight press of a breast against his arm. That's all it took, because he wanted to give his wife and child the best of everything. Did he guess the game Sabitri was playing? If so, he forgave her. He joined a giant oil corporation with tentacles everywhere and found that he did not dislike it as much as he had feared. He discovered he had a special talent for solving problems. He was too honest, blunt in his answers, but the management loved him in spite of that. Or perhaps because of it. These were rare qualities in the corporate world. He was promoted, then promoted again, then sent to their headquarters in Delhi to be groomed for higher leadership.

Did I love him, Granddaughter? I'll answer by saying I was the best possible wife. Certainly I loved our life in the capital, a flat in a wealthy colony, a motorcar, respectful servants who believed that I had been born into affluence. I took classes in English conversation and comportment, and learned that I, too, had a talent. I built a reputation for hosting the best parties. I knew how to charm the most taciturn guest into chatting. I never skimped on the alcohol, even if it meant we had to eat rice and lentils for the rest of the month. I created desserts that became the talk of the town. I wonder if Bijan realized that many of his tough deals fell into place because of my dinners.

After seven years of service, Bijan was sent back to Kolkata with yet another promotion. Sabitri was both delighted and uneasy. The sooty, sprawling city of her first humiliation and heartbreak had a hold on her like no other place. The smallest triumph here meant more than the hugest victories elsewhere. They lived on the top floor of a tall building, and sometimes it seemed to her, as she stood on the balcony and looked down on the treetops, that the city had spread itself at her feet. But the past still rankled. Sometimes, after dropping Bela at school, she would ask the driver to take her past the men's college. The memory of that night when she wept outside the Women's Common Room was like a half-formed scab she could not stop picking at.

When on a visit to the village I learned from my mother that Leelamoyi was now a widow and in ill health, alone in the old mansion because her rich daughter-in-law refused to live with her, I formed a plan.

I lie, Tara. The plan had been in me for a long time, like a dormant virus, waiting.

When Sabitri told Bijan that she wanted to visit Leelamoyi, he approved. "I'm glad you've decided to forgive her. After all, if she hadn't forced you to leave her house, we wouldn't be married!"

She nodded. There was no point in telling this straightforward man that she was impelled by a darker motive. She sent a note, accompanied by an expensive basket of fruits, and received a reply in Sarkar Moshai's spidery handwriting. Leelamoyi would like to see her.

That morning, Granddaughter, I dressed with care. I wore a silk sari with a thick gold border and my best

jewelry. I made your mother wear a lace dress and shiny new shoes even though she complained that they hurt her feet. (But it was only a mild complaint because she was a biddable girl. Who would have guessed that she'd give me so much grief in later years?) This I did because I knew that Leelamoyi had no grandchildren.

As the car approached the Mittir house, Sabitri found that her hands were shaking. She hid them in the folds of her sari. The house looked shrunken; paint was peeling in parts; here and there, broken shutters hung dangling. There was no darwan on duty, so the driver had to get down and push open the rusting gates. She stepped out, holding tight to her daughter's hand and carrying a platter of Leelamoyi's favorite sweets.

The driver was reversing the car, going back to the office. He needed to take Bijan from one meeting to another. "Come back as soon as you drop Bijan Babu," she instructed him. "I don't want to stay long."

She rang the bell, but no one came. When she pushed at the door, it opened with a creak. Ahead of her was the stairway. How many times had she climbed it, wearing those saris that were hers and yet not hers, her heart beating light and rapid because she believed she was moving closer to her dream. The memory of that foolish young self overwhelmed her with tenderness and shame.

There was dirt on the staircase, crumbled stucco. She held up the edge of her sari and warned Bela not to touch the banister. Familiar, familiar, the second floor, that long corridor filled with anticipation, the airy windows through which bright trees peeped, that milk-white ocean of a bed.

Today the windows were shut. Through the haphazard light that seeped in between shutters, she saw a form on the bed, widow's white melting into the sheets, so still that for a disappointed lurch of the heart she believed that death had robbed her of revenge.

But no, the form struggled to sit up. She patted the bed for Sabitri to join her, called to a maid to fetch snacks for the visitors. Leelamoyi may have dwindled, but her voice was still autocratic.

"So this is your daughter?" She frowned at Bela, who was playing quietly, as was her habit, with her dolls. She did not compliment the child, though Bela was beautiful, even more so this day, with bright ribbons in her wavy hair. But Sabitri would not allow herself to be upset. She adjusted her sari, making sure her gold bangles tinkled, and said brightly, familiarly, "But Auntie, you must have many grandchildren by now!"

Leelamoyi's face grew dark as iron. She launched into a tirade about her daughter-in-law. What a mistake they had made in choosing that spoiled, useless rich girl. Couldn't produce an heir. Refused to live with the Mittirs even though they remodeled the entire third floor for her, Western-style toilets and all. Turned Rajiv against his parents so that he moved out within six months of marriage—abandoning the home of his forefathers, can you believe that?—to live in a fancy new house in Gariahat that his wife's father bought her. That's what caused Mittir Moshai's heart attack, Leelamoyi was sure of it.

The maid did not arrive. Leelamoyi shouted invectives, wandered into other spaces. "That girl, a witch, a murderer, can you believe, she took all the wedding jewelry when she left, my own jewelry that I had gifted her! When I tried to stop her, she said, hire a lawyer if you want it back. And Rajiv—he didn't even have the guts to stand up to her and support me."

Rajiv had made a mess of the hospital, too, Leelamoyi went on to say. Oh, life had given her more than her share of trials. But at least he stopped by to see her once in a while. Where was that idiot maid, that Khyama, who should be bringing snacks? No, she said with a scowl, Paro was no longer with her. She offered no

details.

Sabitri smiled the kind, charming smile she had practiced. She assured Leelamoyi that they did not need a snack. They had had an ample breakfast. She directed Leelamoyi's attention to the platter. Look, Auntie, your favorite sweets. The older woman scrabbled for a sandesh, then another one. She smiled slyly and confessed that she had high blood sugar; the doctor had decreed that she must not indulge. But what other pleasure was left in an old woman's life?

"Durga," she said with a sigh, "you always did make the best sweets. You should have opened a shop of your own."

A dizziness assailed Sabitri at being called by her mother's name. Her smile fell away. Once again, Leelamoyi had forgotten who she was. How could you avenge yourself against such oblivion?

"I have to leave now," Sabitri said. She had intended to mention that her car would be waiting downstairs, but she no longer had the energy.

"Stay a little longer," Leelamoyi implored. When Sabitri apologized, she gave an angry laugh. "Yes, yes, I know. No one likes being around sick people. Even my own son is always in a hurry to leave. . . . At least help me sit up straighter before you go."

Sabitri felt a great reluctance to touch her, but out of old habit she found herself obeying. She placed her hands gingerly under Leelamoyi's armpits and pulled. It was like lifting a sack. Traces of sweat were left on her fingers. A smell of staleness, like rotten eggs. It was all she could do not to rush out to find a tap and wash it off.

"Turn on the radio," Leelamoyi ordered. A program of devotional songs came on. "Who would have thought I'd turn religious! Age does strange things to us. Ah, you'll come to it, too, soon enough. Bring the girl near me. I want to see her hair." She put out a greedy hand.

Downstairs, sitting on a bench in the dark passageway, I couldn't stop trembling. The car wasn't back yet—I knew it wouldn't be. But Granddaughter, I couldn't have stood that room, its bitter odors of disease and rage, for another second. It had been a mistake, coming here to gloat. I had wanted Leelamoyi to regret that she didn't let Rajiv marry me, to see that I would have made a far better daughter-in-law than the one she chose. But now I felt only shame. Shame, and disgust at myself for using my daughter in this game. I promised myself I would never set foot in this house again.

One good thing had come out of all this. I'd exorcised a demon. I would no longer lie awake at night, remembering Leelamoyi's twisted face as she called me a whore. I would no longer hold conversations in my head, all the things I'd been too young and afraid to say at that time. I am a good person. I did nothing wrong. He loves me. I love him. I will make him happy because I am the only one to whom he can say what's in his heart.

There was another thing, Tara. As Leelamoyi spoke of Rajiv, I began to see him differently. All these years I'd been blinded by the longing we feel for what is snatched from us. Now I realized that he had been weak and pampered, too weak to stand up for me. He must have known that his mother had thrown me out of the house. But he hadn't even inquired after me. Even if he was in a different city, it would have been easy

enough to ask a friend to go to the college and find out what had happened.

A fumbling at the door. The driver had arrived, thank God. Sabitri started gathering Bela's dolls.

But it was not the driver. It was Rajiv—as though she had conjured him up with her thinking. She recognized him at once, though he was heavier now. He wore expensive clothes, more expensive even than the fine white shirts of old, which Sabitri had sometimes unbuttoned so she could lay her head upon his chest. Once, to celebrate a promotion, she had taken Bijan to New Market to buy him a shirt like that, but he had shaken his head with a laugh. Something that expensive would burn my skin. He had walked out, not caring that the salesmen stared at him.

Sabitri pulled the edge of her sari over her head. She would leave now. Leave and wait on the road. That was best. But as she passed Rajiv, she glanced up. She couldn't help it. Ah, that face, those once-loved lips. How the useless past tugged at you, unsteadying the breath. Was that discontent in his heavy jowls? In the droop of his mouth, a sorrow? Surely it was disillusionment she saw in the circles under his eyes.

Nonsense. She was imagining things to suit her fancy.

"Tri!" Rajiv exclaimed, peering at her. His face, filled with incredulous hope, was young again for a moment before the years came rushing mercilessly back. "God, God, is it really you? No, don't go, please, give me just a minute." But he need not have begged. The special name he had coined for her had struck her at the core, rendering her immobile. "I can't tell you how often I've thought of you. How I've imagined—hoped—that I'd see you again—" He stammered to a stop. Were those tears on his lashes? He still had those ridiculously long lashes, like a girl's. "You must have been—must still be—furious with me—" He grasped her wrists with a suddenness that sent a wave of remembered fire up her body. He was kissing her hands, his lips on the pulse at one wrist, then the other. How long it had been. "I can see you're happily married—with a lovely child." There was hunger in his voice. "I don't want to cause trouble. Just give me another minute of your time—a chance to apologize. To explain what they did to me. Please—"

"Don't," Sabitri said. "My driver will be here any minute." But her voice shook, and she did not pull her hands away.

His words surrounded her like a dust storm. She could see Bela staring at him, openmouthed. Once in a while, she picked bits out of the roaring: Crazy with worry locked up at my uncle's not even a phone ran away but they caught me taken straight to the wedding hated her for it hated them all—

In the early months of her marriage, if Rajiv had come to her, she would have walked out with him. Even if he had not told her all this. She would have lived as his mistress, not caring if she blackened her family's name beyond all salvaging.

Granddaughter, here is my most terrible secret: even after I gave birth to Bela, I would have done it.

She shook her hands from his grip. It was easier than she'd expected. He was a weak man, after all. She wished to say, You could have found me, if you had really wanted to. But it no longer mattered. Better to say, I love my husband. Because that—she was surprised to discover it—was the truth. How long had it been true?

Finally she walked away in silence, Rajiv no longer worth wasting words on. Her chest was full of the new truth's brightness. Emerging into the hot yellow sunshine was like being born. Under her fingertips her daughter's shoulder bones were fragile, magical wings.

There was the car, waiting, with someone in the back seat. Bijan. Her heart flung itself around her body. How long had he been there? What had he seen?

But Bijan was exuberant with success. The morning's meeting had gone excellently. He had negotiated a better deal than anyone had hoped. A significant bonus would be forthcoming. He had decided to celebrate by taking the rest of the day off. How would they like a trip to the Grand Hotel for ice cream, and then the zoo? He sat in the middle of the car like a king, his arms around them, beaming beneficently at his beautiful girls. Bela was telling Bijan about the dirty staircase and strange old lady who kept touching her hair and how hungry she was because the lady didn't give them anything to eat, didn't share even one of Mamoni's delicious sweets. She might just starve to death before they reached the Grand. Sabitri rested her head on Bijan's shoulder, weak with relief, and smiled at Bela's theatrics. The child had widened her eyes and slumped on the seat, saying that she had to have three scoops of ice cream. Could she? Could she, please? How blessed Sabitri was to have this family. From this moment on, she was going to be the best wife and mother to them.

"Yes, you can have three scoops," she said. "Just don't throw up afterwards."

It was the happiest moment of her life.

She wants to write all this to Tara, but she is so tired. Her fingers are cramping. They've been cramping for a while, she realizes, even the fingers of her left hand. It's almost dawn, the jackals long vanished, a couple of overeager roosters beginning to crow. She must lay her head on the table; it's grown too heavy to hold up. She places her cheek against the gouge and remembers, suddenly, its genesis. Bela had slashed the wood with her favorite Parker fountain pen, which Sabitri had saved for months to gift her with when she entered college, ruining both pen and table. This, because Sabitri had insisted that Bela stop seeing the man she was in love with, a man who would later entice her into running away to America. Who would not let her see her mother again. A man who—Sabitri had known this in every vibrating nerve of her body—was utterly wrong for her.

"Your father, Tara," she whispers. "That was him. And now he's abandoned you both, hasn't he? Is that why you're dropping out of college? Why you won't talk to him?"

Oh, this mess, it's beyond her powers to fix. She longs to close her eyes; she's finding it hard to focus. Who is that in a dark corner? Is it her granddaughter? And behind her, could that be Bela? Shadows with blank ovals for faces, waiting for her wisdom—as if she had any to give! Or was it her dead baby, the boy she had named Harsha, bringer of joy, hoping he would buy her a second chance? But no. He had left her long ago.

Sleep. She hungers for it with her entire being.

But first she must write something, because finally she knows what she needs to say. She forces her hand forward, grasps the pen.

But that moment in the car wasn't the happiest moment of my life. Just like it hadn't been so on the starlit terrace with Rajiv. My happiest moment would come much later. After Bijan's drinking problem, my widowhood. After baby Harsha flew away. After all my troubles with your mother. I had opened Durga

Sweets by then. How Leelamoyi would have writhed in rage if she knew that she'd been the one to plant the idea in some secret chamber of my being! It had been tough going, the first few years. But with the help of Bipin Bihari—ah, what a support he had been—I'd finally managed to turn the store into a profitable concern.

One day, in the kitchen at the back of the store, I held in my hand a new recipe I had perfected, the sweet I would go on to name after my dead mother. I took a bite of the conch-shaped dessert, the palest, most elegant mango color. The smooth, creamy flavor of fruit and milk, sugar and saffron mingled and melted on my tongue. Satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone. No one could take it away. That's what I want for you, my Tara, my Bela. That's what it really means to be a fortunate lamp. . . .

In the car, Bijan asked Sabitri, "Do you feel better, now that you've seen Leelamoyi?" She could feel his breath, warm on her hair. "Will it help you forget?"

The solicitousness in his voice brought her close to tears. She nodded, unable to speak.

Bela said, "There was a man, downstairs. He kept crying and kissing Mamoni's hands. Mamoni, why was he kissing your hands?"

Bijan pulled away his arm and sat up straight. In the dead silence that took over the car, Sabitri was aware of the driver's curious eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Just someone I knew long ago," she said, speaking to Bijan. "He doesn't even live in this house anymore. I hadn't expected to see him. We met by the merest chance as I was leaving. He means nothing to me." The words tumbled out of her too fast. She knew she sounded guilty, even though it was the truth she was telling.

"I understand," Bijan said. He looked coldly at her sari, her jewelry. "I understand perfectly."

"I love you, only you," she cried, though she knew it was a major faux pas to speak in this manner in front of servants.

Bijan leaned forward. "Drive me back to the office."

"Aren't we going to the zoo?" Bela asked.

"You can go wherever the hell you want," Bijan said to Sabitri. In the mirror the driver's eyes widened because Bijan-saab never spoke like this. Sabitri guessed it would not be long before the rest of the servants heard about it.

They rode in silence. Near the Maidan they passed a herd of goats crossing the street; heat rose from their coats in shimmery waves. Sabitri had never seen such a sight in the city. For a moment, with a thin spike of hope, she thought she had dreamed it all.

When they had dropped Bijan off, Bijan now transformed into someone she did not know, Sabitri told the driver to take them home. She had difficulty meeting his eyes, but she forced herself.

“I want to go to the zoo!” Bela cried. “I want my ice cream. Why can’t we go to the zoo? Baba said we could. Why can’t we go?” She kicked the seat-back again and again. The noise thudded inside Sabitri’s head.

“It’s because of you we aren’t going!” she shouted. “Stupid girl—you’ve ruined everything.” The Bengali word for “ruin,” noshto, which could also mean “rotten,” or, when applied to women, “unfaithful,” hung in front of her, as visible as her future. Her hand arced through the air, there was a sound like something bursting, and Bela cried out in pain.

The first time you hit your child with all your strength, wanting to hurt, it changes things.

She feels that sting again now. It travels up her arm and lodges in her shoulder. The shock with which Bela had stared at Sabitri. The splotch blooming red on her cheek. The way she shrank back against the car door. Was that when the troubles between them began?

“I’m sorry, Bela,” she says. “Forgive me.” Words that all these years she hadn’t been able to speak.

The pain has taken up permanent residence in her chest. She must have dropped something with a crash, because here comes Rekha, rubbing at her eyes, then running forward with a cry. Sabitri tries to push the letter toward her. But she’s on the floor. When did she fall? Rekha shouts for the milkman, who’s rattling the door, to help her get Ma onto the bed.

Sabitri tries to tell her about the letter. It is the only thing that matters now. It must be put in the mail. It must. “Tell Bipin Bihari,” she whispers. She thinks of his dear face, calm and steady and attentive, even in the worst of her times. “He’ll know what to do.”

But Rekha does not hear. She is sobbing on the phone, urging Doctor Babu to get here fast. Something terrible has happened to Ma. The milkman lifts Sabitri up. Or is she flying? The bed is very soft. The pain is very large. She lifts her eyes, and there is Death in the corner, but not like a king with his iron crown, as the epics claimed. Why, it is a giant brush loaded with white paint. It descends upon her with gentle suddenness, obliterating the shape of the world.

BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS: A NOVEL BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI PDF

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BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS: A NOVEL BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI PDF

A beautiful, powerful new novel from the bestselling, award-winning author of Sister of My Heart and The Mistress of Spices about three generations of mothers and daughters who must discover their greatest source of strength in one another—a masterful, brilliant tale of a family both united and torn apart by ambition and love.

The daughter of a poor baker in rural Bengal, India, Sabitri yearns to get an education, but her family's situation means college is an impossible dream. Then an influential woman from Kolkata takes Sabitri under her wing, but her generosity soon proves dangerous after the girl makes a single, unforgiveable misstep. Years later, Sabitri's own daughter, Bela, haunted by her mother's choices, flees abroad with her political refugee lover—but the America she finds is vastly different from the country she'd imagined. As the marriage crumbles and Bela is forced to forge her own path, she unwittingly imprints her own child, Tara, with indelible lessons about freedom, heartbreak, and loyalty that will take a lifetime to unravel.

In her latest novel, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the complex relationships between mothers and daughters, and the different kinds of love that bind us across generations. Before We Visit the Goddess captures the gorgeous complexity of these multi-generational and transcontinental bonds, sweeping across the twentieth century from the countryside of Bengal, India, to the streets of Houston, Texas—an extraordinary journey told through a sparkling symphony of voices.

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Review
"Affecting." (The New York Times)

"Emotionally accessible…[Divakaruni] balances the ache of separation with the thrills of independence and self-discovery…her characteristic passion, nerve and insight into the troubled soul are here in full." (The Wall Street Journal)

"Divakaruni proves herself adept with all the tools in the writer's toolbox…Divakaruni makes use of two major writerly tools that seldom go together — tragic drama, and screwball comedy. What's more, she finds entirely fresh ways to mete out the tropes of the South Asian immigrant story…hilarity deepens and clarifies the story's dark tones…an heirloom tapestry." (The Miami Herald)

“Before We Visit the Goddess is full of different voices, going back and forth in time, with beautifully written chapters that could stand on their own as short stories but add layer upon layer of complication, wonder, humanity and empathy when joined together…Divakaruni builds her female characters as multidimensional — highly complex, intelligent and nobody’s doormat… Divakaruni guides us along their journeys with beautiful writing, surprising laughter and a truly memorable ending…I can’t recommend this book enough. When it comes to fiction, Divakaruni is a new goddess on the Texas landscape.” (The Austin American Statesman)

“Divakaruni elegantly leads the reader through the twists and turns of life given the complications of culture, family expectations, and words left unsaid…the writing was crisp and clear. The characters were realistic and the dialogue believable. The story explores the dynamics of mothers and daughters caught in the cross-hairs of cultural and generation differences, as well as the complications of expectations, believed or real…Before We Visit the Goddess will leave the reader wondering about the relationship they have with their parents and what should be said before it is too late.” (The Portland Book Review)

“A novel about female strength and ambition and how one mother’s decision can affect the lives of her family for generations to come.” (Bustle)

“Takes readers on an exotic, visceral journey beginning in the mango and saffron-scented kitchens of 1950s India and ending in present day Houston, Texas.” (The Santa Cruz Sentinel)

"Three generations of headstrong Bengali women, their passions, secrets, regrets and mysteries, come to life through Divakaruni’s storytelling wizardry… Divakaruni brings us from the poor villages to the upper crust urban families, from India to Texas, to show how three courageous women struggle toward independence.” (BBC.com)

"The best storytellers always keep you coming back. They have their unique signatures, a unique voice, that enchants the reader and draws them back to listen to one story, then the next and then the one after that. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such masterful story smith. I am done with reading Before We Visit The Goddess for now, but I keep thinking about the characters, and I know that a re-reading is in store for the future.” (The Reading Desk)

“Divakaruni has created characters to be embraced despite their difficulties with each other; learned from when they stumble and fall; and celebrated as the picked themselves up again. There is grace and compassion in her writing as emotions spike and subside. Life-changing disappointments are tempered with kindness, and at no time does the author chastise a character for her imperfections.” (India Currents)

“[Divakaruni is] one of my favorite recent discoveries. Before We Visit the Goddess is full of different voices, going back and forth in time, with beautifully written chapters that could stand on their own as short stories but add layer upon layer of complication, wonder, humanity and empathy when joined together.” (Austin 360)

“The always enchanting and enlightening Divakaruni spins another silken yet tensile saga about the lives of women in India and as immigrants in America…Divakaruni’s gracefully insightful, dazzlingly descriptive, and covertly stinging tale illuminates the opposition women must confront, generation by generation, as they seek both independence and connection." (Booklist (Starred Review))

“Richly drawn characters…a novel of quiet but deeply affecting moments.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“An extraordinary journey told through a sparkling symphony of male and female voices." (Indo American News)

"There are few writers who get the setting, characters and story pitch perfect, like Divakaruni does, every single time. Before We Visit the Goddess is no exception. Brilliantly magical, lyrical and powerful, it is in keeping with the tradition Divakaruni has made of capturing the Kolkata spirit and the strength of its women. A richly woven tapestry of three generations of ancestresses, goddesses and women… Divakaruni's finest work yet, given its polished writing and intense, passionate characters.” (India Today)

"This book turned out to be the perfect palate cleanser…for the burgeoning bright glory of summer.The greatest strength of the book is Divakaruni’s three unapologetically complicated, fierce female protagonists.” (Hyphen Magazine)

“Masterful.” (ReadItForward.com)

“I will never forget Sabitri, Bela, and Tara: grandmother, mother, and daughter after my own heart. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni cycles through generations of time, until we come to know our ancestresses—and the goddess. A lovely book.”
(Maxine Hong Kingston, author of I Love a Broad Margin to My Life)

“Tender, bittersweet, beautifully wrought tales about love and longing, exile and loneliness. I was reminded of the songs of separation sung by Bhojpuri women: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni discovers new nuances in the ‘biraha’ that creeps into the lives of migrants.” (Amitav Ghosh, author of The Glass Palace)

About the Author
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the author of sixteen books, including Oleander Girl, The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, Palace of Illusions, One Amazing Thing, and Before We Visit the Goddess. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, and The New York Times, and has won, among other prizes, an American Book Award. Born in India, she currently lives in Texas and is the McDavid professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Before We Visit the Goddess Fortunate Lamps: 1995
Somewhere in the dark, jackals are howling. They like it when storms bring down the electric lines in the village, leaving only broken bits of moonlight. Maybe they have a blood-memory of how it was before humans came and pushed them to the edges.

By now Sabitri is usually asleep. The doctor has warned her that she needs to keep regular hours. Her heart isn’t doing too well, and there’s the blood pressure, too. Did she want to be bedridden and force-fed barley water? Did she want him to phone her daughter in Houston? Or Bipin Bihari Ghatak, her business manager who lived in Kolkata?

No, she did not. Bela would rant, which was her default state when besieged by guilt, and Bipin Bihari, who was her oldest friend, would go silent with worry because he hadn’t ever wanted Sabitri to move back to her ancestral village, so far from Kolkata, in her retirement. The savage lands, he termed it.

She sets out pen and paper on the rickety dining table next to the kerosene lamp. She takes care not to wake Rekha, snoring on her coir mat in the alcove, because then she’ll start scolding, the way longtime servants feel they’re entitled to.

The evening had started well, with her perched on the windowsill, watching sheets of rain blotting out the world. Gashes of lightning tore open the sky. Behind her Rekha wrung her hands. Let me shut the window. The rain will make all the bedclothes damp, the quilts will turn moldy, you'll get the pneumonia again, and then what will we do? But Sabitri refused. She loved the smell of night rain: wet earth, darkness, but also something else, nameless and a little frightening. When she was young, no one could keep her indoors at times like this. Even now, after she had grown brittle and creaky, the storm tugged at her insides. Ah, but Bipin Bihari should have seen her tonight!

The phone rang. She wasn't going to pick it up. That's what she had bought that fancy expensive answering machine for. But then there was Bela's voice, ragged. She'd been crying. What is it about children? An old need twisted in Sabitri's chest. Protect, protect. She lunged unwisely across the dark and banged her knee; pain shot down her leg like a fire.

"What happened?" she called into the receiver, her voice sounding rough and angry, though she had not meant it to come out like that. Even now Bela had this effect on her.

But Bela, preoccupied as she often was by her own drama, didn't seem to notice. She rushed into her tale. Tara was thinking of dropping out of college, they had to stop her, she'd only completed one semester, it would be the worst mistake of her life, the girl refused to listen to Bela, she never listened to anything her mother said nowadays.

Sabitri hid her concern. Sympathy would only make Bela cry more.

"I'm sorry to hear this." But how cold and unfeeling she sounded.

"You've got to write to her, Ma! You're the grandmother. If you stress the right things, point out the dangers of her stupid choice, perhaps it'll stop Tara from ruining her life!"

Sabitri wanted to remind Bela that she had tried all of the above with her. What good had it done? Besides, Tara had never even seen Sabitri. Every time Sabitri had asked Bela to bring her to India, Bela had an excuse ready. Almost as though she—or maybe that husband of hers, that Sanjay—felt Sabitri would be a bad influence.

The years had taught Sabitri to keep such thoughts to herself. She said, instead, "What made Tara want to drop out? She's such a good student."

When she didn't receive an answer, she continued, "Has Tara's father talked to her about this? There's a better chance of her listening to him than to me. Aren't they really close?"

Silence at the other end, more distressing than any amount of weeping. Then Bela said, "Tara isn't talking to Sanjay at the moment."

Something else was wrong, something worse than Tara aborting her studies, which in America, Sabitri had heard, could easily be picked up again. Sabitri suddenly felt much older than her sixty-seven years. She didn't have the strength to question Bela. What was the use of questions, anyway? Already she knew the most important thing: if her daughter—proud, stubborn, so like herself—had had anyone else to turn to, she would never have called Sabitri for help.

She wrote down, carefully, the college dorm address that Bela dictated. She promised to take a rickshaw to

the post office early tomorrow morning. She promised to send the letter by express delivery.

Now she sits at the table that has been with her for decades, running her fingers over a gouge that Bela had hacked into the wood after they'd had a fight. What can she write in her rusty English to change Tara's mind? She cannot even imagine her granddaughter's life, the whirlwind foreign world she lives in. All Sabitri has is a handful of photos. The child Tara in a costume, brandishing a broomstick, celebrating some odd American festival, the point of which Sabitri could not figure out. A teenage Tara at a special party called a prom, alien and glamorous in a strapless dress. Sabitri had been intimidated by her glittery cheekbones, the sophistication of her plucked eyebrows. How different from the photo she kept in her drawer, under her sari-blouses: baby Tara in Bela's arms, peering from under a woolly blue hood, a foggy orange bridge floating in the distance.

That had been the first photo. Sabitri still remembers the pang she felt on receiving it because she had so wanted to be present at Tara's birth. But she hadn't been invited.

Push away the past, that vessel in which all emotions curdle to regret. Start the letter.

Dearest Granddaughter Tara,

I am sure you are surprised to receive this, since customarily we write to each other only to send Bijoya greetings. Your mother informs me that you do not wish to continue with college. I am very sorry to hear this and hope you will reconsider. Without education, a woman has little chance of standing on her own feet. She will be forced to watch from the sidelines while others enjoy the life she has dreamed about—

Wrong, wrong, all wrong. An entire hour wasted. She balls up the sheet and throws it to the floor.

Dearest Granddaughter Tara,

You do not know how lucky you are to be sent to college. So many families are too poor to be able to afford such an expense. It would be a criminal waste if you do not avail yourself of the opportunity life has given you.

She hates what she has written, prissy, stilted, schoolmarmish. Tears it up. Her mind wanders, again, to the photos. Her favorite one, which she keeps on her dresser, is of Tara at the swimming pool, taken when she was nine. Dressed in a pink two-piece swimsuit, she balances on the edge of a board, about to leap into the water. Her face is filled with terror and elation.

How well Sabitri knows that feeling.

Sabitri's own leap began, as so many things in Bengal do, with a platter of sweets. She has forgotten many things from that time—just a few years after Independence; she was only seventeen then—but the platter she remembers clearly: heavy, made of solid silver, with a sharp, raised edge that cut into her fingers as she carried it down a mud path behind her mother, Durga, who held a similar platter. Durga's back was bent. As she walked, the knobs of her backbone bobbed up and down under her worn sari-blouse. She was the hardest worker Sabitri knew. But for her, their household would have fallen apart long ago, for her father was the

kind of man the world routinely took advantage of. Sabitri felt a churning inside her as she watched her mother, a mix of sadness and anger and love.

The platters belonged to the Mittirs, the wealthiest family in the village. Their names were etched on the rims to discourage theft, or perhaps as a kind of proclamation. Mittir's wife Leelamoyi had ordered the sweets from Durga for a luncheon. The Mittirs had their own cook, a brahmin imported from Kolkata, but Durga's sweets, famous throughout the village, were far superior to anything he could have concocted. And Leelamoyi had to have the best.

Sabitri hadn't wanted to come. Leelamoyi, who lived in Kolkata and only visited the village under duress during festival time, was known to have a sharp tongue, unpredictable moods, and an elevated notion of her own importance. She would surely remark on how tall Sabitri had grown and how, if her parents didn't act fast, they wouldn't be able to marry her off. But there was no one else to help Durga. Sabitri's sister was too young. Her father was at the temple, where he was a part-time priest. And even if he had been home, he would have reminded them in his mild, surprised way that this wasn't a man's job. So here was Sabitri, sweating and irritated and trying not to step in cow dung.

Inside the Mittir home it was cool and misty, the windows covered with damp rushes. Two maids wielded large palm-leaf fans. Leelamoyi, surrounded by a gaggle of gossips, had spread her considerable bulk over a flowery silken sofa. She must have been in an expansive mood, because she tasted the desserts, pronounced them satisfactory, and handed Durga a stack of rupees without counting them. Then she looked Sabitri up and down.

"What's your daughter's name again?" she asked Durga.

"Sabitri, Rani Ma."

"Ha! Ambitious, aren't you, naming her after the mythic heroine who snatched her husband from the clutches of Death himself. Well, you'd better find her a match fast, else she won't have a husband at all."

Sabitri hid her fury and tugged at Durga's sari, trying to get her to leave, but Durga said, "Sabi doesn't want to get married, Rani Ma. She wants to go to college. Wants to become a teacher. She's smart. Stood first in the matric exams in the Girls School. But we don't have the money."

Sabitri's face burned. Go through life with your head held high, Durga had taught her. Why, then, would she humiliate herself—and Sabitri—by exposing to a rich, spoiled woman the tender dreams that Sabitri had entrusted to her? Dreams as impossible as sprouting wings. She would never confide in her mother again!

Sabitri thinks: If only one could erase the years—just long enough to say, I understand. But by the time she realized how much it had cost her mother to speak those words—Sabitri was a mother herself then, and alone—Durga was dead, beyond the reach of all apologies.

"Really?" Leelamoyi raised disbelieving eyebrows. Gold weighed down her arms. Just her bracelets would have paid for Sabitri's college twice over.

Sometimes the unfairness of the world made Sabitri feel like she might burst. She pushed her way through the entourage toward the door.

Behind her Leelamoyi spoke sharply. "Girl, did I say you could leave?"

Sabitri considered disobedience, but an angry Leelamoyi could make their lives more miserable than they already were. She couldn't do that to her family. She stopped, though she did not turn around.

"Tell you what, Durga," Leelamoyi said, her voice indolent once more, "if your impatient daughter is as smart as you claim, if she manages to get into a Kolkata college, I'll pay her fees and let her stay in our home while she studies."

The sycophants jostled around Leelamoyi, jealously exclaiming at this goddesslike generosity, so much more than Sabitri deserved. Sabitri stood frozen in disbelief until Durga pulled her forward and told her to touch the Rani Ma's feet in thanks.

The pure chill of marble against her forehead. Her thoughts whirling like a flock of startled birds. The drab dead-end wall of her future had just become a golden door. Thank you, she thought fervently, ashamed of her misjudgment. Leelamoyi's voice, booming from above, did sound like a goddess's. Sabitri could not decipher the words, though she heard the women titter in response.

A lifetime's worth of impatience, days slow as cattle grazing in a parched summer field. Then she was in front of the Mittirs' Kolkata home, peering through the wrought-iron gate, clutching a painted tin suitcase in a sweaty hand. She had expected grandeur. Still, she was taken aback by the hugeness of the mansion, three stories tall, the shuttered windows like heavy-lidded eyes. Under an enormous portico gleamed a motorcar. The brick walls surrounding the compound were topped with broken glass to keep out intruders. A gatekeeper, thick-mustachioed as a bandit, banged his lathi on the paved driveway and shouted in his terrifying voice for her to move along. When she said that Leelamoyi had invited her to live here, he sneered in disbelief and tried to snatch away the letter of confirmation the Mittirs' manager, Sarkar Moshai, had sent her.

How the matter would have ended she did not know, but right then a young man emerged from the house. "What's all the commotion?" he asked.

His shirt blazed in the sun, blinding her. She had never seen anything so white. Later she would ask him what kind of soap the Mittirs used. But his life had not taken him anywhere near the washing area of the house, so he did not know.

She gathered her courage, pushed past the gatekeeper, and held out the note with desperate, trembling fingers. The young man gave it a brief glance and ordered the gateman to send her in to Sarkar Moshai. "Make sure someone gives her food and water," he added. "Can't you see she's exhausted?"

Before Sabitri could thank him, he stepped into the waiting car.

Later she would say, "You didn't even read that note, did you?"

"No," he said. "But I read your eyes."

"Eyes can lie."

"Not yours," he said.

Useless, these rambling memories. Focus on the letter, the one thing that might make a difference in the future.

Granddaughter, people look down on a woman without education. She has few options. To survive, she is forced to put up with ill-treatment. She must depend on the kindness of strangers, an unsure thing. I do not want that for you—

Even the most startling adventure, sooner or later, must become routine. So it was with Sabitri. Each morning she took the tram to the women's college, where most of her classes were held. For science and mathematics, she walked to a nearby men's college with a small group of girls. They sat in a nervous clump on a back bench because they had never had male classmates. The professors addressed only the men. Sabitri was mostly grateful to be ignored. The village school had not prepared her adequately; it was only with frantic effort that she managed to keep up.

After classes, she studied in the library with two girls who were also from distant villages, sharing textbooks since none of them had enough money to buy them all. Sabitri received a monthly stipend from Sarkar Moshai, but it was barely enough to pay her fees and her tram fare, and she was too shy to ask for more. In between homework, they spoke of their families, how much they missed them. The girls stayed in a run-down women's hostel, six to a room. Once they went with Sabitri to see where she lived and stood staring at the mansion. Struck dumb by their amazement, Sabitri couldn't tell them how unhappy she was there.

So many things run together in her head nowadays. But this she remembers: On the day of her arrival, Paro, Leelamoyi's favorite maid, had taken her to the second floor. Leelamoyi sat on a four-poster bed carved with massive lion paws, playing cards with three friends. Sunlight dazzled an oval vanity mirror that stood, tilted, on a mahogany stand. On the wall was a clock unlike anything Sabitri had seen. Even as she stared, it struck the hour, and a little wooden bird popped out with a series of squawks, startling her so that she jumped. And the windows—with their shutters thrown wide, they were as big as doors. Through the bars, she could see hosts of treetops dancing in the breeze. It was like living in a leafy ocean. If this was Sabitri's room, she would have sat on the windowsill all day, staring into the sky. But these women didn't even glance out.

Paro gave a small, apologetic cough and Leelamoyi looked up, frowning.

"Who's this?" she said.

Sabitri had prepared a careful speech about appreciation and gratitude, but when she realized Leelamoyi had forgotten her, she grew flustered. Her words ran into each other as she tried to explain her presence.

Leelamoyi raised her hand to cut her off. "Ah, yes, you're that sweet-maker's daughter. Study hard now, and stay out of trouble." She turned back to her cards, and Paro pinched Sabitri's arm, indicating that she had been dismissed.

Paro showed her where she would stay, a musty ground-floor room with a tiny, barred window set too high for Sabitri to look out. A weight pressed down on her chest—she can feel it even today. Their mud hut in the village had been rudimentary, but there was dappled light, the bright emerald of lau vines climbing up a wall. She knows now that Paro could easily have given her a better room—many lay empty in that mansion. But Paro had taken a dislike to her. Perhaps she resented her because she did no housework and yet received food and lodging. Sabitri wept that night for her mother, for the lost moon. For her own folly in believing that

Leelamoyi's benevolence had been something more than a moment's caprice.

It took her some time to understand her complicated position in the household's hierarchy: neither servant nor master. She was of a higher caste than the servants, but they made the important decisions: what she would eat, where she would bathe and hang her clothes to dry. They hesitated to ill-treat her because she was the daughter of a temple priest; but it was a small temple in a faraway village, so they did not feel compelled to treat her well. Someone would put her morning meal, a thala of rice with a dollop of dal thrown over it, a grudging piece of fish dumped on the side, in the passageway outside the kitchen in the mornings. She sat on the floor by herself and ate before leaving for college. The aroma of the dishes being cooked for the Mittirs—jackfruit curry, mutton kurma, biryani—assailed her. She hungered also for the bits of conversation floating from the kitchen: a moment of laughter, a raucous fight between the cook and the bazaar-servant. Her stomach ached with the longing to be included. At night she was afraid to arrive too soon for dinner; she didn't want the servants to think she was greedy. By the time she sat down to her meal, the rutis were leathery, the vegetables dry. Dinner was when she missed her mother the most. At home they had eaten together, Durga listening with fascinated admiration to Sabitri's recital of her day.

One evening, gathering her sari from the clothesline at the far end of the backyard, she noticed a narrow winding staircase, rusted in places. She climbed it—perhaps from a desire to escape. It led to a terrace, empty except for water tanks marked with pigeon droppings, a place where no one came. She made it hers. Each night after dinner she escaped to it, careful to ensure no one saw her. She looked at the stars and imagined them shining on her family. She finger-traced words onto the twinkling vastness of the sky, the things she would have written to her mother had Durga been able to read. Sometimes she wrote things she needed to believe: I'm lucky to be in Kolkata, getting an education. How many girls get this opportunity? Soon I'll get a great job. I'll earn enough money so my family will never be hungry again. Sometimes she whispered into the dark the saying Durga had quoted before bidding her goodbye: Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. There was a second part to the saying, but Durga had left that out. When she said goodbye to her daughter, her eyes had glittered like broken glass. To send Sabitri to Kolkata, she'd had to fight all their relatives, who warned her that she was sending the girl to her ruination. Remembering that gave Sabitri the strength to go down to her cheerless room for another long night of study.

Granddaughter, this is the truth: if you are uneducated, people look down on you. To survive, you are forced to accept crumbs thrown from a rich man's table. How can such a woman ever brighten the family name?

One morning when Sabitri came to the passageway, there was no food. She ventured through the door to find out why. The kitchen was in an uproar. Leelamoyi had ordered the cook to make rasogollas for a luncheon, and so he had. But something had gone wrong. The soft round balls that should have been floating in syrup had exploded into hundreds of pieces. There was no time to make another batch. How shamed Leelamoyi would be if the guests had to be served store-bought sweets! Cooks had been fired for less.

"I won't be going alone," the cook was shouting. "I'll make sure you all come with me." He transfixed Sabitri with a terrifying frown. "What do you want?"

Don't meddle, her wiser side warned. But she heard herself saying, in a small voice, that maybe she could fix the problem. The cook glared at her effrontery, but then he waved her in. Her hands shook as she boiled milk, sweetening it with jaggery syrup. She shredded the exploded balls into tiny pieces, remembering how

her mother did it. She added them to the milk, along with ground cardamom and chopped pistachios. She was late for college already. But the mixture needed to be stirred, constantly, gently, so it would not stick to the bottom of the pan. She could not abandon it.

By the time she got to the college, she had missed her first three classes. Even in the others, she was distracted. Her friends joked that it was because of the new Maths professor. Their regular professor was in the hospital with a lung infection, and the university had found a substitute, a recent college graduate, a lanky young man with an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down when he got excited about what he was teaching. Sabitri didn't pay her friends—or him—much attention. Was Leelamoyi angry because her menu had been changed? Or did she like the new dessert? If she did, the cook would probably take full credit for it.

But how Sabitri had enjoyed cooking! At home she would grumble while helping Durga. This morning, though, when the milk had thickened perfectly, no ugly skin forming on top, she found herself smiling as she had not done since coming to Kolkata.

"Look at her grinning," her friends whispered. "Ei, Sabi, are you in love or what?"

Upon her return, she was summoned by Leelamoyi. She climbed the stairs with some trepidation. One never knew what pleased the rich, what affronted them. But Leelamoyi, reclined on her bed—did she ever do anything else?—chewing on betel leaves, was all smiles. The guests had loved the dessert. Even her husband and son had asked for second helpings.

"From now on when I have company," she said, with the air of conferring a great favor, "I want you to make the dessert."

Though she hated herself for it, Sabitri's heart ballooned at Leelamoyi's approval. But what about her studies? She had copied her classmates' notes today, but she had not understood them well. If this happened often, how would she pass her classes?

Leelamoyi gestured to Paro, who walked over to the mahogany almirah with a face like she'd just bitten into a bitter melon. From the bottom shelf she removed two saris and handed them to Sabitri. Sabitri held her breath, marveling at the slip-shiny feel of the silk, trying not to show her excitement. She had never owned a silk sari. And these, though not new, were far more expensive than anything her family could afford to buy her.

"Rani Ma wants you to have them," Paro said with her bitter-melon mouth.

In her room, Sabitri tried on the saris, wishing she had a mirror. The first was pomegranate-red with a border of green parrots. She would wear it to college tomorrow, even though she knew it was too showy. The second sari was more expensive, evening-sky-blue with a thin gold border. Where could she wear it? Certainly not to the kitchen, where no doubt Paro was fanning the waves of resentment by telling everyone of these undeserved gifts. But she couldn't bear to take it off. It was smooth as water against her skin, lighter than she had imagined a sari could be. She decided to go to the terrace.

Once there, she walked up and down the way she imagined a great lady would, steps tiny and elegant, the sunset breeze rustling the silk. She became a rich heiress who possessed two entire almirahs of saris like this. Her diamond nose ring sparkled as she promenaded.

But she was not alone! In a corner behind a water tank stood the young man who had helped her upon her

arrival at the Mittirs', smoking and watching. Leelamoyi's son. From overheard kitchen gossip she knew his name: Rajiv. He was studying to be a doctor so that he could take over the family business, a hospital. There was a smile on his face—derision, no doubt. She rushed back to the staircase.

"Please don't run away!" said the young man, and when she didn't listen, "Stop, I insist!"

Granddaughter, at that, I stopped. Perhaps a part of me believed that, charity case that I was, he had the right to command me. But a part of me wanted to stay because he was young and handsome and had been chivalrous. My heart beat unevenly as I turned to face him, and not just out of fear.

She looks down at the page. What made her write this foolishness? She crushes the sheet in her fist, as though to crush the memory. Then she smooths the paper out again. She is not equipped to advise Tara, she knows this. But perhaps, if she shares her life, the girl might see something there. For the first time, she feels hopeful.

How long did they speak that time, and the next, and the next? And of what? Later she would only remember fragments, torn clouds drifting in front of the moon. When she told him, shyly, why she was in Kolkata, he listened with careful attention. Then he talked about himself, disarming her with his self-deprecating honesty. He hated medical school: the stink of illness, the pus and the vomit, the dark, jaundiced urine of the patients. But it wasn't something he could tell his parents, who were counting on him. The terrace was his escape, too. He loved playing the flute. Would she like him to play for her one night? But already she knew he would never do that. They could not risk anyone finding out.

Days passed. How many? It is hard to keep track of such mundanities when one is balanced inside a fairy tale. After some time, he brought up an old red quilt, so they could sit in comfort as they spoke. One moonless night, he lay down on it so he could point out the constellations to her. Here is Kalpurush with his shining, here are the seven wise rishis. She was impressed. She hadn't thought a city boy would know the names of stars. Maybe that was what made her lie down next to him on the worn malmal, though her mother's warnings buzzed in her ears like mosquitoes. She told him her dreams: she would dress in a starched sari and teach history to schoolchildren, stories of conquerors and despots. Her students would be obedient; she would never need to cane anyone. She would become a principal with tortoiseshell glasses, the entire school standing at attention when she entered the assembly hall.

He nodded. She would make a great principal, he said with conviction. He wound a finger softly around a lock of her hair, which he had persuaded her to unbraid. That was what made her fall in love, finally: his belief in her, and his gentleness.

But even as she confessed her dreams, they were changing.

That first night, their conversation, so hard to break off, had continued beyond safety. She rushed to her room to change the magical sari that had summoned her prince for an old cotton one. She was frighteningly late for her meal. But no one noticed. They were chattering about how the young master had been tardy to dinner. Leelamoyi had scolded him severely when he finally showed up. She demanded to know where he'd been. He wouldn't tell her, though. The servants guessed it was at some nightclub with his no-good friends. Didn't he look like he'd had one too many to drink? The older retainers decried today's youth, their lack of

filial respect. The younger ones grumbled because now everyone would have to stay up late. Sabitri could barely swallow her food as she listened, her throat dry with guilty excitement, her heart hot and swollen with a secret power.

Granddaughter, when you are poor and ill-educated, how unequipped you are to read the world. All you know is your place in it: down near the bottom. You believe you are meant for better things, but how will you ever climb out to get them? The first opportunity that appears, you grasp at it to pull yourself up. You don't check to see if it can bear your weight.

She wore her red sari to college and was roundly teased by her friends, especially when, in Maths class, the young professor dropped his books while setting them on the table. You're distracting him, Sabi! She laughed it off, but as he was leaving, in a spirit of mischief she looked him in the eye, with what she considered a sultry smile. He dropped his books again. Later her friends said they thought they would die from holding in their laughter.

It was as though she had entered a golden time. She woke early and heavy-eyed and rushed to the kitchen to prepare desserts: mihidana and malpua, pithay made from sweet potatoes, fried and dipped in thick syrup. Leelamoyi's friends loved them all. Even the young master—who had never had a sweet tooth, Leelamoyi told Sabitri—asked for two helpings of rice pudding. He told his mother that whoever had prepared it was a treasure. Make sure you don't let her go, he said.

Sabitri wrote all this in a letter to Durga, along with elaborate descriptions of the sweets, which she had adapted to Leelamoyi's citified taste. She did not mention her missed classes, how she was falling behind in her schoolwork. On the envelope, she wrote a line asking her father to please read the letter to her mother. Perhaps the letter was lost, because she never received a reply.

Late at night, after the terrace (they had decided it was best to meet post-dinner, when everyone assumed they had gone to bed), she tossed and turned on her pallet, longing to tell her mother about Rajiv. Her secret cramped her belly like indigestion. If there had been a chance to see Durga face-to-face, she would have done it. Durga would have been shocked. Maybe she would have slapped her. But because she loved her daughter, she would have finally come around.

On the terrace, Rajiv told her how in the operating theater he felt he was drowning in the blood, horrifyingly bright, that sometimes pulsed out over his hands. She shuddered and held him close, her lips in his hair.

"Thank God I have you to talk to," he said against her collarbone. "Otherwise I would kill myself."

This, then, was why he loved her. She was his confessional, his absolution.

Yes, she thought. She had never felt so necessary.

He took her face in his hands and looked into it as though it were the moon. When he buried his own face in her breasts, desire, dangerous as a sparking wire, traveled down her body into the pit of herself until she thought she would break apart.

“I wish this moment would last forever, Tri. That it would become my whole life.”

Yes, yes.

She loved the way he shortened her name, made it unique. But a moment cannot become a whole life. She knew that. She was hungry for more.

One of Leelamoyi’s card-playing friends had become a grandmother. She would be gone to her daughter’s home for a whole month. But how would they play Twenty-Nine without her? Sabitri was summoned to Leelamoyi’s airy bedroom, told the rules of the game. She found them simple enough.

“Smart girl!” Leelamoyi said, smiling with her brilliant, betel-stained lips. “Can you come home right after your classes, then?”

It wasn’t really a question.

Sabitri no longer had time to study in the library. She rushed home and changed into one of her good saris—she had four now, given to her for this purpose—and went to the upstairs room, where, because she was better at strategy than the other women, Leelamoyi insisted that she be her partner. In order to play, Sabitri had to sit across from Leelamoyi, on her bed. At first she was uncomfortable. The people in her village, her parents included, would have flinched at such presumption. But Leelamoyi didn’t seem to mind. All she cared about was winning. Paro brought tea and crisp kachuris stuffed with spicy green peas. “Eat, eat,” Leelamoyi said. She addressed Sabitri as meye, a word that could mean either “girl” or “daughter.” Sabitri could see the rage behind the crust of politeness that was Paro’s face.

But, Granddaughter, I found it impossible to worry. How soft the mattress was, how fine and silken the bedcover. How sweet the sandesh I had made that morning. And Leelamoyi calling me “daughter”—surely that was a sign.

At school she told her friends she had to help in the house. It was only a half lie, wasn’t it? She felt guilty at the disappointment on their faces, for they counted on her to explain their English texts: Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Hardy. But as soon as she stepped out of the college gates, she forgot everything: her friends, her upcoming exams, the eyes of the young Maths professor searching her out during class. It was like being bewitched.

This was what Sabitri dreamed as she rode on the tram, dozing because she didn’t get enough sleep nowadays: She’s in a wedding mandap, dressed in bridal red. She lifts a garland high and slips it over Rajiv’s head. Under the bright Petromax lanterns, she sees her face reflected, tiny and shining and perfect, in his eyes. The auspicious sound of conches accompany them to the third floor of the Mittir home, where Rajiv has told her his room is. In the bed the years pass with swift pleasure. A baby joins them. Two. She pushes back the gold bangles on her arms to nurse them. At her waist, the cool heft of the household keys that Leelamoyi has handed over. In the kitchen the cook nods docile agreement, Yes, Boudimoni, when she tells him to make jackfruit curry. Paro washes the children’s soiled nappies. No. She deletes Paro from her world.

Perfect, a perfect dream, granddaughter. Why, then, waking with a start as the conductor jangled the bell for

my stop, did I feel a constriction in my chest, a sense that I had misplaced something?

Summer had descended upon Kolkata with epic vengeance. Sabitri came back from college bedraggled with sweat, craving a bath, cold water cascading over her body in the maids' bathroom. But a servant was waiting. Leelamoyi wanted to see her. Sabitri was surprised. There were no card games today—or had she made a mistake? Let me drink some water, she said. Change my sari. The woman scrunched up her face and shook her head. Rani Ma's waiting. Better come right now.

The first thing she saw when she entered the room was the red quilt from the terrace, crumpled on the floor like the pelt of a dead animal. The blood rushed to her head and then away; she had to hold on to the doorframe. When her vision cleared she looked around for Rajiv, who would defend her. But there was only Leelamoyi, and behind her Paro, hands on her hips, swollen with satisfaction.

From across the years, Sabitri remembers Leelamoyi's contorted mouth, spitting out invectives: conniving slut, harlot's daughter, poisonous snake in my bosom. Her own mouth frozen, so that when she tried to say she had done nothing wrong, the words would not obey. She learned that Rajiv had been sent away already to his uncle's home in another city. He would continue his studies there. So don't be thinking that you can sink your witch-claws into him again. As for Sabitri, she was to leave the house right now. No, Leelamoyi didn't care where she went, or what happened to her. If it wasn't for the fact that your father's a priest, I would have you whipped. Now get out of my sight before I change my mind.

Sabitri stood at the tram stop for a long while in the oppressive dusk, carrying her small painted trunk. Finally, she boarded a tram that would take her to the men's college. She could think of no other place. She opened her handbag—so light—and looked down at the frighteningly few rupee notes in there. Her trunk was light, too. Paro had followed her to her room and rummaged through it—Let's see what you're stealing—and taken the silk saris. She'd taken some of Sabitri's own things as well. A buffalo-horn comb that Durga had given her. A tiny bottle of rosewater Sabitri had saved up for months to buy. Sabitri had been too heartsick to protest.

The men's college loomed eerily in the gloom. She slipped through the gate, thankful that the gateman wasn't there to stop her, and ran up the stairs. On the second story, at the end of a corridor, there was a small room with a plaque on it, WOMEN'S COMMON ROOM. She had gone there once, exploring, with her friends. It was piled with dusty furniture and smelled of mice droppings. But there was a bolt on the inside, and a small toilet. She could stay there for the night. Tomorrow—ah, she couldn't handle the thought of tomorrow yet.

When she reached it, the door to the common room was padlocked.

The strength went out of her and she slid to the floor, unable to hold in her sobs any longer. Terror and rage. But foremost was the fear of what might happen to her tonight when the night watchman came by. Would he throw her out on the street? Would he do worse? Beneath it all roiled the humiliation. What would her parents, her relatives, her village, say if they knew that she had been kicked out of the Mittir home like a dog? No one would care that the love she and Rajiv had felt for each other was pure and beautiful. Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. Could she have strayed any farther from that?

The second half of the saying, the part her mother had left unspoken, struck her like a slap:

Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name.

Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame.

She had been weeping too hard to hear the footsteps. When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she flinched and cried out, throwing up her arms to protect herself. But it wasn't the night watchman, as she had feared. It was her Maths professor.

He'd been working on his research, he said, in one of the classrooms—something he often did, since the hostel where he stayed was very noisy. On his way out, he heard a woman weeping and came to see what the matter was. He was shocked to see her in such a state. What had happened?

She hid her face. How mortifying, that he who had always looked at her with admiration should see her like this. She made a vague gesture—please go away. But he lowered himself to the floor beside her, his lanky knees drawn up. The unexpectedness of it made her look up. His eyes were distressed. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Clearly, he had never been in such a situation before. She felt a hysterical laugh spiraling up and had to hide her face in her sari.

His hand—tentative, nervous—touched her shoulder. "Don't cry like that, please. Maybe I can help—"

Something in his voice, in those awkward, patting motions. A plan formed in my head. I held on to it like a drowning woman. I did not allow myself to think of anything, of anyone else. Tara, can you blame me? I lifted my face to him and smiled my prettiest, saddest, falsest smile.

He took her to a cousin's house, his only family in Kolkata. "Here's a student of mine," he said, "homeless because of a rich woman's selfish whim. Please keep her until the end of the college year. I'll pay—"

"An unknown girl, Bijan?" His cousin was dubious. "Who knows why those people forced her to leave their house? Maybe she's a thief—"

"I told you—she lost an important card game where she was the rich woman's partner. The woman was furious because she had to hand over a lot of money. She threw Sabitri out into the night. If I hadn't found her, anything might have happened! I can't force you to help her, but if you don't, understand this: we will never speak again."

The inflexibility in his voice surprised me and frightened his cousin. She gave in.

He came by each evening to help with my studies, for I was dreadfully behind. When he was not around, the cousin was cold to me. Perhaps, with a woman's instinct, she saw into my crooked core. She warned him, but he would not listen. Granddaughter, he had love enough for the both of us.

Each day Sabitri checked the papers surreptitiously. One morning she saw it: "Mittirs of Shyambazar Celebrate Wedding of Their Only Son to Beautiful Coal Mine Heiress." There were photographs. The heiress was beautiful indeed. With a gritted heart Sabitri threw herself into her studies. She made herself meek and helpful in the house until she won the cousin over. Everything happened as she had planned: she passed her classes; Bijan asked her to marry him; the cousin urged her to agree. When Sabitri wept, they thought it was from grateful joy.

The newlyweds went to the village to pay their respects. Sabitri's parents were astonished but not displeased. Her father was relieved that they had had a quiet temple wedding in Kalighat for which he did not have to pay. The relatives swung between respect for the professor son-in-law and envy at Sabitri's good luck, once again undeserved. Durga was delighted that Bijan wanted Sabitri to continue her studies.

But Tara, I didn't do that. Within a year I was expecting a child. I dropped out of college, and though Bijan encouraged me to go back once the child was born, I no longer wanted to. Once again, I had been seduced by a different dream.

Bijan had published his research in a journal, something very intellectual that Sabitri didn't understand. What she did understand was that several companies wanted to hire him. They were willing to pay him highly. Give him a prestigious title. Bijan would have preferred to live in their one-bedroom flat and continue teaching. Sabitri set to persuading him otherwise.

Her strategy lacked originality, but she was aided by the fact that he had never been with a woman before. Additionally, he was in love. She cooked him the dishes he most enjoyed, the comfort foods of a man who had grown up poor—rice, yellow mung dal, fried brinjal. From her own life, she knew them well. After dinner she put on a thin cotton night-chemise, which showed off her figure—she had recently taken on this Westernized habit—and laid their daughter, Bela, freshly changed and powdered, in his lap. How he loved that child! He could play toe-games with her all evening, making funny noises that set her giggling. Sabitri sat next to them, leaning her head on his shoulder. It was so peaceful that she almost forgot what she was there to do.

A sentence here, a phrase there, a small, plaintive smile, the slight press of a breast against his arm. That's all it took, because he wanted to give his wife and child the best of everything. Did he guess the game Sabitri was playing? If so, he forgave her. He joined a giant oil corporation with tentacles everywhere and found that he did not dislike it as much as he had feared. He discovered he had a special talent for solving problems. He was too honest, blunt in his answers, but the management loved him in spite of that. Or perhaps because of it. These were rare qualities in the corporate world. He was promoted, then promoted again, then sent to their headquarters in Delhi to be groomed for higher leadership.

Did I love him, Granddaughter? I'll answer by saying I was the best possible wife. Certainly I loved our life in the capital, a flat in a wealthy colony, a motorcar, respectful servants who believed that I had been born into affluence. I took classes in English conversation and comportment, and learned that I, too, had a talent. I built a reputation for hosting the best parties. I knew how to charm the most taciturn guest into chatting. I never skimped on the alcohol, even if it meant we had to eat rice and lentils for the rest of the month. I created desserts that became the talk of the town. I wonder if Bijan realized that many of his tough deals fell into place because of my dinners.

After seven years of service, Bijan was sent back to Kolkata with yet another promotion. Sabitri was both delighted and uneasy. The sooty, sprawling city of her first humiliation and heartbreak had a hold on her like no other place. The smallest triumph here meant more than the hugest victories elsewhere. They lived on the top floor of a tall building, and sometimes it seemed to her, as she stood on the balcony and looked down on the treetops, that the city had spread itself at her feet. But the past still rankled. Sometimes, after dropping Bela at school, she would ask the driver to take her past the men's college. The memory of that night when

she wept outside the Women's Common Room was like a half-formed scab she could not stop picking at.

When on a visit to the village I learned from my mother that Leelamoyi was now a widow and in ill health, alone in the old mansion because her rich daughter-in-law refused to live with her, I formed a plan.

I lie, Tara. The plan had been in me for a long time, like a dormant virus, waiting.

When Sabitri told Bijan that she wanted to visit Leelamoyi, he approved. "I'm glad you've decided to forgive her. After all, if she hadn't forced you to leave her house, we wouldn't be married!"

She nodded. There was no point in telling this straightforward man that she was impelled by a darker motive. She sent a note, accompanied by an expensive basket of fruits, and received a reply in Sarkar Moshai's spidery handwriting. Leelamoyi would like to see her.

That morning, Granddaughter, I dressed with care. I wore a silk sari with a thick gold border and my best jewelry. I made your mother wear a lace dress and shiny new shoes even though she complained that they hurt her feet. (But it was only a mild complaint because she was a biddable girl. Who would have guessed that she'd give me so much grief in later years?) This I did because I knew that Leelamoyi had no grandchildren.

As the car approached the Mittir house, Sabitri found that her hands were shaking. She hid them in the folds of her sari. The house looked shrunken; paint was peeling in parts; here and there, broken shutters hung dangling. There was no darwan on duty, so the driver had to get down and push open the rusting gates. She stepped out, holding tight to her daughter's hand and carrying a platter of Leelamoyi's favorite sweets.

The driver was reversing the car, going back to the office. He needed to take Bijan from one meeting to another. "Come back as soon as you drop Bijan Babu," she instructed him. "I don't want to stay long."

She rang the bell, but no one came. When she pushed at the door, it opened with a creak. Ahead of her was the stairway. How many times had she climbed it, wearing those saris that were hers and yet not hers, her heart beating light and rapid because she believed she was moving closer to her dream. The memory of that foolish young self overwhelmed her with tenderness and shame.

There was dirt on the staircase, crumbled stucco. She held up the edge of her sari and warned Bela not to touch the banister. Familiar, familiar, the second floor, that long corridor filled with anticipation, the airy windows through which bright trees peeped, that milk-white ocean of a bed.

Today the windows were shut. Through the haphazard light that seeped in between shutters, she saw a form on the bed, widow's white melting into the sheets, so still that for a disappointed lurch of the heart she believed that death had robbed her of revenge.

But no, the form struggled to sit up. She patted the bed for Sabitri to join her, called to a maid to fetch snacks for the visitors. Leelamoyi may have dwindled, but her voice was still autocratic.

"So this is your daughter?" She frowned at Bela, who was playing quietly, as was her habit, with her dolls. She did not compliment the child, though Bela was beautiful, even more so this day, with bright ribbons in her wavy hair. But Sabitri would not allow herself to be upset. She adjusted her sari, making sure her gold

bangles tinkled, and said brightly, familiarly, “But Auntie, you must have many grandchildren by now!”

Leelamoyi’s face grew dark as iron. She launched into a tirade about her daughter-in-law. What a mistake they had made in choosing that spoiled, useless rich girl. Couldn’t produce an heir. Refused to live with the Mittirs even though they remodeled the entire third floor for her, Western-style toilets and all. Turned Rajiv against his parents so that he moved out within six months of marriage—abandoning the home of his forefathers, can you believe that?—to live in a fancy new house in Gariahat that his wife’s father bought her. That’s what caused Mittir Moshai’s heart attack, Leelamoyi was sure of it.

The maid did not arrive. Leelamoyi shouted invectives, wandered into other spaces. “That girl, a witch, a murderer, can you believe, she took all the wedding jewelry when she left, my own jewelry that I had gifted her! When I tried to stop her, she said, hire a lawyer if you want it back. And Rajiv—he didn’t even have the guts to stand up to her and support me.”

Rajiv had made a mess of the hospital, too, Leelamoyi went on to say. Oh, life had given her more than her share of trials. But at least he stopped by to see her once in a while. Where was that idiot maid, that Khyama, who should be bringing snacks? No, she said with a scowl, Paro was no longer with her. She offered no details.

Sabitri smiled the kind, charming smile she had practiced. She assured Leelamoyi that they did not need a snack. They had had an ample breakfast. She directed Leelamoyi’s attention to the platter. Look, Auntie, your favorite sweets. The older woman scrabbled for a sandesh, then another one. She smiled slyly and confessed that she had high blood sugar; the doctor had decreed that she must not indulge. But what other pleasure was left in an old woman’s life?

“Durga,” she said with a sigh, “you always did make the best sweets. You should have opened a shop of your own.”

A dizziness assailed Sabitri at being called by her mother’s name. Her smile fell away. Once again, Leelamoyi had forgotten who she was. How could you avenge yourself against such oblivion?

“I have to leave now,” Sabitri said. She had intended to mention that her car would be waiting downstairs, but she no longer had the energy.

“Stay a little longer,” Leelamoyi implored. When Sabitri apologized, she gave an angry laugh. “Yes, yes, I know. No one likes being around sick people. Even my own son is always in a hurry to leave. . . . At least help me sit up straighter before you go.”

Sabitri felt a great reluctance to touch her, but out of old habit she found herself obeying. She placed her hands gingerly under Leelamoyi’s armpits and pulled. It was like lifting a sack. Traces of sweat were left on her fingers. A smell of staleness, like rotten eggs. It was all she could do not to rush out to find a tap and wash it off.

“Turn on the radio,” Leelamoyi ordered. A program of devotional songs came on. “Who would have thought I’d turn religious! Age does strange things to us. Ah, you’ll come to it, too, soon enough. Bring the girl near me. I want to see her hair.” She put out a greedy hand.

Downstairs, sitting on a bench in the dark passageway, I couldn't stop trembling. The car wasn't back yet—I knew it wouldn't be. But Granddaughter, I couldn't have stood that room, its bitter odors of disease and rage, for another second. It had been a mistake, coming here to gloat. I had wanted Leelamoyi to regret that she didn't let Rajiv marry me, to see that I would have made a far better daughter-in-law than the one she chose. But now I felt only shame. Shame, and disgust at myself for using my daughter in this game. I promised myself I would never set foot in this house again.

One good thing had come out of all this. I'd exorcised a demon. I would no longer lie awake at night, remembering Leelamoyi's twisted face as she called me a whore. I would no longer hold conversations in my head, all the things I'd been too young and afraid to say at that time. I am a good person. I did nothing wrong. He loves me. I love him. I will make him happy because I am the only one to whom he can say what's in his heart.

There was another thing, Tara. As Leelamoyi spoke of Rajiv, I began to see him differently. All these years I'd been blinded by the longing we feel for what is snatched from us. Now I realized that he had been weak and pampered, too weak to stand up for me. He must have known that his mother had thrown me out of the house. But he hadn't even inquired after me. Even if he was in a different city, it would have been easy enough to ask a friend to go to the college and find out what had happened.

A fumbling at the door. The driver had arrived, thank God. Sabitri started gathering Bela's dolls.

But it was not the driver. It was Rajiv—as though she had conjured him up with her thinking. She recognized him at once, though he was heavier now. He wore expensive clothes, more expensive even than the fine white shirts of old, which Sabitri had sometimes unbuttoned so she could lay her head upon his chest. Once, to celebrate a promotion, she had taken Bijan to New Market to buy him a shirt like that, but he had shaken his head with a laugh. Something that expensive would burn my skin. He had walked out, not caring that the salesmen stared at him.

Sabitri pulled the edge of her sari over her head. She would leave now. Leave and wait on the road. That was best. But as she passed Rajiv, she glanced up. She couldn't help it. Ah, that face, those once-loved lips. How the useless past tugged at you, unsteadying the breath. Was that discontent in his heavy jowls? In the droop of his mouth, a sorrow? Surely it was disillusionment she saw in the circles under his eyes.

Nonsense. She was imagining things to suit her fancy.

"Tri!" Rajiv exclaimed, peering at her. His face, filled with incredulous hope, was young again for a moment before the years came rushing mercilessly back. "God, God, is it really you? No, don't go, please, give me just a minute." But he need not have begged. The special name he had coined for her had struck her at the core, rendering her immobile. "I can't tell you how often I've thought of you. How I've imagined—hoped—that I'd see you again—" He stammered to a stop. Were those tears on his lashes? He still had those ridiculously long lashes, like a girl's. "You must have been—must still be—furious with me—" He grasped her wrists with a suddenness that sent a wave of remembered fire up her body. He was kissing her hands, his lips on the pulse at one wrist, then the other. How long it had been. "I can see you're happily married—with a lovely child." There was hunger in his voice. "I don't want to cause trouble. Just give me another minute of your time—a chance to apologize. To explain what they did to me. Please—"

"Don't," Sabitri said. "My driver will be here any minute." But her voice shook, and she did not pull her

hands away.

His words surrounded her like a dust storm. She could see Bela staring at him, openmouthed. Once in a while, she picked bits out of the roaring: Crazy with worry locked up at my uncle's not even a phone ran away but they caught me taken straight to the wedding hated her for it hated them all—

In the early months of her marriage, if Rajiv had come to her, she would have walked out with him. Even if he had not told her all this. She would have lived as his mistress, not caring if she blackened her family's name beyond all salvaging.

Granddaughter, here is my most terrible secret: even after I gave birth to Bela, I would have done it.

She shook her hands from his grip. It was easier than she'd expected. He was a weak man, after all. She wished to say, You could have found me, if you had really wanted to. But it no longer mattered. Better to say, I love my husband. Because that—she was surprised to discover it—was the truth. How long had it been true?

Finally she walked away in silence, Rajiv no longer worth wasting words on. Her chest was full of the new truth's brightness. Emerging into the hot yellow sunshine was like being born. Under her fingertips her daughter's shoulder bones were fragile, magical wings.

There was the car, waiting, with someone in the back seat. Bijan. Her heart flung itself around her body. How long had he been there? What had he seen?

But Bijan was exuberant with success. The morning's meeting had gone excellently. He had negotiated a better deal than anyone had hoped. A significant bonus would be forthcoming. He had decided to celebrate by taking the rest of the day off. How would they like a trip to the Grand Hotel for ice cream, and then the zoo? He sat in the middle of the car like a king, his arms around them, beaming beneficently at his beautiful girls. Bela was telling Bijan about the dirty staircase and strange old lady who kept touching her hair and how hungry she was because the lady didn't give them anything to eat, didn't share even one of Mamoni's delicious sweets. She might just starve to death before they reached the Grand. Sabitri rested her head on Bijan's shoulder, weak with relief, and smiled at Bela's theatrics. The child had widened her eyes and slumped on the seat, saying that she had to have three scoops of ice cream. Could she? Could she, please? How blessed Sabitri was to have this family. From this moment on, she was going to be the best wife and mother to them.

"Yes, you can have three scoops," she said. "Just don't throw up afterwards."

It was the happiest moment of her life.

She wants to write all this to Tara, but she is so tired. Her fingers are cramping. They've been cramping for a while, she realizes, even the fingers of her left hand. It's almost dawn, the jackals long vanished, a couple of overeager roosters beginning to crow. She must lay her head on the table; it's grown too heavy to hold up. She places her cheek against the gouge and remembers, suddenly, its genesis. Bela had slashed the wood with her favorite Parker fountain pen, which Sabitri had saved for months to gift her with when she entered college, ruining both pen and table. This, because Sabitri had insisted that Bela stop seeing the man she was in love with, a man who would later entice her into running away to America. Who would not let her see her mother again. A man who—Sabitri had known this in every vibrating nerve of her body—was utterly wrong for her.

“Your father, Tara,” she whispers. “That was him. And now he’s abandoned you both, hasn’t he? Is that why you’re dropping out of college? Why you won’t talk to him?”

Oh, this mess, it’s beyond her powers to fix. She longs to close her eyes; she’s finding it hard to focus. Who is that in a dark corner? Is it her granddaughter? And behind her, could that be Bela? Shadows with blank ovals for faces, waiting for her wisdom—as if she had any to give! Or was it her dead baby, the boy she had named Harsha, bringer of joy, hoping he would buy her a second chance? But no. He had left her long ago.

Sleep. She hungers for it with her entire being.

But first she must write something, because finally she knows what she needs to say. She forces her hand forward, grasps the pen.

But that moment in the car wasn’t the happiest moment of my life. Just like it hadn’t been so on the starlit terrace with Rajiv. My happiest moment would come much later. After Bijan’s drinking problem, my widowhood. After baby Harsha flew away. After all my troubles with your mother. I had opened Durga Sweets by then. How Leelamoyi would have writhed in rage if she knew that she’d been the one to plant the idea in some secret chamber of my being! It had been tough going, the first few years. But with the help of Bipin Bihari—ah, what a support he had been—I’d finally managed to turn the store into a profitable concern.

One day, in the kitchen at the back of the store, I held in my hand a new recipe I had perfected, the sweet I would go on to name after my dead mother. I took a bite of the conch-shaped dessert, the palest, most elegant mango color. The smooth, creamy flavor of fruit and milk, sugar and saffron mingled and melted on my tongue. Satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone. No one could take it away. That’s what I want for you, my Tara, my Bela. That’s what it really means to be a fortunate lamp. . . .

In the car, Bijan asked Sabitri, “Do you feel better, now that you’ve seen Leelamoyi?” She could feel his breath, warm on her hair. “Will it help you forget?”

The solicitousness in his voice brought her close to tears. She nodded, unable to speak.

Bela said, “There was a man, downstairs. He kept crying and kissing Mamoni’s hands. Mamoni, why was he kissing your hands?”

Bijan pulled away his arm and sat up straight. In the dead silence that took over the car, Sabitri was aware of the driver’s curious eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Just someone I knew long ago,” she said, speaking to Bijan. “He doesn’t even live in this house anymore. I hadn’t expected to see him. We met by the merest chance as I was leaving. He means nothing to me.” The words tumbled out of her too fast. She knew she sounded guilty, even though it was the truth she was telling.

“I understand,” Bijan said. He looked coldly at her sari, her jewelry. “I understand perfectly.”

“I love you, only you,” she cried, though she knew it was a major faux pas to speak in this manner in front of servants.

Bijan leaned forward. “Drive me back to the office.”

“Aren’t we going to the zoo?” Bela asked.

“You can go wherever the hell you want,” Bijan said to Sabitri. In the mirror the driver’s eyes widened because Bijan-saab never spoke like this. Sabitri guessed it would not be long before the rest of the servants heard about it.

They rode in silence. Near the Maidan they passed a herd of goats crossing the street; heat rose from their coats in shimmery waves. Sabitri had never seen such a sight in the city. For a moment, with a thin spike of hope, she thought she had dreamed it all.

When they had dropped Bijan off, Bijan now transformed into someone she did not know, Sabitri told the driver to take them home. She had difficulty meeting his eyes, but she forced herself.

“I want to go to the zoo!” Bela cried. “I want my ice cream. Why can’t we go to the zoo? Baba said we could. Why can’t we go?” She kicked the seat-back again and again. The noise thudded inside Sabitri’s head.

“It’s because of you we aren’t going!” she shouted. “Stupid girl—you’ve ruined everything.” The Bengali word for “ruin,” noshto, which could also mean “rotten,” or, when applied to women, “unfaithful,” hung in front of her, as visible as her future. Her hand arced through the air, there was a sound like something bursting, and Bela cried out in pain.

The first time you hit your child with all your strength, wanting to hurt, it changes things.

She feels that sting again now. It travels up her arm and lodges in her shoulder. The shock with which Bela had stared at Sabitri. The splotch blooming red on her cheek. The way she shrank back against the car door. Was that when the troubles between them began?

“I’m sorry, Bela,” she says. “Forgive me.” Words that all these years she hadn’t been able to speak.

The pain has taken up permanent residence in her chest. She must have dropped something with a crash, because here comes Rekha, rubbing at her eyes, then running forward with a cry. Sabitri tries to push the letter toward her. But she’s on the floor. When did she fall? Rekha shouts for the milkman, who’s rattling the door, to help her get Ma onto the bed.

Sabitri tries to tell her about the letter. It is the only thing that matters now. It must be put in the mail. It must. “Tell Bipin Bihari,” she whispers. She thinks of his dear face, calm and steady and attentive, even in the worst of her times. “He’ll know what to do.”

But Rekha does not hear. She is sobbing on the phone, urging Doctor Babu to get here fast. Something terrible has happened to Ma. The milkman lifts Sabitri up. Or is she flying? The bed is very soft. The pain is very large. She lifts her eyes, and there is Death in the corner, but not like a king with his iron crown, as the epics claimed. Why, it is a giant brush loaded with white paint. It descends upon her with gentle suddenness, obliterating the shape of the world.

Most helpful customer reviews

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.
Divakaruni writes passionately, although sometimes sentimentally, about loss, regret, importance of communication & forgiveness
By Texasbooklover
FICTION
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
Before We Visit the Goddess
Simon & Schuster
Hardcover, 978-1-4767-9200-2 (also available as an ebook, audiobook, and on Audible), 224 pgs., $25.00
April 19, 2016

“What is more painful, the misplaced past or the runaway future?”

It’s 1995 and Sabitri, in questionable health, has retired to her ancestral village in India. Receiving a desperate late-night phone call from her estranged daughter, Bela, in Houston, Texas, Sabitri begins a letter to her granddaughter, Tara, who has decided to drop out of college—but Sabitri dies before the letter is mailed. Fast forward to 1998: Tara has dropped out of college and is working in a thrift store in Houston, aimless and disconnected from her Indian heritage and a community that might offer her support, estranged from her mother and father, never knowing her grandmother.

Before We Visit the Goddess, the seventeenth book by American Book Award winner Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is about dislocation: from family, country, and history; and the inevitable conflict resulting from each successive generation’s refusal, or inability, to learn from the mistakes of the previous generation. These women have more in common than they know.

The plot is simple and would almost be a comedy of errors if the results weren’t so frequently tragic. The narrative, told by multiple characters and varying points of view—sometimes third person, other times first—is challenging as the flow is constantly interrupted by time and space, jumping around between the past, beginning in 1963, and ending up in the future, 2020; and between India, California, and Texas. On the other hand, this technique neatly mirrors the feelings of dislocation experienced by the diverse, well-developed characters. All of the principals are complex human beings in their successes and failures, provided with rich backstories and motivations.

Divakaruni’s Houston is a joy in all of its multiples: racial, ethnic, cultural. She pokes a little fun at the “suburban funhouse” of street names in the surrounding bedroom communities: “Austin Colony, Austin Glen, Austin Crossing.”

Divakaruni is adept at the just-right simile: the child Bela wakes from a fever in the hospital where “her mother’s face looms large over the bed, alarming as an out-of-orbit moon”; and when a young man who has recently suffered a heartbreak is asked out by a new man his “chest felt like it was too small to contain all the things knocking around inside it. Heart, lungs, excitement, a surge of blood like sorrow. The backwash of memories.”

With its embossed dust jacket, Before We Visit the Goddess is a physically beautiful book in which Divakaruni writes passionately, although sometimes sentimentally, about loss, regret, and the importance of communication and forgiveness. Though the ending is rather abrupt, it is satisfying and hopeful. We fail each other, not necessarily from selfishness, but from obliviousness and with the best of intentions.

Originally published by Lone Star Literary Life.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.
Enjoyed!
By mona
The author took me on a journey through generations with a range of emotions... I liked the characterization very much! Each person in the book had a relevance, no matter the size of role they were cast in. What does an old grandmother have to give to her culturally contrasting grandchild? Find out as you read this book about intricate relationships set in two worlds. The East has its own rhythm and mannerisms. How does it appear different as we immerse ourselves in the West? Also, I loved some of the supporting roles played by such interesting characters. Find out for yourself how their lives are intertwined to create an endearing story like Before We Visit the Goddess.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.
Not as good as the author's other books
By SNH
I have loved many other books by this author, but this one disappointed me. At the end, I felt like I wanted to turn it back over to the author, and say, "Okay...now write the other 1/2." There just isn't the detail and depth I have relished in her other books, and this one jumps from one person to another to another to another to another with time frames that are not sequential. I found this a little confusing and distracting. I am left feeling unsatisfied and with so many questions about the content, which touched on much and left much unexplained. One question, "Who or what *exactly* was the magician???"

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BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS: A NOVEL BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI PDF

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Review
“Affecting.” (The New York Times)

“Emotionally accessible…[Divakaruni] balances the ache of separation with the thrills of independence and self-discovery…her characteristic passion, nerve and insight into the troubled soul are here in full.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“Divakaruni proves herself adept with all the tools in the writer’s toolbox…Divakaruni makes use of two major writerly tools that seldom go together — tragic drama, and screwball comedy. What’s more, she finds entirely fresh ways to mete out the tropes of the South Asian immigrant story…hilarity deepens and clarifies the story’s dark tones…an heirloom tapestry.” (The Miami Herald)

“Before We Visit the Goddess is full of different voices, going back and forth in time, with beautifully written chapters that could stand on their own as short stories but add layer upon layer of complication, wonder, humanity and empathy when joined together…Divakaruni builds her female characters as multidimensional — highly complex, intelligent and nobody’s doormat… Divakaruni guides us along their journeys with beautiful writing, surprising laughter and a truly memorable ending…I can’t recommend this book enough. When it comes to fiction, Divakaruni is a new goddess on the Texas landscape.” (The Austin American Statesman)

“Divakaruni elegantly leads the reader through the twists and turns of life given the complications of culture, family expectations, and words left unsaid…the writing was crisp and clear. The characters were realistic and the dialogue believable. The story explores the dynamics of mothers and daughters caught in the cross-hairs of cultural and generation differences, as well as the complications of expectations, believed or real…Before We Visit the Goddess will leave the reader wondering about the relationship they have with their parents and what should be said before it is too late.” (The Portland Book Review)

“A novel about female strength and ambition and how one mother’s decision can affect the lives of her family for generations to come.” (Bustle)

“Takes readers on an exotic, visceral journey beginning in the mango and saffron-scented kitchens of 1950s India and ending in present day Houston, Texas.” (The Santa Cruz Sentinel)

"Three generations of headstrong Bengali women, their passions, secrets, regrets and mysteries, come to life through Divakaruni’s storytelling wizardry… Divakaruni brings us from the poor villages to the upper crust

urban families, from India to Texas, to show how three courageous women struggle toward independence." (BBC.com)

"The best storytellers always keep you coming back. They have their unique signatures, a unique voice, that enchants the reader and draws them back to listen to one story, then the next and then the one after that. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such masterful story smith. I am done with reading Before We Visit The Goddess for now, but I keep thinking about the characters, and I know that a re-reading is in store for the future." (The Reading Desk)

"Divakaruni has created characters to be embraced despite their difficulties with each other; learned from when they stumble and fall; and celebrated as the picked themselves up again. There is grace and compassion in her writing as emotions spike and subside. Life-changing disappointments are tempered with kindness, and at no time does the author chastise a character for her imperfections." (India Currents)

"[Divakaruni is] one of my favorite recent discoveries. Before We Visit the Goddess is full of different voices, going back and forth in time, with beautifully written chapters that could stand on their own as short stories but add layer upon layer of complication, wonder, humanity and empathy when joined together." (Austin 360)

"The always enchanting and enlightening Divakaruni spins another silken yet tensile saga about the lives of women in India and as immigrants in America…Divakaruni's gracefully insightful, dazzlingly descriptive, and covertly stinging tale illuminates the opposition women must confront, generation by generation, as they seek both independence and connection." (Booklist (Starred Review))

"Richly drawn characters…a novel of quiet but deeply affecting moments." (Kirkus Reviews)

"An extraordinary journey told through a sparkling symphony of male and female voices." (Indo American News)

"There are few writers who get the setting, characters and story pitch perfect, like Divakaruni does, every single time. Before We Visit the Goddess is no exception. Brilliantly magical, lyrical and powerful, it is in keeping with the tradition Divakaruni has made of capturing the Kolkata spirit and the strength of its women. A richly woven tapestry of three generations of ancestresses, goddesses and women… Divakaruni's finest work yet, given its polished writing and intense, passionate characters." (India Today)

"This book turned out to be the perfect palate cleanser…for the burgeoning bright glory of summer.The greatest strength of the book is Divakaruni's three unapologetically complicated, fierce female protagonists." (Hyphen Magazine)

"Masterful." (ReadItForward.com)

"I will never forget Sabitri, Bela, and Tara: grandmother, mother, and daughter after my own heart. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni cycles through generations of time, until we come to know our ancestresses—and the goddess. A lovely book."
(Maxine Hong Kingston, author of I Love a Broad Margin to My Life)

"Tender, bittersweet, beautifully wrought tales about love and longing, exile and loneliness. I was reminded of the songs of separation sung by Bhojpuri women: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni discovers new nuances in the 'biraha' that creeps into the lives of migrants." (Amitav Ghosh, author of The Glass Palace)

About the Author

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the author of sixteen books, including Oleander Girl, The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, Palace of Illusions, One Amazing Thing, and Before We Visit the Goddess. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, and The New York Times, and has won, among other prizes, an American Book Award. Born in India, she currently lives in Texas and is the McDavid professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Before We Visit the Goddess Fortunate Lamps: 1995

Somewhere in the dark, jackals are howling. They like it when storms bring down the electric lines in the village, leaving only broken bits of moonlight. Maybe they have a blood-memory of how it was before humans came and pushed them to the edges.

By now Sabitri is usually asleep. The doctor has warned her that she needs to keep regular hours. Her heart isn't doing too well, and there's the blood pressure, too. Did she want to be bedridden and force-fed barley water? Did she want him to phone her daughter in Houston? Or Bipin Bihari Ghatak, her business manager who lived in Kolkata?

No, she did not. Bela would rant, which was her default state when besieged by guilt, and Bipin Bihari, who was her oldest friend, would go silent with worry because he hadn't ever wanted Sabitri to move back to her ancestral village, so far from Kolkata, in her retirement. The savage lands, he termed it.

She sets out pen and paper on the rickety dining table next to the kerosene lamp. She takes care not to wake Rekha, snoring on her coir mat in the alcove, because then she'll start scolding, the way longtime servants feel they're entitled to.

The evening had started well, with her perched on the windowsill, watching sheets of rain blotting out the world. Gashes of lightning tore open the sky. Behind her Rekha wrung her hands. Let me shut the window. The rain will make all the bedclothes damp, the quilts will turn moldy, you'll get the pneumonia again, and then what will we do? But Sabitri refused. She loved the smell of night rain: wet earth, darkness, but also something else, nameless and a little frightening. When she was young, no one could keep her indoors at times like this. Even now, after she had grown brittle and creaky, the storm tugged at her insides. Ah, but Bipin Bihari should have seen her tonight!

The phone rang. She wasn't going to pick it up. That's what she had bought that fancy expensive answering machine for. But then there was Bela's voice, ragged. She'd been crying. What is it about children? An old need twisted in Sabitri's chest. Protect, protect. She lunged unwisely across the dark and banged her knee; pain shot down her leg like a fire.

"What happened?" she called into the receiver, her voice sounding rough and angry, though she had not meant it to come out like that. Even now Bela had this effect on her.

But Bela, preoccupied as she often was by her own drama, didn't seem to notice. She rushed into her tale. Tara was thinking of dropping out of college, they had to stop her, she'd only completed one semester, it would be the worst mistake of her life, the girl refused to listen to Bela, she never listened to anything her mother said nowadays.

Sabitri hid her concern. Sympathy would only make Bela cry more.

“I’m sorry to hear this.” But how cold and unfeeling she sounded.

“You’ve got to write to her, Ma! You’re the grandmother. If you stress the right things, point out the dangers of her stupid choice, perhaps it’ll stop Tara from ruining her life!”

Sabitri wanted to remind Bela that she had tried all of the above with her. What good had it done? Besides, Tara had never even seen Sabitri. Every time Sabitri had asked Bela to bring her to India, Bela had an excuse ready. Almost as though she—or maybe that husband of hers, that Sanjay—felt Sabitri would be a bad influence.

The years had taught Sabitri to keep such thoughts to herself. She said, instead, “What made Tara want to drop out? She’s such a good student.”

When she didn’t receive an answer, she continued, “Has Tara’s father talked to her about this? There’s a better chance of her listening to him than to me. Aren’t they really close?”

Silence at the other end, more distressing than any amount of weeping. Then Bela said, “Tara isn’t talking to Sanjay at the moment.”

Something else was wrong, something worse than Tara aborting her studies, which in America, Sabitri had heard, could easily be picked up again. Sabitri suddenly felt much older than her sixty-seven years. She didn’t have the strength to question Bela. What was the use of questions, anyway? Already she knew the most important thing: if her daughter—proud, stubborn, so like herself—had had anyone else to turn to, she would never have called Sabitri for help.

She wrote down, carefully, the college dorm address that Bela dictated. She promised to take a rickshaw to the post office early tomorrow morning. She promised to send the letter by express delivery.

Now she sits at the table that has been with her for decades, running her fingers over a gouge that Bela had hacked into the wood after they’d had a fight. What can she write in her rusty English to change Tara’s mind? She cannot even imagine her granddaughter’s life, the whirlwind foreign world she lives in. All Sabitri has is a handful of photos. The child Tara in a costume, brandishing a broomstick, celebrating some odd American festival, the point of which Sabitri could not figure out. A teenage Tara at a special party called a prom, alien and glamorous in a strapless dress. Sabitri had been intimidated by her glittery cheekbones, the sophistication of her plucked eyebrows. How different from the photo she kept in her drawer, under her sari-blouses: baby Tara in Bela’s arms, peering from under a woolly blue hood, a foggy orange bridge floating in the distance.

That had been the first photo. Sabitri still remembers the pang she felt on receiving it because she had so wanted to be present at Tara’s birth. But she hadn’t been invited.

Push away the past, that vessel in which all emotions curdle to regret. Start the letter.

Dearest Granddaughter Tara,

I am sure you are surprised to receive this, since customarily we write to each other only to send Bijoya greetings. Your mother informs me that you do not wish to continue with college. I am very sorry to hear this

and hope you will reconsider. Without education, a woman has little chance of standing on her own feet. She will be forced to watch from the sidelines while others enjoy the life she has dreamed about—

Wrong, wrong, all wrong. An entire hour wasted. She balls up the sheet and throws it to the floor.

Dearest Granddaughter Tara,

You do not know how lucky you are to be sent to college. So many families are too poor to be able to afford such an expense. It would be a criminal waste if you do not avail yourself of the opportunity life has given you.

She hates what she has written, prissy, stilted, schoolmarmish. Tears it up. Her mind wanders, again, to the photos. Her favorite one, which she keeps on her dresser, is of Tara at the swimming pool, taken when she was nine. Dressed in a pink two-piece swimsuit, she balances on the edge of a board, about to leap into the water. Her face is filled with terror and elation.

How well Sabitri knows that feeling.

Sabitri's own leap began, as so many things in Bengal do, with a platter of sweets. She has forgotten many things from that time—just a few years after Independence; she was only seventeen then—but the platter she remembers clearly: heavy, made of solid silver, with a sharp, raised edge that cut into her fingers as she carried it down a mud path behind her mother, Durga, who held a similar platter. Durga's back was bent. As she walked, the knobs of her backbone bobbed up and down under her worn sari-blouse. She was the hardest worker Sabitri knew. But for her, their household would have fallen apart long ago, for her father was the kind of man the world routinely took advantage of. Sabitri felt a churning inside her as she watched her mother, a mix of sadness and anger and love.

The platters belonged to the Mittirs, the wealthiest family in the village. Their names were etched on the rims to discourage theft, or perhaps as a kind of proclamation. Mittir's wife Leelamoyi had ordered the sweets from Durga for a luncheon. The Mittirs had their own cook, a brahmin imported from Kolkata, but Durga's sweets, famous throughout the village, were far superior to anything he could have concocted. And Leelamoyi had to have the best.

Sabitri hadn't wanted to come. Leelamoyi, who lived in Kolkata and only visited the village under duress during festival time, was known to have a sharp tongue, unpredictable moods, and an elevated notion of her own importance. She would surely remark on how tall Sabitri had grown and how, if her parents didn't act fast, they wouldn't be able to marry her off. But there was no one else to help Durga. Sabitri's sister was too young. Her father was at the temple, where he was a part-time priest. And even if he had been home, he would have reminded them in his mild, surprised way that this wasn't a man's job. So here was Sabitri, sweating and irritated and trying not to step in cow dung.

Inside the Mittir home it was cool and misty, the windows covered with damp rushes. Two maids wielded large palm-leaf fans. Leelamoyi, surrounded by a gaggle of gossips, had spread her considerable bulk over a flowery silken sofa. She must have been in an expansive mood, because she tasted the desserts, pronounced them satisfactory, and handed Durga a stack of rupees without counting them. Then she looked Sabitri up and down.

“What’s your daughter’s name again?” she asked Durga.

“Sabitri, Rani Ma.”

“Ha! Ambitious, aren’t you, naming her after the mythic heroine who snatched her husband from the clutches of Death himself. Well, you’d better find her a match fast, else she won’t have a husband at all.”

Sabitri hid her fury and tugged at Durga’s sari, trying to get her to leave, but Durga said, “Sabi doesn’t want to get married, Rani Ma. She wants to go to college. Wants to become a teacher. She’s smart. Stood first in the matric exams in the Girls School. But we don’t have the money.”

Sabitri’s face burned. Go through life with your head held high, Durga had taught her. Why, then, would she humiliate herself—and Sabitri—by exposing to a rich, spoiled woman the tender dreams that Sabitri had entrusted to her? Dreams as impossible as sprouting wings. She would never confide in her mother again!

Sabitri thinks: If only one could erase the years—just long enough to say, I understand. But by the time she realized how much it had cost her mother to speak those words—Sabitri was a mother herself then, and alone—Durga was dead, beyond the reach of all apologies.

“Really?” Leelamoyi raised disbelieving eyebrows. Gold weighed down her arms. Just her bracelets would have paid for Sabitri’s college twice over.

Sometimes the unfairness of the world made Sabitri feel like she might burst. She pushed her way through the entourage toward the door.

Behind her Leelamoyi spoke sharply. “Girl, did I say you could leave?”

Sabitri considered disobedience, but an angry Leelamoyi could make their lives more miserable than they already were. She couldn’t do that to her family. She stopped, though she did not turn around.

“Tell you what, Durga,” Leelamoyi said, her voice indolent once more, “if your impatient daughter is as smart as you claim, if she manages to get into a Kolkata college, I’ll pay her fees and let her stay in our home while she studies.”

The sycophants jostled around Leelamoyi, jealously exclaiming at this goddesslike generosity, so much more than Sabitri deserved. Sabitri stood frozen in disbelief until Durga pulled her forward and told her to touch the Rani Ma’s feet in thanks.

The pure chill of marble against her forehead. Her thoughts whirling like a flock of startled birds. The drab dead-end wall of her future had just become a golden door. Thank you, she thought fervently, ashamed of her misjudgment. Leelamoyi’s voice, booming from above, did sound like a goddess’s. Sabitri could not decipher the words, though she heard the women titter in response.

A lifetime’s worth of impatience, days slow as cattle grazing in a parched summer field. Then she was in front of the Mittirs’ Kolkata home, peering through the wrought-iron gate, clutching a painted tin suitcase in a sweaty hand. She had expected grandeur. Still, she was taken aback by the hugeness of the mansion, three stories tall, the shuttered windows like heavy-lidded eyes. Under an enormous portico gleamed a motorcar.

The brick walls surrounding the compound were topped with broken glass to keep out intruders. A gatekeeper, thick-mustachioed as a bandit, banged his lathi on the paved driveway and shouted in his terrifying voice for her to move along. When she said that Leelamoyi had invited her to live here, he sneered in disbelief and tried to snatch away the letter of confirmation the Mittirs' manager, Sarkar Moshai, had sent her.

How the matter would have ended she did not know, but right then a young man emerged from the house. "What's all the commotion?" he asked.

His shirt blazed in the sun, blinding her. She had never seen anything so white. Later she would ask him what kind of soap the Mittirs used. But his life had not taken him anywhere near the washing area of the house, so he did not know.

She gathered her courage, pushed past the gatekeeper, and held out the note with desperate, trembling fingers. The young man gave it a brief glance and ordered the gateman to send her in to Sarkar Moshai. "Make sure someone gives her food and water," he added. "Can't you see she's exhausted?"

Before Sabitri could thank him, he stepped into the waiting car.

Later she would say, "You didn't even read that note, did you?"

"No," he said. "But I read your eyes."

"Eyes can lie."

"Not yours," he said.

Useless, these rambling memories. Focus on the letter, the one thing that might make a difference in the future.

Granddaughter, people look down on a woman without education. She has few options. To survive, she is forced to put up with ill-treatment. She must depend on the kindness of strangers, an unsure thing. I do not want that for you—

Even the most startling adventure, sooner or later, must become routine. So it was with Sabitri. Each morning she took the tram to the women's college, where most of her classes were held. For science and mathematics, she walked to a nearby men's college with a small group of girls. They sat in a nervous clump on a back bench because they had never had male classmates. The professors addressed only the men. Sabitri was mostly grateful to be ignored. The village school had not prepared her adequately; it was only with frantic effort that she managed to keep up.

After classes, she studied in the library with two girls who were also from distant villages, sharing textbooks since none of them had enough money to buy them all. Sabitri received a monthly stipend from Sarkar Moshai, but it was barely enough to pay her fees and her tram fare, and she was too shy to ask for more. In between homework, they spoke of their families, how much they missed them. The girls stayed in a run-

down women's hostel, six to a room. Once they went with Sabitri to see where she lived and stood staring at the mansion. Struck dumb by their amazement, Sabitri couldn't tell them how unhappy she was there.

So many things run together in her head nowadays. But this she remembers: On the day of her arrival, Paro, Leelamoyi's favorite maid, had taken her to the second floor. Leelamoyi sat on a four-poster bed carved with massive lion paws, playing cards with three friends. Sunlight dazzled an oval vanity mirror that stood, tilted, on a mahogany stand. On the wall was a clock unlike anything Sabitri had seen. Even as she stared, it struck the hour, and a little wooden bird popped out with a series of squawks, startling her so that she jumped. And the windows—with their shutters thrown wide, they were as big as doors. Through the bars, she could see hosts of treetops dancing in the breeze. It was like living in a leafy ocean. If this was Sabitri's room, she would have sat on the windowsill all day, staring into the sky. But these women didn't even glance out.

Paro gave a small, apologetic cough and Leelamoyi looked up, frowning.

"Who's this?" she said.

Sabitri had prepared a careful speech about appreciation and gratitude, but when she realized Leelamoyi had forgotten her, she grew flustered. Her words ran into each other as she tried to explain her presence.

Leelamoyi raised her hand to cut her off. "Ah, yes, you're that sweet-maker's daughter. Study hard now, and stay out of trouble." She turned back to her cards, and Paro pinched Sabitri's arm, indicating that she had been dismissed.

Paro showed her where she would stay, a musty ground-floor room with a tiny, barred window set too high for Sabitri to look out. A weight pressed down on her chest—she can feel it even today. Their mud hut in the village had been rudimentary, but there was dappled light, the bright emerald of lau vines climbing up a wall. She knows now that Paro could easily have given her a better room—many lay empty in that mansion. But Paro had taken a dislike to her. Perhaps she resented her because she did no housework and yet received food and lodging. Sabitri wept that night for her mother, for the lost moon. For her own folly in believing that Leelamoyi's benevolence had been something more than a moment's caprice.

It took her some time to understand her complicated position in the household's hierarchy: neither servant nor master. She was of a higher caste than the servants, but they made the important decisions: what she would eat, where she would bathe and hang her clothes to dry. They hesitated to ill-treat her because she was the daughter of a temple priest; but it was a small temple in a faraway village, so they did not feel compelled to treat her well. Someone would put her morning meal, a thala of rice with a dollop of dal thrown over it, a grudging piece of fish dumped on the side, in the passageway outside the kitchen in the mornings. She sat on the floor by herself and ate before leaving for college. The aroma of the dishes being cooked for the Mittirs—jackfruit curry, mutton kurma, biryani—assailed her. She hungered also for the bits of conversation floating from the kitchen: a moment of laughter, a raucous fight between the cook and the bazaar-servant. Her stomach ached with the longing to be included. At night she was afraid to arrive too soon for dinner; she didn't want the servants to think she was greedy. By the time she sat down to her meal, the rutis were leathery, the vegetables dry. Dinner was when she missed her mother the most. At home they had eaten together, Durga listening with fascinated admiration to Sabitri's recital of her day.

One evening, gathering her sari from the clothesline at the far end of the backyard, she noticed a narrow winding staircase, rusted in places. She climbed it—perhaps from a desire to escape. It led to a terrace, empty except for water tanks marked with pigeon droppings, a place where no one came. She made it hers. Each night after dinner she escaped to it, careful to ensure no one saw her. She looked at the stars and

imagined them shining on her family. She finger-traced words onto the twinkling vastness of the sky, the things she would have written to her mother had Durga been able to read. Sometimes she wrote things she needed to believe: I'm lucky to be in Kolkata, getting an education. How many girls get this opportunity? Soon I'll get a great job. I'll earn enough money so my family will never be hungry again. Sometimes she whispered into the dark the saying Durga had quoted before bidding her goodbye: Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. There was a second part to the saying, but Durga had left that out. When she said goodbye to her daughter, her eyes had glittered like broken glass. To send Sabitri to Kolkata, she'd had to fight all their relatives, who warned her that she was sending the girl to her ruination. Remembering that gave Sabitri the strength to go down to her cheerless room for another long night of study.

Granddaughter, this is the truth: if you are uneducated, people look down on you. To survive, you are forced to accept crumbs thrown from a rich man's table. How can such a woman ever brighten the family name?

One morning when Sabitri came to the passageway, there was no food. She ventured through the door to find out why. The kitchen was in an uproar. Leelamoyi had ordered the cook to make rasogollas for a luncheon, and so he had. But something had gone wrong. The soft round balls that should have been floating in syrup had exploded into hundreds of pieces. There was no time to make another batch. How shamed Leelamoyi would be if the guests had to be served store-bought sweets! Cooks had been fired for less.

"I won't be going alone," the cook was shouting. "I'll make sure you all come with me." He transfixed Sabitri with a terrifying frown. "What do you want?"

Don't meddle, her wiser side warned. But she heard herself saying, in a small voice, that maybe she could fix the problem. The cook glared at her effrontery, but then he waved her in. Her hands shook as she boiled milk, sweetening it with jaggery syrup. She shredded the exploded balls into tiny pieces, remembering how her mother did it. She added them to the milk, along with ground cardamom and chopped pistachios. She was late for college already. But the mixture needed to be stirred, constantly, gently, so it would not stick to the bottom of the pan. She could not abandon it.

By the time she got to the college, she had missed her first three classes. Even in the others, she was distracted. Her friends joked that it was because of the new Maths professor. Their regular professor was in the hospital with a lung infection, and the university had found a substitute, a recent college graduate, a lanky young man with an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down when he got excited about what he was teaching. Sabitri didn't pay her friends—or him—much attention. Was Leelamoyi angry because her menu had been changed? Or did she like the new dessert? If she did, the cook would probably take full credit for it.

But how Sabitri had enjoyed cooking! At home she would grumble while helping Durga. This morning, though, when the milk had thickened perfectly, no ugly skin forming on top, she found herself smiling as she had not done since coming to Kolkata.

"Look at her grinning," her friends whispered. "Ei, Sabi, are you in love or what?"

Upon her return, she was summoned by Leelamoyi. She climbed the stairs with some trepidation. One never knew what pleased the rich, what affronted them. But Leelamoyi, reclined on her bed—did she ever do anything else?—chewing on betel leaves, was all smiles. The guests had loved the dessert. Even her husband

and son had asked for second helpings.

“From now on when I have company,” she said, with the air of conferring a great favor, “I want you to make the dessert.”

Though she hated herself for it, Sabitri’s heart ballooned at Leelamoyi’s approval. But what about her studies? She had copied her classmates’ notes today, but she had not understood them well. If this happened often, how would she pass her classes?

Leelamoyi gestured to Paro, who walked over to the mahogany almirah with a face like she’d just bitten into a bitter melon. From the bottom shelf she removed two saris and handed them to Sabitri. Sabitri held her breath, marveling at the slip-shiny feel of the silk, trying not to show her excitement. She had never owned a silk sari. And these, though not new, were far more expensive than anything her family could afford to buy her.

“Rani Ma wants you to have them,” Paro said with her bitter-melon mouth.

In her room, Sabitri tried on the saris, wishing she had a mirror. The first was pomegranate-red with a border of green parrots. She would wear it to college tomorrow, even though she knew it was too showy. The second sari was more expensive, evening-sky-blue with a thin gold border. Where could she wear it? Certainly not to the kitchen, where no doubt Paro was fanning the waves of resentment by telling everyone of these undeserved gifts. But she couldn’t bear to take it off. It was smooth as water against her skin, lighter than she had imagined a sari could be. She decided to go to the terrace.

Once there, she walked up and down the way she imagined a great lady would, steps tiny and elegant, the sunset breeze rustling the silk. She became a rich heiress who possessed two entire almirahs of saris like this. Her diamond nose ring sparkled as she promenaded.

But she was not alone! In a corner behind a water tank stood the young man who had helped her upon her arrival at the Mittirs’, smoking and watching. Leelamoyi’s son. From overheard kitchen gossip she knew his name: Rajiv. He was studying to be a doctor so that he could take over the family business, a hospital. There was a smile on his face—derision, no doubt. She rushed back to the staircase.

“Please don’t run away!” said the young man, and when she didn’t listen, “Stop, I insist!”

Granddaughter, at that, I stopped. Perhaps a part of me believed that, charity case that I was, he had the right to command me. But a part of me wanted to stay because he was young and handsome and had been chivalrous. My heart beat unevenly as I turned to face him, and not just out of fear.

She looks down at the page. What made her write this foolishness? She crushes the sheet in her fist, as though to crush the memory. Then she smooths the paper out again. She is not equipped to advise Tara, she knows this. But perhaps, if she shares her life, the girl might see something there. For the first time, she feels hopeful.

How long did they speak that time, and the next, and the next? And of what? Later she would only remember

fragments, torn clouds drifting in front of the moon. When she told him, shyly, why she was in Kolkata, he listened with careful attention. Then he talked about himself, disarming her with his self-deprecating honesty. He hated medical school: the stink of illness, the pus and the vomit, the dark, jaundiced urine of the patients. But it wasn't something he could tell his parents, who were counting on him. The terrace was his escape, too. He loved playing the flute. Would she like him to play for her one night? But already she knew he would never do that. They could not risk anyone finding out.

Days passed. How many? It is hard to keep track of such mundanities when one is balanced inside a fairy tale. After some time, he brought up an old red quilt, so they could sit in comfort as they spoke. One moonless night, he lay down on it so he could point out the constellations to her. Here is Kalpurush with his shining, here are the seven wise rishis. She was impressed. She hadn't thought a city boy would know the names of stars. Maybe that was what made her lie down next to him on the worn malmal, though her mother's warnings buzzed in her ears like mosquitoes. She told him her dreams: she would dress in a starched sari and teach history to schoolchildren, stories of conquerors and despots. Her students would be obedient; she would never need to cane anyone. She would become a principal with tortoiseshell glasses, the entire school standing at attention when she entered the assembly hall.

He nodded. She would make a great principal, he said with conviction. He wound a finger softly around a lock of her hair, which he had persuaded her to unbraid. That was what made her fall in love, finally: his belief in her, and his gentleness.

But even as she confessed her dreams, they were changing.

That first night, their conversation, so hard to break off, had continued beyond safety. She rushed to her room to change the magical sari that had summoned her prince for an old cotton one. She was frighteningly late for her meal. But no one noticed. They were chattering about how the young master had been tardy to dinner. Leelamoyi had scolded him severely when he finally showed up. She demanded to know where he'd been. He wouldn't tell her, though. The servants guessed it was at some nightclub with his no-good friends. Didn't he look like he'd had one too many to drink? The older retainers decried today's youth, their lack of filial respect. The younger ones grumbled because now everyone would have to stay up late. Sabitri could barely swallow her food as she listened, her throat dry with guilty excitement, her heart hot and swollen with a secret power.

Granddaughter, when you are poor and ill-educated, how unequipped you are to read the world. All you know is your place in it: down near the bottom. You believe you are meant for better things, but how will you ever climb out to get them? The first opportunity that appears, you grasp at it to pull yourself up. You don't check to see if it can bear your weight.

She wore her red sari to college and was roundly teased by her friends, especially when, in Maths class, the young professor dropped his books while setting them on the table. You're distracting him, Sabi! She laughed it off, but as he was leaving, in a spirit of mischief she looked him in the eye, with what she considered a sultry smile. He dropped his books again. Later her friends said they thought they would die from holding in their laughter.

It was as though she had entered a golden time. She woke early and heavy-eyed and rushed to the kitchen to

prepare desserts: mihidana and malpua, pithay made from sweet potatoes, fried and dipped in thick syrup. Leelamoyi's friends loved them all. Even the young master—who had never had a sweet tooth, Leelamoyi told Sabitri—asked for two helpings of rice pudding. He told his mother that whoever had prepared it was a treasure. Make sure you don't let her go, he said.

Sabitri wrote all this in a letter to Durga, along with elaborate descriptions of the sweets, which she had adapted to Leelamoyi's citified taste. She did not mention her missed classes, how she was falling behind in her schoolwork. On the envelope, she wrote a line asking her father to please read the letter to her mother. Perhaps the letter was lost, because she never received a reply.

Late at night, after the terrace (they had decided it was best to meet post-dinner, when everyone assumed they had gone to bed), she tossed and turned on her pallet, longing to tell her mother about Rajiv. Her secret cramped her belly like indigestion. If there had been a chance to see Durga face-to-face, she would have done it. Durga would have been shocked. Maybe she would have slapped her. But because she loved her daughter, she would have finally come around.

On the terrace, Rajiv told her how in the operating theater he felt he was drowning in the blood, horrifyingly bright, that sometimes pulsed out over his hands. She shuddered and held him close, her lips in his hair.

"Thank God I have you to talk to," he said against her collarbone. "Otherwise I would kill myself."

This, then, was why he loved her. She was his confessional, his absolution.

Yes, she thought. She had never felt so necessary.

He took her face in his hands and looked into it as though it were the moon. When he buried his own face in her breasts, desire, dangerous as a sparking wire, traveled down her body into the pit of herself until she thought she would break apart.

"I wish this moment would last forever, Tri. That it would become my whole life."

Yes, yes.

She loved the way he shortened her name, made it unique. But a moment cannot become a whole life. She knew that. She was hungry for more.

One of Leelamoyi's card-playing friends had become a grandmother. She would be gone to her daughter's home for a whole month. But how would they play Twenty-Nine without her? Sabitri was summoned to Leelamoyi's airy bedroom, told the rules of the game. She found them simple enough.

"Smart girl!" Leelamoyi said, smiling with her brilliant, betel-stained lips. "Can you come home right after your classes, then?"

It wasn't really a question.

Sabitri no longer had time to study in the library. She rushed home and changed into one of her good saris—she had four now, given to her for this purpose—and went to the upstairs room, where, because she

was better at strategy than the other women, Leelamoyi insisted that she be her partner. In order to play, Sabitri had to sit across from Leelamoyi, on her bed. At first she was uncomfortable. The people in her village, her parents included, would have flinched at such presumption. But Leelamoyi didn't seem to mind. All she cared about was winning. Paro brought tea and crisp kachuris stuffed with spicy green peas. "Eat, eat," Leelamoyi said. She addressed Sabitri as meye, a word that could mean either "girl" or "daughter." Sabitri could see the rage behind the crust of politeness that was Paro's face.

But, Granddaughter, I found it impossible to worry. How soft the mattress was, how fine and silken the bedcover. How sweet the sandesh I had made that morning. And Leelamoyi calling me "daughter"—surely that was a sign.

At school she told her friends she had to help in the house. It was only a half lie, wasn't it? She felt guilty at the disappointment on their faces, for they counted on her to explain their English texts: Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Hardy. But as soon as she stepped out of the college gates, she forgot everything: her friends, her upcoming exams, the eyes of the young Maths professor searching her out during class. It was like being bewitched.

This was what Sabitri dreamed as she rode on the tram, dozing because she didn't get enough sleep nowadays: She's in a wedding mandap, dressed in bridal red. She lifts a garland high and slips it over Rajiv's head. Under the bright Petromax lanterns, she sees her face reflected, tiny and shining and perfect, in his eyes. The auspicious sound of conches accompany them to the third floor of the Mittir home, where Rajiv has told her his room is. In the bed the years pass with swift pleasure. A baby joins them. Two. She pushes back the gold bangles on her arms to nurse them. At her waist, the cool heft of the household keys that Leelamoyi has handed over. In the kitchen the cook nods docile agreement, Yes, Boudimoni, when she tells him to make jackfruit curry. Paro washes the children's soiled nappies. No. She deletes Paro from her world.

Perfect, a perfect dream, granddaughter. Why, then, waking with a start as the conductor jangled the bell for my stop, did I feel a constriction in my chest, a sense that I had misplaced something?

Summer had descended upon Kolkata with epic vengeance. Sabitri came back from college bedraggled with sweat, craving a bath, cold water cascading over her body in the maids' bathroom. But a servant was waiting. Leelamoyi wanted to see her. Sabitri was surprised. There were no card games today—or had she made a mistake? Let me drink some water, she said. Change my sari. The woman scrunched up her face and shook her head. Rani Ma's waiting. Better come right now.

The first thing she saw when she entered the room was the red quilt from the terrace, crumpled on the floor like the pelt of a dead animal. The blood rushed to her head and then away; she had to hold on to the doorframe. When her vision cleared she looked around for Rajiv, who would defend her. But there was only Leelamoyi, and behind her Paro, hands on her hips, swollen with satisfaction.

From across the years, Sabitri remembers Leelamoyi's contorted mouth, spitting out invectives: conniving slut, harlot's daughter, poisonous snake in my bosom. Her own mouth frozen, so that when she tried to say she had done nothing wrong, the words would not obey. She learned that Rajiv had been sent away already to his uncle's home in another city. He would continue his studies there. So don't be thinking that you can sink your witch-claws into him again. As for Sabitri, she was to leave the house right now. No, Leelamoyi

didn't care where she went, or what happened to her. If it wasn't for the fact that your father's a priest, I would have you whipped. Now get out of my sight before I change my mind.

Sabitri stood at the tram stop for a long while in the oppressive dusk, carrying her small painted trunk. Finally, she boarded a tram that would take her to the men's college. She could think of no other place. She opened her handbag—so light—and looked down at the frighteningly few rupee notes in there. Her trunk was light, too. Paro had followed her to her room and rummaged through it—Let's see what you're stealing—and taken the silk saris. She'd taken some of Sabitri's own things as well. A buffalo-horn comb that Durga had given her. A tiny bottle of rosewater Sabitri had saved up for months to buy. Sabitri had been too heartsick to protest.

The men's college loomed eerily in the gloom. She slipped through the gate, thankful that the gateman wasn't there to stop her, and ran up the stairs. On the second story, at the end of a corridor, there was a small room with a plaque on it, WOMEN'S COMMON ROOM. She had gone there once, exploring, with her friends. It was piled with dusty furniture and smelled of mice droppings. But there was a bolt on the inside, and a small toilet. She could stay there for the night. Tomorrow—ah, she couldn't handle the thought of tomorrow yet.

When she reached it, the door to the common room was padlocked.

The strength went out of her and she slid to the floor, unable to hold in her sobs any longer. Terror and rage. But foremost was the fear of what might happen to her tonight when the night watchman came by. Would he throw her out on the street? Would he do worse? Beneath it all roiled the humiliation. What would her parents, her relatives, her village, say if they knew that she had been kicked out of the Mittir home like a dog? No one would care that the love she and Rajiv had felt for each other was pure and beautiful. Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. Could she have strayed any farther from that?

The second half of the saying, the part her mother had left unspoken, struck her like a slap:

Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name.

Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame.

She had been weeping too hard to hear the footsteps. When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she flinched and cried out, throwing up her arms to protect herself. But it wasn't the night watchman, as she had feared. It was her Maths professor.

He'd been working on his research, he said, in one of the classrooms—something he often did, since the hostel where he stayed was very noisy. On his way out, he heard a woman weeping and came to see what the matter was. He was shocked to see her in such a state. What had happened?

She hid her face. How mortifying, that he who had always looked at her with admiration should see her like this. She made a vague gesture—please go away. But he lowered himself to the floor beside her, his lanky knees drawn up. The unexpectedness of it made her look up. His eyes were distressed. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Clearly, he had never been in such a situation before. She felt a hysterical laugh spiraling up and had to hide her face in her sari.

His hand—tentative, nervous—touched her shoulder. "Don't cry like that, please. Maybe I can help—"

Something in his voice, in those awkward, patting motions. A plan formed in my head. I held on to it like a drowning woman. I did not allow myself to think of anything, of anyone else. Tara, can you blame me? I lifted my face to him and smiled my prettiest, saddest, falsest smile.

He took her to a cousin's house, his only family in Kolkata. "Here's a student of mine," he said, "homeless because of a rich woman's selfish whim. Please keep her until the end of the college year. I'll pay—"

"An unknown girl, Bijan?" His cousin was dubious. "Who knows why those people forced her to leave their house? Maybe she's a thief—"

"I told you—she lost an important card game where she was the rich woman's partner. The woman was furious because she had to hand over a lot of money. She threw Sabitri out into the night. If I hadn't found her, anything might have happened! I can't force you to help her, but if you don't, understand this: we will never speak again."

The inflexibility in his voice surprised me and frightened his cousin. She gave in.

He came by each evening to help with my studies, for I was dreadfully behind. When he was not around, the cousin was cold to me. Perhaps, with a woman's instinct, she saw into my crooked core. She warned him, but he would not listen. Granddaughter, he had love enough for the both of us.

Each day Sabitri checked the papers surreptitiously. One morning she saw it: "Mittirs of Shyambazar Celebrate Wedding of Their Only Son to Beautiful Coal Mine Heiress." There were photographs. The heiress was beautiful indeed. With a gritted heart Sabitri threw herself into her studies. She made herself meek and helpful in the house until she won the cousin over. Everything happened as she had planned: she passed her classes; Bijan asked her to marry him; the cousin urged her to agree. When Sabitri wept, they thought it was from grateful joy.

The newlyweds went to the village to pay their respects. Sabitri's parents were astonished but not displeased. Her father was relieved that they had had a quiet temple wedding in Kalighat for which he did not have to pay. The relatives swung between respect for the professor son-in-law and envy at Sabitri's good luck, once again undeserved. Durga was delighted that Bijan wanted Sabitri to continue her studies.

But Tara, I didn't do that. Within a year I was expecting a child. I dropped out of college, and though Bijan encouraged me to go back once the child was born, I no longer wanted to. Once again, I had been seduced by a different dream.

Bijan had published his research in a journal, something very intellectual that Sabitri didn't understand. What she did understand was that several companies wanted to hire him. They were willing to pay him highly. Give him a prestigious title. Bijan would have preferred to live in their one-bedroom flat and continue teaching. Sabitri set to persuading him otherwise.

Her strategy lacked originality, but she was aided by the fact that he had never been with a woman before. Additionally, he was in love. She cooked him the dishes he most enjoyed, the comfort foods of a man who had grown up poor—rice, yellow mung dal, fried brinjal. From her own life, she knew them well. After

dinner she put on a thin cotton night-chemise, which showed off her figure—she had recently taken on this Westernized habit—and laid their daughter, Bela, freshly changed and powdered, in his lap. How he loved that child! He could play toe-games with her all evening, making funny noises that set her giggling. Sabitri sat next to them, leaning her head on his shoulder. It was so peaceful that she almost forgot what she was there to do.

A sentence here, a phrase there, a small, plaintive smile, the slight press of a breast against his arm. That's all it took, because he wanted to give his wife and child the best of everything. Did he guess the game Sabitri was playing? If so, he forgave her. He joined a giant oil corporation with tentacles everywhere and found that he did not dislike it as much as he had feared. He discovered he had a special talent for solving problems. He was too honest, blunt in his answers, but the management loved him in spite of that. Or perhaps because of it. These were rare qualities in the corporate world. He was promoted, then promoted again, then sent to their headquarters in Delhi to be groomed for higher leadership.

Did I love him, Granddaughter? I'll answer by saying I was the best possible wife. Certainly I loved our life in the capital, a flat in a wealthy colony, a motorcar, respectful servants who believed that I had been born into affluence. I took classes in English conversation and comportment, and learned that I, too, had a talent. I built a reputation for hosting the best parties. I knew how to charm the most taciturn guest into chatting. I never skimped on the alcohol, even if it meant we had to eat rice and lentils for the rest of the month. I created desserts that became the talk of the town. I wonder if Bijan realized that many of his tough deals fell into place because of my dinners.

After seven years of service, Bijan was sent back to Kolkata with yet another promotion. Sabitri was both delighted and uneasy. The sooty, sprawling city of her first humiliation and heartbreak had a hold on her like no other place. The smallest triumph here meant more than the hugest victories elsewhere. They lived on the top floor of a tall building, and sometimes it seemed to her, as she stood on the balcony and looked down on the treetops, that the city had spread itself at her feet. But the past still rankled. Sometimes, after dropping Bela at school, she would ask the driver to take her past the men's college. The memory of that night when she wept outside the Women's Common Room was like a half-formed scab she could not stop picking at.

When on a visit to the village I learned from my mother that Leelamoyi was now a widow and in ill health, alone in the old mansion because her rich daughter-in-law refused to live with her, I formed a plan.

I lie, Tara. The plan had been in me for a long time, like a dormant virus, waiting.

When Sabitri told Bijan that she wanted to visit Leelamoyi, he approved. "I'm glad you've decided to forgive her. After all, if she hadn't forced you to leave her house, we wouldn't be married!"

She nodded. There was no point in telling this straightforward man that she was impelled by a darker motive. She sent a note, accompanied by an expensive basket of fruits, and received a reply in Sarkar Moshai's spidery handwriting. Leelamoyi would like to see her.

That morning, Granddaughter, I dressed with care. I wore a silk sari with a thick gold border and my best

jewelry. I made your mother wear a lace dress and shiny new shoes even though she complained that they hurt her feet. (But it was only a mild complaint because she was a biddable girl. Who would have guessed that she'd give me so much grief in later years?) This I did because I knew that Leelamoyi had no grandchildren.

As the car approached the Mittir house, Sabitri found that her hands were shaking. She hid them in the folds of her sari. The house looked shrunken; paint was peeling in parts; here and there, broken shutters hung dangling. There was no darwan on duty, so the driver had to get down and push open the rusting gates. She stepped out, holding tight to her daughter's hand and carrying a platter of Leelamoyi's favorite sweets.

The driver was reversing the car, going back to the office. He needed to take Bijan from one meeting to another. "Come back as soon as you drop Bijan Babu," she instructed him. "I don't want to stay long."

She rang the bell, but no one came. When she pushed at the door, it opened with a creak. Ahead of her was the stairway. How many times had she climbed it, wearing those saris that were hers and yet not hers, her heart beating light and rapid because she believed she was moving closer to her dream. The memory of that foolish young self overwhelmed her with tenderness and shame.

There was dirt on the staircase, crumbled stucco. She held up the edge of her sari and warned Bela not to touch the banister. Familiar, familiar, the second floor, that long corridor filled with anticipation, the airy windows through which bright trees peeped, that milk-white ocean of a bed.

Today the windows were shut. Through the haphazard light that seeped in between shutters, she saw a form on the bed, widow's white melting into the sheets, so still that for a disappointed lurch of the heart she believed that death had robbed her of revenge.

But no, the form struggled to sit up. She patted the bed for Sabitri to join her, called to a maid to fetch snacks for the visitors. Leelamoyi may have dwindled, but her voice was still autocratic.

"So this is your daughter?" She frowned at Bela, who was playing quietly, as was her habit, with her dolls. She did not compliment the child, though Bela was beautiful, even more so this day, with bright ribbons in her wavy hair. But Sabitri would not allow herself to be upset. She adjusted her sari, making sure her gold bangles tinkled, and said brightly, familiarly, "But Auntie, you must have many grandchildren by now!"

Leelamoyi's face grew dark as iron. She launched into a tirade about her daughter-in-law. What a mistake they had made in choosing that spoiled, useless rich girl. Couldn't produce an heir. Refused to live with the Mittirs even though they remodeled the entire third floor for her, Western-style toilets and all. Turned Rajiv against his parents so that he moved out within six months of marriage—abandoning the home of his forefathers, can you believe that?—to live in a fancy new house in Gariahat that his wife's father bought her. That's what caused Mittir Moshai's heart attack, Leelamoyi was sure of it.

The maid did not arrive. Leelamoyi shouted invectives, wandered into other spaces. "That girl, a witch, a murderer, can you believe, she took all the wedding jewelry when she left, my own jewelry that I had gifted her! When I tried to stop her, she said, hire a lawyer if you want it back. And Rajiv—he didn't even have the guts to stand up to her and support me."

Rajiv had made a mess of the hospital, too, Leelamoyi went on to say. Oh, life had given her more than her share of trials. But at least he stopped by to see her once in a while. Where was that idiot maid, that Khyama, who should be bringing snacks? No, she said with a scowl, Paro was no longer with her. She offered no

details.

Sabitri smiled the kind, charming smile she had practiced. She assured Leelamoyi that they did not need a snack. They had had an ample breakfast. She directed Leelamoyi's attention to the platter. Look, Auntie, your favorite sweets. The older woman scrabbled for a sandesh, then another one. She smiled slyly and confessed that she had high blood sugar; the doctor had decreed that she must not indulge. But what other pleasure was left in an old woman's life?

"Durga," she said with a sigh, "you always did make the best sweets. You should have opened a shop of your own."

A dizziness assailed Sabitri at being called by her mother's name. Her smile fell away. Once again, Leelamoyi had forgotten who she was. How could you avenge yourself against such oblivion?

"I have to leave now," Sabitri said. She had intended to mention that her car would be waiting downstairs, but she no longer had the energy.

"Stay a little longer," Leelamoyi implored. When Sabitri apologized, she gave an angry laugh. "Yes, yes, I know. No one likes being around sick people. Even my own son is always in a hurry to leave. . . . At least help me sit up straighter before you go."

Sabitri felt a great reluctance to touch her, but out of old habit she found herself obeying. She placed her hands gingerly under Leelamoyi's armpits and pulled. It was like lifting a sack. Traces of sweat were left on her fingers. A smell of staleness, like rotten eggs. It was all she could do not to rush out to find a tap and wash it off.

"Turn on the radio," Leelamoyi ordered. A program of devotional songs came on. "Who would have thought I'd turn religious! Age does strange things to us. Ah, you'll come to it, too, soon enough. Bring the girl near me. I want to see her hair." She put out a greedy hand.

Downstairs, sitting on a bench in the dark passageway, I couldn't stop trembling. The car wasn't back yet—I knew it wouldn't be. But Granddaughter, I couldn't have stood that room, its bitter odors of disease and rage, for another second. It had been a mistake, coming here to gloat. I had wanted Leelamoyi to regret that she didn't let Rajiv marry me, to see that I would have made a far better daughter-in-law than the one she chose. But now I felt only shame. Shame, and disgust at myself for using my daughter in this game. I promised myself I would never set foot in this house again.

One good thing had come out of all this. I'd exorcised a demon. I would no longer lie awake at night, remembering Leelamoyi's twisted face as she called me a whore. I would no longer hold conversations in my head, all the things I'd been too young and afraid to say at that time. I am a good person. I did nothing wrong. He loves me. I love him. I will make him happy because I am the only one to whom he can say what's in his heart.

There was another thing, Tara. As Leelamoyi spoke of Rajiv, I began to see him differently. All these years I'd been blinded by the longing we feel for what is snatched from us. Now I realized that he had been weak and pampered, too weak to stand up for me. He must have known that his mother had thrown me out of the house. But he hadn't even inquired after me. Even if he was in a different city, it would have been easy

enough to ask a friend to go to the college and find out what had happened.

A fumbling at the door. The driver had arrived, thank God. Sabitri started gathering Bela's dolls.

But it was not the driver. It was Rajiv—as though she had conjured him up with her thinking. She recognized him at once, though he was heavier now. He wore expensive clothes, more expensive even than the fine white shirts of old, which Sabitri had sometimes unbuttoned so she could lay her head upon his chest. Once, to celebrate a promotion, she had taken Bijan to New Market to buy him a shirt like that, but he had shaken his head with a laugh. Something that expensive would burn my skin. He had walked out, not caring that the salesmen stared at him.

Sabitri pulled the edge of her sari over her head. She would leave now. Leave and wait on the road. That was best. But as she passed Rajiv, she glanced up. She couldn't help it. Ah, that face, those once-loved lips. How the useless past tugged at you, unsteadying the breath. Was that discontent in his heavy jowls? In the droop of his mouth, a sorrow? Surely it was disillusionment she saw in the circles under his eyes.

Nonsense. She was imagining things to suit her fancy.

"Tri!" Rajiv exclaimed, peering at her. His face, filled with incredulous hope, was young again for a moment before the years came rushing mercilessly back. "God, God, is it really you? No, don't go, please, give me just a minute." But he need not have begged. The special name he had coined for her had struck her at the core, rendering her immobile. "I can't tell you how often I've thought of you. How I've imagined—hoped—that I'd see you again—" He stammered to a stop. Were those tears on his lashes? He still had those ridiculously long lashes, like a girl's. "You must have been—must still be—furious with me—" He grasped her wrists with a suddenness that sent a wave of remembered fire up her body. He was kissing her hands, his lips on the pulse at one wrist, then the other. How long it had been. "I can see you're happily married—with a lovely child." There was hunger in his voice. "I don't want to cause trouble. Just give me another minute of your time—a chance to apologize. To explain what they did to me. Please—"

"Don't," Sabitri said. "My driver will be here any minute." But her voice shook, and she did not pull her hands away.

His words surrounded her like a dust storm. She could see Bela staring at him, openmouthed. Once in a while, she picked bits out of the roaring: Crazy with worry locked up at my uncle's not even a phone ran away but they caught me taken straight to the wedding hated her for it hated them all—

In the early months of her marriage, if Rajiv had come to her, she would have walked out with him. Even if he had not told her all this. She would have lived as his mistress, not caring if she blackened her family's name beyond all salvaging.

Granddaughter, here is my most terrible secret: even after I gave birth to Bela, I would have done it.

She shook her hands from his grip. It was easier than she'd expected. He was a weak man, after all. She wished to say, You could have found me, if you had really wanted to. But it no longer mattered. Better to say, I love my husband. Because that—she was surprised to discover it—was the truth. How long had it been true?

Finally she walked away in silence, Rajiv no longer worth wasting words on. Her chest was full of the new truth's brightness. Emerging into the hot yellow sunshine was like being born. Under her fingertips her daughter's shoulder bones were fragile, magical wings.

There was the car, waiting, with someone in the back seat. Bijan. Her heart flung itself around her body. How long had he been there? What had he seen?

But Bijan was exuberant with success. The morning's meeting had gone excellently. He had negotiated a better deal than anyone had hoped. A significant bonus would be forthcoming. He had decided to celebrate by taking the rest of the day off. How would they like a trip to the Grand Hotel for ice cream, and then the zoo? He sat in the middle of the car like a king, his arms around them, beaming beneficently at his beautiful girls. Bela was telling Bijan about the dirty staircase and strange old lady who kept touching her hair and how hungry she was because the lady didn't give them anything to eat, didn't share even one of Mamoni's delicious sweets. She might just starve to death before they reached the Grand. Sabitri rested her head on Bijan's shoulder, weak with relief, and smiled at Bela's theatrics. The child had widened her eyes and slumped on the seat, saying that she had to have three scoops of ice cream. Could she? Could she, please? How blessed Sabitri was to have this family. From this moment on, she was going to be the best wife and mother to them.

"Yes, you can have three scoops," she said. "Just don't throw up afterwards."

It was the happiest moment of her life.

She wants to write all this to Tara, but she is so tired. Her fingers are cramping. They've been cramping for a while, she realizes, even the fingers of her left hand. It's almost dawn, the jackals long vanished, a couple of overeager roosters beginning to crow. She must lay her head on the table; it's grown too heavy to hold up. She places her cheek against the gouge and remembers, suddenly, its genesis. Bela had slashed the wood with her favorite Parker fountain pen, which Sabitri had saved for months to gift her with when she entered college, ruining both pen and table. This, because Sabitri had insisted that Bela stop seeing the man she was in love with, a man who would later entice her into running away to America. Who would not let her see her mother again. A man who—Sabitri had known this in every vibrating nerve of her body—was utterly wrong for her.

"Your father, Tara," she whispers. "That was him. And now he's abandoned you both, hasn't he? Is that why you're dropping out of college? Why you won't talk to him?"

Oh, this mess, it's beyond her powers to fix. She longs to close her eyes; she's finding it hard to focus. Who is that in a dark corner? Is it her granddaughter? And behind her, could that be Bela? Shadows with blank ovals for faces, waiting for her wisdom—as if she had any to give! Or was it her dead baby, the boy she had named Harsha, bringer of joy, hoping he would buy her a second chance? But no. He had left her long ago.

Sleep. She hungers for it with her entire being.

But first she must write something, because finally she knows what she needs to say. She forces her hand forward, grasps the pen.

But that moment in the car wasn't the happiest moment of my life. Just like it hadn't been so on the starlit terrace with Rajiv. My happiest moment would come much later. After Bijan's drinking problem, my widowhood. After baby Harsha flew away. After all my troubles with your mother. I had opened Durga

Sweets by then. How Leelamoyi would have writhed in rage if she knew that she'd been the one to plant the idea in some secret chamber of my being! It had been tough going, the first few years. But with the help of Bipin Bihari—ah, what a support he had been—I'd finally managed to turn the store into a profitable concern.

One day, in the kitchen at the back of the store, I held in my hand a new recipe I had perfected, the sweet I would go on to name after my dead mother. I took a bite of the conch-shaped dessert, the palest, most elegant mango color. The smooth, creamy flavor of fruit and milk, sugar and saffron mingled and melted on my tongue. Satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone. No one could take it away. That's what I want for you, my Tara, my Bela. That's what it really means to be a fortunate lamp. . . .

In the car, Bijan asked Sabitri, "Do you feel better, now that you've seen Leelamoyi?" She could feel his breath, warm on her hair. "Will it help you forget?"

The solicitousness in his voice brought her close to tears. She nodded, unable to speak.

Bela said, "There was a man, downstairs. He kept crying and kissing Mamoni's hands. Mamoni, why was he kissing your hands?"

Bijan pulled away his arm and sat up straight. In the dead silence that took over the car, Sabitri was aware of the driver's curious eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Just someone I knew long ago," she said, speaking to Bijan. "He doesn't even live in this house anymore. I hadn't expected to see him. We met by the merest chance as I was leaving. He means nothing to me." The words tumbled out of her too fast. She knew she sounded guilty, even though it was the truth she was telling.

"I understand," Bijan said. He looked coldly at her sari, her jewelry. "I understand perfectly."

"I love you, only you," she cried, though she knew it was a major faux pas to speak in this manner in front of servants.

Bijan leaned forward. "Drive me back to the office."

"Aren't we going to the zoo?" Bela asked.

"You can go wherever the hell you want," Bijan said to Sabitri. In the mirror the driver's eyes widened because Bijan-saab never spoke like this. Sabitri guessed it would not be long before the rest of the servants heard about it.

They rode in silence. Near the Maidan they passed a herd of goats crossing the street; heat rose from their coats in shimmery waves. Sabitri had never seen such a sight in the city. For a moment, with a thin spike of hope, she thought she had dreamed it all.

When they had dropped Bijan off, Bijan now transformed into someone she did not know, Sabitri told the driver to take them home. She had difficulty meeting his eyes, but she forced herself.

“I want to go to the zoo!” Bela cried. “I want my ice cream. Why can’t we go to the zoo? Baba said we could. Why can’t we go?” She kicked the seat-back again and again. The noise thudded inside Sabitri’s head.

“It’s because of you we aren’t going!” she shouted. “Stupid girl—you’ve ruined everything.” The Bengali word for “ruin,” noshto, which could also mean “rotten,” or, when applied to women, “unfaithful,” hung in front of her, as visible as her future. Her hand arced through the air, there was a sound like something bursting, and Bela cried out in pain.

The first time you hit your child with all your strength, wanting to hurt, it changes things.

She feels that sting again now. It travels up her arm and lodges in her shoulder. The shock with which Bela had stared at Sabitri. The splotch blooming red on her cheek. The way she shrank back against the car door. Was that when the troubles between them began?

“I’m sorry, Bela,” she says. “Forgive me.” Words that all these years she hadn’t been able to speak.

The pain has taken up permanent residence in her chest. She must have dropped something with a crash, because here comes Rekha, rubbing at her eyes, then running forward with a cry. Sabitri tries to push the letter toward her. But she’s on the floor. When did she fall? Rekha shouts for the milkman, who’s rattling the door, to help her get Ma onto the bed.

Sabitri tries to tell her about the letter. It is the only thing that matters now. It must be put in the mail. It must. “Tell Bipin Bihari,” she whispers. She thinks of his dear face, calm and steady and attentive, even in the worst of her times. “He’ll know what to do.”

But Rekha does not hear. She is sobbing on the phone, urging Doctor Babu to get here fast. Something terrible has happened to Ma. The milkman lifts Sabitri up. Or is she flying? The bed is very soft. The pain is very large. She lifts her eyes, and there is Death in the corner, but not like a king with his iron crown, as the epics claimed. Why, it is a giant brush loaded with white paint. It descends upon her with gentle suddenness, obliterating the shape of the world.