THE ILLUMINATED

ANINDITA GHOSE

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For my mothers and my grandmothers.

It is the moon that is drunk with its own light,
But the world that is confused.

— Bhasa, 3rd-4th century CE

When she talks, I hear the revolution
In her hips, there's revolution
When she walks, the revolution's coming
In her kiss, I taste the revolution.

— Bikini Kill, 'Rebel Girl', 1993

LAST QUARTER

Shashi Mallick knew she would have to do the cleaning herself.

That day, she wiped the kitchen counter using the new checked towel she had bought in a three-for-one pack at Patel's Cash and Carry. She had prepared breakfast and dinner almost every day since they had arrived in their son's apartment in New Jersey. And afterwards, she had wiped the counter clean, using those spray bottles of cleaning liquids, choosing between Tuscan Lavender and Pacific Breeze.

She always measured half a cup of basmati for each of them. The rest of the meal was decided by what the refrigerator held. She wasn't going to go to Patel's by herself, raising one foot after the other in the snow, pinching up the woollen slacks she only wore on their annual visits to meet their son. She planned elaborate feasts. She had time here. No one rang the doorbell in the morning. There were no servants to look over. No driver to raise petty errands for, just so he wouldn't get lazy. The vegetables arrived cleaned, and

sometimes chopped. The thought of her son eating frozen roti from a resealable plastic packet the rest of the year made her mouth sour. So she made dal in ghee, fish with mustard paste, minced mutton with potato and peas, brinjals shallow-fried in mustard oil. Afterwards, she aired the place with incense. Even in this open kitchen in her son's apartment, the smell of mustard lingered for days. But this week had been filled with different kinds of smells. She had not touched the stove, chopped or cooked anything, or even made herself a cup of tea.

When her husband had the stroke the week before, he had rested his hands on the kitchen counter before falling down. First, the whisky had spilled, cooling cubes pattering off the double-walled glass. He hadn't fallen straight and flat, like they did in Hindi movies. Something in his spine had suddenly lost its bearings and he had coiled down like a kathputli—the string puppets of her childhood—at the end of a show. They had all thought he was choking on a fish bone. She had thumped his back and tried to feed him a fistful of rice to push it down like her mother would when she was a child, when her fingers hadn't learnt how to manage fine fish bones. Their son, Surjo, had called 911. His wife, Laura, had jumped into the ambulance even though she had just had her embryo transfer and been advised rest by the fertility specialist. Shashi and Surjo had followed the ambulance by car. Ventricular fibrillation, the doctors at JFK Medical Centre had said. Robi Mallick was announced Dead on Arrival.

'You'll be all right, Ma?' Surjo asked from the front door.

He'd missed seven days at the bank. This made his voice shrill.

When she walked over to the door, he put his arms around her and rested his chin on her head.

Even with the little sleep she'd had in the last few days, Shashi noticed that his shoes, flattened out at the back, looked out of place with his clothes. But she didn't say anything. She wanted him to leave.

She'd had no time alone in the past week. She wanted to make herself tea and sit at the kitchen counter and sip it slowly. She wanted to see it all again and again till the memory became cold, till it cracked and fell on the floor. Her body felt heavy. She smelled of days-old sweat. Even this morning alone had been hard to earn. On learning that Surjo and Laura were going back to work that day, Robi's cousin Tutu had called and offered to keep her company. She said she would bring over food. There was no need, Shashi had told her. They would all be meeting soon for the ritual shradh meal on the thirteenth day.

After she closed the door behind Surjo, with the gaze a mother reserves for her firstborn, she wound her watch back—at home in Delhi, it was time to boil the rice for dinner. She didn't need to keep time here. But she wore the watch like an ornament every morning after her bath. A married woman's wrists should never be bare, her mother used to tell her. The small gold buckle of the watch would clink against her wedding bangle when she combed her hair. Until last week, she had never removed that wedding bangle, iron wrapped in gold. The only time she had removed it was to get it resized when it had begun to dig into her flesh. The goldsmith had to cut it off her. That was so many years ago. The children were still at home then.

Shashi sat on the sofa in Surjo and Laura's living room. Grey

with no cushions. It had a chevron throw with a Made in India tag that made Robi laugh. A stackable centre table allowed everyone to have their own islands when they watched TV. The screen took up half the wall but didn't play any Hindi or Bengali TV serials or even any of the old BBC sitcoms she liked.

It wasn't ideal having to perform her husband's funeral here in New Jersey, away from their friends and family in India. But this place had everything, even the special kind of ghee needed for the funeral rites. Surjo, who was essential for the rites, was here. Being here also meant she didn't have to talk to the hordes of relatives and acquaintances she didn't want to see, the ones who'd show up and expect to be fed and taken care of through the day. Everyone insisted on being the last to eat, as if starving themselves proved their closeness to the deceased.

It had surprised her how many people had come. The Saturday after the cremation, the apartment was filled with fifty-four people; she'd counted. In America, even gods wait their turn for the weekend. What luck did an ordinary man have? Even if he had been a popular one.

Robi Mallick had not just been top of his class at Delhi School of Architecture. All these years later, he had also been the one with the most hair—a boyish mop of silver that fell in spikes across his forehead. The National Award had prompted him to be more sociable with his friends, in a charitable way. He was always the first to break into song at the reunion parties of the Class of 1974. He had kept up correspondence with his classmates, many of whom were scattered stateside. Those who had known him and lived on the east coast had turned up. Cousins twice and thrice removed had arrived. Laura's family had come. Surjo's colleagues

too. But the person Robi loved the most in the world wasn't there. *The light of his eyes*, Nayantara, he called her. Their daughter, Tara. They hadn't been able to reach her in time.

Tutu, all bobbed hair and metallic sneakers, had managed to round up a Bengali priest. 'Don't wear trousers for the rituals,' she had told him on the phone. 'We want it to look authentic.' Both times the young man had come to perform the rites, he had arrived from his half-day shift at a travel ticketing office with his kurta-pyjama in a gym bag. Not what a priest would wear back home but it was too cold to go bare-chested here. On his first visit, he sat on Surjo's grey sofa and narrated the list of things that were needed for the funeral: banana leaves, sandalwood, coconuts, incense, five kinds of fruit, camphor, cow dung… He could bring it all for a fixed rate. Tutu had negotiated a package deal. Alongside the thirteen-day rituals dictated by the travel-agent priest, Laura had insisted on putting together an elaborate memorial service. 'Robi deserved the best,' she said, with the unsentimental clarity of her law school training. And so, flowers had arrived in the back of a truck early in the morning and an apron-clad florist had spent hours bunching up large-headed roses, lilies and spray chrysanthemums around the house, while struggling to instruct two assistants on stringing marigolds together for an Indian touch. Even though the bar was out of bounds on Shashi's request, it was a set-up she knew Robi would have approved of. If he were there, he would have floated around the rooms, speaking to everyone, banging a fist against the Georgian-style window frames to explain their constructional genius to a niece or two.

Shashi assigned her husband's nature to something in his blood. Robi was the only child of his parents—a rare thing in the India

of their generation. First Class degrees, state-level swimming trophies, Diwali bonuses and double promotions, they cannot make a man's face glow like the privilege of being an only child can. To be named after the sun god. To be reminded every day that you are the centre around which every member of the household circles like an insignificant planet. To wake up as a young boy knowing that the shelf beside the dining table only stood to hold up photographs of him. Robi at age five or six as the God Krishna in a school play, peacock feather pinned to his hair. Robi shona again, with his first swimming trophy. A tall Robi in a wide-collared shirt and bell-bottoms, aviators hooked low on the nose, with friends at Digha beach. Five boys and one girl, Robi's fingers are looped with hers if you look closely.

Shashi was the one with a master's degree in Comparative Philosophy from Kolkata's esteemed Jadavpur University. She had written her thesis on Hegelian dialectics, read Hegel in the original. And yet, she would never dare to converse in German with Laura's Hamburg-born mother. Robi was better suited to rolling foreign syllables on his tongue. How beautiful his voice was, and how it spilled from his long neck when he sang, the Adam's apple rolling up and down like a batasha offered to the gods. He would call forth Tennyson and Shakespeare in a tongue trained to perfection by the Jesuit priests of his convent school. Nobody would correct him if he got a few things wrong. Tagore's verses, to suit the light and time of day, would come to him like known melodies. It wasn't a dinner party till he started complimenting the women's sarees, or teased them about the flowers in their hair. In his mid-sixties, he was handsome and uncommonly tall for a Bengali man. When Surjo had taken them to a French restaurant the day after they

had arrived, a young waitress had coquettishly enquired if he was Amitabh Bachchan. 'Si vous voulez,' he'd shot back. The waitress had giggled with her hand on her chest.

During the memorial, one of Robi's aunts had wailed on Shashi's shoulder, her cranberry lipstick staining her cream-coloured blouse. She had peered into Shashi's eyes. They were too dry for a woman just widowed.

But Shashi had always been the practical kind. How much can you grieve when arrangements are to be made? Caterers have to be scolded because there isn't enough condensed milk in the patishapta. After some time, a funeral home becomes a teahouse. You have to serve tea or coffee to everyone who comes to visit. You have to remember to bring out the cream biscuits, not the glucose ones. And you have to remember which aunt has diabetes and which one wants her tea with a thumb of ginger.

When she had woken up this morning, Shashi had realized that she hadn't had tea the way she liked all of last week. Surjo or Laura had handed her a cup with a tea bag every morning, as they coaxed her to have some breakfast, while rushing through their own. Laura only drank herbal tea—h silent. Surjo had cultivated a daily Starbucks habit because all his colleagues walked in for markets opening with a tall Americano. But tea bags, this idea of tea powder portioned in paper bags, upset Shashi as much as plastic flowers in a nice home. Shashi had never cared much for silk sarees or embroidered bed covers or Swarovski figurines—the things the women at their Delhi dinner parties discussed. When she travelled, she wouldn't carry any more jewellery than the wedding bangle

on her wrist and the pearl studs she always wore in her ears. But a small tin of loose leaf Darjeeling tea from Kolkata's Shyam Lal & Sons was always in her suitcase.

'Now you can keep busy with your hobbies,' Tutu had told her. She was being kind. Shashi knew Tutu had always wished her dear cousin, who she fondly called Robin Bird, had married someone more like her own self. 'No one knows where the time goes when they're around,' Tutu added. This part seemed true. Tutu herself had bloomed after her divorce. Her body had lost its apple-shape, her eyes shone when she spoke about her book club. What were Shashi's hobbies? Shashi used to graft, even make bonsais. But in the last twenty years, their garden had been overrun with ferns and frangipani. Time showed in their sprawl and girth, in how the delicate green stems were now rough brown trunks, marked with lines, like wrinkles. The frangipani that she had planted when Robi had bought their plot of land in Delhi, even before construction had begun, dropped its rubbery white blooms through most of the year on the grass. Robi liked this. He booked a professional service to maintain their front garden with its perfectly shorn lawn. He made it a practice to plant a 'Shashi tree' to mark the start of all his large residential commissions. People said he was devoted to his wife. He liked this too. Shashi grew jasmine, pinwheel and hibiscus behind the kitchen window for the gods on the altar that her mother-in-law had installed in their home on her first visit. Robi didn't want these bushes in the front garden. They were fragrant but wilful, too temperamental in their flowering patterns. Could she call tending to a handful of plants behind her kitchen window a hobby? Hobbies were for women who smoked and wore sleeveless blouses and had children in their thirties. Shashi did

make time for the Sunday crossword—though not on Sunday, of course. There was a time she could have won any movie trivia quiz on the radio, but she was totally out of touch with news from the Hindi film world these days.

How thrilling it had been when she was a schoolgirl, the world of Hindi cinema, of Bombay, of Rajesh Khanna and his white car festooned with pink lipstick marks. Later, in college, she and the other girls would take turns to buy *Starglow* and read it aloud after the day's lectures. Most of the leading men were married, the women could never be. After affairs with their married co-stars, they married a film producer and promptly produced a child. They broke the mould on screen, playing political revolutionaries or hiding undercover with a love child, but the personal lives of the rich and glamorous had a set script. *Starglow* revelled in the details. Such filthy prose! It horrified even Professor Bagchi, who taught them modern literature. The Miss Misstry column painted colourful scenes of scandal. The way the pair met, how film producers were manipulated into shooting in outdoor locations, from Kashmir to the Keukenhof tulip gardens, to allow new lovers new rooms. How the lovers were caught by a make-up artist 'stuck like two grains of rice'.

Her father-in-law disapproved of Hindi cinema, and so she had stopped bringing the magazine home after she got married. Anyway, *Starglow* had stopped being what it used to be. Besides, is an encyclopedic knowledge of film trivia even a real hobby? Robi emblazoned the things he was passionate about in their homes and holidays, in the minds of their family and friends. There were so many things he was interested in: football leagues, smoked Japanese whisky, Jamini Roy, Brutalism, The Rolling Stones. When

Surjo made his trips back home from Yale, he would spend weeks deciding what to buy for Baba. Once he had got him a vintage leather-stamping tool set. He would always bring Shashi gift-packs of hand soap or perfume.

Perhaps tea could have been a hobby, or even a job, had tea tasting been a job appropriate for women. The love for tea had come to Shashi after her wedding. Her own mother had never allowed her to have more than one cup of tea in a day. It would make her dark, like too-hot bath water. Her mother never let her comb her hair back either. A young woman should have her hair parted in the centre in anticipation of getting married, she used to say. One day it would be marked in red by a husband.

In the months immediately following her wedding, back when they still lived in Kolkata, Shashi used to wake up from her afternoon sleep and ponder how she and Robi had come to be put together in this room with its tall almirahs on the first floor of the big house in North Kolkata. She had grown up in rented rooms around the city, a set of three rooms for their family of six. One room for her parents, one that she shared with her Didu and one for her two younger brothers. There were always relatives visiting from her father's village and they were welcome to stay for as long as their college degrees or doctor's appointments needed them to. Shashi was used to giving room, sleeping on a mattress that she rolled up in the morning, having fish only once a day, listening to the transistor radio leaning out of the window late in the night, studying while her brothers played. This luxury of a room to herself pleased her. But sometimes she felt terribly alone.

No grandmother's chest to press her face into when her stomach twisted into hot knots. No Manai or Shona to sing with when the city was plunged into darkness by frequent load-sheddings. She had stared at the ceiling of this new bedroom so much that she knew the contours of the shifting damp patches. She worried what would happen if the fan fell on Robi and her one night, crushing the newlyweds. Would they bother to put her back in the saree unspooled on the floor when they wheeled her body out?

Her marriage had been arranged with a boy from the Baidya caste, same as hers. But what else did they have in common? He didn't like Simon & Garfunkel. She liked movies with Uttam Kumar. He always wanted to watch the ones with Soumitro when they played on TV. What you got assigned in the draw of matches was fate. Handsome grooms wouldn't always have a beautiful bride. See what had happened to her own brother Shona? Being a tall girl was the worst. There were so few tall Bengali men that you would probably marry an old man or a balding man. Or worse, a businessman. At least they no longer married women off to infants to break the curse of dying unwed.

Not only was Shashi not tall, at twenty-two, she was just the right age for a bride. Robi was almost thirty. The right age for a Bengali groom. When her father's eldest sister, Bodo Pishi, had come home with the proposal, the family had at first suspected there was something wrong with the boy. 'Maybe an affair with an Anglo-Indian girl?' That old romantic blockbuster was still giving bad ideas to young Bengali men. The only son of the Mallicks, one of the oldest families of North Kolkata, why would they want a match with an art teacher's daughter? They both belonged to the small and proud community of Baidyas, but she had no property

to her name and no chance of inheriting any. Her parents weren't members of any of the old clubs.

Bodo Pishi had seen their birth charts and approved. He was a lion and she was a fish. Their lives would be without conflict. She assessed Shashi as she brought over tea and Thin Arrowroot biscuits for her. A literature or philosophy degree was the mark of a girl from a good family. Study sociology and there is the danger of becoming the kind of activist who wears sarees without starch and her hair in an angry knot. Science streams almost always mean you're in the company of men who have their eyes set to go abroad. Those girls spend long hours in the library and get dropped home late in the evening by male classmates.

What really worked in Shashi's favour, Bodo Pishi believed, was her complexion. It was she who had named her niece Shashi, like the moon. Light skin was heavy currency in the marriage market. And then her beloved Shashi also had long hair that framed her moon face like dark brackets. When they heard of the proposal, other aunts said good luck had fallen on Shashi because she had been fasting every Monday, eating only after she poured milk at the temple in the evening. She was bound to get a husband like the God Shiva.

Bodo Pishi had asked her how they should describe her in response to the proposal. Shashi had thought about it all morning and come up with 'likes movies and books'. She believed she could be defined in efficient words. She did not think herself deserving of Homeric similes. She didn't have dimples like Sharmila Tagore. Some actresses of the time were known to get their molars pulled out to create the illusion of high cheekbones. But Shashi knew she would never have done that even if she

were an actress. What was more pleasurable in life than eating? When she wore a pale yellow saree and ate the season's first kuls with her Didu, the old woman would hold her face in her wrinkled palms and call her Saraswati, the serene goddess of books and music. Hers was a gentle beauty that didn't register in photographs. Not like Saraswati's sister Lakshmi, clad in red and gold, floating lithely on a lotus with a threat on her lips: please me or die poor. Shashi was beautiful to grandmothers and babies. Not to adolescent boys being ushered into manhood by the pointed breasts of Mumtaz on screen. A cousin had once tried to teach her to line her eyes with kohl. But she would make a crooked line always. Shashi didn't take notepads to the cinema to sketch the blouses that the actresses wore to show her tailor. Her only vanity was glass bangles. She had a pair in almost every colour. For their first wedding anniversary, Robi had made her a wooden bangle holder. She couldn't remember where it was now.

Shashi had wanted tuberoses for the memorial. The New Jersey florist had not been able to source them. She remembered the loud smell of tuberoses from her wedding night. Louder than the high and reedy shehnai music. Louder than the laughter and teasing. Tuberoses had been strung along the four posters of their bed. Strings of jasmine and tuberoses had been tied on her wrists and arms, around her neck and like a crown around her head.

Shashi was still wiping the kitchen counter when she found a spot of dried-up dal. How Robi would leave kitchen counters like a battlefield! There was one dish that he loved to make. Tara had named it Baba's Mutton Delight. He put things in the pan

after everything had been cleaned and chopped by their cook, and measured out by Shashi. When they had guests over and the pressure cooker whistled, he would excuse himself to 'check on the mutton'. Everybody praised Robi's mutton. They told Shashi how lucky she was that her husband helped in the kitchen. He used to glide along on those Sundays wearing the 'Master Chef' apron that Tara had gifted him.

Shashi washed and hung the towel she was using on a hook above the sink. She opened the cabinet where she kept her tea. She looked for the familiar rectangular tin but couldn't find it. She began to pull out the identical glass jars filled with cereal and dried berries and sea salt and spices, but her tin was nowhere to be seen. Laura had a habit of pushing it to the back as if the sight of it disturbed the orderly cabinet, the shiny metal a third-world embarrassment. Still, having an American daughter-in-law was better than having an Indian one. It was better than arguing over who gets what jewellery. It was true that Shashi had been taken aback seeing her wedding Benarasi saree crumpled in a corner of a suitcase filled with other Indian curiosities when Surjo had brought it down to look for silver utensils for the funeral rites. It was what she had worn for what her mother had said was the most important day of her life. And here it was, trying to battle a pair of wooden elephants, its golden threads caught around a tusk. She had given the saree to Laura because she'd said she fancied it. Shashi had learnt later it was a way of saying you didn't love something.

Shashi found the tin. It was behind a pack of low-sugar cereal bars. She let the air out of her lungs. At home in Delhi, she would boil tap water in a copper pan and wait for the first few bubbles to appear, nudging the heat back down to keep it from bubbling

violently. Then she'd measure one spoon for each cup and a little more. She would let the tea leaves unfurl in the water. The copper radiated a gentle warmth when she gave the pan a shake. She'd watch the leaves dance in the water for another minute before straining the brew into cups. She liked watching the hot brew melt the sugar crystals as it was poured over. The milk, just a drop of it, went in last. Don't stir the whole thing too much because that would make the tea cold, she told Poornima, their cook in Delhi. She never used a timer. But everyone always said that her tea tasted the same every time. The few times in their married life that she'd travelled by herself to visit her mother, leaving Robi with the children, he'd asked her to instruct the servants how to make tea the way she did. But Shashi had always put off the instruction until it was too late. Over the phone, Robi would tell her what he'd eaten for lunch and dinner, whether her hibiscus had flowered, and how Tara was doing in school. When he told her that he missed her tea, a warmth would flood her stomach, like the embrace of a child who comes running and wraps his arms around you.

Her tea didn't taste the same in New Jersey. It was the water. When she was packing her tea before leaving home, she had considered carrying a plastic bottle filled with tap water. Water from the Ganges and Zam Zam had been making its way around the world on airlines, hadn't it? But there were too many things on Tutu's shopping list and too many winter clothes to carry.

She wished she had it now.

She was cold. A quilt that knew her body's secrets and scents, that she would sense being pulled away even in her sleep, had been wrenched from her while she was awake.

He was the only man she had really known. Her introduction

to intimacy had been from novels. Both the classic love stories and the Harlequin paperbacks they hid under their desks when the school principal did her rounds. The girls in the stories were always being pulled up by horsemen or cornered in barns. In the end, however, there was moaning and a flushing of the face. The principal called it patriarchal brainwashing but it's not like their fathers and brothers were encouraging them to read these, so it was confusing. Shashi had pictured herself with Rajesh Khanna in many of these scenes. But Rajesh Khanna wasn't hers alone.

When Bodo Pishi had come home with the photograph, she had seen Robi for the first time: a tall, lanky man clad in a safety jacket and helmet outside a construction site somewhere in Italy. A lock of hair escaped the helmet and fell over one brow. His face was tilted upwards to catch the light. He would be looking down on everyone who would see the photo afterwards. He had arrogant eyes but a boy's smile. She had liked him immediately. She'd never travelled abroad. She thought of how they might go to Florence and Rome for their honeymoon. How she'd wear a trench coat over her saree. Or how, maybe, her husband's family would let her wear the bell-bottoms and shirts she wore to college even after they were married. They would go to Tolly Club in the evenings. He would have a gin and tonic and she would have an ice-cream soda with a straw.

For almost a fortnight after their wedding, in the absence of any sort of courtship, she had invented her own ritual. She would sit in front of her dressing table and uncoil her hair. It would fall down her shoulders. Robi, usually reading in bed, would look up and look at her in the mirror. Then they would talk about their day.

They hadn't had a honeymoon. Surjo was born within a year

of the marriage. When she'd moved into Robi's family home, a sprawling three-storeyed affair in North Kolkata, it had seemed like she'd married a household instead of a man. The only time they had to themselves was somewhere between 10 p.m. and midnight. And the days Robi went swimming at the club, he fell asleep earlier. It was considered vulgar for the young couple to spend time with each other while the other members of the household were awake. Her father-in-law, whom she grew to love dearly, and who took great pride in the fact that his daughter-in-law studied at Jadavpur, raised an eyebrow if he saw them exchange more than the cursory in his presence. And so she had to pretend that the man she slept with every night was a stranger during the day.

The Mallick house stood off Beadon Street on a cross street between Shyam Lal & Sons tea house and Durga silk boutique. A grilled gate led from the street up a flight of stairs to a pair of Burma Teak doors. There was a world beyond those doors: a central courtyard with tall white Corinthian columns, a majestic thakur dalan—the ceremonial platform on one end of the courtyard—and rooms that wrapped around at three levels. There was a separate annex for the kitchen and bathrooms on either end, and a small shed for a cow that was milked every morning. There were red oxide floors and green shuttered windows and a soap nut tree that grew out of the courtyard and spread out its branches, sharing its fruit with the world. Inside the rooms, whitewashed walls glowed with the light from Belgian cut-glass chandeliers. It was a house so grand that the marble sculptures of Greek deities and oversized ceramic urns—gifts to Robi's grandfather from trading

partners—didn't look out of place. Her father-in-law's sitting room had a Thomasson Chronometer grandfather clock imported from London in the early 1800s.

The newly-weds were given a room on the first floor, sheltered by the branches of the soap nut tree. Robi's parents were on the ground floor, in the largest room of the house. Even though Robi's father, Tapan Mallick, was the second of three brothers, he was now the patriarch of the Mallick house. His elder brother had died early, cradling in his arms his only son, when a hand-drawn rickshaw had toppled over with them and their bags of Pujo shopping. Father and son had been cremated in their new clothes while the ill-fated widow Lata took to white clothing. She was only twenty, slender and tenacious like the climbing creeper that she was named after. Had this been outside of Bengal, Lata might have been wedded to one of her husband's brothers—either Tapan or the youngest, Swapan. It was dangerous to have a fragile beauty in the house with unmarried men. But it was not the custom in North Kolkata. Lata was allowed to stay if she kept out of festivities. Some said it was her bad luck that had killed her husband, but this was not the kind of household that entertained such talk. She wasn't even asked to shave her head. Life doesn't stop for the wretchedness of young widows. Soon there was another wedding in the house. Tapan was wed to Kumudini. She was dusky but her family was very wealthy. Robi was born after three years to an exhausted Kumudini, and it was Lata Jethi who raised him while Kumudini recovered, and even later, as Kumudini ran the house.

Kumudini had an aquiline nose and a generous figure with no sharp angles—she and her siblings had grown up drinking a tall glass of milk with thick-set cream and chopped dry fruits every

morning. Fearing a disruption in this childhood indulgence, her brothers sent large trays of dry fruits and boxes of milk sweets every month for a whole year after her wedding. Though she barely came up to Tapan's shoulder, Kumudini had an imposing presence. The gold adornments on her neck and wrists gleamed when she stood with her hands on her waist in the courtyard, surveying the servants at work. They called her notun bou, the endearing term for demure new brides, but they knew she was the kind who would check the bottoms of pans and the corners of steps. This is how she remained even when Shashi joined the household: feared by the servants, worshipped by her son and husband.

Swapan and his wife Sree, and their daughter Dolly, had rooms on the first floor. Lata Jethi had a small room on the second floor, besides the thakur ghor, the small room where the family deities were housed. Here, she spent most of her time in prayers. Though she sometimes cooked her bitter gourd and country rice in a corner of the kitchen, she also had her own stove on the terrace outside her room where she experimented with dried vegetable peels and new kinds of chutney. Even in the Mallick house, where women had BA degrees and wore blouses with French lace, widows were forbidden pink lentils and meat. That kind of food increased heat in the body, made women covetous. Tapan would have liked to do things differently. But what would people say?

The women of the Mallick house before Lata and Kumudini's generation had spent their entire lives around that courtyard, stepping out only for rare occasions like a family wedding or a pilgrimage. The saree and jewellery makers came to the house. The music and grammar teachers too. The servants brought in the fish and vegetables. The men and children brought news of the world.

Once a week, the barber's wife came home and polished their feet with pumice and outlined the feet of the married women with a red dye. Once a year, even the Goddess Durga visited. For more than a hundred and twenty years the Mallicks had hosted their own Pujo, like the other old houses of North Kolkata. The Goddess was sculpted from clay and painted and installed in their own thakur dalan in the courtyard. Why would the women of the Mallick house need to go out, when the world came to their doorstep? The festivities were open to all. The Mallick girls and women appeared when food was served to devotees. The courtyard could seat a hundred and fifty people at a time. All the big Kolkata babus, and in Robi's grandfather's time even British officers, would come and sit with the visitors from across the city. This single annual outing of the Mallick girls had a purpose: marriage proposals followed in the weeks after.

Even in Shashi's time in the Mallick house, for weeks leading upto Pujo, sculptors and artisans would live and work in a shed cordoned off from the courtyard. Once Shashi had peered in and seen this: a sinewy figure, the skin on his back glistening with sweat and mustard oil, lungi tied low on the waist. He stood on the balls of his feet, dipping his hands in a bowl of water and running his fingers softly along the thigh of the clay Goddess, her calves and hips, shaping the soft clay to obscene perfection even though nobody would see it. The devotees would only see her silk vestments and crown, her jewellery made with shola and tinsel. But every small muscle on the back of this man was stretching and releasing itself to perform the delicate action. She imagined his face, with his large, wet eyes dripping for his woman on his paddy fields. What would it feel like to be touched by a man like that?

Shashi couldn't imagine the life of the women before her. She looked forward to stepping out of the house. The car dropped her at the bus stop every morning and waited till she boarded her ride to the university, where she read Hegel, Kant and Adorno, even as her mind wandered. She thought about what she would eat at the university canteen that afternoon and the thick cream on top of the earthen pot of curd that she would scoop on their plates after dinner. The anonymity of traffic noises made her think of the specific domestic smells of Pears soap, mosquito coil smoke and tuberoses.

Shashi was grateful to be part of the Mallick household. Her new family was modern, they ate toast for breakfast. Unlike some of her Marwari classmates, she hadn't had to give up attending her classes after the wedding. She was still writing her thesis when she became a mother. But she didn't have to bother about Surjo's meals or baths. Everything ran like clockwork under the watchful eyes of Kumudini. Aside from spending a long hour every evening in the kitchen, as was expected of her, she didn't have any domestic duties. Before Pujo, she would draw Lakshmi's feet with a paste of ground rice outside every room in the house, which everyone praised. But otherwise, she was free to play Scrabble with herself, pore over her textbooks and her paperbacks through the afternoon, and listen to her Hindi music radio show with her evening tea.

It was around this period that teatime became a ritual. At 5 p.m., after her afternoon sleep, she would change for the evening. The kitchen was the women's social space, it was where she'd meet visiting aunts and neighbours. They gave her recipes to keep her hair black and her skin clear, information that she resolutely kept from lodging in her mind.

Shashi liked to make her tea before the kitchen fired up for dinner. Babloo da, the old kitchen hand, left the stove to her. He used that time to plate up fritters for his favourite new entrant into the family. She was still too quiet and too preoccupied with her books to bicker with him like the other women of the household. She used a small copper pan to make her tea because Babloo da said the cast-iron kettle was too heavy to bother to wash for a single cup. She carried the tea back to her bedroom. This was the happiest part of her day. This time, and its tastes and thrills, were all her own.

When Shashi finally told Professor Mitra that she wouldn't be continuing after her master's degree, her teacher had barely spoken a few full sentences. But she had reached behind her to a shelf and given Shashi a book of poems by Kamini Roy. Shashi had been hurt by Professor Mitra's reticence and opened the book only much later to learn why the poet had stopped writing. 'My children are my living poems,' Roy had written in the book's foreword.

When Robi's job took them to Delhi some years later, the contours of her day changed. She was thrown into managing the domestic terrain. Some years later, Tara was born. As Robi established his own practice and began to take more commissions abroad, she saw less of him. The children, who she had raised most devotedly, forgoing a life in academia, went their own ways. Shashi began to fill her afternoons teaching at an observation home for juvenile delinquents.

Robi always had a lot going on. He was the sort of man all the women would fawn over at the South Delhi Bengali Culture Club. Bengali women of her generation, the ones who called themselves mod, had the peculiar habit of wearing sleeveless blouses that

barely concealed the undersides of their breasts. And they held on to the arms of men they called brothers in high-pitched voices. When you live with that sort of thing from when you're twenty-two, it is easy to accept it like one would a mild, seasonal allergy.

Shashi was interrupted by a loud trilling noise. She had just put the kettle on boil. It was Laura calling to check if she should order lunch for her through her app. 'No, no, there are too many leftovers,' said Shashi. But she was moved by the gesture. She appreciated Laura's outward courtesies. Her Surjo would be lost without his wife. Surjo and Laura were the type of couple that frequently quarrelled about insignificant things, and went to couples' counselling the minute things took a turn towards the rancid, beyond who was supposed to renew the internet plan and who had thrown out the milk carton. But even after they screamed and shouted, and said terrible things to each other, Shashi would see them reach for a quick kiss at breakfast. Or make an elaborate dinner reservation, which seemed code for we'll be home late and we'll make some noise shuffling around when we are back.

Modern love was different. Surjo had broken off a three-year relationship in his senior year at Yale, the week he had met Laura. Tara had so many boyfriends that Shashi couldn't distinguish one wild-haired boy from the other.

Shashi was struck by the thought that she had never known love. Not like her own children had. Not like Robi had with the girl he looped fingers with in that photo taken at Digha beach. Not like the faceless man in the shed.

The water began to bubble. She took the kettle off the heat and

spooned the tea leaves in. She opened the refrigerator to fetch the milk. The carton was unopened and the kitchen scissors weren't where they were supposed to be. She remembered she had a pair in her room. She walked to the guest room and found them in her grey toiletries pouch. But under the pair of scissors, her eyes fell on Robi's nail cutter. Surjo had taken great care in packing away his father's things after the cremation. But this had remained hidden, amongst Shashi's creams and lipsticks. She zipped up the pouch and returned to the kitchen with the scissors.

When Robi cut his toenails after his shower on Sunday mornings, he used to sit on the edge of the bed with a towel wrapped around his waist and another around his neck to catch the water from his hair. Nail clippings would gather on a newspaper on the floor. He always left a wet patch on the bed.

During the holy bath before the cremation, when the body is washed with milk, ghee and honey, her eyes had lingered on Robi's toes—it was easier that way. As she saw his big toes, drained of colour, being tied together with a thread, she remembered the time she had painted one of them red. The chemical smell of nail polish filled her nostrils.

Robi had returned home early one afternoon and come straight up to their room. Her Hindi music radio show was on. She had been so startled seeing him that she'd knocked over the bottle of red nail polish that she had open. She should have been sad. It was a bottle of Chambor that a cousin from London had sent. But Robi, who knew what had come over him, had carried her straight off the chair to their bed, like a Mills & Boon hero. She had remembered this flourish for months, aided by the bright red stain on the floor.

Later that night, under the mosquito netting, Robi had held her palms in his hands—eight fingernails red and the other two still unpolished—and asked her why she liked painting her nails. 'To make myself more beautiful,' she had said, staring at her own hands to see what he was seeing.

'Make me beautiful, Shashi,' he had joked, switching on the bedside lamp. She had shyly put a fleck of red polish on one toenail. They had let it stay there till Robi had had to remove it with a cotton ball dipped in acetone a few days later, after a disapproving look from Kumudini.

Shashi held the pair of scissors in her hand. She cut the carton of milk. She opened the cabinet to fetch the jar of sugar. It was empty. The priest had used it up for the rites.

Her lips started to tremble.

Shashi strained the tea into a cup. She carried it to the kitchen counter. She sat down and ran her fingers along the cup's rim. She took a sip, and placed it back on the saucer, pushing it away. It was not how it was supposed to taste. Some tea spilt on the counter and Shashi wiped it up with the edge of her saree. Her upper lip turned salty. She brought the damp saree to her face and began to weep.