

# THIRD EYE EDITION

## 1.

### Lonely hearts' club

This piece is about loneliness and at once an anecdote comes to mind. A friend of mine was slowly slipping into the unenviable quagmire of being a confirmed bachelor. Weekdays were somewhat bearable. At the press he worked, colleagues provided company, cigarettes and silly jokes. But Sundays were all his own. The days stretched out like a strand of chewed-out-all sweetness-spent-chewing gum. As the grey misery wrapped itself around him like a wet, burlap sack, he took to visiting his married friends, a different family each Sunday. The hostile silence of his flat was replaced by homes that had the telly on, little ones screeching with laughter, tables groaning with food, and the mistress of the house tending to him with the solicitousness of one nursing back to health a stray kitten. Before he knew it, the children of his friends began to call him Sunday Uncle. It made sense, considering he appeared only on Sundays. But my friend was quick to take offence. He thought of the term as an epithet for being a loser, a tramp. The following year, he tied the knot with a pleasant, cheerful lady and it became an enormous source of satisfaction to have a confirmed bachelor or two sheepishly dropping in on Sundays to dine at his table.

But there is so much more to loneliness than an anecdote with a happy ending. A great tidal wave of loneliness, or social isolation is sweeping over the world, both in the affluent and the less-developed societies. Research has found that lonely people have disrupted sleep patterns, altered immune systems, more inflammation and higher stress hormones. Loneliness, call it isolation if you will, increases the risk of strokes and heart attacks. Cognitive decline, premature death, are all offset by individuals living in isolation, deprived of company.

But would you and I admit to being lonely? Wouldn't that automatically imply we are not popular, we are not loved, wanted, cherished? Would it not mean we have failed to find belonging, love, attachment? And so we perpetuate this conspiracy of silence, treat this human condition as a stigma, a taboo. And when we reach out for help, we are told to snap out of it, we are handed a bottle of anti-depressants.

Mankind as a whole is lonely. Sci-fi writer Arthur C. Clarke wondered if we are alone in the universe. We long for extra-terrestrials to break our solitude. We long to show them our AI, our music, our art, our nuclear plants, our bullet trains, our phones, our fire-power. We want their compliments, or even their grudging approval. But all we have is us and that chest-thumping will perhaps never take place.

Eminent Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami questioned why people have to be this lonely. In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, there is an agonised attempt to understand what makes people yearn for company and are denied it. No wonder Japan has the highest suicide rate in the world, with its own suicide forest where demented souls go and starve to death.

Christopher Fry, the British comic and actor is a manic depressive who famously said, "I want to be left alone but I don't want to be alone." Balzac wrote in the same vein that solitude is fine but you need someone to tell that solitude is fine.

It then appears that loneliness is an adversary that creeps up on you without warning. Let there be a battle of wills between loneliness and you. Stare it in the eye. Dare it to do its worst. Think of the people who care for you and are ranged on your side. Some years ago, packing Junior's bags for his sojourn to a Delhi college, his first departure from home, I tearfully asked him if he would be lonely. He told me something I have never forgotten. "If you have books, you are never alone." So while the other half is hooked on cricket in the other room, I immerse myself in Manto and Alice Munro, Michael Cunningham and Yuval Noah Harari. People throng through the pages, multitudes of them, people who seem within touching distance, and every book is a journey down a rabbit hole.

There's a key difference between loneliness and solitude, loneliness is what happens to you, and solitude is that which you seek for restoration and balance. Bikers, surfers, artists, writers thrive on solitude. It provides them the space and atmosphere to do what their hearts desire. There are people out there who actually enjoy being alone, though they are not unsocial. Most famously, we have Gandhi withdrawing into silence, Thoreau in his cabin, Van Gogh alone in an asylum and Beethoven mired in stillness.

Can you imagine Michelangelo high up on the scaffold, painting the Sistine Chapel? It takes genius, or madness, to stretch oneself to such a limit. And he is supposed to have said, "If you are alone, you belong entirely to yourself." Great creators have admitted that it is in the stygian darkness of their loneliness that they have found the flickering flame of creation.

Enough about human loneliness. Why do we feel only we matter? Cats, dogs, gorillas, elephants – all feel lonely and miserable. Wolves howl to get back to their packs. In the 1970s, a "Pit of Despair" experiment was conducted by psychologist Harry Harlow. Newborn monkeys were put in isolation chambers shortly after they bonded with their mother. The duration of isolation ranged from one month to one year. Within days the babies stopped moving and stayed huddled in a corner. Harlow was widely criticised for torturing the primates by cutting off their social interaction.

In the end, loneliness is not a lack of companionship; it is the lack of purpose. Discover in yourself the resources to fight this silent evil. Don't hesitate to seek help.

## 2.

### Catch me if you can...

“Because life, by its very nature, is full of vulgarities. What need is there to emphasise them by speaking of them?” – Alberto Moravia

So there I was, minding my own business, when a video popped up on WhatsApp. No, it wasn't about a dancing traffic policeman in Thailand or baby chicks walking in a line, like the iconic Beatles pic, along a zebra crossing. It wasn't my baby granddaughter splashing happily in her inflatable pool. I would have ignored it, but this thing called curiosity makes it kinda hard to resist. So there I was, minding my business put on hold, and following a long-haired lady down a corridor. She is clearly in a spot of trouble, for uniformed guards with batons are sternly ordering her to open her bag. She pretends to be surprised, then stands impassively as a female guard paws into her capacious bag and fishes out a mind-boggling array of cosmetics and toiletries. Our lady wants to leave. Instead, she is told that the owner of the general store is on the way. She seems to be blissfully unaware of close circuit cameras. Surprisingly though, this is the second consecutive day she has filched at this store. She wants to be allowed to leave. “I won't come back again.” She says plaintively, twice. Wild horses won't drag her there, duh. Later on, my female friends are not being able to mind their own businesses too. One stalks the lady on Facebook, another taps her old girl's network to obtain personal details of the lady in question. A third informs the lady wept when the police came. And then wept some more when the media got into it. Someone said she was almost sorry for her. Another came up with the news that the lady had come in a flashy car that none of us could afford. That got our claws out a bit.

So, why am I writing this – is it schadenfreude, the human tendency to enjoy the misery of others? I don't think so. Last year, I wrote a book on women and crime. I went to jails across the State to meet women who had committed violent crimes, including murder. Compared to those hardened, brutal women, our lady is an offender of the garden variety. The murderers I met were pushed to the edge by horrendous circumstances. Our lady, hair straightened, manicured, pedicured, privileged, nay loaded, filched stuff to pamper herself. I am very disappointed in you, lady, for you let us women down. Even more than the moral transgression, you were laughably clumsy in your crime. I would describe it as a sad blend of naiveté, clumsiness and failure to smooth talk your way out of the fiasco. And the tears ... having made a moral choice, having acted on your own volition, why the wimpy self-pity? Toughen up, lady, if you want to go further along this path.

Why do we steal? Hungarian psychiatrist Robert Tyminski has penned a seminal study *Psychology of theft and loss: Stolen and fleeced*, in which his premise is that stealing can be the result of deprivation, of envy, of a desire for power and influence.

An act of theft can also bring forward someone's hidden traits, Tyminski stresses that stealing is related to the subtle balance of loss versus gain that operates in all of us. Our natural aversion to loss can lead to extreme actions as a means to acquire what we may not be able to gain through time, work or money. He describes theft as timeless and fundamentally human. There is a complexity of human motivation when it comes to stealing.

What men can do, women can do better. Our lady in question sadly failed to live up to this expectation. Her work was shoddy, to say the least. In case she wants to hone her skills, here is a guideline.

Remember, the main aim is not to get caught. Is that rocket science? Then, think of experimenting with disguises. Ski-masks won't work in our tropical country. Master that art of smooth talking, rather than asking to be let go. Think of Vincenzo. He made off with the Mona Lisa. Yes, you heard me right. The Mona Lisa, arguably one of the most recognised paintings on Planet Earth. In 1911, Vincenzo hid in the Louvre Museum and strolled out with it concealed under his smock. He kept it in his flat for two years before being busted. Then there's Frank Abagnale (played in the movie *Catch Me If You Can* by Leonardo DiCaprio) who scammed millions of dollars from banks across 26 countries. And this started when he was 16. Surprise, surprise, you can be a poet and a thief. Francois Villon was one, and he is read till today, his crimes long forgotten.

Then there is Bill Mason – regular job, wife, kids, a suburban house with a picket fence. Only, on weekends, he burgled the homes of the rich and famous, making off with mega-bucks jewellery. He became addicted to stealing, got caught and lived five years in prison. Once out, he wrote his bestselling book *Nine Lives*. Must be a darned good read.

Somehow, I have a more benevolent attitude towards book thieves, provided they don't filch my books, that is. When you make off with a book, it's because you love reading, actually turning the pages, dog-eared them. In a world where no mall in my city has a book shop, books and readers have receded to the past. Most people just read the reviews, and don't want to wrap their heads around something more substantial than Chetan Bhagat. The book thief restores my faith that reading as an art will prevail.

Then there are other thefts for noble causes. In Lian Tanner's *Museum of Thieves*, a character says “There are some things, child, which you should steal, if you have enough love and courage in your heart. You must snatch freedom from the hands of the tyrant. You must spirit away innocent lives before they are destroyed.”

In my own line of work, I have come across many cases of theft, or plagiarism. Perfectly respectable, educated men, women passing off online material as their own, unaware that a little bit of verifying exposes them. Many years ago, a woman writer had her second book brought out by a major publishing house. She was a protégé of Khushwant Singh himself. He shook his head sadly as he recounted to me that after its release, a British publishing house exposed the book as being copied word for word from a book by a British writer. It was a major scandal and the lady, unable to cope, took her own life.

In our country today, petty thieves are lynched, while multi-crore scamsters holiday in Monaco. New crimes have proliferated – crimes that leave us bewildered.... data-theft, identity theft, techno theft. If it takes brains to commit them, we need all our wits about us to prevent them.

The video that set off this piece got deleted. I wish the lady well and think that she is a good person with a temporary aberration. I think I'll get back to minding my own business.

### 3.

## Trashing it

I walk every evening along a serpentine road skirting a hill. It's quiet, shady, with a view of the city spread out down below. There is very little traffic and the air is pure enough to safely breathe in deeply. In such peaceful solitude, the mind sinks into a dream-like trance, memories wake to life, the soullessness of urban life is forgotten and the spirit soars blithely among the trees.

If this sounds too good to be true, you are right. My spot of green heaven is changing even as I write this. Blocks of ugly, half-built apartment building blocks are coming up on the slopes. Loud-voiced labourers of unidentified origin shout raucously above the drone of drilling machines. Bricks, stones, iron rods, sacks of cement lie by the roadside. In a year or two, families will move in, cars will glide to and fro, horns tooting, making me tense as I walk. And the worst fear I have is of garbage thrown carelessly into any open space, putrid dumps that will emit a stench which will sear you to the core of your being. My tranquil thoughts transform into a mood of foreboding.

Then I meet her. A little girl in pigtails, vest and shorts wriggles by the side of her grandmother as they sit on a cement pillar by the roadside. I tickle her chin, ask her name and try to make eye contact. She buries her face in her grandmother's lap. I feel a small twinge of disappointment.

This goes on for a few days. Then, one day, when I least expect it, she trills and toddles towards me, arms outstretched. We hug and she finally tells me her name. Isha.

"Is it alright if I give her chocolates?" I ask the grandma.

"Sure," she gives a toothless smile.

So, there I am, meeting her again, this time with a bar of chocolate. She grabs it from me with her podgy little fingers and is soon tearing the packet with her teeth. I get a warm, fuzzy feeling. But it doesn't last for long. The sight of that chocolate wrapper on the side of the road makes me profoundly uneasy. I too am culpable. If I am to indulge little Isha this way, there will soon be a mound of empty candy wrappers in my green heaven. What have I done?

As a Sixties' child, I go dewy-eyed at the mention of Woodstock – that iconic festival of free love and music. But when Woodstock ended, over 600 acres of garbage was left behind on farmer Max Yasgur's farm. It took over 400 volunteers and 100 thousand dollars to remove it all. Idealism often comes with a smelly aftermath.

The binary of modern capitalist society is produce and consume. We produce more than we need and consume in a kind of mindless frenzy that is greedy, grasping and forever unfulfilled. My elderly aunt is very happy with her new Chinese phone because the moment it conks out, she can just throw it away and get a new one, e-waste be damned. Our consumerist society looks like it is going to choke on the garbage it generates. Land that could have been used to grow trees, vegetables, flowers or crops are being used as landfills. Citizens and governments blame each other. Consumers cheerfully pay for the plastic packet in malls. The price is no deterrence. Then, a word about the food delivery companies that are falling over each other to enable us to have restaurant food at home and work with frictionless ease. The food comes in plastic containers, plastic dishes, wrapped up in cellophane. After we eat, it's a struggle coping with all the garbage we have generated. So there you have it – conscience vs convenience.

Every time you pass a garbage bin, don't you see women and children working through the trash for bottles, cardboard boxes and anything that can be recycled? We think of these people as garbage, whereas, the truth be told, they are performing a useful task. This reminds me of a story I read on the net. Garbage collectors in Ankara, Turkey, have opened a public library comprised entirely of books once thrown away and destined for the landfills. It all started when sanitation workers started collecting discarded books. As news of the collection spread, residents donated books they were meaning to get rid of. Today the library, inaugurated by the Mayor, has 6,000 books, ranging from literature to non-fiction, children's books to works of scientific research. People who used to dump their books on sidewalks now carry them to the library. It has become a popular haunt for people of all ages.

Creative people can extract value out of trash. Remember the movie Wall-E? Centuries into the future, the Earth is a bleak, garbage strewn place where the only denizen seems to be Wall-E (short for Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth Class). Wall-E comes across an egg-shaped robot left behind by a spaceship. She is Eve and she is sleek and stunning. Love blooms but she hurtles back to mankind's current home – a spaceship named Axiom. This is where humans float on personal hovercrafts, interact via screen phones and have grown so fat that they have forgotten how to walk. Wall-E follows Eve to Axiom, and unleashes a chain of events that change mankind. For children, Wall-E is a cute robot. For adults, this future dystopic scenario – especially the scale of the garbage, seems frighteningly probable.

Last month I was reading Katharine Boo's Pulitzer-winning novel *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. Memorable characters live in the Mumbai slum of Annawadi. There's Abdul the garbage sorter, who sustains his family of 13 by selling recycled items to a recycling factory. Another young boy Sunil realises how a better future is beyond reach for others like him. A high wall has been built to hide the slum from international airport's rich international passengers. Writing about families teetering on the brink of nowhere, Boo reveals one of the 21st century's hidden worlds.

Indeed, the future is not just about flying cars and finding the secret to human immortality. Now, the vision should also include how to lessen the garbage before it swallows us up. In fact, the good thing about dying is that it is only then that you finally stop generating trash. Think about it.

## 4.

### The long night

Ila Das, (not her real name) carries in her heart the burden of her story. She tells it to whoever will listen, and once she starts, she speaks in a hypnotic trance, wading across a river of tears. Yet her eyes are dry and burning with a cold fire, her mouth twisted with quiet rage. Unbearable as it is to her, this dreadful true account, she keeps it alive, stoking the embers, so that we are reminded as to what depths of bestiality man can descend to, and how a family continues to suffer due to the sins of others.

At the heart of the story is a forest of segun trees, a steep slope and leaves drifting down as a mad March wind rustles through it. Ila, her family and neighbours cross this eerie forest several times a day. Thus, today, she speaks of this forest as a living, malevolent entity. For this lonely cluster of tall trees and drifting leaves was where an innocent life was snuffed out, a flower's petals casually plucked, a small, bright flame extinguished. Ila's daughter's.

"She was my golden girl," she says in a flat voice. "No, I am wrong. She was more precious to me than gold. She, my Maina (name changed) danced the Bihu, was bright in her studies. At 21, she attended college and worked at a call centre. We were more friends than mother and daughter, and she told me everything. She loved her three brothers and sister, she was never cross with her alcoholic father. I wanted the best for her, and her teachers and employers loved her too. She had a way of talking to people – she was polite, friendly, very smart. For years I have worked at people's homes. It has been a life of hardship and drudgery. But Maina made me believe that a happier future was coming towards us, that we could build a better house, afford the things we needed, say goodbye to the grinding poverty that had dogged us for so long. But Maina had a different fate waiting for her. If only we knew, if only we had been more careful, if only her assailants had an iota of goodness in them.

Usually, when Maina was late at the call centre, they sent her home in a cab. She then gave us a call, and I or her brothers went down the hill to escort her safely through the forest. That March day, three years ago, we had no inkling about what was to happen. She did not call us from the bottom of the hill that evening. Seven, eight o'clock – no sign of her. We went down through the forest eight times that night to search for her. My body was like ice. Our neighbours joined in – Pankaj (not his real name) among them. Pankaj was in his forties, was married, had a family. Maina called him Borta (elder uncle). There were many others who helped in the search or pretended to. At the nearest police station, the men on duty said Maina had surely eloped. Two days passed in this way. The sun would rise, then set, and my darling did not return, did not put her arms around my neck, did not tease her sister. For how could she? She was lying deep in the forest, gang-raped, her tongue sliced off, her lifeless open eyes watching the leaves fall.

When she was found, it was all over TV. The police got to work. I collapsed as I was taken to see her. They had to put me in hospital. When I came home countless people were there to console me. Then the public staged a hartal. As people sat raising their arms, the television cameras revealed bite marks on Pankaj's hand. The police swooped down on him. Before long, they picked up the other two. Pankaj and one other had lived beside us as neighbours. All our precautions for her safety had come to no avail. The monsters were close to home.

Within four days, they were arrested. Hundreds of people gathered to ensure instant justice. But I begged them to be calm and not set alight Pankaj's house. His family had already fled under police security. One of these criminals, also a neighbour, had always praised me to my face about how well I had brought up my children. He did this so frequently that it got on my nerves. I began to distrust him, have a bad feeling about him. He was one of the three who snuffed out my Maina's life. Sometimes I am angry with my daughter. Why has she left me with nothing but pain and emptiness? Why did she not defend herself? These days I visit all the homes which have faced such a tragedy, I have been to Jagiroad, Dhing. Everywhere the story is the same.

I am fighting for justice for my daughter. I will do so till my last breath. I sit at court hearings, my eyes boring into the handcuffed criminals. Many people help me in many thoughtful ways.

Our troubles are far from over. Hooligans have beaten up two of my sons. My 18-year-old daughter is circled by motor-cycle youths on the road. Policemen in civil dress protected her for some time. Maina's passing has snapped the link with my husband. He has been an alcoholic and a layabout and never carried out a father's duties. If he had been more of a man, perhaps people may not have taken advantage of us. At court, the monsters and their families try to scare me. Their lawyer makes me know that we would be thrown out of our home. I fear the future, for the safety of my children. Then I remember Maina's face and know I have to go on.

As a child she once was marked wrong for a sum, when, in fact, she had been correct. For days she kept on doing the sum, till the teacher marked her right. Maina, life is not a sum, my dearest. Sometimes, things just don't add up."

## 5.

### Up in the clouds

Today's piece starts with tears, and ends with quiet rejoicing. It's about hills, mountains, and the many forked paths in between. It's about leaving and returning, loss and redemption. It is about certain kinds of journeys.

It begins with my grandfather's journey in a pony cart with his wife, several children and servants. The cart creaked, the bells pealed and a determined man inched up the hills to join his British sahibs in Shillong, the capital of undivided Assam. Soon the family quickly took to the morning frost, the sudden rains, brilliant sunshine, garden parties, fetes and even attended the Governor's annual ball, an event that reappeared again and again in family lore. Three generations flourished in that dappled sun and shade. Then destiny turned, so silently that we, the third generation, never got a hint of it. My grandfather sold off his large house and cottage near Nazareth Hospital for a song. Uncles, aunts, cousins, and my grandparents waved us goodbye and descended the hills. Only my parents, brother and I remained. We felt orphaned. My father took it very hard. Sometimes he took us to his old house and we would stand by the padlocked gates, imagining an absent family tending to the flowerbed, bowing for evening prayers, or circled around the kitchen table with cups of tea and grandma's fragrant, delicate patisepta. All around us, people were leaving behind empty houses. Men talked in low murmurs and women dismantled their households with heavy sighs. With the naivete of the very young, we never anticipated it would happen to us. Then came that cloudy evening when my father, returning from office, said in a voice choked with emotion. "We have to leave, we cannot stay here anymore." Like Chicken Little, I felt the sky had fallen on me. I screamed, rolled on the floor, writhed in an agony I have felt rarely since. Nobody picked me up and soothed me. I was giving voice to what they were feeling inside. At school, the good nuns taught us how to live in peace and joy, as brothers and sisters. But some brothers and sisters were less equal than others. We were the exiles, turned away from our homes, the land we loved. On the last days of February, in the beginning of the Seventies, books, clothes, toys, utensils, vanished into ugly cardboard boxes, as did the bulky Murphy radio. On the last night, when everyone was asleep, I wrote a note "This home is haunted" and stuck it on a corner wall, hoping the new owners would be too scared to inhabit my little heaven.

Years would pass before I would return, this time the foursome being my husband and my sons. I chose to not go to my grandfather's house and ours. I had become skilled in avoiding pain. Instead, we ate heartily, shopped at Police Bazar and fed the fish at Ward's Lake. In the morning, while the family slept in the hotel, I sat upstairs at Bread Café watching an old Khasi man reading the paper and red-cheeked girls stride to school. I watched ponies prance along the streets and heard the tooting of taxi horns. It is a little too late, but it's enough.

Then, something magical happened. My younger son, he of the few words, asked me on the phone.

"Want to go to McLeodganj?" There was a sharp intake of breath from my side. McLeodganj, Himachal Pradesh, more importantly, a hill station.

"I'll talk to you later," I managed to say. "I have to pack."

On a crystal clear morning, we land at Kangra Airport. When we climb the hills, we lean out, watching the snow change colour on the majestic peaks. Groups of red-robed lamas walk past. Sonny has booked a round cottage from where you can almost tickle a mountain. All around are temples, churches, monasteries. The mountains call to our higher self. We get wet in the rain, drink kahwa, marvel at curios. For hours every morning, I watch a tiny mountain village below the snow line. How did they get there? What did they do? Perhaps, I thought, they were truly blessed. Because nobody told them to leave. Sonny and I shared long conversations, shared what we kept from each other all these years. We were equals at last in the journey of our lives. His love and the mountains healed the sorrow of a little girl's heart so long ago. Sonny had brought me back to the hills and it felt like I had never left.

## 6.

### Between strangers

The icy wind was blowing down the Dhaulagiri. Their feet crunched against the dry leaves on the cement path that snaked its way towards the circular cottage. There were seven or eight such cottages at different levels on the hill. Anirban had booked the last one, at the far end.

"Come on," he said, smiling, turning back to look at her.

"Aren't you freezing?"

"Yes, sure."

They entered and he switched on the light. "Let me see where the heater is."

"Oh, here it is," He rang room service for coffee. His giant shadow loomed on the wall. Full of nervous energy.

As the room heated up, she took off her coat. She felt stiff and uneasy. She sat on the edge of the snow white bed. Night had fallen outside. He took off his jacket, washed his hands and face, wiping himself with a fleecy towel. When the coffee came, he handed the cup to her, trying to read her face.

Ten seconds later, the phone rang again.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said, pretending to be casual. "I have to take this call."

For some strange reason, she felt relieved when he went out into the night. The last weeks of shopping, inviting guests, choosing jewellery, hours at the parlour... all had numbed her to the important truths, that she was not single any more, that she had been pledged to a stranger. Anirban was tall, a little thick at the waist, with rounded shoulders, clean shaven, a bit short-sighted. "I would do anything my ma says," he had said at the first meeting. "So rejecting you is not an option." She had flushed with humiliation. But after some more meetings, she realised this was just his way of talking, not taking into consideration the nuances of what he expressed. As they had driven up the steep hills to Kangra, she had been thrown against him, time and again. It would have been easier to hold her with his arms. They were, after all, on their honeymoon. But, Anirban sat with his arms crossed, looking out into the snow-clad peaks, the fluttering prayer flags and tiny hamlets on the ravines, formal, indifferent.

Half an hour passed. She thought of taking a hot bath and slipping into her night gown. If she did that, he might think she was too forward. "All well, Ma," she messaged her mother. She parted a curtain and looked out, cautiously. His big, imposing figure loomed in the distance. His phone in his right hand, held to his ear, while with his right hand, he gesticulated forcefully. She watched, wondering what to make of the man coupled to her destiny. Why was she finding faults in him? Was it because she wanted to distance herself from him? In some childish way, she had hoped he would be honest, tender, strong, brave and everything in between. And there he was in the dark, already keeping something away from her. Alone, in the round room, she felt she did not exist because he was not seeing her existing, she has nothing to say because he is not there to listen. Perhaps, she will not be fully alive because he will be stingy with his love.

He came back and lay down fully dressed on the bed. He looked pale and gaunt.

"Have you ordered dinner?" he asked. "I was waiting for you."

"That's sweet. Look through the menu."

"I'll have a risotto. What about you?"

"Do they have jeera rice. And may be chicken curry?"

She ordered the meal. It arrived quickly enough, carried by a Pahari youth, with gangly limbs and ruddy cheeks.

Then they were in bed, the lights switched off.

He began to smoke. His tone was chatty, relaxed.

"Strange, I barely know you," he began.

"Does that trouble you?" she asked.

"Of course, I always wonder what you are thinking," he teased.

"I'm pretty simple, no issues," she lied.

"Are you a virgin?" he asked casually.

"Do I have to be one?" she countered.

"Are you?"

"What about you?"

"I have nothing to hide. I was once in a relationship. But why are you being defensive?"

"It's different for women. If I say I am not a virgin, you'd think I am a slut. If I say I am one, you'll have trust issues."

"When there is nothing left to hide, you start with a clean slate."

"Okay. I'm not. At university, I slept every evening with my supervisor in a corner classroom. He was gentle, funny, a divorcee. He was 15 years older than me. He died of cancer when I was 22. He taught me to love Carnatic music."

The tip of his cigarette glowed. "And I am supposed to be jealous?"

"Feel what you wish. It was you who started this game."

"You can cry, if you want. Be my guest."

They did not talk for the rest of the night. Their bodies remained unexplored. She lay awake to his gentle snores. Their conversation had been like fencing, thrusting into each other with formal ferocity.

At dawn, she dressed in her jeans and fleece coat, her wool cap and muffler. She followed the path out of their room, the dry leaves crunching underfoot. There was a large terrace overlooking the mountain, she leaned against the railing, Carnatic music in her head.

A waiter ushered her to a chair, and got her a steaming pot of masala tea. It was then that she saw him, looking intently at her from the other end of the terrace.

"Staying here?" he smiled. His eyes crinkled when he smiled. His hair was brown, tousled.

"Yes."

"May I join you?"

"Sure."

He poured himself a cup of tea, after asking. There were bags under his eyes. He looked like he hadn't slept for a couple of days.

"How's your dog, Smoky?"

A chill spread on her body.

"What did you say?"

"Smoky. Your Labrador."

"Do I know you?"

"No," he looked towards the mountains. "I'm not in the picture, that's the story."

"Look, it seems you've been stalking me on the internet. You are a creep. Stay away from me."

"No," he lashed at her. "Stay away from him. Five years, five years, and I don't exist."

"You're not making sense. I'll call my husband."

"No, you relax here. I'll call him."

He picked up his bag and walked assuredly towards the last cottage on the slope. She waited. Then she realised she had already been given the answer. She looked at her hennaed hands. She would wait for it to fade. Everything passes.

## 7.

### Wages of war

Across this vast country, there are sure to be many expectant mothers who are going to name their sons Abhinandan. It was an electric moment when Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman walked past the gates at Wagah into Indian territory. We cheered as a nation and felt victory was ours. Young men trooped off to the nearest saloons and got themselves the Wing Commander's distinctive moustache and beard. But such moments, such euphoria is short-lived. Once again the amnesiac populace sits drugged in front of their television sets, immune to political squabbles, multicore scams, rivers turning black with effluents, farmers ending their lives, young girls raped. There is a detachment about this drugged populace, a sense that this has nothing to do with them, and as long as the mortgage, the EMI and children's future is secured, what appears on the flickering screen has nothing whatsoever to do with them, their country.

Then war clouds loom in the horizon. A wave of fear runs through the people. The idea of India, often an abstraction becomes real, distilled. Suddenly, our fate is inextricably linked to the acts of soldiers, pilots, the navy. The hopes of a nation rest on men who may not return.

Throughout the ages, wars have not only been fought, but also described, glorified, analysed, vilified.

Novelist Margaret Atwood put it succinctly when she said "War is what happens when language fails."

We, humans, at the pinnacle of life on earth fail to make each other understood, fail to find a bridge of peace, fail to utter words to calm the adversary. This has happened for thousands of years, when Ashoka gave up war after Kalinga, we school-girls listened enthralled. And yet, he had to kill before being sickened by the blood bath, the groans of the dying.

An eye for an eye turns the whole world blind. As we race ahead to create deadly arsenal, we cannot help but remember Einstein's words "I know not with what weapons will World War III be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." A high tech war will take us back to the dark ages. War is a licence to kill, a crime for which one would otherwise be tried and punished in a court of law. Only those who kill in large numbers escape scot free. There is also the aspect of age. Leaders of countries, older men, declare war. But it is the youth who must fight and make the ultimate sacrifice.

SunTzu, the Chinese scholar has it that the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.

Since the dawn of our freedom, in 1947, we have had ugly wars with this neighbour. They say strong fences make good neighbours. But men with evil intent continue to slip through our borders. I wish to mention a knee-jerk reaction of some Indians who promptly want to ban Pakistani artistes, singers, actors as soon as things turn tense. But when I read Faiz Ahmed Faiz or Ismat Chughtai, I do not feel they are alien. It is their creative energy, their honesty, the delicacy of their sentiments, which touch the heart. They are citizens of the world, dwelling in the realm of the spirit. For those who spread poison in clear waters, Faiz's words are a challenge "They may have succeeded in blowing out the candle in lovers' luminous chambers, but can they blow out the moon?" Haruki Murakami, who comes from a country that saw the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, refuses to believe that there will be a war to end all wars. A war, fought by totalitarianism or in the name of liberty and democracy, has no meaning for the dead and the orphaned.

If this reads as overt pacifism, there's a sound reason for it. War has been a quintessentially male activity. Where military skill is valorised, no one acknowledges that it is the women who keep households running with limited resources and under great uncertainty. Where men were and are warriors, women are just non-combatants. But they are fighting a war too, raising children, penny pinching, running households, forcing themselves not to think if their men would come home walking or in a coffin. They know the price of war more than the men, and if we have more women policymakers, leaders, decision makers, we might just have less misunderstanding, hostility and war.

Let me end this with an anecdote. One rainy morning, shortly after the Kargil War, my family and I went to Shillong, to meet the family of Clifford Nongrum, the first Kargil martyr from Meghalaya. I was a mother and watching Clifford's mother touch her son's photo broke my heart. And then she went into the kitchen and returned with a plate of cakes for my sons. When it was time to leave, we hugged, and her tears wet my cheeks. She hurried in to be near her son's portrait.

This is the price of war.

## 8.

### The last feast

At about six every evening, I unbolt our front door and leave it slightly ajar. There is a reason why I do this. Our maid Rashmi is too short to reach our door bell. Her shortness angers and humiliates her. So, if she cannot press the bell, even standing tip toe on her battered sandals, she would retaliate by hammering at the door so fiercely that it was as if policemen were after us. I am a woman of a somewhat nervous disposition. I like to sit in a room with the lights turned dim and Ghulam Ali playing softly in the background. Nursing a Baccardi Breezer, at peace with the world. Ankur, my son, says he will try to come this autumn. Far away in Los Angeles, he works at something I understand little about. My only child has been good at everything he has done. His father and I can no longer follow his trajectory.

In the beginning, Rashmi tells little about herself. All we know are she has three children and a husband who drives his taxi to distant towns. Then we know that of her three children the oldest, the boy, had a Muslim father. Idris was a money-lender who got into a fight and was hauled off to prison. Then Rashmi met Thanuram Boro. Boro was a charmer, grinning at her, his eyes twinkling. With money from his taxi trips, they built a shack on railway land. He took in her son. Two more children were born – Nila – the girl, and Puwali – the little one.

Rashmi is barely four feet, pale, with the sullen face of a disappointed monkey. Her breasts have sagged and her skinny wrists are adorned with tarnished brass bangles. All her kurtas and saris once belonged to other people on whose largesse she depended.

I wonder why we have hired Rashmi. We are just the two of us – my husband Pranab and I. Pranab practices law in his private chamber upstairs. He is busy the whole day. We eat very simple meals– rice, dal, a sabji, a fish curry. And at night, a stew and brown bread. Since we hardly socialise much, there are no elaborate meals to be prepared.

But each evening when she comes, there is something to surprise, to make me laugh, or fall silent in pity. Some days later, I found Puwali in the guest room, crouched under the bed, his eyes dark and staring straight into my eyes like a little animal getting ready to lunge at me.

“Why have you put your boy under the bed?”

“Ask his father. He forces all three under the bed when he is drunk. They are used to it.”

Rashmi's daughter is a dark, saturnine girl, who is puzzled as to whether to thrust her pubescent breasts for the world to see or move with a stoop to keep them out of sight. These days she wears long patched skirts, sequined tattered blouses and a dupatta that she endlessly arranges over her chest. She never looks at anyone in the eye and sits crouched before the television – watching girls getting fairer by the second, driven by cars to wonderful places. She gobbles in the images of perfect palms and ice blue swimming pools. Then she looks at her gnome of a mother stirring the vegetables, struggling with the bitterness of having a mother who was a servant and a cook all day. I plead with her to go back to school. She ignores me.

They tell me their shack is in a tri-junction by the rail tracks. It is a maze of vegetable and fruit stalls, baskets of eggs and chicken, carcasses of slaughtered goats hanging pink and gleaming on hooks. Most of the time Rashmi would have no money. The wages I paid went into food and repairing her flimsy dwelling. Big rats travelled all over their bodies at night. The only door was rotten at the bottom.

After about six months, Rashmi's family virtually lay siege on us. As she prepared breakfast, she served us first. Then, in one corner of the kitchen, unseen by us, below a concrete slab on which the gas stood, the children swallowed in whatever they could find. They ate in big greedy gulps, urgently moving it to where no hostile hand could pull out the puris, the sabji.

Pranab was furious. What was the logic of feeding four people? Were we running a dammed dharamshala here? Have patience, I said. Rashmi's man is sick. And, indeed, he was. Slowly, over the months, Thanesar felt too fatigued to drive his master's taxi. Bruises appeared on his hands and feet. But nothing could stop him from drinking. His ankles swelled and he threw up whatever he ate. Rashmi's eyes were bleak and without hope. He drinks, he beats the children. But he took in my Bablu, the son of another man. When she told me he had turned yellow, I knew. Cirrhosis of the liver. He lay stretched out in the hovel, his eyes sunken, his stomach a taut drum, a yellow drum with blue and spider-like blood vessels on his skin. Rashmi left her children at home to look after their father. They fed him spoonfuls of dal, water, milk. He cursed them for not giving him his hooch.

The hours stretched long as the children sat on their vigil. Bablu got out his tube of Dendrite and did some sniffing. Nila and Puwali shared a sketch pen to write their names on the grotesque mound of the yellow stomach.

Things moved very slowly. Once Rashmi went to the government hospital. She walked long corridors. A doctor wrote out a prescription and waved her away. She lost the prescription on the way home.

Towards the end, Rashmi stopped speaking completely. She did her work and floated out of the house like a ghost, the parting of her hair ablaze with sindoor. One afternoon, I was reading a book when I heard a noise in the kitchen. Rashmi was frantically stuffing something into a plastic packet. Horrified, I saw drops of blood on the floor. There were pigeons on our window ledge, waddling about, pecking the grain I lay scattered. With her skinny hands, Rashmi had grabbed a pigeon, twisted its neck and was now thrusting it into the packet.

“You are a cruel woman,” I burst out. “How can you do this?”

“He is leaving,” she said with a sob. “I could not save him. I could not stop the hooch. Tonight I will cook him pigeon curry and rice. Let him go happy.”

For ten days, Rashmi did not come. I did not have to be told. Her forehead was now bare.

## 9.

### Rooting for the bark

Somewhere in the attic of memory, in a jammed closet of yellowing letters and curling, sepia-tinted photographs, rests Jimmy, my grandfather's dog, some lost, sleepy afternoon, when even the butterflies forgot to flutter. Some uncle, one of my two (in the mid-Sixties, women didn't handle cameras), must have idly clicked the one and only photograph of Jimmy, as he lay beside a wicker chair, black and white, his tongue lolling, looking with utter devotion at the uncle who was immortalising him in film. He was old then, and had fruitlessly chased many cats, gone frenetically after his own tail, waited with the patience of Job for scraps from the dining table, trotted tirelessly behind grandfather on his dusk walks. And now all the smells had been smelt and the sights had been sighted, all the bones had been chewed and the barks barked, whimpers whimpered, growls growled. In the photo, coins of sunlight fall on his tired body from the bougainvillea climbing down the roof. It was in this spot he was discovered six months later, all breaths breathed.

I am not a dog person. I am paranoid about being bitten. I don't fancy barks giving me insomnia. Muddy footprints on the floor, dog hair on the cushions, the ridiculous sight of a person dragged by the chain of a big, frisky dog, no thank you. But paradoxically, I am a huge fan of dog videos; I have spent, hours watching all breeds of dogs – from Afghan hounds, beagles, fox terriers, chihuahuas, dachshunds. I have loved their silly antics, their goofball performances, their energy, their uncompromising love for their masters, their gentleness around human babies. These videos buoy me up much more than a drink or retail therapy can.

Dogs originated from wolves and one of the mysteries about how early man was able to domesticate wolves has been solved. Only baby wolves were raised by people and hence, it became all that much easier to tame them. Besides their obvious uses, like sniffing for guns and drugs, guarding households, driving sledges in the frozen poles, being retrievers of hunted game, dogs have a significant role in helping people cope with depression. In a survey by the Human-Animal Bond Research, 74 per cent of pet owners said having a dog improved their mental health. A pet reminds you that you are not alone. And that knowing you have to feed, wash and care for your pet may give you a sense of purpose and routine. Literature has created many endearing and interesting portraits of canines, ranging from ancient Greek literature to modern memoirs. Funny four-legged man's friends have served as confidants, sidekicks, nurturers and provided comic relief.

Who is the doggie legend who has 12 movies, multiple television episodes, some radio shows and several book spin-offs? It's Lassie, of course, created by Eric Knight in 1940, based on a true story of a dog triumphing all odds to reunite with the little boy he loves. Toto is another charmer, complete with silky hair and twinkling eyes, as he follows Dorothy into the magic of Oz. In J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan, the Newfoundland Nana is a responsible housekeeper to the Darling family. In Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Fang is the cowardly slobbering boarhound. He is scared witless by giant spiders, flying cars, among other things. Rather endearing, that.

If you are writing about dogs, how can you leave out Jack London? In his classic Call of the Wild, a St. Bernard Collie Buck is kidnapped from sunny California and sold to dog sled slavery. Beaten, malnourished, forced to survive in cold wastes, pulling heavy loads, he is finally rescued by John Thornton, who nurses him back to health. Buck finally finds a kind, humane master and a new life begins for him. Tin Tin's Snowy, Dennis the Menace's Ruff and Charlie Brown's Snoopy are dogs that have become iconic in comics.

There's even a Netflix series on dogs. In our matchbox flats, it is becoming increasingly hard to keep pets, unless they are goldfish. My neighbour feeds mongrels and in return for his kindness, they patrol our streets. The trouble is, they howl even on moonless nights. So, you know where my insomnia comes from, as does my wariness about man's best friend.

Dogs are wiser than us. They are not fooled by fake news. They sniff out the truth on their own. They don't pollute the environment. They are not corrupt, see how they don't even have pockets. They live for the moment. They don't pop pills to feel better. They treat their drunk owner without judgement. They don't fight over religion and ideology. They are happy with what they get. We ought to pray we are born as dogs in our next life. They are a more evolved form of existence than the neurotic, polarised, cynical beings we have become.

10.

## Love, actually

Love comes with gossamer wings, touches your cheek, and you are not the same anymore. A pair of eyes, teasing or solemn, meet yours and the ground moves beneath your feet. Under your skin, in the pulse beat of your blood, his name beats a tattoo, whether you are asleep or awake. You see him in all the cars that sweep past you, under all the trees nodding in the breeze, under each lamp-post, in the ferries surging through the broad river. The chaos in your mind quiets and dissolves like the sea at low tide and you know what you want – to love and be loved. Those around you see you are different. You are incandescent, filled with light, dazed by love. You trust him with your heart, careless about the possibility it could get broken. You know you are born alone, you die alone, but when you are on his bike, your arms around him, your hair flying, your cheek on his back, a dreamy smile on your lips, you feel, for a moment, the dark loneliness of the past is finally over, for in the darkness of now you see the orb of the moon, the sprinkle of a million stars, other lovers absorbed in themselves – in parks, cafés, streets, anywhere where their words can merge, and hands curl against each others’.

Your friends, curse them, tell you he is ordinary and has not much prospects. He cannot take you to fancy restaurants. Only rolls and coffee in a hole in the wall coffee house with white painted chairs, plastic covers on tables that wobble, and sometimes just a kulfi by the roadside. “I do not starve for food,” you lash out at them. “You don’t read Neruda but this is how I feel – I love him without knowing how. I want him to do with me what Spring does with the cherry trees. I am not ashamed of my love and I pity you, for you do not know how alive it makes me feel, how sharp the pain when we are apart, and the joy that comes to me when I hear his engine that stops outside my door. I do not know how long it will be that we are like this. Sometimes when he does not come, the earth does not turn on its axis and the hands of my watch are frozen. A dreadful silence falls over my heart and all city lights go dim. I am a ghost in my room, feeding on my memories, wondering why he does not come. This is when I hate myself, for losing my trust, my sanity, my all. I want to rid of this fever and slip into the tattered cloak of everyday life. And just when I am about to forget his face, the touch of his hands, the way his hair curls on his collar, the mole below his ear, I hear his quick steps running up my stairs, my misery evaporates like camphor.”

And then they are, man and wife, two signatures in a registry office, for the whole world seems to want to keep them apart. These days, through the long arcade of years, their hair is silver and gait slow. The children born of them, grown-ups, now talk on the phone of hypertension, diabetes, uric acid, ECGs. This too is one kind of love. The love that fears losing them. The man with no prospects has risen in life. She teases him about that long ago battered Yamaha, second-hand to boot. The home is full of photographs – of them, their children, travels across the country, a tousle-haired grandchild. They remind them of the good times they have shared and the bad times they have buried deep in their hearts. They are frail but theirs is not the end of romance, but something alive and ongoing. She does not share all her thoughts with him because everybody must grow a secret garden.

Beginnings are bright with promises... when his eyes met hers across the college canteen. What about the end? It is a celebration of a love that has endured and two lives become entwined. These days she does not agonise when he is late from an evening walk. She is just concerned as it rains and he is without an umbrella. Sometimes she feels he is not romantic enough and should bother less about stocks and shares. She is also irritated by his bias for his mother’s cooking, bless her. They know everything about each other and so they sit in the porch in companionable silence. Then he goes in, comes back, and wraps a shawl over her shoulders. What else is there to say?

They move forward in a braided stream, changing directions, now languid, now rushing in a burst of desire. What if they had never met? What if they had boarded trains going in opposite directions, unaware each existed, rushing, swaying further away, utter strangers?

11.

## All shook up!

Nothing amuses the human race as much as watching one of its denizens fall. Whether it is slipping on a banana peel or sliding down a wet flight of steps, people gleefully chortle at the spectacle in an undisguised moment of sheer amusement. I hasten to add that there is no true malice in that laughter. It is just perceived that falling is a comic act of losing balance, without too much regard for the victim's alarm, pain and general humiliation. Some of the most amusing falls have been in Chaplin movies and even a mere stumble rouses the audience to howls of laughter. Dr. William F. Fry, a psychiatrist and founder of Gelotology – the science of laughter, explains that no one would laugh if a man fell to his death from 21 storeys, but would chortle if a man stumbled on the street. Society trains people not to behave in an eccentric manner by falling down, which is not seen as normal. Laughter at someone's fall can also be seen as an assertion of superiority.

But there are other ways of falling that are sombre. Christianity speaks of the fall from the state of grace. There have been falls of dynasties and empires. Powerful economies have collapsed. We watched in horror as the twin towers fell. What takes years to be built is decimated in the twinkling of an eye.

On the second day of November, early in the morning, two things occupied my mind simultaneously. One, I painfully remembered the Elvis Presley song All shook up and secondly, I developed a healthy respect for the laws of gravity. One moment I had finished brushing my pearlies and the next, stepping on the wet bathroom floor, I slipped and slammed my face in a brutal slam dunk on the very floor. It goes without saying that I saw a lot of stars and meteors. The pain was excruciating and all 206 bones in my body were staging a protest. Somewhere I got up and hobbled towards my still dozing other half. Even as I was, in a blend of tears, theatrical movements and vivid rendering, brought alive the mishap that had befallen me, one of my eyes disappeared beneath my swollen, purple eyelids and my forehead extended out like a Cro-Magnon Man. The purple looked real menacing and I had a fleeting thought that I would be assumed to be a victim of domestic violence. Or a pirate in drag.

At the eye hospital, many eyes followed my battered face. The doctor waved three fingers and then two fingers before my good eye. When I identified them correctly, I felt the jubilation of a nursery kid. After a battery of tests, I was eased into an MRI machine and asked to be still.

Back home, Senior and Junior watched with shock and awe the WhatsApp image of my closed, purple, swollen eye. Having that eye was like a pregnancy. You just had to wait it out. I wore a pair of dark glasses so as not to alarm the other half.

And there was a big downside... no watching television, internet, Netflix. What came to my rescue were hundreds of podcasts on the phone – comedy, the supernatural, the political, crime, author interviews. My ears became my new eyes, experiencing the world, imagining what I could not see, waiting for my eye to open, and perhaps learn to look with new eyes, what my jaded sight would not. As Paulo Coelho wrote, "You can become blind by seeing each day in the same way."

What happened to me that fateful day kept me imprisoned at home for 12 days. Twelve days of exile from office, the streets I walked, the shops and cafés I frequented, the juice bar I loved to relax in. Even in such a short time, nostalgia set in. Those days of freedom and mobility seemed to recede far away and all I had for company was a face I did not recognise anymore. Yes, indeed, there is a lot of optimism in changing scenery and in seeing what's down the road. But then, the true seeing is within. I can see as clear as day the late family members who have left this realm, though they are no longer there. I enter doors of our homes that have been demolished years ago. I see the faces of my childhood friends playing hopscotch within me, though they are long out of sight and middle-aged to boot.

After about a week, my right eye finally opened, though the area around it was still bruised. I was deeply grateful; the doctor had said I could have lost my sight. I no longer question why that accident happened. It has not taken away my sense of humour and equanimity. I have refused to feel sorry for myself. I understand life has risks and you cannot insulate from them. We understand the miracle of life fully when we allow the unexplained to happen.

People are always reluctant to talk about their private lives. But for me, my life is grist to my mill. Within an hour of the great fall, I knew I was going to write about it. In solidarity with all people who fall. But are too embarrassed to say so. People of the world unite. You have nothing to fear but your inhibitions.

12.

## Expose Creep

My friend does not wish to be identified. Not that she has been running from the law or anything. She is just wary of how she will sound in this column. And she's right.

K appears out of sync, rather square and quite happy to languish in the dusty precincts of academia. She fancies herself a feminist, gads about the country speaking at seminars that only other feminists comprehend. She is also, may I add, on the panel of a whole lot of bodies. Her life is a mound of paperwork.

When we meet at the cafe, K in white hair and Fabindia sari (how predictable), we realise with a small twinge of dismay that the crowd there was ridiculously young, the music was ear-splitting and civilised conversation impossible. So we moved to another place nearby, its heydays past, the service tardy, and the food far from what was described in the tattered menu. But we were happy, unthreatened by youth and its restless energy.

Unknown to K, I had come with an agenda and I went straight to the point.

"What," I began casually, "Do you think of the Tanushree Dutta affair?"

"Umm. I don't know. These days I am reading Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman."

"Good for you." I said a bit tartly. "You need to get that nose off the book, however edifying it is, and think of women in your time, the raw deal they get, and how spunky Tanushree chooses to fight back, even if it is too late."

"I thought you don't watch TV..." she said, hesitantly.

"Not the regressive Saas bahu serials, but this is an issue that affects all Indian women of today. Do they suffer in silence, do they please men for fame, glamour, lucre, do they refuse to compromise on their self-respect? Wollstonecraft said it is justice that is wanted in this world. I've read her, too, you know."

"Who is this girl anyway?" I filled in the details, "She is an ex-Femina Miss India, has done a couple of films, was also one of the finalists at the Miss India Universe title. All this was in 2004. So, as you can see, she was not some village yokel from Jhumritalaya. She was beautiful, ambitious and ready to go places. Not surprisingly, she got film offers. Rehearsing for a dance in one of her films, she encountered a lewd proposition from actor Nana Patekar, at the moment a minor Harvey Weinstein of India."

"But isn't it common, this stuff?" K peered short-sightedly at me.

"No, it took a real ugly turn. Tanushree and her parents were inside a car when hoodlums smashed it. Even the doors of the studio were shut to prevent them from leaving. This was during the shooting of Horn 'OK' Pleassss in 2008. In 2013, Tanushree said in an interview about how traumatised she was about the incident."

"So, counselling helped, right?" "K, don't be glib about this. You are beautiful, young, the world is ahead of you. Then a creep snatches your dream, threatens you to silence; she tries to calm herself with eastern spirituality. She stays at an ashram for one-and-a-half years. Then she goes to Ladakh to learn Buddhist meditation, breathing techniques." "So, isn't there some forum young female actors can go to?" asked K, carving up her cutlet.

"She did. She complained to the Cine and TV Artistes Association, but no action was taken. This allegation was repeated in 2013 and 2018. After ten tortuous years, the girl has filed an FIR against Nana Patekar."

"I suppose justice will be done."

"I'm not that hopeful. Too much time has passed. There is lack of evidence of the sexual harassment."

"Tell me," K said after a sip of coffee. "Why do young women aspire to act in Bollywood? It isn't a safe place, right? They'd be better off as teachers or doctors."

"That's absurd," I spoke out. "The Indian film industry is the biggest in the world. What if Madhubala and Nargis hesitated to walk those portals? What if Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi chickened out? The industry must get its act together and sensitise every actor, producer and other film workers on the Vishakha guidelines which protect women and give them recourse to justice. The chaotic industry must be streamlined and all associated with it answerable to their actions. Or we will go back to having simpering men in ghagras, pretending to be women, as when Indian cinema started."

"Whew, that was good. I might even put you in some feminist panel," beamed K.

"Thanks, but no thanks. Here's a last bit of insight. In 2004, Tanushree beat Miss Israel Gal Gadot to make it to the final 10 of the Miss Universe pageant. This same Gal Gadot, an international star now, refused to work in the Wonder Woman sequel until Brett Ratner, one of the financiers of the first movie, was fired. Brett has been accused of sexual harassment by multiple women and Gal's firm stance caused Warner Brothers' to sever its ties with him."

K looked at her watch. She seemed eager to bury herself in Wollstonecraft. But, I had a last aside.

"When Amitabh Bachchan was asked about the issue he said, 'Am I Tanushree Dutta? Am I Nana Patekar?' And left it at that. I remember the pious feel-good things he says in ads that fill his coffers. As the patriarch of the film industry, it is in his power to bring sanity and reason. Is it too much to hope for?"

K and I left the café. In our own different ways, we felt helpless and angry. More creeps are coming out of the woodwork. That's some comfort.

13.

## What a wonderful world

Hi all,

Everyone keep calm and go on reading. A coup has taken place, even as you skim over the words. Coups don't take place only in banana republics. Let me assure you that as coups go, it was a most peaceful transition. Everything seems just the same, but don't be fooled. Remember the absent-minded, bespectacled lady who penned this column at the last instance? Well, I've taken over her column. She has been going at it since the mid-Nineties and you folks, I figured out, need a break from her and all the sentimental blabber she so revels in.

Introductions are in order, what's the point of a coup if you don't know who is in charge now? Well, I'm a homo sapien, a mammal, and a female. At the moment, I am not much inclined to conversation and other social graces. But I'm already on Facebook with a humongous lot of likes and comments. To keep it short, I am this former columnist's granddaughter. I came into this world a week ago and boy, or rather girl, am I calling the shots!

Of course it was scary at first. They exited me from the dim floating world of tranquillity, that was my mother's womb. There were bright lights, strange voices, the indignity of being held upside-down and slapped on my back. I was furious and let out some lusty wails. It seems that was what they wanted. Then they cleaned me up, swaddled me and put me in this long room, where there were others like me, all swaddled, to prevent us from waving our arms and legs. We did not have language to make small talk, and anyway the journey was pretty hectic. I need to de-stress at a spa. I fell asleep.

When I was awake, a man was looking down at me. He was talking soothingly with me. His penetrating gaze, deep voice sent my alarm bells ringing. Though toggled out in plain clothes, I had a strong hunch he was a cop. Then I had an even stronger hunch that he was my dad. That was a relief. Then, in a dim downstairs room, one floor below, they put me next to my mother. That was the best moment of my recent earthly experience. I wish they had left me alone with my brand new parents. But no, they had to have their way. My two grandfathers peered over me, too tongue-tied to even say "hi". My grandmother decided to hum and put me back to sleep. It was terribly off-key, till I realised they were numbers from The Sound of Music, which I guess she will never outgrow. By and by, her humming became so much better that even my parents fell asleep.

I know, I know. You are about to challenge me. How do I know so much of the world? I can only say adults suffer from the arrogance that they know everything. We babies come with the wisdom of the ages, till you ruin it all by force-feeding us with a hotch-potch of facts you call education.

From the animated conversation of the grown-ups, my newly-acquainted family, I understood that I am supposed to have a name. In these first few days when their hearts were sloshing in a sea of emotions, they called me diva, princess, Lakshmi, angel, and believe it or not – Coochie Co. It was most discriminating to be addressed with such a variety of names, but ultimately sanity prevailed and my parents stuck to the two names they had already made up their minds about.

There was one word that assumed a lot of importance. It was 'germs'. Nobody was allowed to touch me without rubbing their hands with a liquid. That, of course, made me feel real special, since I was able to order the banishment of pullers of germs without so much as having to say a word.

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I was enjoying how my family was behaving. My parents, grandparents, even my great grandmother filled their every waking moments coming up with ways to keep me happy. They tip-toed around me, talked in whispers. My absent-minded grandma, you know who, washed my diapers as if they were the most precious things she had ever laid her hands on. My two uncles, based in a faraway city, called up and gushed in most endearing terms. They are planning to come over soon, just to attend my durbar, with gifts, two wise men from the West.

So I dream and I smile, eager to find out about this wonderful world. I am glad I am a girl, because women don't wage war and they get to wear beautiful clothes. Of course, there is more to it. I am being called cute and adorable, but that's not enough for me.

This coup thing is a little overrated, I confess. It's tough drumming up ideas about things to write. Right now, all I want is to be fed and kept dry. Even this swaddling thing isn't so bad. When my arms reach out to feel this wide world, it's rather scary. Give me the swaddle any day to keep me calm.

To wind up, I guess I have so much power that I can afford to be benevolent. I, hereby, hand over this column back to my grandma. Trust me, she will find ways and means to pen anecdotes about me for you now and then. That's what love does. Makes the world go round.

14.

## The man and the writer

Acclaimed author Jonathan Franzen described himself as a cranky 51-year-old. He is just one among grouchy, elderly, male writers who have a sense of entitlement towards being plain nasty, making fans quake and sweat when extending the hand for the obligatory autograph. Franzen's pettiness extends to mobile phone, Facebook, Microsoft Word and believe it or not, having to kiss his mother, and, yet, he is a first-rate writer, with such a range of vision and depth, that we are willing to overlook the cantankerousness.

But then, madness and obsession are the crutches of a writer. Booker Prize winner John Banville claimed in a meeting that writers make lousy parents and most would sell their children for a good turn of phrase. Roald Dahl freely admitted to being a grouchy bum, prone to rages when his work wasn't going well. Many children of famous writers have accused their famous writer parents of being cold and distant, putting their books first and being plain nasty when the wee ones were frisky.

Incongruous as it may sound, I have a tenuous link with Sir Vidia Naipaul, who passed away a few days ago. Some years hence I met the celebrated author Paul Theroux, creator of books like *The Great Railway Bazaar* at a Guwahati hotel. I remember the afternoon clearly. Theroux was chatty, friendly, someone without any airs. As we talked of his travel writing, I vouched the subject of his falling out with writer Sir Vidia. He at once looked animated and it was as if the flood gates had opened up. Theroux was once the acolyte and close friend of Sri Vidia. It was a friendship that stretched to three decades. Then, in 1996, Sri Vidia accused Theroux of having a relationship with his first wife. After Theroux found Vidia selling one of Theroux's books, inscribed to the Naipauls, the men parted ways with much rancour. Theroux went on to write a book titled *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, the two men eventually made up at a book fest. But the harm had long been done. Theroux described Naipaul's *Half a Life* as slight and weird. Theroux finds it unforgivable that Naipaul savaged the reputation of author E.M. Forster and economist John Maynard Keynes. Theroux scoffs at Sir Vidia's chest-thumping bravado, calling it 'elevated crankishness'. But what gets my goat is Sir Vidia's attitude to women, when his first wife died, he put her urn on the boot of his car. He had subjected her to years of cruelty and tantrums. What seems unforgivable is his slamming of *Jane Eyre*, saying he is unable to share her sentimental ambitions. As she is not the complete master of her house, that comes through in her writing too. He accused veteran writer Diana Athill of penning literary tosh. He has criticised India's top female authors of banality.

A good writer is not a good person or a good husband and father, that little boy from Trinidad is today known around the world for his luminous prose and razor-sharp intellect. It occurs to me that when we were young we did not have recourse to information about writers. Thus, we were able to read the text uncluttered by extraneous matter.

I wish to end on a generous note. Deeply moved by his books like *A Bend in the River* and *An Area of Darkness*, I would like to concede that there is a gentleness and sensitivity in Sir Vidia's personality. For many decades, he kept in his possession a box of letters between him and his father. The father, worn down by the cares of a large family and the sadness of unfulfilled ambitions, corresponds with the son in distant Oxford, on the threshold of a brilliant career. Out of this was born the timeless classic *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The elder Naipaul wrote a novel and described the writerly life as everything. Sir Vidia published this slim volume of letters and was so moved by them that he could not bear to read them. It is a noble, moving validation of the bond between a father and son.

In the end, one ought to remember Sir Vidia's triumphant transition from Trinidad, the back of beyond, to the world stage. His unflagging curiosity took him to exotic lands and created a body of work that is outstanding. He did not suffer fools, saying his life was too short to be wasted on banality. He was dismayed that the world is full of men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing. For a man who was at home in several continents, he said, "Home is, I suppose, just a child's idea. A home at night, and a lamp in the house. A place to feel safe. He felt his world was always in movement and it was futile to arise at immutable conclusions on it."

Perhaps the clearest advice Naipaul gave on being a writer is, "To be a writer, you have to be in the world, risk yourself in the world, immerse yourself in the world, you have to go looking for it."

Having freed him from the back of beyond, he bemoans the choice of men who exist in a niche and have the desire to learn nothing new. He is clear-eyed in the sense that none has to have an idealised view of the world. What is needed is a clear-eyed view of the state of the world.

In *Miguel Street*, he made this confession "Life is a helluva thing. You can see trouble coming and you can't do a thing to prevent it."

Well, Sir Vidia, your troubles are over.

## Beloved stranger

There are so many different kinds of fairy tales I have outgrown now. I wanted to be Snow White, alabaster in her forever sleep. I wanted to be Cinderella, the glass shoe changing my destiny. I wanted to kiss the frog, just as a dare. I wanted to be Red Riding Hood, clambering through the woods to meet my wrinkled grandmother. Something happy and uplifting always happened in fairy tales and the hope they promised spilled over in real life.

But now I know no glass slipper awaits me, and no amount of sleeping will make the prince come. My father, mother, brother and I live in a modest university quarter at the slope of a hill. Birds sing from the trees all day and our cats snooze in the front porch on winter mornings. Baba is a professor of literature in the university. Ma gave up her job to look after us, me and my younger brother Bhim. Bhim has always been a strong boy and hence, the name. At eight months, he was calling us Baba, Mama, Dinky — for me, Dina. And then a cloud blotted out the stars, the birds fell silent. Some malevolent power stole the few words Bhim had gathered with playful joy. He fell silent. He would not let our eyes meet. When we called him by name, he would not turn around on enquiry. When our neighbourhood children were invited on some occasions, he crouched in a corner, sometimes under a table, silent. It is as if he became unaware that there was anyone near him. There were whispers around the colony. Something is not right with Professor Prabir Chowdhury's son. Empty upstairs, poor thing. My miserable parents stopped these get-togethers.

I am five years older than Bhim. I love my brother with the fierceness of a tigress. No one dares mention Bhim in front of me. When I come home from school I fling my bag aside and run to Bhim. He is usually on the floor, singing something in a garbled way, making no sense. Ma has cut his hair very short so that he can no longer pull it out in clumps. I know what to do. I know how to make my Bhim happy. I grab him and squeeze his legs. He begins to laugh joyfully. He allows me to touch him, for those brief moments. It is enough for me. You see, we have learnt to take one moment at a time.

You may have guessed by now that ours is not a normal home. Each in our own ways, Baba, Ma and I try to penetrate Bhim's silent world. Each day we try to introduce ourselves to him, to meet his gaze and understand his keening and his rages. My father sits for hours with him, trying to read to him, so those stolen words of long ago may return. Bhim crouches in the other end of his room, flapping his hands, rocking back and forth and often twirling a blue nylon rope he sleeps with under his pillow. He is like Mercury, never still, as if he is aflame within and seeking the peace that forever eludes him. We always have to be silent because if a dish falls or a bucket is filled with water, if Ma handles the mixie, he screams and holds his hands over his ears, his eyes wide with terror.

This is not a home, but a madhouse. When he was eight and beginning to grow, he could not bear to wear clothes and covered himself in a big white towel. Unable to handle the spoon, he would smash the crockery. Sometimes my mother would lock herself in the bedroom and weep till she was exhausted. That was how it started. When Baba went for his classes, Ma roamed the city, visiting godmen, charlatans, astrologers who took her money and gave her amulets, flowers, cowries shells, ash, sweet pills that she would try to use on Bhim, till his screams became unbearable.

"How long can we go on like this, Dina?" she asked me, spent.

"He'll get better, Ma."

"Our savings are almost gone. All the experts call it development disability, an Autistic Spectrum disorder. What use do we have of clever words? Soon he will grow so much that he may hurt us. After all, he does not know who we are. Baba and I will grow old. Who will look after him?"

"Hey, you've forgotten me."

"You will have your own life, your family."

"We are a family – Bhim, Baba, you and me."

A few days later, we had Saraswati Puja at the colony. Ma draped on me her white silk sari with the red zari border. I had flowers on my bun, rouge on my cheeks and pearls on my throat. As the tranquil goddess played her veena, we danced in a circle underneath a tree. I was never so happy... I completely forgot what my best friend had once said... "the more you laugh, the more you'll cry." When I returned home, nobody was there. A distant aunt, Mona Mahi, opened the door.

"There you are." She smiled and hugged me. "I've cooked you a nice meal. Get changed and wash up."

"Where's everybody?"

"They had to go somewhere in a hurry. They will be back in the morning."

Ma and Baba came in the morning. They avoided my gaze. A terrible fear gripped me.

"Where's Bhim? Where have you left him?"

"One day, you will understand." My skin felt cold. I remembered my mother's conversation with me. My beloved Bhim had been cast aside because the witch stole his words, because he flapped his arms, because he hid under the table.

For two days, my parents went on as before. Aunt Mona left for her home. On the third day, I suddenly knew what to do. I stopped talking. I turned my eyes away. Behave yourself, Dina. Ma said crossly. I went to Bhim's room and found the nylon rope. I twirled it endlessly, as if by doing so he would materialise here. I kept rocking to and fro on my chair, emitting a high keening sound. I wrapped the white towel Bhim used around me and spouted gibberish. Years of observing Bhim, being part of his life, made it easy to become him.

I broke their resistance. My mother wept heart-brokenly.

"My boy! My dear Bhim!"

"I'll take leave tomorrow." My father said, haggard. "Dina, come with us."

In the car, I sat silent on the back seat. The strange incidents of the past days made me feverish. I fell asleep, dreaming of dark forests, tunnels of light, a blue nylon rope, twirling on its own. When I woke up, we were driving along a narrow road towards a plain, white-washed building.

There were children like Bhim here, children lost in vast forests, not knowing how to enter the tunnels of light. Bhim was at the far end of the compound, seated on the grass, rocking to and fro. I knew what to do. I knelt by his side, held his legs and squeezed them. He let out a whoop of joy. Ma and Baba watched us. They knew I would never let my little brother go. Ever.

16.

## The new masters

Sci-fi and me? Nyet, no indeed, absolutely not, most certainly not, of course not, under no circumstance, by no means, not at all, negative, never, no thanks. By now you must get the drift. It's my dad's fault. He talked endlessly of Isaac Asimov and dystopian, Armageddon as well. Scared the voice out of me.

I don't fancy metallic voices, adversarial attitudes, strong propositions of the end of the earth. I don't like non-human enviable pectorals and biceps and spacecrafts about to disintegrate. What is the point, I murmur pointedly. And now, hold on to your hat, Star Trek and Star Wars designers have made stuff that comes from the real McCoy. If you have watched 2001: A Space Odyssey, you will see astronauts are reading and watching from flat screen tablets.

There's this pic called Snowpiercer, where the denizens eat bugs. In real life, you have protein bug bars and chips made from cricket flour. I just downloaded this app which delivers delicious food from restaurants all around the town. I painfully make enquiries into the ingredients and not surprisingly, they hang up. At this rate, they will block my phone. I deserve to know what I put in my mouth.

Amazon Echo Alexa are taking up our homes in smart ways. In the Disney film, Smart House, a house is run by a robot called PAT – Personal Applied Technology, that receives and responds to voice summons. It keeps the home spic and span, answers orders and learns about its owners. When I first heard about Alexa, I was uneasy as you can be. I thought she would have peroxide blonde hair, slavic cheek bones, legs that went on and on, could flirt in 85 languages. I saw Alexa the other day, ash grey or with uninspiring white funnels. My expectations of AI babes plummeted ways below Lara Croft.

Then, like Minority Report, you have adverts aimed at people's retinas. Louboutins for her, BMWs for him. Long live capitalism. One other thing, capitalism doesn't appeal to me either. It's too darned greedy.

Wait a bit here and do some real thinking. Not the Louboutin kind. Robots, call it AI, Robotics, all are taking over the world – whether in the U.S. or China. What does it mean? Robots are taking over our jobs. Some quarters are rejoicing. A retreat to the holiday home at Saint-Tropez. As much golf as you want. Round the world cruise, a new spouse, a much younger one, if feasible.

Then, there are the gazillions like us – middle-class, with bills to pay, mortgages to mourn over. You get up and you have nowhere to go. The suit hangs at the rack behind the door. Your eyes mist over about cooler talk and coffee breaks, the office parties where people bitched and someone was on a fast, a diet, or both.

You can't help it. You get dressed, spray more Eau de Cologne, then you drive to your office. It is as you guessed. Incredibly ugly robots are high-fiving each other and rubbishing humans. They are eating what looks like bug tortillas. Since they wear no clothes, it's kind of hard to identify them. The robot girls are easier. They have simpering voices and don't high-five. They have sabotaged you and are celebrating. How galling can it be?

When the Industrial Revolution started, the Luddites took the machines because they thought straight and thought that machines would take their jobs. They did. Now we have self-driving cars, autonomous military vehicles, androids, video conferencing mobile phones, smartphones. But what good does that do to you when you are jobless, penniless and actually twiddling your thumbs?

Let's face it, we are headed to just being tramps, huddling before Wall Street. We may even think of occupying it. But those darn robots, they got laser guns. The moral of the story is – we are seated on the very branch we're gonna chop. And it's not even funny.

I can't imagine how man could be so foolish as to create millions who do not have the empathy not to kill. We can't just tell the robot to go to the kitchen and get us a peanut butter sandwich. That is infantile logic. And the galling thing is, we have precious little to do. When Apollo was sending men to the moon, we sent surreal data there. But with our computers and technology, a rover can do all the work we could do. Why does Google need to come up with self-driven cars? I hugely enjoy doing a spot of back-seat driving for the spouse. Who's gonna do that job? How can I warn my hubby about a stationary car? How will I prove that our car is speeding when it's running abreast a galloping horse?

But what scares me most, the future of mankind will be slavery at the hands of robots. Hollywood makes robots our clones. That's a dumb idea. We have no idea what robots think.

17.

## The nameless one

Dear you,

It is strange to call you so, as if you do not have a name. But you do, and I was forbidden, in the early days of our marriage, to put that name on you, to grow close to you in the articulation of that name in the little, everyday routine of our lives. But it never happened, not even when we moved to our own house. There were so many ways I thought of the absence of your name on my tongue. In the early days, when love rose unbidden in my heart, your name, whispered in empty rooms, secretly, felt like a plum bursting with juices in my mouth.

Dear you, if only we had talked about the important things in life... not how the water pump was leaking again, or the fridge was not cooling enough. How Sharma's dogs were keeping us awake at night and that Ma's photo with the broken glass, needed to be repaired. How it was important for you to see my bank account so that I was not giving money to my mother and sisters. I could not for instance persuade you to watch the roseate clouds piled high on a pale sky where the evening star already shone. I could not tell you for instance, how a hill stream carried me as a child away for terrifying minutes. But yours was the world of receipts and invoices, tax bills, seated at the table, impassive, while outside the clouds piled over our house, whispering poetry.

Dear you,

In the ten years we have been together, we have been happy, in our own ways. Happy when expect nothing from each other, happy when you need not touch each other because the act of coupling is quick, embarrassing and unclean. We have nothing to say to each other and that saves us from misunderstanding. Sometimes I feel the words have shrivelled like petals and died at my throat and you will not notice.

You should have guessed it the first time. Seventeen pills and half a bottle of rum, gagging, as a pipe explored my insides at the clinic. After a day you brought me home. You got me apples. But you never asked me, how, a healthy, 35-year-old woman, wanted to end it all.

It perhaps never occurred to you that you were the problem. That you studied tax bills while the roseate clouds whispered poetry above.

"Don't embarrass me again," you said that night as you switched off the night lamp and turned your back to me.

Embarrass. Such an interesting word. You stumble on the road, you mistake someone for somebody else. You bump against somebody. Your shopping bag tears and potatoes and tomatoes spill on the street. You forget the name of the person who has called out to you. You utter an innuendo without meaning to. My frayed purse. My three good saris. My mother and sisters knowing things about you without being told. You peering at my bank account. That is embarrassing, a lifetime of it.

After the pills and the rum, I realised that it was impossible to die. They had implements that sucked out what you ingested and your husband warned you to never embarrass him. Switching off the light. A trivial act of trying to die. Of no consequence ever. Nobody was told.

Dear you, you could have listened. We could have met halfway. We could have shut off the leaking machine. You could have not called my death embarrassing.

But all that does not matter now. My bag is packed with the collected poems of Emily Dickinson, three good saris, the frayed purse, the discharge slip at the hospital. Strangely I am proud of it. A road almost taken. Life is full of coincidences. Your office colleague Arun invited us to their anniversary party. I had to go, you said, because it would be embarrassing. So I wore one of the three embarrassing saris, climbed my embarrassing self into my battered sandals and got into the car.

Arun and Sheela were a surprise. They were jolly, talkative, filled their walls with Anjolie Ela Menon and flirted openly with each other. Their two sons, rumbunctious boys oudid each other in gobbling pastries. Sheela took me to see her garden, star-like flowers in the dark foliage.

Then you and I got back into the car. It was late and I could see the shop shutters down. A city with a desolate air. The sugarcane man, with his blue cart, pushing his embarrassed way.

Life can change in a moment. You are breaking hard, the car jolts, there is a frisson of fear. Two men are running towards us. You back the car and speed along a bylane. We drive around in circles, my palms over my face, yours impassively facing ahead.

We reach the house at 12. You sit before the TV. An unknown car has knocked down a ten-year-old rag-picker. The CCTV camera was not working.

Dear you,

I must leave you now. It is one thing to be a murderer and another to be a coward. From now our road must diverge. When I tell the world about you, about the innocent, pitiful life you took away, there will be many who will say I must be by your side. But some wrongs must be righted and I hope you will forgive me.

Goodbye, nameless one.

## Marauders of the night

Neel and Abhi, Abhi and Neel. Regular guys who loved the great outdoors, food, driving. Neel drove 6000 miles across this vast country, relying on the kindness of strangers. Then that fateful decision to travel to a remote part of this Assam, enchanting in its tangled foliage, birdsong and gushing streams. They spent a peaceful day there... till night came, and then they knew it was the last night of their young lives.

It has been two weeks and we are grieving in our own ways. We discover friends of friends, quirky anecdotes, wistful smiles, eyes welling up. Every day, on our television screens, we see the killers hauled up, 35 in the last count. I use just one term to describe them – sub-human.

All of us like to think we are rational, sorted out individuals, capable of making our own decisions and sticking to them, contrary to what others think. And yet, in a crowd, we give up that decisive part of ourselves and join others in doing bizarre, violent things we would otherwise not even have dreamt of. This phenomenon goes far back in history and the terror of the mob in the French Revolution is too well-known to chronicle here. English football fans turn hooligans before you can blink. Hitler set off the Holocaust with the active connivance of thousands of normal German men and women with families. The same with Pol Pot in the killing fields of Cambodia or Idi Amin in Uganda.

Today, the internet is the breeding ground of mob mentality – spreading false news, inciting people, spewing hate, organising attacks, bullying the weak, destroying reputations. Whichever way you look at it, it is sexist, racist, homophobic and has driven numberless people to suicide.

A mob is manipulated by one or a close-knit group of people. These culprits feed on the fears, insecurities, superstitions of the mob. Once that is set in motion, each member eggs the other on to more violent action. It is a phase of collective insanity that will not calm down until some terrible price is extracted. If you deconstruct the violent mob, you will discover that we all have a herd mentality. It is in our DNA, when in primitive societies hunters and gatherers sought security in numbers. But this herd instinct could in many cases mutate to an orgy of mindless violence. Psychologists have formulated three theories when it comes to a mob mentality.

The first is the Contagion theory. A group of people, fuelled by a rumour, lose control, get into a hypnotic trance of violence and lose all rationality.

The next is the Convergence Theory. This is usually a positive force when people come together to forward an agenda, though there can be violence in the outcome.

The final is the Emergent Norm Theory, which is evident in cyber crimes and taking advantage of anonymity to create anarchy.

We live in an increasingly uncertain and polarised world. Social scientists, the police force, the government need to devise effective means of gauging crowd behaviour and preventing mishaps. Psychologists like Freud, Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde and Steve Reicher have done valuable work on crowd mentality. It is time to return to those texts.

Fear is the opiate that crowds are drugged on. A couple of years ago, I conversed with anti-witchcraft crusader Birubala Rabha. She described victims as men and women lynched by ignorance and superstition. She works in remote villages without electricity, roads, potable water, schools, health centres. There is already a long-simmering resentment against the powers that be. But netas sit far away, too far to reach. So they turn their hate to people among them. A whispering campaign ensues. A time is marked. Huts are set on fire. Victims are tied up and whipped. Many die, not knowing what their sins are. There are many such places in our Assam. Witchcraft, mob frenzy... all are part of a larger picture, pieces of a jigsaw puzzle we must all try to solve. And we must have the courage to think that the direction of the herd is not always right.

Neel and Abhi's deaths must not go in vain. I was filled with pride when we stepped back from the brink of retaliation. That is who we are – peaceful, tolerant, revealing grace under fire.

## My lost art of eating

This piece, like many others of its kind, begins once more with a confession. Some years ago, digging into a dusty, long-forgotten chest, I retrieved the diary I had kept when I was about nine. I promptly handed it to my younger son, the acerbic critic in the family. I was sure he would be profoundly moved by the encounter with his nine-year-old mother. “Hmmm”, he grunted after reading it. “Why did you write about food so often?”

Indignant, I snatched the diary from him, settled down in a corner, and began to read. And what do you know, he was right. Every other page celebrated Mom’s fluffy luchis with mutton curry, malpuas with cream, hilsa resting gently on mustard gravy, mutton samosas from Eee Cee in greasy paper bags and sinful pastries from New India. Some days the entry would simply state cryptically “It is a cloudy day. Mom made khichdi with brinjal fry.”

In retrospect, I should not have been upset by my son’s caustic comment. As a child I was simply recording with solemn gladness the pleasure of one of all living creature’s fundamental acts – the act of eating. Eating the food cooked by our mom or bought at restaurants by Dad was a validation of family intimacy, family stability, an intimation of safety, security and pleasure. And so it was that when I saw movies like Ray’s *Asani Sanket* on the Great Bengal Famine I was powerfully moved not only by the hunger and desperation of the sufferers, but also felt as if the absence of food meant a terrible anarchy, the breakdown of social mechanisms that ensured order and sanity.

Somewhere down the road of life, it is truly ironic that I am compelled to give up all the foods I once so lovingly recorded in my diary – simply in order to live longer and slash hospital bills. From a kind of ecstasy, almost a spiritual epiphany, ingesting food has become a problem to be discussed, clinically dissected, measured, made sugar-free, gluten-free, with all the cholesterol sucked out, rendered bland, soulless and something you want to swallow only if there’s a gun pointed at your head.

I haven’t had sugar, bread and cheese in ages. Every time I succumb to chocolate, I experience pangs of guilt, self-hatred, defeat, all mixed up together to wipe the smile off my face till I forget about it.

Years ago, I got into a spot of trouble at college. First year pre-university students were given to write an essay on “Do we live to eat or eat to live?” I set to work and somewhere along the way mentioned how the nobles in Nero’s banquet would be so satiated that they would tickle their throats with feathers to induce vomiting so that they could get on with their eating again. After we had submitted our essays, I was urgently summoned to the English Department. Two professors, including the head, quizzed me closely. Did I write the essay myself? Scared out of my wits, I said that of course I had. I think that feather tickling part was a detail that spooked them. But at Nero’s banquet, anything goes.

One of the greatest books in 20th century literature – Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* celebrates how the eating of a madeleine opens up a world of memories and associations rendered in exquisite sensuous prose. Alexander Dumas prescribed that dinner can be done justice to only by intelligent people capable of calm conversation. In the centre of Virginia Woolf’s fascinating stream of consciousness is a beef stew. Amy Tan has gone on record saying that Chinese mothers express their love for their children not with hugs and kisses but with duck’s gizzards and crabs.

In my growing up years I remember a lot of Bengali and Hindi films in which the men in the family sat cross-legged on the floor eating, as they were served and fanned by the women. This seemed to be an undeserved privilege enjoyed by the men and I silently resented it. Later, I came to know that the men left behind a piece of fish or some vegetable on their plates as a sign of generosity towards their wives. And as if this was not enough, the women sat and ate from their husbands’ plates without washing them. This is food and gender politics all skewed.

Let’s face it, food has gone way beyond being a source of sustenance and pleasure. Food is the new bogeyman, scaring us silly; worse, advice regarding food changes constantly. What is tom-tomed as good for you today will be condemned next year. Alarmists have it that whatever you eat is a ticking time bomb.

Many of us joke that we may as well have a food pill that has all the nutrients. We pop it at breakfast, lunch and dinner. No menu planning, no shopping, dicing, slicing, grinding, pureeing, stir-frying, basting, boiling, stirring and laying the table. This will leave us more time to work on our computers and click on pictures of pineapple upside down cake for a feel of the old times. What a dystopian world without dessert...!

## No country for the old

Namita Sharma, 76 (not her real name), has decided to take life one day at a time. A severe diabetic and cardiac patient, she has to tend to her husband, who is rapidly slipping into senility. Eight months ago, Namita developed a cyst on her right foot, necessitating surgery. With her three children settled abroad, Namita took the help of a nephew to get admitted to hospital. After the surgery, she was confined to bed for a fortnight. For the first time, she hired nurses to take care of herself and her husband. But there is no respite for her. She has to run the household, monitor the nurses, and keep track of the regimen of pills and tonics they have to take throughout the day. Namita is better now, but she endlessly worries about the future, when she will no longer be able to manage in this way. In her Skype calls to her children, she struggles to sound brave and cheerful.

Then there is Kiron Devi. A year ago, she had a fall and broke her wrist. The fracture healed, but her troubles were far from over. Traumatized by the accident, Kiran refused to leave her bed, not even to go to the bathroom. Her son consulted Dr. Yogiraj Das, trained in geriatric medicine and care. Dr. Das suggested that the lady required physiotherapy for her hand and psychotherapy to help her overcome her trauma. The son agreed, but nothing was done. Financial considerations could be one of the reasons for his reluctance.

Dr. Yogiraj Das is no stranger to the twilight world of the ageing, and he has many moving anecdotes about their struggles for a life of health, happiness and dignity.

Says Dr. Das, "Ageing in India is exponentially increasing due to increased life expectancy. This calls for a growth in facilities catering to their needs – social, medical, financial, etc. By 2025, the geriatric population is expected to be 840 million in the developing countries. In 2010, India had more than 91.6 million elderly and the figure is expected to be 158.4 million in 2025. Care for the elderly is fast emerging as a critical element of both public and private concern."

There is a tendency to think that healthcare for the ageing involves only medical interventions. What is needed, instead, is a total wellness therapy that takes into account how the patient feels about himself/herself. A human being is not a collection of organs. As one ages, he/she must be ensured of a good quality of life – a peaceful congenial environment, interaction with friends, sound bonding with one's children, and affordable medical care. Says Dr. Das, "Of all the patients I have treated, the most difficult are those who have an ageist mentality – negative attitude, withdrawal from the society, reluctance to participate in life. However, the needs and problems vary significantly, according to age, socio-economic status, health, living status, etc."

"As a geriatric specialist working closely with families, one cannot help but notice certain features like children's reluctance to invest in the care of their aged parents. This has a very distressful impact on the elderly, as they feel neglected and in some cases, redundant. It is very important for couples to save for the old age and not spend their entire savings on studies and marriage of their offspring. Another aspect is that an aged person must put down in writing his preferences for end-of-life medical care."

"Guwahati has seen a proliferation of senior citizen associations in the last few years. This is a very positive sign as the aged not only get to socialise, but also discuss their problems. They are also proactive as citizens. Senior citizens need to give back to the society. This gives them a sense of satisfaction."

As with every stage of life, old age has to be planned. Expectations must be realistic and the attitude pragmatic. People are being internet savvy to remain in touch with the whole world and learn something new every day. "Interacting with the aged has given me a wealth of experience. There is so much to learn from them. So many of them show such fortitude in the face of adversity. They have given the best years of life, contributing to the society and raising their families. Now they need our help in passing through this stage of their lives."

21.

## Passion for the past

Historian DR. SHIELA BORA is enamoured of the past.

The facts very much speak for themselves. The jolly, ever-smiling lady in front of me, impeccably turned out in a cream and pink sari and a strand of fetching pearls has a CV that truly impresses. Dr. Shiela Bora was a professor of History at Dibrugarh College and the co-ordinator of its Centre of Tourism Management. Post retirement, she is the guest faculty both at the History Department and Women's Studies Department at Gauhati University. She is also member of the national consultative committee for UGC's programme for capacity-building for Women in Higher Education. Two times Fulbright scholar, she did her post-doctoral at Yale University and later taught Women's History at Divinity School at Harvard University. She is a life member of the Indian History Congress.

What was it about history that fascinated Dr. Bora? "I thought I had done well in history in my school-leaving exams, but I got the lowest marks in that subject. This challenged me to take it up in earnest and restore my self-esteem. And as I went deeper into the subject, I fell in love with it. There is so much that is inherent in history – civilisation, wars, social mores, differences among people. Everything has a history and far from being a dry subject, it brims over with life.

"But the biggest blunder is that the authorities have taken away history from our syllabus. If our youth are suffering from an identity crisis, isn't it because they don't know their roots, their history, where they came from?

On the one hand, we are demanding that Indians should know about Assam, and on the other, generations of Assamese are growing up ignorant of their legacy.

"There is one respect of history that I must speak out about and that, but for a few exceptions, women are rendered voiceless and invisible in history. During the freedom movement, Gandhi called out to the women to join in the protests. Thousands of women left their homes and hearths for the sacrifice. But our historians do not give this the validity it deserves.

"I won my first Fulbright in 1986 for post-doctoral work were on women's history. My area of specialisation was the American Baptist Mission's impact on women's education in the North-East.

The most interesting aspect of Missionary activity in the field of education was their emphasis on the mother tongue. They prescribed a minimum schooling for girls where they were taught reading and writing the vernacular language, geography, history and simple arithmetic. They were given training on sewing, knitting, tailoring and Bible studies. Home schooling was also undertaken for those girls not allowed to leave home. There was tremendous resistance to educating girls and Miles Bronson himself used to face the ire of his mission in America. He was repeatedly asked not to squander money in educating the natives. When Chatribari Hospital was established, the nuns were told to give the women soaps, combs, a rudimentary knowledge of hygiene and at the most, delivery. The colonial powers had no interest in bettering the lives of Indians. In America, I came across photographs of the first American doctors in the Garo hills. I came across the private letters of the Missionaries which told of real challenges and heartbreaks they had to endure. In the US, they respect history. Every document, artifact is carefully catalogued and preserved And we have torn down our heritage buildings. The Assam Government is silent about maintaining Lakshminath Bezbaroa's house in Sambalpur, whereas the Orissa Government has already allocated funds for it. I wrote to everybody. There is silence all around." Dr. Bora is associated with INTACH and it was in that capacity that she tried to get things done.

A devoted wife and mother, Dr. Bora remains young at heart, teaching, sharing her thoughts, feeling deeply for her land and making plans for the future.

## Speak, memory

Papa, that autumn evening when the frail canoe of your life set sail alone in the vast grey waters of oblivion, the skies opened up in a sudden downpour. Trees bowed and twisted in the wind, silver raindrops pelted on the roofs, pavements, streets. The frozen sea in my heart longed for such a release, a tumultuous deluge of tears, grief, regret and love. High up on the fifth floor of the hospital, doctors and the latest technology strove to delay the moment and when it came, the next dawn, the skies were clear and blue, just as you wanted Sundays always to be. And in these two weeks that have passed, we have learnt how absence can be such a loving, constant presence. You continue to talk to us in that gentle, coaxing way. As if impelled by you, I play Mantovani, Frank Sinatra, Rabindra Sangeet on my PC late into the night. On my bedside table is your diary that you slipped into my hands when you first started forgetting to remember. In the last family photograph we took in February, in Delhi, you look slightly quizzical, disoriented, an uncertain smile on your lips. But your grip on my shoulder is firm, sure. Salman Rushdie once coined a word, forgettery – a dark cavern that sucks in memories, all facts, information, names, melodies that make up one's existence. And for you, Papa, the master raconteur and dedicated diarist, this seemed so cruel and heartbreaking, because for you the treasures of life are wholly of the mind. And in your valiant battle against the wicked troll of forgettery, my mother was an indefatigable warrior, patiently answering your puzzled queries, telling you over and over again what day of the week it was, which city you lived in, recounting anecdotes of your half-a-century of togetherness. And keeping vigil by your bedside, I read to you from Reader's Digest, sang to you snatches of songs and verse. Que Sera Sera – whatever will be, will be, the future's not ours to see. You mouthed the words with me, smiling tremulously, your hands clasped in mine and delighted that you remembered, I began to hope the wicked troll would retreat. To forget is to have the fog roll in and obscure the hills you saw a moment ago. To forget is to get lost in a labyrinthine cave near your beloved Shillong. So, you made sure that we, my mother, brother and I would have your precious legacy – diaries of every year since 1960, letters of loved ones long gone, for you believed in the sacredness of the evanescent moment.

Every dad is a hero to his children. I am Scout to your Atticus Finch – a daughter adoring a man of great integrity and idealism. Though my brother and I often got a taste of your stern, authoritarian side, you were as unpredictable as the Shillong weather, joining in with a boisterous game of throw ball, plunging headlong into the gleeful task of creating hilarious limericks and solemnly serving us coffee in orange peels during a picnic at Hydari Park because Mom forgot the cups. You were that avid fan who drove his Lambretta from Shillong, with best friend perched behind, to Guwahati and back in one day to watch the finals of the Gopinath Bordoloi Football Tournament. You almost forgot to enroll me in school, but conscientiously made me a member of the State Central Library before I learnt to read. These days when people toy around with fancy terms like "spending quality time", every moment spent with you was joyous, stimulating, unpredictable. You put us in the centre of your world and always made us feel we mattered. One query that epitomises the kind of dad was how you often gently asked me when you saw me lost in some reverie – "A penny for your thoughts?" A question like that from a brilliant, quirky father demanded brilliant, quirky answers. I think that was where my fiction came from, having to make it all up. On my 16th birthday, you gifted me a copy of the glossy Seventeen girly magazine, and also The Diary of Anne Frank. I think you wanted me to enjoy the frivolity of being a girl, but also be receptive to suffering and injustice, to count my blessings and be aware of the fragility of life.

We caught on from you that we could endlessly amuse ourselves if only we used our imagination. You initiated us into word-games, punning, learning strange words, writing, painting, singing songs, enacting skits. And one of the greatest gifts you gave us was that you freed us from the tyranny of academia – no exam was too important to merit burning the midnight oil. And yet, when we were staging our music concerts for you and Mom, you would happily urge us to go on, raising your drink and beaming, "The night is still young."

Like all children, we, too, were afraid of the dark, of ghosties and beasties and things that go bump in the night. You thought up a very original way of exorcising those demons right out of our system. One grey monsoon, during a vacation, you read aloud to us the entire edition of Bram Stoker's Dracula, transporting us to Transylvania, the baroque castle, the crepuscular vampire rising at sundown to search for his prey. Dry-mouths, cold sweat, goose bumps notwithstanding, we begged you to go on and on and you obliged, with tea breaks and quick puffs of your fag. And yet, you also shielded us from the cruel reality of life. One golden Spring morning, my hand tucked in yours, I was on my way to school. A stout youth bursting with good health and vitality came bounding down Lachumiere. He swept past us, jaywalking in the morning traffic. There was a sudden squeal of brakes, shouts of alarm. For one fleeting instance, I saw the youth sprawled on the road, inert. Then you covered my eyes with your hand and hurried me forward. Even as we proceeded, four or five policemen crossed us, half-running. I dimly realised something cataclysmic had happened, but you did not speak a word. There were other times, too, when I got my eyes covered by your big hands. It was always mystifying to sit with you watching an English movie in Kelvin and suddenly, have my eyes covered by you. It took some years to figure out why. A handy censorship was being clamped in place.

Books, music, movies, picnics, Puja outings – you made sure there was never a dull moment. But life was not all fun and games. There were life-lessons you imparted that resonate to this day. At the ripe old age of nine, I committed my first forgery. My teacher had marked 'Homework not done' on my school diary.

Scared stiff of showing it to you, I was in a dilemma. I had to have it signed by you and show it to the teacher the following day. So, I made a desperate inky squiggle, a laughably unconvincing imitation of your signature and took it to school. It aroused no suspicion. A teacher in charge of 50 girls doesn't have the luxury of noticing. I thought no more about it. Scatterbrained (your favourite word to describe me) as I was, I hadn't figured out that one day, you would have to sign the diary. Sure enough, you soon saw my evil handiwork. To put it mildly, all hell broke loose. After a gale of rage, I was banished to solitary confinement in a room with a tiny window overlooking Fruit Garden Hill. I sniffled and wept piteously for hours, heartbroken at having fallen from grace, terrified of never being forgiven. Then you did something that had me totally gobsmacked. You wrote a note for my teacher in that school diary outlining my misdemeanour and requesting her to punish me in front of the class in any manner she deemed fit. The next morning, I stood in abject misery before my teacher and handed her the note. She skimmed through it, looked at me pale and trembling – "You are a good girl," she said softly. "I'll let it pass this time."

But it was only when you kissed my forehead that evening that I felt forgiven. I bawled in relief and gave up forgery forever.

The frozen sea of grief has started to thaw as these memories come in a cavalcade. Many years ago, you brought us books on reincarnation, out of body experiences, exploration of the hereafter, extra sensory perception. Today we look for a sign you are close to us, within reach. When my mother's tears course down her cheeks, I envelop her in my arms and say things I feel only you could have spoken. When my mother sees my impatience, my quirky humour, my diary writing, you, her beloved companion for 55 years are still with her. When my brother talks to her in his calm, measured tones, full of loving concern, it is you reaching out to her.

Our father, mentor, loving husband, shy, recluse, friend, doting grandfather, dreamer and mystic, in the way we meet eternity in every second, we meet and cherish you.

## 23.

### Best foot forward

Remember that song Walk like an Egyptian ? It was fun doing those moves and it revved up one's mood. Which got me thinking. Is there a version of walk like an Assamese? Well, yes, from my experience. Assamese women don't believe in walking for walking's sake. On their evening peregrinations, they don't have the grim, no-eye contact, power strides of those hell-bent on defeating high blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol, arthritis – euphemistically named lifestyle diseases. My fellow women walkers stop every few minutes to haggle with street hawkers over bunches of khutora saak, olives, bhoot jolokia – you get the picture. So by the time she returns, she is saddled with armfuls of Nature's bounty and the original aim of walking is all but forgotten. This may be another instance of women's multi-tasking skills, but I beg to differ. For these days, when I walk, I leave my cellphone and purse behind. I believe walking is a non-commercial communion with the world. As Rebecca Solnit, author of *Wanderlust, A History of Walking* puts it so beautifully, "Walkers are practitioners of the city, for the city is made to be walked. A city is a language, a repository of possibilities, and walking is the act of speaking that language, of selecting from those possibilities."

It is a given that walking is so much more than putting one foot ahead of the other. It involves complex concepts like kinematics (pure motion), kinetics, endorphin release and things that go on within us in our marvellously engineered bodies. Some of the greatest minds, be it Gandhi, Rousseau, Dickens, Kant, Wordsworth, Jiddu Krishnamurti were compulsive walkers. Some years ago, Professor Frederic Gros brought out his *A Philosophy of Walking*. He expounds the view that walking helps one overcome all of modernity's indignities. Setting off for a walk is an act of liberation, a refusal, however temporarily, to submit to the soul-destroying tedium of one's drab duties and controlling commitments. The aimless, rambling walk is a silent protest against discipline and authoritarian surveillance by the powers that be, as well as your own family, neighbours and friends. When I leave my purse and cellphone behind, I become the hermit, needing nothing, an ascetic purged of all greed, cut off from contact, cocooned in my aloneness, seeking nothing but a mystic sense of being in the moment.

In my daily perambulations I am struck by the difference in people just walking, and those who walk for health. The health walkers are fitted out in expensive sneakers, have their earphones on, and they tear past you as if the devil is after them. Their faces are set in grim resolve, they make no eye-contact, and often look self-conscious. No pleasure is evident in their striding. They are calculating how much they have sweated, how many calories they have burnt, and whether or not the doctor will chastise them on their next visit. Even as they pound the asphalt they are figuring out how much they will save on medical bills this way.

In an accelerated and hyper-charged world where "move it, move it" is a transnational anthem, one needs to dwell on the joys of slow walking. There already is a movement for slow food, and slow walking is a wonderful way of winding down, saying no to instant gratification and discovering the humane in the alienation of urban existence. We have invented terms like power-walk, walking for a cause. What about the nameless women of rural India who walk the entire day to fetch water for their families? They don't have the luxury of opting out of a walk.

We Guwahatians are keenly awaiting November 25, when we will get to know if our city makes it to the

list of top 20 smart cities of India. People have a very nebulous idea of what constitutes a smart city. In Wikipedia, a smart city uses digital technologies or information and communication technologies to enhance quality and performance of urban services, and to engage more effectively with its citizens. This space does not permit a polemical discourse on whether we will or will not make it to the top 20. Even if Guwahati is not a smart city, its denizens are street smart, and literally so. The nubile nymph with her mincing walk crosses roads even while cooing into her cellphone. The doughty pensioner doesn't fall headlong into the basket of Singimari tomatoes on the pavement. The portly matron stretches her mekhela just enough to bound nimbly over a manhole. The earring-wearing, mohawk-styled youth outsmarts traffic jams by zooming over the pavement, never mind the angry mutters of pedestrians. Smart is the chanawallah who positions his glass box plonk in front of a wine shop. So is the momo man, lying in wait outside coaching institutions for the hungry young crowd. Somewhere along the way, the elderly and the children are being edged out of the streets. Walking in Guwahati, alas, is no more a safe activity. Fewer children walk to school. For senior citizens, air and noise pollution, the murderous traffic, open manholes, lack of proper streetlight make an evening's walk a recipe for disaster. Open spaces are shrinking, parks are few and far apart. All this does not bode well for walkers. Indeed, some have abandoned the open air for gyms. I am not about to let another human being dictate how I move myself. I will keep walking the city I love, assuring myself that it is far safer than Arundhati Roy trudging for miles in India's Maoist heartland to pen her expose. Now that is what you would call a walk on the wild side. Most of us, yours truly included, are happy with more prosaic peregrinations. And walking our crowded pavements provides a life-lesson in tolerance – something that is in short supply in India at the moment.

24.

## Tears and birdsong.

At some unknown hour of the night, the girl melted away. There was a high brick wall all around the housing colony, girding the eight apartment blocks, shutting off with bricks and barbed wire the clubhouse, the society office, the badminton court and the namghar. So the girl must have slipped like a faint, sad, wispy shadow, past the gate where the lone security guard sat, cheap liquor on his breath, snoring on his chair in the cubicle, the visitors' register open before him on the table.

She must have seen the shuttered shops out on the road, the halogen streetlights with their sickly orange glow, the bushes thick with dust. The barks of street dogs somewhere near, and then, echoing from afar, the answering barks. To the north, along the new highway, the trucks were thundering past, now slowing with a squeal of brakes, now accelerating.

How frightened she must have been. An eleven-year-old in a pink frock two sizes too large, fastened at the back with a safety pin. Two fragile glass bangles encircled her thin left wrist. She carried nothing else. Nothing, that is, but the bluish, purple bruise on the tender flesh of her left thigh. The black tar on the road felt hard on her feet, the warm stickiness of blood. Then the night swallowed her up.

The darkness passed and dawn broke. A few came out in the early hours, when the cry of the azaan could be heard, and newspaper vendors cycled in through the gates. Many of the men and women who walked briskly along the neat lanes within the walled complex were past their prime. They had bought flats here, in this gated community, because the air was fresh and clean, there was open space and birdsong and the gentle hills to the east seemed so close. Together, they had planted saplings which were now shady, blossoming trees. Morning walks, informal meets at the clubhouse, Major Jogesh Barua and his army jokes, Chanchala Devi's tremulous outpourings in verse ... There was fond pride about children working far away, in Bangalore and New Jersey, and framed pictures of grandchildren in the living rooms. Empty nest, they told each other, wryly, smiling. They were now free, and could do anything they liked. Only, there was nothing to do.

But it was not that they were all similar. For ten families which were respectable, thrifty, abiding by the rules of the building society, signing petitions, offering help to an ailing neighbour even in the middle of the night, there was one which did not fit in, kept to themselves, wary whenever their doorbell was rung. Each such family was like a small hole in a carefully stitched patchwork quilt, the thread unravelling. Flat B21, where the polite, bearded young man lived with his wife. He was in the construction business, he said. But they found out soon enough he was one of those who had laid down arms, who had once done things they talked about only in lowered tones. They imagined him often in a forest, waiting to kill. Then there was Bornali Garg, a divorcee living with her teenage son. It must have been her fault. She was beginning to wear deeper shades of lipstick, even as the boy got into more trouble at school. But everyone was unfailingly polite to those who did not fit in, who had secrets and could not belong, or welcome them in without a troubled shadow flitting across their faces.

Nisha and Pronoy bought the fifth floor flat, one of the three bedroom, east facing ones and moved in one September afternoon. The facts emerged, discreet enquiries, the gossip of servants. Married for a year now, they had been staying with his parents on the other side of the city. All day, the packers and movers lifted leather sofas, the wrought iron bed, boxes of books, crockery, up the stairs. The woman gave orders, like a man. The Hazarikas saw her first on the landing, in jeans, her hair in a ponytail, talking on the phone, her hand on her hip. She looked right through them.

There was something new, disquieting, with the arrival of this couple. Cars driving in at late hours, carrying friends to their housewarming party. Shrill laughter at midnight.

"No puja, no prasad, but lots of whisky bottles," Anita Sarma's lips were thinly pressed. "The music was so loud. We couldn't sleep. We are decent people. What is this nonsense?"

Pronoy and Nisha brought with them the heat of youth, the restlessness of the city lying in wait beyond the brick wall girding the colony. She often stood on the balcony, in a terry robe, after her bath, coffee mug in hand. A sleek cat exquisite in her languor, her aloofness. Pronoy smiled at the neighbours, but only when Nisha was not with him. He looked the decent sort, bespectacled, with a low, pleasant voice. On Sundays, he washed the Esteem, rubbing and polishing it till it shone. He did not look unhappy that she had made him leave his home. That was how it was, now, the women nodded, knowing.

One by one, they all noticed the swelling under Nisha's clothes. Then came the luminous glow on her face, and the contours of her body became softer, rounded. Until, one day, she was so big that Pronoy had to help her up the steps, slowly, tenderly. The middle aged Garima, Abha and Anita, chatting after the namghar prayers, wondered how one could tempt fate by buying a baby cot and so many stuffed toys before the delivery. And was it not strange how nobody from her side or his visited?

When her water broke, twenty days ahead of the date, at one in the morning, he was white-faced and trembling, ringing the Hazarika's doorbell. "We drove her to the nursing home for Pronoy's sake," Anita explained. "He's a good sort."

Little Nainita, or Noni, was born by caesarean section and came home a week later. A few of the women came to see her with gifts of baby clothes, Johnson baby powder, oil and shampoo, blankets. It was the decent thing to do, and now this young woman, all out of shape and her belly spliced, was no more a threat to them. She greeted them stiffly, relying on Pronoy to fill in the gaps in the small talk.

Till then, they had not known there was another child, besides little Nainita, in that flat. It was Garima with her powerful bifocal glasses who saw the brown feet, toes splayed wide, behind the curtain that screened the balcony.

Moments later, Maina wandered in, blinking in the light, eyeing the three visitors with alarm. The faded blue frock was too large on her scrawny frame. A tiny stud on her nostril, eyes black as the night, her big ears sticking out of her shaven head.

"Go inside. I told you to wash the plates." Nisha's voice cracked like a whip.

"Got her two days back, seems retarded. Would you like tea? Coffee then? But you must, ... Aunty."

Maina's head had been shaved so that the lice would not spread to the baby's hair. They had made her bathe with Dettol. She was not to wear slippers in the house. Anita Hazarika got these facts from Maina herself, when Nisha took the baby to the doctor, or visited friends. Maina slept on the carpet, slapping mosquitos that fed on her blood all night. Mrs. Chaliha of the ground floor flat found the bald child munching a slice of mouldy bread from a waste bin. She felt disgusted and quickly closed her door.

Then two things happened at the same time. Little Noni was not too well. When she cried, her face turned blue. There was a wheezing, rattling sound when she breathed. She grew too tired to suck her mother's nipple. Pronoy was always driving to the doctor, tense, unsmiling, hands gripped on the steering wheel. The doctor suspected asthma. Nebulisers were prescribed. More tests, more precautions. At the namghar, they repeated what they had said before the baby's birth. Why buy teddy bears in advance and tempt fate?

As Noni struggled to breathe, life for Maina became harsher, more uncertain. Gossiping servants, sly, observant elderly women who had too much time in their hands, all pooled in the details of what was slowly unravelling in the fifth floor flat, once filled with music, the clink of glasses, the heat of youth. All day, the television was on, but Nisha's voice rose above it, filled with rage as the bald little girl, trembling, dropped dishes, let the baby clothes fly away in the wind, left the fridge door open. Sometimes, Maina would be let out on some errand. Some man or woman always noted the fear in the enormous pools of sadness in her eyes, and the tiny smile she gave them, as if she believed they would do something.

Spring came. The green and trembling leaves spoke of new beginnings. Little Noni was better. The asthma was always worse in winter, said Pronoy to Major Barua. Now Maina walked around the campus with Noni in her arms, jiggling her up and down, kissing her cheeks, showing her the flying birds, the rosy clouds, children riding tricycles. She was a little mother now, pouring her love into the cooing, gurgling baby, holding Noni close to the two tiny mounds of her budding breasts.

Later, the men shook their heads and refused to discuss it. It was too shameful. The women could not discuss anything else. But in those endless conversations eddying like water in a fetid pool, nothing new was learned, or ever revealed. The beautiful young wife with her confident body and the beginning of her new life had made all of them feel old, spent and faded. But now it was proved they were better women, far better than she would ever be. They could never dream of doing what Nisha did in one of her blind, consuming rages.

Maina was pushed out of the house, the door slammed behind her. It could have been the girl's chance to escape, to go back to wherever she came from. But she would not go. She was shrieking and hammering at the door, calling out to her Baideo. Annoyed, Mrs. Hazarika opened her door a few inches to peek out. Maina was naked. The child's face was contorted with horror. She was like a little animal that, through an ancient knowledge in its blood, knows that the end is near. When she saw Mrs. Hazarika, she streaked past her, howling. For twenty, was it thirty minutes, the naked girl ran around crying, up the stairs, along corridors, down on the grassy open. One by one, people stood still, watching her, dumbfounded.

Jatin, the security guard, caught her just as she was running out of the campus. He wrapped her with his shirt and carried her to the fifth floor flat.

"I wanted to ask that woman why she did that to the poor girl," said Garima afterwards, "What could Maina have done that was so bad? Breaking a cup? Stealing food from the fridge? I think it was something else. That girl was growing up ..."

Two days later, Maina was gone. Nobody saw her go. They were so relieved. Mrs. Hazarika could now enjoy television without the keening of a girl being beaten next door. It was a good place to stay, again. All of them, as if by common consent, avoided Nisha and her family. Nobody asked her why. She had no right to disturb them, to ruffle the serenity of their lives here, where the air was fresh and clean, and there was birdsong.

25.

## Small wonder

We do, indeed, live in a world of contradictions. On the one hand, you are asked to think big, dream big, but on the other, hosannas are sung for cutting edge, futuristic nanotechnology. Our tweets are limited to a mere 44 characters and our texting is full of compressed words that seem gibberish to the uninitiated. And yet, every singer, actor, writer, athlete thinks of fame in global terms. Given a choice between big and small, I have a natural affinity for the underdog and would like to cheer for small. The dictionary describes small as a size that is less than normal or usual. Its many synonyms include bijou, miniature, minute, microscopic, wee, tiny and my favourite is teensy-weensy.

A slender woman is described as small-boned, petite and elfin. Slender men are unkindly termed puny, undersized, stubby, dwarf, midget and even the Swiftian Lilliputian. Former French president Sarkozy would know how it feels. I know a Chinese eatery in the city which is ordinary in all respects. Its interiors are gloomy, the furniture quite ugly, the dim lights camouflage the seediness, though the food is good. However, the life of that place is a tubby dwarf who waddles up and down the aisle with a cherubic smile on his button-nosed face, his eyes reaching just table-top level and one can't help but smile back between mouthfuls of hakka noodles.

But then, the word 'small' goes beyond the dimensions of size. It implies being of not much importance, or as something trivial. You are small (now we add the doubly insulting fry after it) if you hold a humble position. It also indicates a certain narrowness of outlook, a provincial mentality derided by city slickers. You may have come across the American expression "don't sweat the small stuff." It's a breezy informal way (the Americans are real good at this) to remind you not to worry about unnecessary details, since the big picture is what really matters. But in this fiercely competitive dog eat dog times, some driven management guru twisted it around to goad you into actually sweating the small stuff because every detail is important when it comes to creating the big picture. Now you know why companies, American ones included, have such high attrition levels.

The phrase small is beautiful is pretty shopworn by now. But some of the most enthralling things are, indeed, teensy-weensy. Think snow flakes. No two are alike in the intricacy of their designs. Think dewdrops asleep on blushing petals. Think bonsai and haiku of the Japanese, those exquisite miniature replicas of trees and haiku, a form of poetry just three lines in length.

Going through Zen-like meditations of the former Samurai Basho's haikus, I came up with one that made me chuckle. It says simply – Why so scrawny, eat? Starving for fat fish/or mice.../ or backyard love? Small is big in contemporary minimalist literature. It looks like flash fiction is the rage these days. A style of fictional literature, it is marked by extreme brevity. The stories can vary in length from 53 to a 1,000 words. This genre is variously described as micro fiction, micro narrative, postcard fiction and sudden fiction. Is it written in the tacit understanding that our collective attention spans getting lower, and our lives moving at an ever more frenetic pace? A pace in which you can read a teensy-weensy story on your phone when someone is making yet another boring PowerPoint presentation at a dreary convention hall? It seems they have these stories in China, too. They call them smoke long, the implication being that the story can be read before you finish smoking a cigarette. Flash fiction's most haunting and memorable example is the Hemingway classic of six words "For sale, Baby shoes. Never worn." Can you feel the pang of loss?

I am a new convert to flash fiction, though I do worry about the future of the short story, challenged as it is by this abbreviative trend. Anushree Nande is a young Mumbai-based editor and author who is this delicate, adorable wispy nerd in glasses with a postgraduate degree in creative writing and media from Edge Hill University UK. Last year, we had e-mailed back and forth as we readied my collection of short stories for the publishers she worked for. It soon developed into a warm friendship and last week, she mailed me her e-book – 55 Words, published by Underground Voices of Los Angeles. An anthology of 46 distilled pieces – each running into exactly 55 words, they are taut, enigmatic, tantalising and gets you hooked. The first, named Stories, perhaps sums up Anushree's literary intent. It says "Does something incomplete still qualify as a whole? Does one have to be aware of everything that went on before to understand what is to come? What if something goes on long after what we think is the end? A journey without a final destination, he decided that's what he would call his story." Her book is a miniaturised world of unexpected images, pomegranate shampoo and chipped, broken ridges of a seashell, hair and relationships going awry, a couple on a blanket under a sky full of stars. The tense, staccato lines resonate with a wistful poignancy, a longing to hold back the fleeting moment. The rootlessness of modern life, the constant sense of being transplanted into the elsewhere, comes through with urgency. A powerful existentialist query is expressed as "can the person you were exist when all you have known is gone?" A little boy wakens up to the alarm clock trilling. He brushes his teeth, combs his hair, has chocolate milk with a neon straw, a neatly chopped banana and jam on toast, with the edges cut off. He

has to learn about animals and numbers one to 20. When his mother straps him to the back-seat, he wonders why grown-ups hated Mondays. Is the author summoning up the reassurances of childhood, the soothing comfort of a banal routine? Or could it be sarcasm about a modern urban child's regimented existence? It is for the reader to decide and that is the beauty of Anushree's work... that you get to complete it, interpret it according to your own life experiences.

In yet another context, miracles come in small sizes. Journalist Syed Zarir Hussain introduced us to the amazing eight-year-old child prodigy, Kautilya Pandit, who took our breath away with his prodigious knowledge of the world around him. When Zarir first got in touch with him over phone, the wee lad fired away questions about Assam... its population, culture, festivals. Soon he was the star attraction on television, live shows, with police actually having to do a mild lathi charge to manage the curious crowds outside a venue. Kautilya has an IQ higher than Einstein and a phenomenal memory. Over the months, Zarir felt that the gifted boy needed to be protected from too much public scrutiny. Since he could remember everything, it was vital to give him the right information. The small wonder today has morphed into a big phenomenon. He has just delivered a motivational talk to an astonished gathering of NRIs in London. When he is 12, he will take a shot at the IIT entrance exam. This little genius from Karnal has won the hearts of millions and made us realise the infinite capacity of the human brain. He is our Google Boy, a human search engine with a gargantuan appetite for knowledge.

In the end, one can find the answer to the dichotomy between small and big through these meaningful words by futurologist author Alvin Toffler "You've got to think about big things while you are doing small things, so that all small things go in the right direction." That about sums it up.

26.

## Rolling through time

For on the left, with just a sandbank beyond the road, was a vast sea of water rippling in the afternoon light. It winked, it glinted, it beckoned, seduced, and ultimately, ignored the viewer.

Know what? Heraclitus had a point there. He said no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and has not the same man. I just wished he had included the term women too. For me, it is not so much about stepping into the Brahmaputra as about the images, colours and memories its vast waters awaken in me. It began when I was about five. My quirky dad decided to present me with two double whammies on my unsuspecting self, that long ago sunny afternoon. He hoisted me onto his lap for the first rickshaw ride of my life. What was this winged contraption whishing by, driven by a man with the desperation of one after whom the devil himself was hotfooting? I shrieked, shut my eyes, grabbed my father's shirt pocket and felt the cold rush of the wind all around me. After some moments I cautiously opened one eye and was again dumbfounded. For on the left, with just a sandbank beyond the road, was a vast sea of water rippling in the afternoon light. It winked, it glinted, it beckoned, seduced, and ultimately, ignored the viewer. This long lost afternoon's experience was a study in dichotomy... me on a ridiculous contraption finding it tough to negotiate the space from point A to point B and an old river, lazily drifting by for thousands of years, supremely indifferent to me, or anyone else. It was an early lesson on humility.

Then one was in college and the one bright spot was that, one got to see the river if you got a window seat in the bus for ten whole minutes. It was food for the soul that flat mirror reflecting the colours of the sky, the dhobis spreading out, washing on the sandbanks. Green and white IWT ferries tethered by iron chains to roadside trees. Ramshackle shanties on the sands on the very edge of the river, pitiful slapping together of tin sheets and sacking, where people loved and fought, dreamed and created even more babies to crawl around butt naked on those sands. And the breeze catching your hair, till you catch yourself thinking you are almost beautiful and nothing seems impossible any longer, those hills beyond the river seem closer now that you have seen more of the world. In the impetuosity of youth many of us yearned to be like the river – without boundaries, always rolling forward, growing wide and deep with experience, swelling back after the thin channels of winter, surging our own song, boundless and free. Always on those rides to college, there would be a corpulent man seated on a sheet on the pavement, his back to the river. A parrot fretted about in a cage, and cards were laid out on the sheet. Your future was decided by the parrot selecting a certain card. And the customers were poor men who carried sacks of grains to the godowns and women in oiled buns and gaudy saris who swept the pavements with long brooms. And yet the river behind them, as do the Rhine and Mississippi, the Tigris, Euphrates and the Hwang Ho, remind us by their flowing that we are on an onward journey that promises no return, and there are powers too colossal for us to measure out with our little spoons.

Mark Twain, Marquez, many have written about rivers in gripping detail. But the one I root for the most is Orhan Pamuk's rendering of his beloved Bosphorus. Pamuk discovers in it the imperial past of Turkey in and out of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. He finds in the river a continuity that is lacking in politics and the rapid transformation of his city. He often goes on ferry rides, feeling the engine throbbing underneath, watching the retreating banks, the flotsam and jetsam drifting with the current, headlights of cars on distant roads. He is sunk in a strange melancholy, as if handcuffed to the destiny of his birth city. It is good, this melancholy. For he has brushstroked these experiences, seemingly mundane, but unbearably sweet, with the power to reach everyone who has ever lived by a river... or yearns to live by one.

Bad weather dampened our family's enthusiasm for the recent Namami festival. To make up for it, this evening, we were on a cruise on the river. Bihu, Sattriya dance, gayan bayan, modern songs – beautifully choreographed. As the cruise boat glided in the dark waters, we saw the illuminated second Saraighat Bridge far to the north. The guests were dancing with such vigour that I had a moment's misgiving of the deck groaning and splitting apart. As no icebergs were in sight, the dancing could orchestrate a Titanic in C-Minor. It is sometimes best to leave the imagination on the shore. As we guests partook of the delicious

buffet below, a large group of men, who had been dancing with such joyful abandon moments before, was in this kind of huddle with their boss hectoring them about focus, commitment, group co-ordination and winning strategy. So that's what it was – an office-sponsored trip to make young men work harder and harder till the river disappears entirely from their view.