

falling  
in love  
again

*Stories of Love and Romance*

RUSKIN  
BOND



The book cover features a dense, repeating pattern of colorful butterflies and flowers. The butterflies, in shades of blue, orange, and purple, are scattered throughout the design. The flowers include large pink and purple blossoms, as well as smaller, spiky purple flowers. The background is a light, neutral color, making the vibrant colors of the butterflies and flowers stand out. The text is centered on the cover.

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**Ruskin Bond** has been writing for over sixty years, and has now over 120 titles in print—novels, collections of stories, poetry, essays, anthologies and books for children. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, received the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys award in 1957. He has also received the Padma Shri, and two awards from the Sahitya Akademi—one for his short stories and another for his writings for children. In 2012, the Delhi government gave him its Lifetime Achievement award.

Born in 1934, Ruskin Bond grew up in Jamnagar, Shimla, New Delhi and Dehradun. Apart from three years in the UK, he has spent all his life in India, and now lives in Mussoorie with his adopted family.

A shy person, Ruskin says he likes being a writer because 'When I'm writing there's nobody *watching* me. Today, it's hard to find a profession where you're not being watched!'

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RUSKIN BOND



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*To  
Vishal and Rekha Bhardwaj,  
great artistes,  
wonderful people.*

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## *Acknowledgements*

# Introduction

I was going through the romantic poets, looking for a quote to head this little introduction, but somehow the right sentiments eluded me. I guess I've grown too old and jaded to go into raptures over Romeo and Juliet or Laila and Majnu and their tragic ends; all too depressing! So I turned to my old friend P.G. Wodehouse and came up with the following line, which I felt was just right for me:

‘You know, the way love can change a fellow, is truly frightful to contemplate.’

Wodehouse's heroes usually make asses of themselves when they fall in love, and so do most of us. Certainly I made an ass of myself time and again (and still do), but when, in my twenties and thirties I sat down to write about my broken heart, I took myself very seriously.

Falling in love is probably the best thing that can happen to a young writer; it gives a certain spontaneity and intensity to his writing. Stories such as ‘The Night Train at Deoli’, ‘The Eyes Have It’ and ‘Time Stops at Shamli’ were written when I was in my early twenties, and have stood the test of time quite well. Fifty years after they were written they still turn up in anthologies aimed at both the young and the old.

In my thirties I came to live in the hills, and my love stories were now greatly influenced by the world of nature. Thus, ‘Binya Passes By’ and ‘On Fairy Hill’ have a magical, other-worldly feeling about them.

The supernatural element also turns up occasionally in a lighter vein, there is ‘The Girl from Copenhagen’ and ‘Who Kissed Me in the Dark?’ And sometimes, in a contemplative mood, I write the occasional poem.

I haven't stopped writing about love. My life has been one long love story, and I have loved people, I have loved books, I have loved flowers, the sun, moon and stars, old roads, old trees, children, grannies, butterflies, seashells, fairies... And of course I keep falling in love, for where love begins, there is the border of heaven.

Ruskin Bond  
January 2013



# The Eyes Have It

I had the train compartment to myself up to Rohana, then a girl got in. The couple who saw her off were probably her parents. They seemed very anxious about her comfort and the woman gave the girl detailed instructions as to where to keep her things, when not to lean out of windows, and how to avoid speaking to strangers.

They called their goodbyes and the train pulled out of the station. As I was totally blind at the time, my eyes sensitive only to light and darkness, I was unable to tell what the girl looked like. But I knew she wore slippers from the way they slapped against her heels.

It would take me some time to discover something about her looks and perhaps I never would. But I liked the sound of her voice and even the sound of her slippers.

‘Are you going all the way to Dehra?’ I asked.

I must have been sitting in a dark corner because my voice startled her. She gave a little exclamation and said, ‘I didn’t know anyone else was here.’

Well, it often happens that people with good eyesight fail to see what is right in front of them. They have too much to take in, I suppose. Whereas people who cannot see (or see very little) have to take in only the essentials, whatever registers tellingly on their remaining senses.

‘I didn’t see you either,’ I said. ‘But I heard you come in.’

I wondered if I would be able to prevent her from discovering that I was blind. Provided I keep to my seat, I thought, it shouldn’t be too difficult.

The girl said, ‘I’m getting off at Saharanpur. My aunt is meeting me there.’

‘Then I had better not get too familiar,’ I replied. ‘Aunts are usually formidable creatures.’

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘To Dehra and then to Mussoorie.’

‘Oh, how lucky you are. I wish I were going to Mussoorie. I love the hills. Especially in October.’

‘Yes, this is the best time,’ I said, calling on my memories. ‘The hills are covered with wild dahlias, the sun is delicious, and at night you can sit in front of a log fire and drink a little brandy. Most of the tourists have gone and the roads are quiet and almost deserted. Yes, October is the best time.’

She was silent. I wondered if my words had touched her or whether she thought me a romantic fool. Then I made a mistake.

‘What is it like outside?’ I asked.

She seemed to find nothing strange in the question. Had she noticed already that I could not see? But her next question removed my doubts.

‘Why don’t you look out of the window?’ she asked.

I moved easily along the berth and felt for the window ledge. The window was open and I faced it, making a pretence of studying the landscape. I heard the panting of the engine, the rumble of the wheels, and, in my mind’s eye I could see telegraph posts flashing by.

‘Have you noticed,’ I ventured, ‘that the trees seem to be moving while we seem to be standing still?’

‘That always happens,’ she said. ‘Do you see any animals?’

‘No,’ I answered quite confidently. I knew that there were hardly any animals left in the forests near Dehra.

I turned from the window and faced the girl and for a while we sat in silence.

‘You have an interesting face,’ I remarked. I was becoming quite daring but it was a safe remark. Few girls can resist flattery. She laughed pleasantly—a clear, ringing laugh.

‘It’s nice to be told I have an interesting face. I’m tired of people telling me I have a pretty face.’

Oh, so you do have a pretty face, thought I. And aloud I said: ‘Well, an interesting face can also be pretty.’

‘You are a very gallant young man,’ she said. ‘But why are you so serious?’

I thought, then, that I would try to laugh for her, but the thought of laughter only made me feel troubled and lonely.

‘We’ll soon be at your station,’ I said.

‘Thank goodness it’s a short journey. I can’t bear to sit in a train for more than two or three hours.’

Yet I was prepared to sit there for almost any length of time, just to listen to her talking. Her voice had the sparkle of a mountain stream. As soon as she left the train she would forget our brief encounter. But it would stay with me for the rest of the

journey and for some time after.

The engine's whistle shrieked, the carriage wheels changed their sound and rhythm, the girl got up and began to collect her things. I wondered if she wore her hair in a bun or if it was plaited. Perhaps it was hanging loose over her shoulders. Or was it cut very short?

The train drew slowly into the station. Outside, there was the shouting of porters and vendors and a high-pitched female voice near the carriage door. That voice must have belonged to the girl's aunt.

'Goodbye,' the girl said.

She was standing very close to me. So close that the perfume from her hair was tantalizing. I wanted to raise my hand and touch her hair but she moved away. Only the scent of perfume still lingered where she had stood.

There was some confusion in the doorway. A man, getting into the compartment, stammered an apology. Then the door banged and the world was shut out again. I returned to my berth. The guard blew his whistle and we moved off. Once again I had a game to play and a new fellow traveller.

The train gathered speed, the wheels took up their song, the carriage groaned and shook. I found the window and sat in front of it, staring into the daylight that was darkness for me. So many things were happening outside the window. It could be a fascinating game guessing what went on out there. The man who had entered the compartment broke into my reverie.

'You must be disappointed,' he said. 'I'm not nearly as attractive a travelling companion as the one who just left.'

'She was an interesting girl,' I said. 'Can you tell me—did she keep her hair long or short?'

'I don't remember,' he said sounding puzzled. 'It was her eyes I noticed, not her hair. She had beautiful eyes but they were of no use to her. She was completely blind. Didn't you notice?'

# The Night Train at Deoli

When I was at college I used to spend my summer vacations in Dehra, at my grandmother's place. I would leave the plains early in May and return late in July. Deoli was a small station about thirty miles from Dehra. It marked the beginning of the heavy jungles of the Indian Terai.

The train would reach Deoli at about five in the morning when the station would be dimly lit with electric bulbs and oil lamps and the jungle across the railway tracks would just be visible in the faint light of dawn. Deoli had only one platform, an office for the stationmaster and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendor, and a few stray dogs; not much else because the train stopped there for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forests.

Why it stopped at Deoli, I don't know. Nothing ever happened there. Nobody got off the train and nobody got in. There were never any coolies on the platform. But the train would halt there a full ten minutes and then a bell would sound, the guard would blow his whistle, and presently Deoli would be left behind and forgotten.

I used to wonder what happened in Deoli behind the station walls. I always felt sorry for that lonely little platform and for the place that nobody wanted to visit. I decided that one day I would get off the train at Deoli and spend the day there just to please the town.

I was eighteen, visiting my grandmother, and the night train stopped at Deoli. A girl came down the platform selling baskets.

It was a cold morning and the girl had a shawl thrown across her shoulders. Her feet were bare and her clothes were old but she was a young girl, walking gracefully and with dignity.

When she came to my window, she stopped. She saw that I was looking at her intently but at first she pretended not to notice. She had a pale skin, set off by shiny black hair and dark, troubled eyes. And then those eyes, searching and eloquent, met mine.

She stood by my window for some time and neither of us said anything. But when she moved on, I found myself leaving my seat and going to the carriage door. I

stood waiting on the platform looking the other way. I walked across to the tea stall. A kettle was boiling over on a small fire but the owner of the stall was busy serving tea somewhere on the train. The girl followed me behind the stall.

‘Do you want to buy a basket?’ she asked. ‘They are very strong, made of the finest cane. . .’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I don’t want a basket.’

We stood looking at each other for what seemed a very long time and she said, ‘Are you sure you don’t want a basket?’

‘All right, give me one,’ I said and took the one on top and gave her a rupee, hardly daring to touch her fingers.

As she was about to speak, the guard blew his whistle. She said something but it was lost in the clanging of the bell and the hissing of the engine. I had to run back to my compartment. The carriage shuddered and jolted forward.

I watched her as the platform slipped away. She was alone on the platform and she did not move, but she was looking at me and smiling. I watched her until the signal-box came in the way and then the jungle hid the station. But I could still see her standing there alone. . .

I stayed awake for the rest of the journey. I could not rid my mind of the picture of the girl’s face and her dark, smouldering eyes.

But when I reached Dehra the incident became blurred and distant, for there were other things to occupy my mind. It was only when I was making the return journey, two months later, that I remembered the girl.

I was looking out for her as the train drew into the station and I felt an unexpected thrill when I saw her walking up the platform. I sprang off the footboard and waved to her.

When she saw me, she smiled. She was pleased that I remembered her. I was pleased that she remembered me. We were both pleased and it was almost like a meeting of old friends.

She did not go down the length of the train selling baskets but came straight to the tea stall. Her dark eyes were suddenly filled with light. We said nothing for some time but we couldn’t have been more eloquent.

I felt the impulse to put her on the train there and then and take her away with me. I could not bear the thought of having to watch her recede into the distance of Deoli station. I took the baskets from her hand and put them down on the ground. She put out her hand for one of them but I caught her hand and held it.

‘I have to go to Delhi,’ I said.

She nodded. ‘I do not have to go anywhere.’

The guard blew his whistle for the train to leave and how I hated the guard for doing that.

‘I will come again,’ I said. ‘Will you be here?’

She nodded again and, as she nodded, the bell clanged and the train slid forward. I had to wrench my hand away from the girl and run for the moving train.

This time I did not forget her. She was with me for the remainder of the journey and for long after. All that year she was a bright, living thing. And when the college term finished I packed in haste and left for Dehra earlier than usual. My grandmother would be pleased at my eagerness to see her.

I was nervous and anxious as the train drew into Deoli because I was wondering what I should say to the girl and what I should do. I was determined that I wouldn’t stand helplessly before her, hardly able to speak or do anything about my feelings.

The train came to Deoli and I looked up and down the platform but I could not see the girl anywhere.

I opened the door and stepped off the footboard. I was deeply disappointed and overcome by a sense of foreboding. I felt I had to do something and so I ran up to the stationmaster and said, ‘Do you know the girl who used to sell baskets here?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said the stationmaster. ‘And you’d better get on the train if you don’t want to be left behind.’

But I paced up and down the platform and stared over the railings at the station yard. All I saw was a mango tree and a dusty road leading into the jungle. Where did the road go? The train was moving out of the station and I had to run up the platform and jump for the door of my compartment. Then, as the train gathered speed and rushed through the forests, I sat brooding in front of the window.

What could I do about finding a girl I had seen only twice, who had hardly spoken to me, and about whom I knew nothing—absolutely nothing—but for whom I felt a tenderness and responsibility that I had never felt before?

My grandmother was not pleased with my visit after all because I didn’t stay at her place more than a couple of weeks. I felt restless and ill at ease. So I took the train back to the plains, meaning to ask further questions of the stationmaster at Deoli.

But at Deoli there was a new stationmaster. The previous man had been transferred to another post within the past week. The new man didn’t know anything about the girl who sold baskets. I found the owner of the tea stall, a small, shrivelled-up man, wearing greasy clothes, and asked him if he knew anything about the girl with the baskets.

‘Yes, there was such a girl here. I remember quite well,’ he said. ‘But she has

stopped coming now.'

'Why?' I asked. 'What happened to her?'

'How should I know?' said the man. 'She was nothing to me.'

And once again I had to run for the train.

As Deoli platform receded, I decided that one day I would have to break journey there, spend a day in the town, make enquiries, and find the girl who had stolen my heart with nothing but a look from her dark, impatient eyes.

With this thought I consoled myself throughout my last term in college. I went to Dehra again in the summer and when, in the early hours of the morning, the night train drew into Deoli station, I looked up and down the platform for signs of the girl, knowing I wouldn't find her but hoping just the same.

Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to break journey at Deoli and spend a day there. (If it was all fiction or a film, I reflected, I would have got down and cleaned up the mystery and reached a suitable ending for the whole thing.) I think I was afraid to do this. I was afraid of discovering what really happened to the girl. Perhaps she was no longer in Deoli, perhaps she was married, perhaps she had fallen ill. . .

In the last few years I have passed through Deoli many times and I always look out of the carriage window half expecting to see the same unchanged face smiling up at me. I wonder what happens in Deoli, behind the station walls. But I will never break my journey there. It may spoil my game. I prefer to keep hoping and dreaming and looking out of the window up and down that lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets.

I never break my journey at Deoli but I pass through as often as I can.



# Tribute to a Dead Friend

Now that Thanh is dead, I suppose it is not too treacherous of me to write about him. He was only a year older than I. He died in Paris, in his twenty-second year, and Pravin wrote to me from London and told me about it. I will get more details from Pravin when he returns to India next month. Just now I only know that Thanh is dead.

It is supposed to be in very bad taste to discuss a person behind his back and to discuss a dead person is most unfair, for he cannot even retaliate. But Thanh had this very weakness of criticizing absent people and it cannot hurt him now if I do a little to expose his colossal ego.

Thanh was a fraud all right but no one knew it. He had beautiful round eyes, a flashing smile and a sweet voice and everyone said he was a charming person. He was certainly charming but I have found that charming people are seldom sincere. I think I was the only person who came anywhere near to being his friend for he had cultivated a special loneliness of his own and it was difficult to intrude on it.

I met him in London in the summer of '54. I was trying to become a writer while I worked part-time at a number of different jobs. I had been two years in London and was longing for the hills and rivers of India. Thanh was Vietnamese. His family was well-to-do and though the Communists had taken their home town of Hanoi, most of the family was in France, well established in the restaurant business. Thanh did not suffer from the same financial distress as other students whose homes were in Northern Vietnam. He wasn't studying anything in particular but practised assiduously on the piano, though the only thing he could play fairly well was Chopin's Funeral March.

My friend Pravin, a happy-go-lucky, very friendly Gujarati boy, introduced me to Thanh. Pravin, like a good Indian, thought all Asians were superior people, but he didn't know Thanh well enough to know that Thanh didn't like being an Asian.

At first, Thanh was glad to meet me. He said he had for a long time been wanting to make friends with an Englishman, a real Englishman, not one who was a Pole, a Cockney or a Jew; he was most anxious to improve his English and talk like Mr



Glendenning of the BBC. Pravin, knowing that I had been born and bred in India, that my parents had been born and bred in India, suppressed his laughter with some difficulty. But Thanh was soon disillusioned. My accent was anything but English. It was a pronounced *chi-chi* accent.

‘You speak like an Indian!’ exclaimed Thanh, horrified. ‘Are you an Indian?’

‘He’s Welsh,’ said Pravin with a wink.

Thanh was slightly mollified. Being Welsh was the next best thing to being English. Only he disapproved of the Welsh for speaking with an Indian accent.

Later, when Pravin had gone, and I was sitting in Thanh’s room drinking Chinese tea, he confided in me that he disliked Indians.

‘Isn’t Pravin your friend?’ I asked.

‘I don’t trust him,’ he said. ‘I have to be friendly but I don’t trust him at all. I don’t trust any Indians.’

‘What’s wrong with them?’

‘They are too inquisitive,’ complained Thanh. ‘No sooner have you met one of them than he is asking you who your father is, and what your job is, and how much money you have in the bank.’

I laughed and tried to explain that in India inquisitiveness is a sign of a desire for friendship, and that he should feel flattered when asked such personal questions. I protested that I was an Indian myself and he said if that was so he wouldn’t trust me either.

But he seemed to like me and often invited me to his rooms. He could make some wonderful Chinese and French dishes. When we had eaten, he would sit down at his second-hand piano and play Chopin. He always complained that I didn’t listen properly.

He complained of my untidiness and my unwarranted self-confidence. It was true that I appeared most confident when I was not very sure of myself. I boasted of an intimate knowledge of London’s geography but I was an expert at losing my way and then blaming it on someone else.

‘You are a useless person,’ said Thanh, while with chopsticks I stuffed my mouth with delicious pork and fried rice. ‘You cannot find your way anywhere. You cannot speak English properly. You do not know any people except Indians. How are you going to be a writer?’

‘If I am as bad as all that,’ I said, ‘why do you remain my friend?’

‘I want to study your stupidity,’ he said.

That was why he never made any real friends. He loved to work out your faults and examine your imperfections. There was no such thing as a real friend, he said. He had looked everywhere but he could not find the perfect friend.

‘What is your idea of a perfect friend?’ I asked him. ‘Does he have to speak perfect English?’

But sarcasm was only wasted on Thanh—he admitted that perfect English was one of the requisites of a perfect friend!

Sometimes, in moments of deep gloom, he would tell me that he did not have long to live.

‘There is a pain in my chest,’ he complained. ‘There is something ticking there all the time. Can you hear it?’

He would bare his bony chest for me and I would put my ear to the offending spot. But I could never hear any ticking. ‘Visit the hospital,’ I advised. ‘They’ll give you an X-ray and a proper check-up.’

‘I have had X-rays,’ he lied. ‘They never show anything.’ Then he would talk of killing himself. This was his theme song: he had no friends, he was a failure as a musician, there was no other career open to him, he hadn’t seen his family for five years, and he couldn’t go back to Indo-China because of the Communists. He magnified his own troubles and minimized other people’s troubles. When I was in hospital with an old acquaintance, amoebic dysentery, Pravin came to see me every day. Thanh, who was not very busy, came only once and never again. He said the hospital ward depressed him.

‘You need a holiday,’ I told him when I was out of hospital. ‘Why don’t you join the students’ union and work on a farm for a week or two? That should toughen you up.’

To my surprise, the idea appealed to him and he got ready for the trip. Suddenly, he became suffused with goodwill towards all mankind. As evidence of his trust in me, he gave me the key of his room to keep (though he would have been secretly delighted if I had stolen his piano and chopsticks, giving him the excuse to say ‘never trust an Indian or an Anglo-Indian’), and introduced me to a girl called Vu-Phuong, a small, very pretty Annamite girl who was studying at the Polytechnic. Miss Vu, Thanh told me, had to leave her lodgings next week and would I find somewhere else for her to stay? I was an experienced hand at finding bed-sitting rooms, having changed my own abode five times in six months (that sweet, nomadic London life!). As I found Miss Vu very attractive, I told her I would get her a room, one not far from my own, in case she needed any further assistance.

Later, in confidence, Thanh asked me not to be too friendly with Vu-Phuong as she was not to be trusted.

But as soon as he left for the farm, I went round to see Vu in her new lodgings which were one tube-station away from my own. She seemed glad to see me and as she too could make French and Chinese dishes I accepted her invitation to lunch. We had chicken noodles, soya sauce and fried rice. I did the washing-up. Vu said: 'Do you play cards, Ruskin?' She had a sweet, gentle voice that brought out all the gallantry in a man. I began to feel protective and hovered about her like a devoted cocker spaniel.

'I'm not much of a card-player,' I said.

'Never mind, I'll tell your fortune with them.'

She made me shuffle the cards. Then scattered them about on the bed in different patterns. I would be very rich, she said. I would travel a lot and I would reach the age of forty. I told her I was comforted to know it.

The month was June and Hampstead Heath was only ten minutes walk from the house. Boys flew kites from the hill and little painted boats scurried about on the ponds. We sat down on the grass, on the slope of the hill, and I held Vu's hand.

For three days I ate with Vu and we told each other our fortunes and lay on the grass on Hampstead Heath and on the fourth day I said, 'Vu, I would like to marry you.'

'I will think about it,' she said.

Thanh came back on the sixth day and said, 'You know, Ruskin, I have been doing some thinking and Vu is not such a bad girl after all. I will ask her to marry me. That is what I need—a wife!'

'Why didn't you think of it before?' I said. 'When will you ask her?'

'Tonight,' he said. 'I will come to see you afterwards and tell you if I have been successful.'

I shrugged my shoulders resignedly and waited. Thanh left me at six in the evening and I waited for him till ten o'clock, all the time feeling a little sorry for him. More disillusionment for Thanh! Poor Thanh. . .

He came in at ten o'clock, his face beaming. He slapped me on the back and said I was his best friend.

'Did you ask her?' I said.

'Yes. She said she would think about it. That is the same as "yes".'

'It isn't,' I said, unfortunately for both of us. 'She told me the same thing.'

Thanh looked at me as though I had just stabbed him in the back. Et tu Ruskin, was what his expression said.

We took a taxi and sped across to Vu's rooms. The uncertain nature of her replies

was too much for both of us. Without a definite answer neither of us would have been able to sleep that night.

Vu was not at home. The landlady met us at the door and told us that Vu had gone to the theatre with an Indian gentleman.

Thanh gave me a long, contemptuous look.

‘Never trust an Indian,’ he said.

‘Never trust a woman,’ I replied.

At twelve o’clock I woke Pravin. Whenever I could not sleep, I went to Pravin. He knew the remedy for all ailments.

As on previous occasions, he went to the cupboard and produced a bottle of Cognac. We got drunk. He was seventeen and I was nineteen and we were both quite decadent.

Three weeks later I returned to India. Thanh went to Paris to help in his sister’s restaurant. I did not hear of Vu-Phuong again.

And now, a year later, there is the letter from Pravin. All he can tell me is that Thanh died of some unknown disease. I wonder if it had anything to do with the ticking in his chest or with his vague threats of suicide. I doubt if I will ever know. And I will never know how much I hated Thanh, and how much I loved him, or if there was any difference between hating and loving him.

# Love Is a Sad Song

I sit against this grey rock, beneath a sky of pristine blueness, and think of you, Sushila. It is November and the grass is turning brown and yellow. Crushed, it still smells sweet. The afternoon sun shimmers on the oak leaves and turns them a glittering silver. A cricket sizzles its way through the long grass. The stream murmurs at the bottom of the hill—that stream where you and I lingered on a golden afternoon in May.

I sit here and think of you and try to see your slim brown hand resting against this rock, feeling its warmth. I am aware again of the texture of your skin, the coolness of your feet, the sharp tingle of your fingertips. And in the pastures of my mind I run my hand over your quivering mouth and crush your tender breasts. Remembered passion grows sweeter with the passing of time.

You will not be thinking of me now, as you sit in your home in the city, cooking or sewing or trying to study for examinations. There will be men and women and children circling about you, in that crowded house of your grandmother's, and you will not be able to think of me for more than a moment or two. But I know you do think of me sometimes, in some private moment which cuts you off from the crowd. You will remember how I wondered what it is all about, this loving, and why it should cause such an upheaval. You are still a child, Sushila—and yet you found it so easy to quieten my impatient heart.

On the night you came to stay with us, the light from the street lamp shone through the branches of the peach tree and made leaf patterns on the walls. Through the glass panes of the front door I caught a glimpse of little Sunil's face, bright and questing, and then—a hand—a dark, long-fingered hand that could only have belonged to you.

It was almost a year since I had seen you, my dark and slender girl. And now you were in your sixteenth year. And Sunil was twelve; and your uncle, Dinesh, who lived with me, was twenty-three. And I was almost thirty—a fearful and wonderful age, when life becomes dangerous for dreamers.

I remember that when I left Delhi last year, you cried. At first I thought it was

because I was going away. Then I realized that it was because you could not go anywhere yourself. Did you envy my freedom—the freedom to live in a poverty of my own choosing, the freedom of the writer? Sunil, to my surprise, did not show much emotion at my going away. This hurt me a little, because during that year he had been particularly close to me, and I felt for him a very special love. But separations cannot be of any significance to small boys of twelve who live for today, tomorrow, and—if they are very serious—the day after.

Before I went away with Dinesh, you made us garlands of marigolds. They were orange and gold, fresh and clean and kissed by the sun. You garlanded me as I sat talking to Sunil. I remember you both as you looked that day—Sunil's smile dimpling his cheeks, while you gazed at me very seriously, your expression very tender. I loved you even then. . .

Our first picnic.

The path to the little stream took us through the oak forest, where the flashy blue magpies played follow-my-leader with their harsh, creaky calls. Skirting an open ridge (the place where I now sit and write), the path dipped through oak, rhododendron and maple, until it reached a little knoll above the stream. It was a spot unknown to the tourists and summer visitors. Sometimes a milkman or woodcutter crossed the stream on the way to town or village but no one lived beside it. Wild roses grew on the banks.

I do not remember much of that picnic. There was a lot of dull conversation with our neighbours, the Kapoors, who had come along too. You and Sunil were rather bored. Dinesh looked preoccupied. He was fed up with college. He wanted to start earning a living: wanted to paint. His restlessness often made him moody, irritable.

Near the knoll the stream was too shallow for bathing, but I told Sunil about a cave and a pool further downstream and promised that we would visit the pool another day.

That same night, after dinner, we took a walk along the dark road that goes past the house and leads to the burning ghat. Sunil, who had already sensed the intimacy between us, took my hand and put it in yours. An odd, touching little gesture!

'Tell us a story,' you said.

'Yes, tell us,' said Sunil.

I told you the story of the pure in heart. A shepherd boy found a snake in the forest and the snake told the boy that it was really a princess who had been bewitched and turned into a snake and that it could only recover its human form if someone who was truly pure in heart gave it three kisses on the mouth. The boy put his lips to the mouth of the snake and kissed it thrice. And the snake was transformed into a beautiful princess. But the boy lay cold and dead.

‘You always tell sad stories,’ complained Sunil.

‘I like sad stories,’ you said. ‘Tell us another.’

‘Tomorrow night. I’m sleepy.’

We were woken in the night by a strong wind which went whistling round the old house and came rushing down the chimney, humming and hawing and finally choking itself.

Sunil woke up and cried out, ‘What’s that noise, Uncle?’

‘Only the wind,’ I said.

‘Not a ghost?’

‘Well, perhaps the wind is made up of ghosts. Perhaps this wind contains the ghosts of all the people who have lived and died in this old house and want to come in again from the cold.’

You told me about a boy who had been fond of you in Delhi. Apparently he had visited the house on a few occasions, and had sometimes met you on the street while you were on your way home from school. At first, he had been fond of another girl but later he switched his affections to you. When you told me that he had written to you recently, and that before coming up you had replied to his letter, I was consumed by jealousy—an emotion which I thought I had grown out of long ago. It did not help to be told that you were not serious about the boy, that you were sorry for him because he had already been disappointed in love.

‘If you feel sorry for everyone who has been disappointed in love,’ I said, ‘you will soon be receiving the affections of every young man over ten.’

‘Let them give me their affections,’ you said, ‘and I will give them my chappal over their heads.’

‘But spare my head,’ I said.

‘Have *you* been in love before?’

‘Many times. But this is the first time.’

‘And who is your love?’

‘Haven’t you guessed?’

Sunil, who was following our conversation with deep interest, seemed to revel in the situation. Probably he fancied himself playing the part of Cupid, or Kamadeva, and delighted in watching the arrows of love strike home. No doubt I made it more enjoyable for him. Because I could not hide my feelings. Soon Dinesh would know, too—and then?

A year ago my feelings about you were almost paternal! Or so I thought. . . But you are no longer a child and I am a little older too. For when, the night after the

picnic, you took my hand and held it against your soft warm cheek, it was the first time that a girl had responded to me so readily, so tenderly. Perhaps it was just innocence but that one action of yours, that acceptance of me, immediately devastated my heart.

Gently, fervently, I kissed your eyes and forehead, your small round mouth, and the lobes of your ears, and your long smooth throat; and I whispered, 'Sushila, I love you, I love you, I love you,' in the same way that millions and millions of love-smitten young men have whispered since time immemorial. What else can one say? I love you, I love you. There is nothing simpler; nothing that can be made to mean any more than that. And what else did I say? That I would look after you and work for you and make you happy; and that too had been said before, and I was in no way different from anyone. I was a man and yet I was a boy again.

We visited the stream again, a day or two later, early in the morning. Using the rocks as stepping-stones, we wandered downstream for about a furlong until we reached a pool and a small waterfall and a cool dark cave. The rocks were mostly grey but some were yellow with age and some were cushioned with moss. A forktail stood on a boulder in the middle of the stream, uttering its low pleasant call. Water came dripping down from the sides of the cave, while sunlight filtered through a crevice in the rock ceiling, dappling your face. A spray of water was caught by a shaft of sunlight and at intervals it reflected the colours of the rainbow.

'It is a beautiful place,' you said.

'Come, then,' I said, 'let us bathe.'

Sunil and I removed our clothes and jumped into the pool while you sat down in the shade of a walnut tree and watched us disport ourselves in the water. Like a frog, Sunil leapt and twisted about in the clear, icy water; his eyes shone, his teeth glistened white, his body glowed with sunshine, youth, and the jewels made by drops of water glistening in the sun.

Then we stretched ourselves out beside you and allowed the sun to sink deep into our bodies.

Your feet, laved with dew, stood firm on the quickening grass. There was a butterfly between us: its wings red and gold and heavy with dew. It could not move because of the weight of moisture. And as your foot came nearer and I saw that you would crush it, I said, 'Wait. Don't crush the butterfly, Sushila. It has only a few days in the sun and we have many.'

'And if I spare it,' you said, laughing, 'what will you do for me, what will you pay?'

'Why, anything you say.'

'And will you kiss my foot?'



‘Both feet,’ I said and did so willingly. For they were no less than the wings of butterflies.

Later, when you ventured near the water, I dragged you in with me. You cried out, not in alarm but with the shock of the cold water, and then, wrenching yourself from my arms, clambered on to the rocks, your thin dress clinging to your thighs, your feet making long patterns on the smooth stone.

Though we tired ourselves out that day, we did not sleep at night. We lay together, you and Sunil on either side of me. Your head rested on my shoulders, your hair lay pressed against my cheek. Sunil had curled himself up into a ball but he was far from being asleep. He took my hand, and he took yours, and he placed them together. And I kissed the tender inside of your hand.

I whispered to you, ‘Sushila, there has never been anyone I’ve loved so much. I’ve been waiting all these years to find you. For a long time I did not even like women. But you are so different. You care for me, don’t you?’

You nodded in the darkness. I could see the outline of your face in the faint moonlight that filtered through the skylight. You never replied directly to a question. I suppose that was a feminine quality; coyness, perhaps.

‘Do you love me, Sushila?’

No answer.

‘Not now. When you are a little older. In a year or two.’

Did she nod in the darkness or did I imagine it?

‘I know it’s too early,’ I continued. ‘You are still too young. You are still at school. But already you are much wiser than me. I am finding it too difficult to control myself, but I will, since you wish it so. I’m very impatient, I know that, but I’ll wait for as long as you make me—two or three or a hundred years. Yes, Sushila, a hundred years!’

Ah, what a pretty speech I made! Romeo could have used some of it; Majnu, too.

And your answer? Just a nod, a little pressure on my hand.

I took your fingers and kissed them one by one. Long fingers, as long as mine.

After some time I became aware of Sunil nudging me. ‘You are not talking to me,’ he complained. ‘You are only talking to her. You only love her.’

‘I’m terribly sorry. I love you too, Sunil.’

Content with this assurance, he fell asleep; but towards morning, thinking himself in the middle of the bed, he rolled over and landed with a thump on the floor. He didn’t know how it had happened and accused me of pushing him out.

‘I know you don’t want me in the bed,’ he said.

It was a good thing Dinesh, in the next room, didn't wake up.

'Have you done any work this week?' asked Dinesh with a look of reproach.

'Not much,' I said.

'You are hardly ever in the house. You are never at your desk. Something seems to have happened to you.'

'I have given myself a holiday, that's all. Can't writers take holidays too?'

'No. You have said so yourself. And anyway, you seem to have taken a permanent holiday.'

'Have you finished that painting of the Tibetan woman?' I asked, trying to change the subject.

'That's the third time you've asked me that question, even though you saw the completed painting a week ago. You're getting very absent-minded.'

There was a letter from your old boyfriend; I mean your young boyfriend. It was addressed to Sunil, but I recognized the sender's name and knew it was really for you.

I assumed a look of calm detachment and handed the letter to you. But both you and Sunil sensed my dismay. At first you teased me and showed me the boy's photograph, which had been enclosed (he was certainly good-looking in a flashy way); then, finding that I became gloomier every minute, you tried to make amends, assuring me that the correspondence was one-sided and that you no longer replied to his letters.

And that night, to show me that you really cared, you gave me your hand as soon as the lights were out. Sunil was fast asleep.

We sat together at the foot of your bed. I kept my arm about you, while you rested your head against my chest. Your feet lay in repose upon mine. I kept kissing you. And when we lay down together, I loosened your blouse and kissed your small firm breasts, and put my lips to your nipples and felt them grow hard against my mouth.

The shy responsiveness of your kisses soon turned to passion. You clung to me. We had forgotten time and place and circumstance. The light of your eyes had been drowned in that lost look of a woman who desires. For a space we both struggled against desire. Suddenly I had become afraid of myself—afraid for you. I tried to free myself from your clasping arms. But you cried in a low voice, 'Love me! Love me! I want you to love me.'

Another night you fell asleep with your face in the crook of my arm, and I lay

awake a long time, conscious of your breathing, of the touch of your hair on my cheek, of the soft warm soles of your feet, of your slim waist and legs.

And in the morning, when the sunshine filled the room, I watched you while you slept—your slim body in repose, your face tranquil, your thin dark hands like sleeping butterflies and then, when you woke, the beautiful untidiness of your hair and the drowsiness in your eyes. You lay folded up like a kitten, your limbs as untouched by self-consciousness as the limbs of a young and growing tree. And during the warmth of the day a bead of sweat rested on your brow like a small pearl.

I tried to remember what you looked like as a child. Even then, I had always been aware of your presence. You must have been nine or ten when I first saw you—thin, dark, plain-faced, always wearing the faded green skirt that was your school uniform. You went about barefoot. Once, when the monsoon arrived, you ran out into the rain with the other children, naked, exulting in the swish of the cool rain. I remembered your beautiful straight legs and thighs, your swift smile, your dark eyes. You say you do not remember playing naked in the rain but that is because you did not see yourself.

I did not notice you growing. Your face did not change very much. You must have been thirteen when you gave up skirts and started wearing the salwar kameez. You had few clothes but the plainness of your dress only seemed to bring out your own radiance. And as you grew older, your eyes became more expressive, your hair longer and glossier, your gestures more graceful. And then, when you came to me in the hills, I found that you had been transformed into a fairy princess of devastating charm.

We were idling away the afternoon on our beds and you were reclining in my arms when Dinesh came in unexpectedly. He said nothing, merely passed through the room and entered his studio. Sunil got a fright and you were momentarily confused. Then you said, ‘He knows already,’ and I said, ‘Yes, he must know.’

Later I spoke to Dinesh. I told him that I wanted to marry; that I knew I would have to wait until you were older and had finished school—probably two or three years—and that I was prepared to wait although I knew it would be a long and difficult business. I asked him to help me.

He was upset at first, probably because he felt I had been deceptive (which was true), and also because of his own responsibility in the matter. You were his niece and I had made love to you while he had been preoccupied with other things. But after a little while when he saw that I was sincere and rather confused, he relented.

‘It has happened too soon,’ he said. ‘She is too young for all this. Have you told her that you love her?’

‘Of course. Many times.’

‘You’re a fool, then. Have you told her that you want to marry her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fool again. That’s not the way it is done. Haven’t you lived in India long enough to know that?’

‘But I love her.’

‘Does she love you?’

‘I think so.’

‘You think so. Desire isn’t love, you must know that. Still, I suppose she does love you, otherwise she would not be holding hands with you all day. But you are quite mad, falling in love with a girl half your age.’

‘Well, I’m not exactly an old man. I’m thirty.’

‘And she’s a schoolgirl.’

‘She isn’t a girl any more, she’s too responsive.’

‘Oh, you’ve found that out, have you?’

‘Well...’ I said, covered in confusion. ‘Well, she has shown that she cares a little. You know that it’s years since I took any interest in a girl. You called it unnatural on my part, remember? Well, they simply did not exist for me, that’s true.’

‘Delayed adolescence,’ muttered Dinesh.

‘But Sushila is different. She puts me at ease. She doesn’t turn away from me. I love her and I want to look after her. I can only do that by marrying her.’

‘All right, but take it easy. Don’t get carried away. And don’t, for God’s sake, give her a baby. Not while she’s still at school! I will do what I can to help you. But you will have to be patient. And no one else must know of this or I will be blamed for everything. As it is Sunil knows too much, and he’s too small to know so much.’

‘Oh, he won’t tell anyone.’

‘I wish you had fallen in love with her two years from now. You will have to wait that long, anyway. Getting married isn’t a simple matter. People will wonder why we are in such a hurry, marrying her off as soon as she leaves school. They’ll think the worst!’

‘Well, people do marry for love you know, even in India. It’s happening all the time.’

‘But it doesn’t happen in *our* family. You know how orthodox most of them are. They wouldn’t appreciate your outlook. You may marry Sushila for love but it will have to *look* like an arranged marriage!’

Little things went wrong that evening.

First, a youth on the road passed a remark which you resented; and you, most unladylike, but most Punjabi-like, picked up a stone and threw it at him. It struck him on the leg. He was too surprised to say anything and limped off. I remonstrated with you, told you that throwing stones at people often resulted in a fight, then realized that you had probably wanted to see me fighting on your behalf.

Later you were annoyed because I said you were a little absent-minded. Then Sunil sulked because I spoke roughly to him (I can't remember why), and refused to talk to me for three hours, which was a record. I kept apologizing but neither of you would listen. It was all part of a game. When I gave up trying and turned instead to my typewriter and my unfinished story, you came and sat beside me and started playing with my hair. You were jealous of my story, of the fact that it was possible for me to withdraw into my work. And I reflected that a woman had to be jealous of something. If there wasn't another woman, then it was a man's work, or his hobby, or his best friend, or his favourite sweater, or his pet mongoose that made her resentful. There is a story in Kipling about a woman who grew insanely jealous of a horse's saddle because her husband spent an hour every day polishing it with great care and loving kindness.

Would it be like that in marriage, I wondered—an eternal triangle: you, me and the typewriter?

But there were only a few days left before you returned to the plains, so I gladly pushed away the typewriter and took you in my arms instead. After all, once you had gone away, it would be a long, long time before I could hold you in my arms again. I might visit you in Delhi but we would not be able to enjoy the same freedom and intimacy. And while I savoured the salt kiss of your lips, I wondered how long I would have to wait until I could really call you my own.

Dinesh was at college and Sunil had gone roller skating and we were alone all morning. At first you avoided me, so I picked up a book and pretended to read. But barely five minutes had passed before you stole up from behind and snapped the book shut.

'It is a warm day,' you said. 'Let us go down to the stream.'

Alone together for the first time, we took the steep path down to the stream, and there, hand in hand, scrambled over the rocks until we reached the pool and the waterfall.

'I will bathe today,' you said; and in a few moments you stood beside me, naked, caressed by sunlight and a soft breeze coming down the valley. I put my hand out to share in the sun's caress, but you darted away, laughing, and ran to the waterfall as though you would hide behind a curtain of gushing water. I was soon beside you. I

took you in my arms and kissed you, while the water crashed down upon our heads. Who yielded—you or I? All I remember is that you had entwined yourself about me like a clinging vine, and that a little later we lay together on the grass, on bruised and broken clover, while a whistling-thrush released its deep sweet secret on the trembling air.

Blackbird on the wing, bird of the forest shadows, black rose in the long ago of summer, this was your song. It isn't time that's passing by, it is you and I.

It was your last night under my roof. We were not alone but when I woke in the middle of the night and stretched my hand out, across the space between our beds, you took my hand, for you were awake too. Then I pressed the ends of your fingers, one by one, as I had done so often before, and you dug your nails into my flesh. And our hands made love, much as our bodies might have done. They clung together, warmed and caressed each other, each finger taking on an identity of its own and seeking its opposite. Sometimes the tips of our fingers merely brushed against each other, teasingly, and sometimes our palms met with a rush, would tremble and embrace, separate, and then passionately seek each other out. And when sleep finally overcame you, your hand fell listlessly between our beds, touching the ground. And I lifted it up, and after putting it once to my lips, returned it gently to your softly rising bosom.

And so you went away, all three of you, and I was left alone with the brooding mountain. If I could not pass a few weeks without you how was I to pass a year, two years? This was the question I kept asking myself. Would I have to leave the hills and take a flat in Delhi? And what use would it be—looking at you and speaking to you but never able to touch you? Not to be able to touch that which I had already possessed would have been the subtlest form of torture.

The house was empty but I kept finding little things to remind me that you had been there—a handkerchief, a bangle, a length of ribbon—and these remnants made me feel as though you had gone forever. No sound at night, except the rats scurrying about on the rafters.

The rain had brought out the ferns, which were springing up from tree and rock. The murmur of the stream had become an angry rumble. The honeysuckle creeper winding over the front windows was thick with scented blossom. I wish it had flowered a little earlier, before you left. Then you could have put the flowers in your hair.

At night I drank brandy, wrote listlessly, listened to the wind in the chimney, and read poetry in bed. There was no one to tell stories to and no hand to hold.

I kept remembering little things—the soft hair hiding your ears, the movement of

your hands, the cool touch of your feet, the tender look in your eyes and the sudden stab of mischief that sometimes replaced it.

Mrs Kapoor remarked on the softness of your expression. I was glad that someone had noticed it. In my diary I wrote: 'I have looked at Sushila so often and so much that perhaps I have overlooked her most compelling qualities—her kindness (or is it just her easy-goingness?), her refusal to hurt anyone's feelings (or is it just her indifference to everything?), her wide tolerance (or is it just her laziness?). . . Oh, how absolutely ignorant I am of women!'

Well, there was a letter from Dinesh and it held out a lifeline, one that I knew I must seize without any hesitation. He said he might be joining an art school in Delhi and asked me if I would like to return to Delhi and share a flat with him. I had always dreaded the possibility of leaving the hills and living again in a city as depressing as Delhi but love, I considered, ought to make any place habitable. . .

And then I was on a bus on the road to Delhi.

The first monsoon showers had freshened the fields and everything looked much greener than usual. The maize was just shooting up and the mangoes were ripening fast. Near the larger villages, camels and bullock carts cluttered up the road, and the driver cursed, banging his fist on the horn.

Passing through small towns, the bus driver had to contend with cycle rickshaws, tonga ponies, trucks, pedestrians, and other buses. Coming down from the hills for the first time in over a year, I found the noise, chaos, dust and dirt a little unsettling.

As my taxi drew up at the gate of Dinesh's home, Sunil saw me and came running to open the car door. Other children were soon swarming around me. Then I saw you standing near the front door. You raised your hand to your forehead in a typical Muslim form of greeting—a gesture you had picked up, I suppose, from a film.

For two days Dinesh and I went house-hunting, for I had decided to take a flat if it was at all practicable. Either it was very hot, and we were sweating, or it was raining and we were drenched. (It is difficult to find a flat in Delhi, even if one is in a position to pay an exorbitant rent, which I was not. It is especially difficult for bachelors. No one trusts bachelors, especially if there are grown-up daughters in the house. Is this because bachelors are wolves or because girls are so easily seduced these days?)

Finally, after several refusals, we were offered a flat in one of those new colonies that sprout like mushrooms around the capital. The rent was two hundred rupees a month and although I knew I couldn't really afford so much, I was so sick of refusals and already so disheartened and depressed that I took the place and made

out a cheque to the landlord, an elderly gentleman with his daughters all safely married in other parts of the country.

There was no furniture in the flat except for a couple of beds, but we decided we would fill the place up gradually. Everyone at Dinesh's home—brothers, sister-in-law, aunts, nephews and nieces—helped us to move in. Sunil and his younger brother were the first arrivals. Later the other children, some ten of them, arrived. You, Sushila, came only in the afternoon, but I had gone out for something and only saw you when I returned at teatime. You were sitting on the first-floor balcony and smiled down at me as I walked up the road.

I think you were pleased with the flat; or at any rate, with my courage in taking one. I took you up to the roof, and there, in a corner under the stairs, kissed you very quickly. It had to be quick, because the other children were close on our heels. There wouldn't be much opportunity for kissing you again. The mountains were far and in a place like Delhi, and with a family like yours, private moments would be few and far between.

Hours later, when I sat alone on one of the beds, Sunil came to me, looking rather upset. He must have had a quarrel with you.

'I want to tell you something,' he said.

'Is anything wrong?'

To my amazement he burst into tears.

'Now you must not love me any more,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Because you are going to marry Sushila, and if you love me too much it will not be good for you.'

I could think of nothing to say. It was all too funny and all too sad.

But a little later he was in high spirits, having apparently forgotten the reasons for his earlier dejection. His need for affection stemmed perhaps from his father's long and unnecessary absence from the country.

Dinesh and I had no sleep during our first night in the new flat. We were near the main road and traffic roared past all night. I thought of the hills, so silent that the call of a nightjar startled one in the stillness of the night.

I was out most of the next day and when I got back in the evening it was to find that Dinesh had had a rumpus with the landlord. Apparently the landlord had really wanted bachelors, and couldn't understand or appreciate a large number of children moving in and out of the house all day.

'I thought landlords preferred having families,' I said.



‘He wants to know how a bachelor came to have such a large family!’

‘Didn’t you tell him that the children were only temporary, and wouldn’t be living here?’

‘I did, but he doesn’t believe me.’

‘Well, anyway, we’re not going to stop the children from coming to see us,’ I said indignantly. (No children, no Sushila!) ‘If he doesn’t see reason, he can have his flat back.’

‘Did he cash my cheque?’

‘No, he’s given it back.’

‘That means he really wants us out. To hell with his flat! It’s too noisy here anyway. Let’s go back to your place.’

We packed our bedding, trunks and kitchen utensils once more; hired a bullock cart and arrived at Dinesh’s home (three miles distant) late at night, hungry and upset.

Everything seemed to be going wrong.

Living in the same house as you, but unable to have any real contact with you (except for the odd, rare moment when we were left alone in the same room and were able to exchange a word or a glance) was an exquisite form of self-inflicted torture: self-inflicted, because no one was forcing me to stay in Delhi. Sometimes you had to avoid me and I could not stand that. Only Dinesh (and of course Sunil and some of the children) knew anything about the affair—adults are much slower than children at sensing the truth—and it was still too soon to reveal the true state of affairs and my own feelings, to anyone else in the family. If I came out with the declaration that I was in love with you, it would immediately become obvious that something had happened during your holiday in the hill station. It would be said that I had taken advantage of the situation (which I had), and that I had seduced you—even though I was beginning to wonder if it was you who had seduced me! And if a marriage was suddenly arranged, people would say: ‘It’s been arranged so quickly. And she’s so young. He must have got her into trouble.’ Even though there were no signs of your having got into that sort of trouble.

And yet I could not help hoping that you would become my wife sooner than could be foreseen. I *wanted* to look after you. I did not want others to be doing it for me. Was that very selfish? Or was it a true state of being in love?

There were times—times when you kept at a distance and did not even look at me—when I grew desperate. I knew you could not show your familiarity with me in front of others and yet, knowing this, I still tried to catch your eye, to sit near you, to

touch you fleetingly. I could not hold myself back. I became morose, I wallowed in self-pity. And self-pity, I realized, is a sign of failure, especially of failure in love.

It was time to return to the hills.

Sushila, when I got up in the morning to leave, you were still asleep and I did not wake you. I watched you stretched out on your bed, your dark face tranquil and untouched by care, your black hair spread over the white pillow, your long thin hands and feet in repose. You were so beautiful when you were asleep.

And as I watched, I felt a tightening around my heart, a sudden panic that I might somehow lose you.

The others were up and there was no time to steal a kiss. A taxi was at the gate. A baby was bawling. Your grandmother was giving me advice. The taxi driver kept blowing his horn.

Goodbye, Sushila!

We were in the middle of the rains. There was a constant drip and drizzle and drumming on the corrugated tin roof. The walls were damp and there was mildew on my books and even on the pickle that Dinesh had made.

Everything was green, the foliage almost tropical, especially near the stream. Great stagferns grew from the trunks of trees, fresh moss covered the rocks, and the maidenhair fern was at its loveliest. The water was a torrent, rushing through the ravine and taking with it bushes and small trees. I could not remain out for long, for at any moment it might start raining. And there were also the leeches who lost no time in fastening themselves on to my legs and fattening themselves on my blood.

Once, standing on some rocks, I saw a slim brown snake swimming with the current. It looked beautiful and lonely.

I dreamt a dream, a very disturbing dream, which troubled me for days.

In the dream, Sunil suggested that we go down to the stream.

We put some bread and butter into an airbag, along with a long bread knife, and set off down the hill. Sushila was barefoot, wearing the old cotton tunic which she had worn as a child, Sunil had on a bright yellow T-shirt and black jeans. He looked very dashing. As we took the forest path down to the stream, we saw two young men following us. One of them, a dark, slim youth, seemed familiar. I said, 'Isn't that Sushila's boyfriend?' But they denied it. The other youth wasn't anyone I knew.

When we reached the stream, Sunil and I plunged into the pool, while Sushila sat on the rock just above us. We had been bathing for a few minutes when the two young men came down the slope and began fondling Sushila. She did not resist but Sunil climbed out of the pool and began scrambling up the slope. One of the youths,

the less familiar one, had a long knife in his hand. Sunil picked up a stone and flung it at the youth, striking him on the shoulder. I rushed up and grabbed the hand that held the knife. The youth kicked me on the shins and thrust me away and I fell beneath him. The arm with the knife was raised over me, but I still held the wrist. And then I saw Sushila behind him, her face framed by a passing cloud. She had the bread knife in her hand, and her arm swung up and down, and the knife cut through my adversary's neck as though it were passing through a ripe melon.

I scrambled to my feet to find Sushila gazing at the headless corpse with the detachment and mild curiosity of a child who has just removed the wings from a butterfly.

The other youth, who looked like Sushila's boyfriend, began running away. He was chased by the three of us. When he slipped and fell, I found myself beside him, the blade of the knife poised beneath his left shoulder blade. I couldn't push the knife in. Then Sunil put his hand over mine and the blade slipped smoothly into the flesh.

At all times of the day and night I could hear the murmur of the stream at the bottom of the hill. Even if I didn't listen, the sound was there. I had grown used to it. But whenever I went away, I was conscious of something missing and I was lonely without the sound of running water.

I remained alone for two months and then I had to see you again, Sushila. I could not bear the long-drawn-out uncertainty of the situation. I wanted to do something that would bring everything nearer to a conclusion. Merely to stand by and wait was intolerable. Nor could I bear the secrecy to which Dinesh had sworn me. Someone else would have to know about my intentions—*someone* would have to help. I needed another ally to sustain my hopes; only then would I find the waiting easier.

You had not been keeping well and looked thin, but you were as cheerful, as serene as ever.

When I took you to the pictures with Sunil, you wore a sleeveless kameez made of purple silk. It set off your dark beauty very well. Your face was soft and shy and your smile hadn't changed. I could not keep my eyes off you.

Returning home in the taxi, I held your hand all the way.

Sunil (in Punjabi): 'Will you give your children English or Hindi names?'

Me: 'Hindustani names.'

Sunil (in Punjabi): 'Ah, that is the right answer, Uncle!'

And first I went to your mother.

She was a tiny woman and looked very delicate. But she'd had six children—a seventh was on the way—and they had all come into the world without much difficulty and were the healthiest in the entire joint family.

She was on her way to see relatives in another part of the city and I accompanied her part of the way. As she was pregnant, she was offered a seat in the crowded bus. I managed to squeeze in beside her. She had always shown a liking for me and I did not find it difficult to come to the point.

'At what age would you like Sushila to get married?' I asked casually, with almost paternal interest.

'We'll worry about that when the time comes. She has still to finish school. And if she keeps failing her exams, she will never finish school.'

I took a deep breath and made the plunge.

'When the time comes,' I said, 'when the time comes, I would like to marry her.' And without waiting to see what her reaction would be, I continued: 'I know I must wait, a year or two, even longer. But I am telling you this, so that it will be in your mind. You are her mother and so I want you to be the first to know.' (Liar that I was! She was about the fifth to know. But what I really wanted to say was, 'Please don't be looking for any other husband for her just yet.')

She didn't show much surprise. She was a placid woman. But she said, rather sadly, 'It's all right but I don't have much say in the family. I do not have any money, you see. It depends on the others, especially her grandmother.'

'I'll speak to them when the time comes. Don't worry about that. And you don't have to worry about money or anything—what I mean is, I don't believe in dowries—I mean, you don't have to give me a Godrej cupboard and a sofa set and that sort of thing. All I want is Sushila. . .'

'She is still very young.'

But she was pleased—pleased that her flesh and blood, her own daughter, could mean so much to a man.

'Don't tell anyone else just now,' I said.

'I won't tell anyone,' she said with a smile.

So now the secret—if it could be called that—was shared by at least five people.

The bus crawled on through the busy streets and we sat in silence, surrounded by a press of people but isolated in the intimacy of our conversation.

I warmed towards her—towards that simple, straightforward, uneducated woman (she had never been to school, could not read or write), who might still have been young and pretty had her circumstances been different. I asked her when the baby was due.

‘In two months,’ she said. She laughed. Evidently she found it unusual and rather amusing for a young man to ask her such a question.

‘I’m sure it will be a fine baby,’ I said. And I thought: That makes six brothers-in-law!

I did not think I would get a chance to speak to your Uncle Ravi (Dinesh’s elder brother) before I left. But on my last evening in Delhi, I found myself alone with him on the Karol Bagh road. At first we spoke of his own plans for marriage, and, to please him, I said the girl he’d chosen was both beautiful and intelligent.

He warmed towards me.

Clearing my throat, I went on. ‘Ravi, you are five years younger than me and you are about to get married.’

‘Yes, and it’s time you thought of doing the same thing.’

‘Well, I’ve never thought seriously about it before—I’d always scorned the institution of marriage—but now I’ve changed my mind. Do you know whom I’d like to marry?’

To my surprise Ravi unhesitatingly took the name of Asha, a distant cousin I’d met only once. She came from Ferozepur, and her hips were so large that from a distance she looked like an oversized pear.

‘No, no,’ I said. ‘Asha is a lovely girl but I wasn’t thinking of her. I would like to marry a girl like Sushila. To be frank, Ravi, I would like to marry Sushila.’

There was a long silence and I feared the worst. The noise of cars, scooters and buses seemed to recede into the distance and Ravi and I were alone together in a vacuum of silence.

So that the awkwardness would not last too long, I stumbled on with what I had to say. ‘I know she’s young and that I will have to wait for some time.’ (Familiar words!) ‘But if you approve, and the family approves, and Sushila approves, well then, there’s nothing I’d like better than to marry her.’

Ravi pondered, scratched himself, and then, to my delight, said: ‘Why not? It’s a fine idea.’

The traffic sounds returned to the street, and I felt as though I could set fire to a bus or do something equally in keeping with my high spirits.

‘It would bring you even closer to us,’ said Ravi. ‘We would like to have you in our family. At least I would like it.’

‘That makes all the difference,’ I said. ‘I will do my best for her, Ravi. I’ll do everything to make her happy.’

‘She is very simple and unspoilt.’

‘I know. That’s why I care so much for her.’

‘I will do what I can to help you. She should finish school by the time she is seventeen. It does not matter if you are older. Twelve years difference in age is not uncommon. So don’t worry. Be patient and all will be arranged.’

And so I had three strong allies—Dinesh, Ravi and your mother. Only your grandmother remained, and I dared not approach her on my own. She was the most difficult hurdle because she was the head of the family and she was autocratic and often unpredictable. She was not on good terms with your mother and for that very reason I feared that she might oppose my proposal. I had no idea how much she valued Ravi’s and Dinesh’s judgement. All I knew was that they bowed to all her decisions.

How impossible it was for you to shed the burden of your relatives! Individually, you got on quite well with all of them; but because they could not live without bickering among themselves, you were just a pawn in the great Joint Family Game.

You put my hand to your cheek and to your breast. I kissed your closed eyes and took your face in my hands, and touched your lips with mine; a phantom kiss in the darkness of a veranda. And then, intoxicated, I stumbled on to the road and walked the streets all night.

I was sitting on the rocks above the oak forest when I saw a young man walking towards me down the steep path. From his careful manner of walking, and light clothing, I could tell that he was a stranger, one who was not used to the hills. He was about my height, slim, rather long in the face; good-looking in a delicate sort of way. When he came nearer, I recognized him as the young man in the photograph, the youth of my dream—your late admirer! I wasn’t too surprised to see him. Somehow, I had always felt that we would meet one day.

I remembered his name and said, ‘How are you, Pramod?’

He became rather confused. His eyes were already clouded with doubt and unhappiness; but he did not appear to be an aggressive person.

‘How did you know my name?’ he asked.

‘How did you know where to find me?’ I countered.

‘Your neighbours, the Kapoors, told me. I could not wait for you to return to the house. I have to go down again tonight.’

‘Well then, would you like to walk home with me, or would you prefer to sit here and talk? I know who you are but I’ve no idea why you’ve come to see me.’

‘It’s all right here,’ he said, spreading his handkerchief on the grass before sitting

down on it. ‘How did you know my name?’

I stared at him for a few moments and got the impression that he was a vulnerable person—perhaps more vulnerable than myself. My only advantage was that I was older and therefore better able to conceal my real feelings.

‘Sushila told me,’ I said.

‘Oh. I did not think you would know.’

I was a little puzzled but said, ‘I knew about you, of course. And you must have known that or you would hardly have come here to see me.’

‘You knew about Sushila and me?’ he asked, looking even more confused.

‘Well, I know that you are supposed to be in love with her.’

He smote himself on the forehead. ‘My God! Do the others know, too?’

‘I don’t think so.’ I deliberately avoided mention of Sunil.

In his distraction he started plucking at tufts of grass. ‘Did *she* tell you?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Girls can’t keep secrets. But in a way I’m glad she told you. Now I don’t have to explain everything. You see, I came here for your help. I know you are not her real uncle but you are very close to her family. Last year in Delhi he often spoke about you. She said you were very kind.’

It then occurred to me that Pramod knew nothing about my relationship with you, other than that I was supposed to be the most benevolent of ‘uncles’. He knew that you had spent your summer holidays with me—but so had Dinesh and Sunil. And now, aware that I was a close friend of the family, he had come to make an ally of me—in much the same way that I had gone about making allies!

‘Have you seen Sushila recently?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Two days ago, in Delhi. But I had only a few minutes alone with her. We could not talk much. You see, Uncle—you will not mind if I also call you Uncle?—I want to marry her but there is no one who can speak to her people on my behalf. My own parents are not alive. If I go straight to her family, most probably I will be thrown out of the house. So I want you to help me. I am not well off but I will soon have a job and then I can support her.’

‘Did you tell her all this?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what did she say?’

‘She told me to speak to you about it.’

Clever Sushila! Diabolical Sushila!

‘To me?’ I repeated.

‘Yes, she said it would be better than talking to her parents.’

I couldn’t help laughing. And a long-tailed blue magpie, disturbed by my laughter, set up a shrill creaking and chattering of its own.

‘Don’t laugh, I’m serious, Uncle,’ said Pramod. He took me by the hand and looked at me appealingly.

‘Well, it ought to be serious,’ I said. ‘How old are you, Pramod?’

‘Twenty-three.’

‘Only seven years younger than me. So please don’t call me uncle. It makes me feel prehistoric. Use my first name, if you like. And when do you hope to marry Sushila?’

‘As soon as possible. I know she is still very young for me.’

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘Young girls are marrying middle-aged men every day! And you’re still quite young yourself. But she can’t get married as yet, Pramod, I know that for a certainty.’

‘That’s what I feared. She will have to finish school, I suppose.’

‘That’s right. But tell me something. It’s obvious that you are in love with her and I don’t blame you for it. Sushila is the kind of girl we all fall in love with! But do you know if she loves you? Did she say she would like to marry you?’

‘She did not say—I do not know. . .’ There was a haunted, hurt look in his eyes and my heart went out to him. ‘But I love her—isn’t that enough?’

‘It *could* be enough—provided she doesn’t love someone else.’

‘Does she, Uncle?’

‘To be frank, I don’t know.’

He brightened up at that. ‘She likes me,’ he said. ‘I know that much.’

‘Well, I like you too but that doesn’t mean I’d marry you.’

He was despondent again. ‘I see what you mean. . . But what is love, how can I recognize it?’

And that was one question I couldn’t answer. How do we recognize it?

I persuaded Pramod to stay the night. The sun had gone down and he was shivering. I made a fire, the first of the winter, using oak and thorn branches. Then I shared my brandy with him.

I did not feel any resentment against Pramod. Prior to meeting him, I had been jealous. And when I first saw him coming along the path, I remembered my dream,



and thought, 'Perhaps I am going to kill him, after all. Or perhaps he's going to kill me.' But it had turned out differently. If dreams have any meaning at all, the meaning doesn't come within our limited comprehension.

I had visualized Pramod as being rather crude, selfish and irresponsible, an unattractive college student, the type who has never known or understood girls very well and looks on them as strange exotic creatures who are to be seized and plundered at the first opportunity. Such men do exist but Pramod was not one of them. He did not know much about women; neither did I. He was gentle, polite, unsure of himself. I wondered if I should tell him about my own feelings for you.

After a while he began to talk about himself and about you. He told me how he fell in love with you. At first he had been friendly with another girl, a classfellow of yours but a year or two older. You had carried messages to him on the girl's behalf. Then the girl had rejected him. He was terribly depressed and one evening he drank a lot of cheap liquor. Instead of falling dead, as he had been hoping, he lost his way and met you near your home. He was in need of sympathy and you gave him that. You let him hold your hand. He told you how hopeless he felt and you comforted him. And when he said the world was a cruel place, you consented. You *agreed* with him. What more can a man expect from a woman? Only fourteen at the time, you had no difficulty in comforting a man of twenty-two. No wonder he fell in love with you!

Afterwards you met occasionally on the road and spoke to each other. He visited the house once or twice, on some pretext or other. And when you came to the hills, he wrote to you.

That was all he had to tell me. That was all there was to tell. You had touched his heart once and touching it, had no difficulty in capturing it.

Next morning I took Pramod down to the stream. I wanted to tell him everything and somehow I could not do it in the house.

He was charmed by the place. The water flowed gently, its music subdued, soft chamber music after the monsoon orchestration. Cowbells tinkled on the hillside and an eagle soared high above.

'I did not think water could be so clear,' said Pramod. 'It is not muddy like the streams and rivers of the plains.'

'In the summer you can bathe here,' I said. 'There is a pool further downstream.'

He nodded thoughtfully. 'Did she come here too?'

'Yes, Sushila and Sunil and I. . . We came here on two or three occasions.' My voice trailed off and I glanced at Pramod standing at the edge of the water. He looked up at me and his eyes met mine.

'There is something I want to tell you,' I said.

He continued staring at me and a shadow seemed to pass across his face—a shadow of doubt, fear, death, eternity, was it one or all of these, or just a play of light and shade? But I remembered my dream and stepped back from him. For a moment both of us looked at each other with distrust and uncertainty. Then the fear passed. Whatever had happened between us, dream or reality, had happened in some other existence. Now he took my hand and held it, held it tight, as though seeking assurance, as though identifying himself with me.

‘Let us sit down,’ I said. ‘There is something I must tell you.’

We sat down on the grass and when I looked up through the branches of the banj-oak, everything seemed to have been tilted and held at an angle, and the sky shocked me with its blueness, and the leaves were no longer green but purple in the shadows of the ravine. They were your colour, Sushila. I remembered you wearing purple—dark smiling Sushila, thinking your own thoughts and refusing to share them with anyone.

‘I love Sushila too,’ I said.

‘*I know,*’ he said naively. ‘That is why I came to you for help.’

‘No, you don’t know,’ I said. ‘When I say I love Sushila, I mean just that. I mean caring for her in the same way that you care for her. I mean I want to marry her.’

‘You, Uncle?’

‘Yes. Does it shock you very much?’

‘No, no.’ He turned his face away and stared at the worn face of an old grey rock and perhaps he drew some strength from its permanency. ‘Why should you not love her? Perhaps, in my heart, I really knew it, but did not want to know—did not want to believe. Perhaps that is why I really came here—to find out. Something that Sunil said. . . But why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘Because you were telling me!’

‘Yes, I was too full of my own love to think that any other was possible. What do we do now? Do we both wait and then let her make her choice?’

‘If you wish.’

‘You have the advantage, Uncle. You have more to offer.’

‘Do you mean more security or more love? Some women place more value on the former.’

‘Not Sushila.’

‘Not Sushila.’

‘I mean you can offer her a more interesting life. You are a writer. Who knows, you may be famous one day.’

‘You have your youth to offer, Pramod. I have only a few years of youth left to me—and two or three of them will pass in waiting.’

‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘You will always be young. If you have Sushila, you will always be young.’

Once again I heard the whistling-thrush. Its song was a crescendo of sweet notes and variations that rang clearly across the ravine. I could not see the bird but its call emerged from the forest like some dark sweet secret and again it was saying, ‘It isn’t time that’s passing by, my friend. It is you and I.’

Listen. Sushila, the worst has happened. Ravi has written to say that a marriage will not be possible—not now, not next year; never. Of course he makes a lot of excuses—that you must receive a complete college education (‘higher studies’), that the difference in our age is too great, that you might change your mind after a year or two—but reading between the lines, I can guess that the real reason is your grandmother. She does not want it. Her word is law and no one, least of all Ravi, would dare oppose her.

But I do not mean to give in so easily. I will wait my chance. As long as I know that you are with me, I will wait my chance.

I wonder what the old lady objects to in me. Is it simply that she is conservative and tradition-bound? She has always shown a liking for me and I don’t see why her liking should change because I want to marry her grandniece. Your mother has no objection. Perhaps that’s why your grandmother objects.

Whatever the reason, I am coming down to Delhi to find out how things stand.

Of course the worst part is that Ravi has asked me—in the friendliest terms and in a most roundabout manner—not to come to the house for some time. He says this will give the affair a chance to cool off and die a natural (I would call it an unnatural) death. He assumes, of course, that I will accept the old lady’s decision and simply forget all about you. Ravi has yet to fall in love.

Dinesh was in Lucknow. I could not visit the house. So I sat on a bench in the Talkatora Gardens and watched a group of children playing gulli-danda. Then I recalled that Sunil’s school got over at three o’clock and that if I hurried I would be able to meet him outside St Columba’s gate.

I reached the school on time. Boys were streaming out of the compound and as they were all wearing green uniforms—a young forest on the move—I gave up all hope of spotting Sunil. But he saw me first. He ran across the road, dodged a cyclist, evaded a bus and seized me about the waist.

‘I’m so happy to see you, Uncle!’

‘As I am to see you, Sunil.’

‘You want to see Sushila?’

‘Yes, but you too. I can’t come to the house, Sunil. You probably know that. When do you have to be home?’

‘About four o’clock. If I’m late, I’ll say the bus was too crowded and I couldn’t get in.’

‘That gives us an hour or two. Let’s go to the exhibition grounds. Would you like that?’

‘All right, I haven’t seen the exhibition yet.’

We took a scooter rickshaw to the exhibition grounds on Mathura Road. It was an industrial exhibition and there was little to interest either a schoolboy or a lovesick author. But a cafe was at hand, overlooking an artificial lake, and we sat in the sun consuming hot dogs and cold coffee.

‘Sunil, will you help me?’ I asked.

‘Whatever you say, Uncle.’

‘I don’t suppose I can see Sushila this time. I don’t want to hang about near the house or her school like a disreputable character. It’s all right lurking outside a boy’s school; but it wouldn’t do to be hanging about the Kanyadevi Pathshala or wherever it is she’s studying. It’s possible the family will change their minds about us later. Anyway, what matters now is Sushila’s attitude. Ask her this, Sunil. Ask her if she wants me to wait until she is eighteen. She will be free then to do what she wants, even to run away with me if necessary—that is, if she really wants to. I was ready to wait two years. I’m prepared to wait three. But it will help if I know she’s waiting too. Will you ask her that, Sunil?’

‘Yes, I’ll ask her.’

‘Ask her tonight. Then tomorrow we’ll meet again outside your school.’

We met briefly the next day. There wasn’t much time. Sunil had to be home early and I had to catch the night train out of Delhi. We stood in the generous shade of a pipal tree and I asked, ‘What did she say?’

‘She said to keep waiting.’

‘All right, I’ll wait.’

‘But when she is eighteen, what if she changes her mind? You know what girls are like.’

‘You’re a cynical chap, Sunil.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means you know too much about life. But tell me—what makes you think she might change her mind?’

‘Her boyfriend.’

‘Pramod? She doesn’t care for him, poor chap.’

‘Not Pramod. Another one.’

‘Another! You mean a new one?’

‘New,’ said Sunil. ‘An officer in a bank. He’s got a car.’

‘Oh,’ I said despondently. ‘I can’t compete with a car.’

‘No,’ said Sunil. ‘Never mind, Uncle. You still have me for your friend. Have you forgotten that?’

I had almost forgotten but it was good to be reminded.

‘It is time to go,’ he said. ‘I must catch the bus today. When Will you come to Delhi again?’

‘Next month. Next year. Who knows? But I’ll come. Look after yourself, my friend.’

He ran off and jumped on to the footboard of a moving bus. He waved to me until the bus went round the bend in the road.

It was lonely under the pipal tree. It is said that only ghosts live in pipal trees. I do not blame them, for pipal trees are cool and shady and full of loneliness.

I may stop loving you, Sushila, but I will never stop loving the days I loved you.



## Time Stops at Shamli

The Dehra Express usually drew into Shamli at about five o'clock in the morning at which time the station would be dimly lit and the jungle across the tracks would just be visible in the faint light of dawn. Shamli is a small station at the foot of the Siwalik hills and the Siwaliks lie at the foot of the Himalayas which in turn lie at the feet of God.

The station, I remember, had only one platform, an office for the stationmaster, and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendor, and a few stray dogs. Not much else was required because the train stopped at Shamli for only five minutes before rushing on into the forests.

Why it stopped at Shamli, I never could tell. Nobody got off the train and nobody got in. There were never any coolies on the platform. But the train would stand there a full five minutes and the guard would blow his whistle and presently Shamli would be left behind and forgotten. . .until I passed that way again.

I was paying my relations in Saharanpur an annual visit when the night train stopped at Shamli. I was thirty-six at the time and still single.

On this particular journey, the train came into Shamli just as I awoke from a restless sleep. The third-class compartment was crowded beyond capacity and I had been sleeping in an upright position with my back to the lavatory door. Now someone was trying to get into the lavatory. He was obviously hard pressed for time.

'I'm sorry, brother,' I said, moving as much as I could to one side.

He stumbled into the closet without bothering to close the door.

'Where are we now?' I asked the man sitting beside me. He was smoking a strong aromatic bidi.

'Shamli station,' he said, rubbing the palm of a large calloused hand over the frosted glass of the window.

I let the window down and stuck my head out. There was a cool breeze blowing down the platform, a breeze that whispered of autumn in the hills. As usual there was

no activity except for the fruit vendor walking up and down the length of the train with his basket of mangoes balanced on his head. At the tea stall, a kettle was steaming, but there was no one to mind it. I rested my forehead on the window ledge and let the breeze play on my temples. I had been feeling sick and giddy but there was a wild sweetness in the wind that I found soothing.

‘Yes,’ I said to myself, ‘I wonder what happens in Shamli behind the station walls.’

My fellow passenger offered me a beedi. He was a farmer, I think, on his way to Dehra. He had a long, untidy, sad moustache.

We had been more than five minutes at the station. I looked up and down the platform, but nobody was getting on or off the train. Presently the guard came walking past our compartment.

‘What’s the delay?’ I asked him.

‘Some obstruction further down the line,’ he said.

‘Will we be here long?’

‘I don’t know what the trouble is. About half an hour at the least.’

My neighbour shrugged and throwing the remains of his beedi out of the window, closed his eyes and immediately fell asleep. I moved restlessly in my seat and then the man came out of the lavatory, not so urgently now, and with obvious peace of mind. I closed the door for him.

I stood up and stretched and this stretching of my limbs seemed to set in motion a stretching of the mind and I found myself thinking: ‘I am in no hurry to get to Saharanpur and I have always wanted to see Shamli behind the station walls. If I get down now, I can spend the day here. It will be better than sitting in this train for another hour. Then in the evening I can catch the next train home.’

In those days I never had the patience to wait for second thoughts and so I began pulling my small suitcase out from under the seat.

The farmer woke up and asked, ‘What are you doing, brother?’

‘I’m getting out,’ I said.

He went to sleep again.

It would have taken at least fifteen minutes to reach the door as people and their belongings cluttered up the passage. So I let my suitcase down from the window and followed it on to the platform.

There was no one to collect my ticket at the barrier because there was obviously no point in keeping a man there to collect tickets from passengers who never came. And anyway, I had a through-ticket to my destination which I would need in the evening.

I went out of the station and came to Shamli.

Outside the station there was a neem tree and under it stood a tonga. The pony was nibbling at the grass at the foot of the tree. The youth in the front seat was the only human in sight. There were no signs of inhabitants or habitation. I approached the tonga and the youth stared at me as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

'Where is Shamli?' I asked.

'Why, friend, this is Shamli,' he said.

I looked around again but couldn't see any sign of life. A dusty road led past the station and disappeared into the forest.

'Does anyone live here?' I asked.

'I live here,' he said with an engaging smile. He looked an amiable, happy-go-lucky fellow. He wore a cotton tunic and dirty white pyjamas.

'Where?' I asked.

'In my tonga, of course,' he said. 'I have had this pony five years now. I carry supplies to the hotel. But today the manager has not come to collect them. You are going to the hotel? I will take you.'

'Oh, so there's a hotel?'

'Well, friend, it is called that. And there are a few houses too and some shops, but they are all about a mile from the station. If they were not a mile from here, I would be out of business.'

I felt relieved but I still had the feeling of having walked into a town consisting of one station, one pony and one man.

'You can take me,' I said. 'I'm staying till this evening.'

He heaved my suitcase into the seat beside him and I climbed in at the back. He flicked the reins and slapped his pony on the buttocks and, with a roll and a lurch, the buggy moved off down the dusty forest road.

'What brings you here?' asked the youth.

'Nothing,' I said. 'The train was delayed. I was feeling bored. And so I got off.'

He did not believe that but he didn't question me further. The sun was reaching up over the forest but the road lay in the shadow of tall trees—eucalyptus, mango and neem.

'Not many people stay in the hotel,' he said. 'So it is cheap. You will get a room for five rupees.'

'Who is the manager?'



‘Mr Satish Dayal. It is his father’s property. Satish Dayal could not pass his exams or get a job so his father sent him here to look after the hotel.’

The jungle thinned out and we passed a temple, a mosque, a few small shops. There was a strong smell of burnt sugar in the air and in the distance I saw a factory chimney. That, then, was the reason for Shamli’s existence. We passed a bullock cart laden with sugar cane. The road went through fields of cane and maize, and then, just as we were about to re-enter the jungle, the youth pulled his horse to a side road and the hotel came in sight.

It was a small white bungalow with a garden in the front, banana trees at the sides and an orchard of guava trees at the back. We came jingling up to the front veranda. Nobody appeared, nor was there any sign of life on the premises.

‘They are all asleep,’ said the youth.

I said, ‘I’ll sit in the veranda and wait.’ I got down from the tonga and the youth dropped my case on the veranda steps. Then he stooped in front of me, smiling amiably, waiting to be paid.

‘Well, how much?’ I asked.

‘As a friend, only one rupee.’

‘That’s too much,’ I complained. ‘This is not Delhi.’

‘This is Shamli,’ he said. ‘I am the only tonga in Shamli. You may not pay me anything, if that is your wish. But then, I will not take you back to the station this evening. You will have to walk.’

I gave him the rupee. He had both charm and cunning, an effective combination.

‘Come in the evening at about six,’ I said.

‘I will come,’ he said with an infectious smile. ‘Don’t worry.’ I waited till the tonga had gone round the bend in the road before walking up the veranda steps.

The doors of the house were closed and there were no bells to ring. I didn’t have a watch but I judged the time to be a little past six o’clock. The hotel didn’t look very impressive. The whitewash was coming off the walls and the cane chairs on the veranda were old and crooked. A stag’s head was mounted over the front door but one of its glass eyes had fallen out. I had often heard hunters speak of how beautiful an animal looked before it died, but how could anyone with true love of the beautiful care for the stuffed head of an animal, grotesquely mounted, with no resemblance to its living aspect?

I felt too restless to take any of the chairs. I began pacing up and down the veranda, wondering if I should start banging on the doors. Perhaps the hotel was deserted. Perhaps the tonga driver had played a trick on me. I began to regret my impulsiveness in leaving the train. When I saw the manager I would have to invent a

reason for coming to his hotel. I was good at inventing reasons. I would tell him that a friend of mine had stayed here some years ago and that I was trying to trace him. I decided that my friend would have to be a little eccentric (having chosen Shamli to live in), that he had become a recluse, shutting himself off from the world. His parents—no, his sister—for his parents would be dead—had asked me to find him if I could and, as he had last been heard of in Shamli, I had taken the opportunity to enquire after him. His name would be Major Roberts, retired.

I heard a tap running at the side of the building and walking around found a young man bathing at the tap. He was strong and well-built and slapped himself on the body with great enthusiasm. He had not seen me approaching so I waited until he had finished bathing and had begun to dry himself.

‘Hallo,’ I said.

He turned at the sound of my voice and looked at me for a few moments with a puzzled expression. He had a round cheerful face and crisp black hair. He smiled slowly. But it was a more genuine smile than the tonga driver’s. So far I had met two people in Shamli and they were both smilers. That should have cheered me, but it didn’t. ‘You have come to stay?’ he asked in a slow easygoing voice.

‘Just for the day,’ I said. ‘You work here?’

‘Yes, my name is Daya Ram. The manager is asleep just now but I will find a room for you.’

He pulled on his vest and pyjamas and accompanied me back to the veranda. Here he picked up my suitcase and, unlocking a side door, led me into the house. We went down a passageway. Then Daya Ram stopped at the door on the right, pushed it open and took me into a small, sunny room that had a window looking out on to the orchard. There was a bed, a desk, a couple of cane chairs, and a frayed and faded red carpet.

‘Is it all right?’ said Daya Ram.

‘Perfectly all right.’

‘They have breakfast at eight o’clock. But if you are hungry, I will make something for you now.’

‘No, it’s all right. Are you the cook too?’

‘I do everything here.’

‘Do you like it?’

‘No,’ he said. And then added, in a sudden burst of confidence, ‘There are no women for a man like me.’

‘Why don’t you leave, then?’

‘I will,’ he said with a doubtful look on his face. ‘I will leave. . .’

After he had gone I shut the door and went into the bathroom to bathe. The cold water refreshed me and made me feel one with the world. After I had dried myself, I sat on the bed, in front of the open window. A cool breeze, smelling of rain, came through the window and played over my body. I thought I saw a movement among the trees.

And getting closer to the window, I saw a girl on a swing. She was a small girl, all by herself, and she was swinging to and fro and singing, and her song carried faintly on the breeze.

I dressed quickly and left my room. The girl's dress was billowing in the breeze, her pigtails flying about. When she saw me approaching, she stopped swinging and stared at me. I stopped a little distance away.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'A ghost,' I replied.

'You look like one,' she said.

I decided to take this as a compliment, as I was determined to make friends. I did not smile at her because some children dislike adults who smile at them all the time.

'What's your name?' I asked.

'Kiran,' she said. 'I'm ten.'

'You are getting old.'

'Well, we all have to grow old one day. Aren't you coming any closer?'

'May I?' I asked.

'You may. You can push the swing.'

One pigtail lay across the girl's chest, the other behind her shoulder. She had a serious face and obviously felt she had responsibilities. She seemed to be in a hurry to grow up, and I suppose she had no time for anyone who treated her as a child. I pushed the swing until it went higher and higher and then I stopped pushing so that she came lower each time and we could talk.

'Tell me about the people who live here,' I said.

'There is Heera,' she said. 'He's the gardener. He's nearly a hundred. You can see him behind the hedges in the garden. You can't see him unless you look hard. He tells me stories, a new story every day. He's much better than the people in the hotel and so is Daya Ram.'

'Yes, I met Daya Ram.'

'He's my bodyguard. He brings me nice things from the kitchen when no one is looking.'

'You don't stay here?'

‘No, I live in another house. You can’t see it from here. My father is the manager of the factory.’

‘Aren’t there any other children to play with?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know any,’ she said.

‘And the people staying here?’

‘Oh, *they*.’ Apparently Kiran didn’t think much of the hotel guests. ‘Miss Deeds is funny when she’s drunk. And Mr Lin is the *strangest*.’

‘And what about the manager, Mr Dayal?’

‘He’s mean. And he gets frightened of the slightest things. But Mrs Dayal is nice. She lets me take flowers home. But she doesn’t talk much.’

I was fascinated by Kiran’s ruthless summing up of the guests. I brought the swing to a standstill and asked, ‘And what do you think of me?’

‘I don’t know as yet,’ said Kiran quite seriously. ‘I’ll think about you.’

As I came back to the hotel, I heard the sound of a piano in one of the front rooms. I didn’t know enough about music to be able to recognize the piece but it had sweetness and melody though it was played with some hesitancy. As I came nearer, the sweetness deserted the music, probably because the piano was out of tune.

The person at the piano had distinctive Mongolian features and so I presumed he was Mr Lin. He hadn’t seen me enter the room and I stood beside the curtains of the door, watching him play. He had full round lips and high, slanting cheekbones. His eyes were large and round and full of melancholy. His long, slender fingers hardly touched the keys.

I came nearer and then he looked up at me, without any show of surprise or displeasure, and kept on playing.

‘What are you playing?’ I asked.

‘Chopin,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes. It’s nice but the piano is fighting it.’

‘I know. This piano belonged to one of Kipling’s aunts. It hasn’t been tuned since the last century.’

‘Do you live here?’

‘No, I come from Calcutta,’ he answered readily. ‘I have some business here with the sugar cane people, actually, though I am not a businessman.’ He was playing softly all the time so that our conversation was not lost in the music. ‘I don’t know anything about business. But I have to do something.’

‘Where did you learn to play the piano?’

‘In Singapore. A French lady taught me. She had great hopes of my becoming a concert pianist when I grew up. I would have toured Europe and America.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘We left during the War and I had to give up my lessons.’

‘And why did you go to Calcutta?’

‘My father is a Calcutta businessman. What do you do and why do you come here?’ he asked. ‘If I am not being too inquisitive.’

Before I could answer, a bell rang, loud and continuously, drowning the music and conversation.

‘Breakfast,’ said Mr Lin.

A thin dark man, wearing glasses, stepped nervously into the room and peered at me in an anxious manner.

‘You arrived last night?’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘I just want to stay the day. I think you’re the manager?’

‘Yes. Would you like to sign the register?’

I went with him past the bar and into the office. I wrote my name and Mussoorie address in the register and the duration of my stay. I paused at the column marked ‘Profession’, thought it would be best to fill it with something and wrote ‘Author’.

‘You are here on business?’ asked Mr Dayal.

‘No, not exactly. You see, I’m looking for a friend of mine who was last heard of in Shamli, about three years ago. I thought I’d make a few enquiries in case he’s still here.’

‘What was his name? Perhaps he stayed here.’

‘Major Roberts,’ I said. ‘An Anglo-Indian.’

‘Well, you can look through the old registers after breakfast.’

He accompanied me into the dining room. The establishment was really more of a boarding house than a hotel because Mr Dayal ate with his guests. There was a round mahogany dining-table in the centre of the room and Mr Lin was the only one seated at it. Daya Ram hovered about with plates and trays. I took my seat next to Lin and, as I did so, a door opened from the passage and a woman of about thirty-five came in.

She had on a skirt and blouse which accentuated a firm, well-rounded figure, and she walked on high heels, with a rhythmical swaying of the hips. She had an uninteresting face, camouflaged with lipstick, rouge and powder—the powder so thick that it had become embedded in the natural lines of her face—but her figure

compelled admiration.

‘Miss Deeds,’ whispered Lin.

There was a false note to her greeting.

‘Hallo, everyone,’ she said heartily, straining for effect. ‘Why are you all so quiet? Has Mr Lin been playing the Funeral March again?’ She sat down and continued talking. ‘Really, we must have a dance or something to liven things up. You must know some good numbers, Lin, after your experience of Singapore nightclubs. What’s for breakfast? Boiled eggs. Daya Ram, can’t you make an omelette for a change? I know you’re not a professional cook but you don’t have to give us the same thing every day, and there’s absolutely no reason why you should burn the toast. You’ll have to do something about a cook, Mr Dayal.’ Then she noticed me sitting opposite her. ‘Oh, hallo,’ she said, genuinely surprised. She gave me a long appraising look.

‘This gentleman,’ said Mr Dayal introducing me, ‘is an author.’

‘That’s nice,’ said Miss Deeds. ‘Are you married?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Are you?’

‘Funny, isn’t it,’ she said, without taking offence, ‘no one in this house seems to be married.’

‘I’m married,’ said Mr Dayal.

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ said Miss Deeds. ‘And what brings you to Shamli?’ she asked, turning to me.

‘I’m looking for a friend called Major Roberts.’

Lin gave an exclamation of surprise. I thought he had seen through my deception. But another game had begun.

‘I knew him,’ said Lin. ‘A great friend of mine.’

‘Yes,’ continued Lin. I knew him. A good chap, Major Roberts.’

Well, there I was, inventing people to suit my convenience, and people like Mr Lin started inventing relationships with them. I was too intrigued to try and discourage him. I wanted to see how far he would go.

‘When did you meet him?’ asked Lin, taking the initiative.

‘Oh, only about three years back. Just before he disappeared. He was last heard of in Shamli.’

‘Yes, I heard he was here,’ said Lin. ‘But he went away, when he thought his relatives had traced him. He went into the mountains near Tibet.’

‘Did he?’ I said, unwilling to be instructed further. ‘What part of the country? I come from the hills myself. I know the Mana and Niti passes quite well. If you have any idea of exactly where he went, I think I could find him.’ I had the advantage in this exchange because I was the one who had originally invented Roberts. Yet I couldn’t bring myself to end his deception, probably because I felt sorry for him. A happy man wouldn’t take the trouble of inventing friendships with people who didn’t exist. He’d be too busy with friends who did.

‘You’ve had a lonely life, Mr Lin?’ I asked.

‘Lonely?’ said Mr Lin, with forced incredulousness. ‘I’d never been lonely till I came here a month ago. When I was in Singapore. . .’

‘You never get any letters though, do you?’ asked Miss Deeds suddenly.

Lin was silent for a moment. Then he said: ‘Do you?’

Miss Deeds lifted her head a little, as a horse does when it is annoyed, and I thought her pride had been hurt, but then she laughed unobtrusively and tossed her head.

‘I never write letters,’ she said. ‘My friends gave me up as hopeless years ago. They know it’s no use writing to me because they rarely get a reply. They call me the Jungle Princess.’

Mr Dayal tittered and I found it hard to suppress a smile. To cover up my smile I asked, ‘You teach here?’

‘Yes, I teach at the girl’s school,’ she said with a frown. ‘But don’t talk to me about teaching. I have enough of it all day.’

‘You don’t like teaching?’

She gave me an aggressive look. ‘Should I?’ she asked.

‘Shouldn’t you?’ I said.

She paused, and then said, ‘Who are you, anyway, the Inspector of Schools?’

‘No,’ said Mr Dayal who wasn’t following very well, ‘he’s a journalist.’

‘I’ve heard they are nosey,’ said Miss Deeds.

Once again Lin interrupted to steer the conversation away from a delicate issue.

‘Where’s Mrs Dayal this morning?’ asked Lin.

‘She spent the night with our neighbours,’ said Mr Dayal. ‘She should be here after lunch.’

It was the first time Mrs Dayal had been mentioned. Nobody spoke either well or ill of her. I suspected that she kept her distance from the others, avoiding familiarity. I began to wonder about Mrs Dayal.

Daya Ram came in from the veranda looking worried.

‘Heera’s dog has disappeared,’ he said. ‘He thinks a leopard took it.’

Heera, the gardener, was standing respectfully outside on the veranda steps. We all hurried out to him, firing questions which he didn’t try to answer.

‘Yes. It’s a leopard,’ said Kiran, appearing from behind Heera. ‘It’s going to come into the hotel,’ she added cheerfully.

‘Be quiet,’ said Satish Dayal crossly.

‘There are pug marks under the trees,’ said Daya Ram.

Mr Dayal, who seemed to know little about leopards or pug marks, said, ‘I will take a look,’ and led the way to the orchard, the rest of us trailing behind in an ill-assorted procession.

There were marks on the soft earth in the orchard (they could have been a leopard’s) which went in the direction of the riverbed. Mr Dayal paled a little and went hurrying back to the hotel. Heera returned to the front garden, the least excited, the most sorrowful. Everyone else was thinking of a leopard but he was thinking of the dog.

I followed him and watched him weeding the sunflower beds. His face was wrinkled like a walnut but his eyes were clear and bright. His hands were thin and bony but there was a deftness and power in the wrist and fingers and the weeds flew fast from his spade. He had a cracked, parchment-like skin. I could not help thinking of the gloss and glow of Daya Ram’s limbs as I had seen them when he was bathing and wondered if Heera’s had once been like that and if Daya Ram’s would ever be like this, and both possibilities—or were they probabilities—saddened me. Our skin, I thought, is like the leaf of a tree, young and green and shiny. Then it gets darker and heavier, sometimes spotted with disease, sometimes eaten away. Then fading, yellow and red, then falling, crumbling into dust or feeding the flames of fire. I looked at my own skin, still smooth, not coarsened by labour. I thought of Kiran’s fresh rose-tinted complexion; Miss Deeds’s skin, hard and dry; Lin’s pale taut skin, stretched tightly across his prominent cheeks and forehead; and Mr Dayal’s grey skin growing thick hair. And I wondered about Mrs Dayal and the kind of skin she would have.

‘Did you have the dog for long?’ I asked Heera.

He looked up with surprise for he had been unaware of my presence.

‘Six years, sahib,’ he said. ‘He was not a clever dog but he was very friendly. He followed me home one day when I was coming back from the bazaar. I kept telling him to go away but he wouldn’t. It was a long walk and so I began talking to him. I liked talking to him and I have always talked to him and we have understood each other. That first night, when I came home, I shut the gate between us. But he stood on



the other side looking at me with trusting eyes. Why did he have to look at me like that?’

‘So you kept him?’

‘Yes, I could never forget the way he looked at me. I shall feel lonely now because he was my only companion. My wife and son died long ago. It seems I am to stay here forever, until everyone has gone, until there are only ghosts in Shamli. Already the ghosts are here. . .’

I heard a light footfall behind me and turned to find Kiran. The barefoot girl stood beside the gardener and with her toes began to pull at the weeds.

‘You are a lazy one,’ said the old man. ‘If you want to help me, sit down and use your hands.’

I looked at the girl’s fair round face and in her bright eyes I saw something old and wise. And I looked into the old man’s wise eyes, and saw something forever bright and young. The skin cannot change the eyes. The eyes are the true reflection of a man’s age and sensibilities. Even a blind man has hidden eyes.

‘I hope we find the dog,’ said Kiran. ‘But I would like a leopard. Nothing ever happens here.’

‘Not now,’ sighed Heera. ‘Not now. . . Why, once there was a band and people danced till morning, but now. . .’ He paused, lost in thought and then said: ‘I have always been here. I was here before Shamli.’

‘Before the station?’

‘Before there was a station, or a factory, or a bazaar. It was a village then, and the only way to get here was by bullock cart. Then a bus service was started, then the railway lines were laid and a station built, then they started the sugar factory, and for a few years Shamli was a town. But the jungle was bigger than the town. The rains were heavy and malaria was everywhere. People didn’t stay long in Shamli. Gradually, they went back into the hills. Sometimes I too wanted to go back to the hills, but what is the use when you are old and have no one left in the world except a few flowers in a troublesome garden. I had to choose between the flowers and the hills, and I chose the flowers. I am tired now, and old, but I am not tired of flowers.’

I could see that his real world was the garden; there was more variety in his flower beds than there was in the town of Shamli. Every month, every day, there were new flowers in the garden, but there were always the same people in Shamli.

I left Kiran with the old man, and returned to my room. It must have been about eleven o’clock.

I was facing the window when I heard my door being opened. Turning, I perceived

the barrel of a gun moving slowly round the edge of the door. Behind the gun was Satish Dayal, looking hot and sweaty. I didn't know what his intentions were; so, deciding it would be better to act first and reason later, I grabbed a pillow from the bed and flung it in his face. I then threw myself at his legs and brought him crashing down to the ground.

When we got up, I was holding the gun. It was an old Enfield rifle, probably dating back to Afghan wars, the kind that goes off at the least encouragement.

'But—but—why?' stammered the dishevelled and alarmed Mr Dayal.

'I don't know,' I said menacingly. 'Why did you come in here pointing this at me?'

'I wasn't pointing it at you. It's for the leopard.'

'Oh, so you came into my room looking for a leopard? You have, I presume been stalking one about the hotel?' (By now I was convinced that Mr Dayal had taken leave of his senses and was hunting imaginary leopards.)

'No, no,' cried the distraught man, becoming more confused. 'I was looking for you. I wanted to ask you if you could use a gun. I was thinking we should go looking for the leopard that took Heera's dog. Neither Mr Lin nor I can shoot.'

'Your gun is not up-to-date,' I said. 'It's not at all suitable for hunting leopards. A stout stick would be more effective. Why don't we arm ourselves with lathis and make a general assault?'

I said this banteringly, but Mr Dayal took the idea quite seriously. 'Yes, yes,' he said with alacrity, 'Daya Ram has got one or two lathis in the godown. The three of us could make an expedition. I have asked Mr Lin but he says he doesn't want to have anything to do with leopards.'

'What about our Jungle Princess?' I said. 'Miss Deeds should be pretty good with a lathi.'

'Yes, yes,' said Mr Dayal humourlessly, 'but we'd better not ask her.'

Collecting Daya Ram and two lathis, we set off for the orchard and began following the pug marks through the trees. It took us ten minutes to reach the riverbed, a dry, hot rocky place; then we went into the jungle, Mr Dayal keeping well to the rear. The atmosphere was heavy and humid, and there was not a breath of air amongst the trees. When a parrot squawked suddenly, shattering the silence, Mr Dayal let out a startled exclamation and started for home.

'What was that?' he asked nervously.

'A bird,' I explained.

'I think we should go back now,' he said. 'I don't think the leopard's here.'

'You never know with leopards,' I said, 'they could be anywhere.'

Mr Dayal stepped away from the bushes. 'I'll have to go,' he said. 'I have a lot of work. You keep a lathi with you, and I'll send Daya Ram back later.'

'That's very thoughtful of you,' I said.

Daya Ram scratched his head and reluctantly followed his employer back through the trees. I moved on slowly, down the little used path, wondering if I should also return. I saw two monkeys playing on the branch of a tree, and decided that there could be no danger in the immediate vicinity.

Presently I came to a clearing where there was a pool of fresh clear water. It was fed by a small stream that came suddenly, like a snake, out of the long grass. The water looked cool and inviting. Laying down the lathi and taking off my clothes, I ran down the bank until I was waist-deep in the middle of the pool. I splashed about for some time before emerging, then I lay on the soft grass and allowed the sun to dry my body. I closed my eyes and gave myself up to beautiful thoughts. I had forgotten all about leopards.

I must have slept for about half an hour because when I awoke, I found that Daya Ram had come back and was vigorously thrashing about in the narrow confines of the pool. I sat up and asked him the time.

'Twelve o'clock,' he shouted, coming out of the water, his dripping body all gold and silver in sunlight. 'They will be waiting for dinner.'

'Let them wait,' I said.

It was a relief to talk to Daya Ram, after the uneasy conversations in the lounge and dining-room.

'Dayal sahib will be angry with me.'

'I'll tell him we found the trail of the leopard, and that we went so far into the jungle that we lost our way. As Miss Deeds is so critical of the food, let her cook the meal.'

'Oh, she only talks like that,' said Daya Ram. 'Inside she is very soft. She is too soft in some ways.'

'She should be married.'

'Well, she would like to be. Only there is no one to marry her. When she came here she was engaged to be married to an English army captain. I think she loved him, but she is the sort of person who cannot help loving many men all at once, and the captain could not understand that—it is just the way she is made, I suppose. She is always ready to fall in love.'

'You seem to know,' I said.

'Oh, yes.'

We dressed and walked back to the hotel. In a few hours, I thought, the tonga will

come for me and I will be back at the station. The mysterious charm of Shamli will be no more, but whenever I pass this way I will wonder about these people, about Miss Deeds and Lin and Mrs Dayal.

Mrs Dayal. . . She was the one person I had yet to meet. It was with some excitement and curiosity that I looked forward to meeting her; she was about the only mystery left in Shamli, now, and perhaps she would be no mystery when I met her. And yet. . . I felt that perhaps she would justify the impulse that made me get down from the train.

I could have asked Daya Ram about Mrs Dayal, and so satisfied my curiosity; but I wanted to discover her for myself. Half the day was left to me, and I didn't want my game to finish too early.

I walked towards the veranda, and the sound of the piano came through the open door.

'I wish Mr Lin would play something cheerful,' said Miss Deeds. 'He's obsessed with the Funeral March. Do you dance?'

'Oh, no,' I said.

She looked disappointed. But when Lin left the piano, she went into the lounge and sat down on the stool. I stood at the door watching her, wondering what she would do. Lin left the room somewhat resentfully.

She began to play an old song which I remembered having heard in a film or on a gramophone record. She sang while she played, in a slightly harsh but pleasant voice:

*Rolling round the world*

*Looking for the sunshine*

*I know I'm going to find some day. . .*

Then she played 'Am I blue?' and 'Darling, Je Vous Aime Beaucoup'. She sat there singing in a deep husky voice, her eyes a little misty, her hard face suddenly kind and sloppy. When the dinner gong rang, she broke off playing and shook off her sentimental mood, and laughed derisively at herself.

I don't remember that lunch. I hadn't slept much since the previous night and I was beginning to feel the strain of my journey. The swim had refreshed me, but it had also made me drowsy. I ate quite well, though, of rice and kofta curry, and then, feeling sleepy, made for the garden to find a shady tree. There were some books on the shelf in the lounge, and I ran my eye over them in search of one that might condition sleep. But they were too dull to do even that. So I went into the garden, and there was Kiran on the swing, and I went to her tree and sat down on the grass.

‘Did you find the leopard?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said, with a yawn.

‘Tell me a story.’

‘You tell me one,’ I said.

‘All right. Once there was a lazy man with long legs, who was always yawning and wanting to fall asleep...’

I watched the swaying motions of the swing and the movements of the girl’s bare legs, and a tiny insect kept buzzing about in front of my nose...

‘...and fall asleep, and the reason for this was that he liked to dream.’

I blew the insect away, and the swing became hazy and distant, and Kiran was a blurred figure in the trees...

‘...liked to dream, and what do you think he dreamt about. . .’ Dreamt about, dreamt about...

When I awoke there was that cool rain-scented breeze blowing across the garden. I remember lying on the grass with my eyes closed, listening to the swishing of the swing. Either I had not slept long, or Kiran had been a long time on the swing; it was moving slowly now, in a more leisurely fashion, without much sound. I opened my eyes and saw that my arm was stained with the juice of the grass beneath me. Looking up, I expected to see Kiran’s legs waving above me. But instead I saw dark slim feet and above them the folds of a sari. I straightened up against the trunk of the tree to look closer at Kiran, but Kiran wasn’t there. It was someone else on the swing, a young woman in a pink sari, with a red rose in her hair.

She had stopped the swing with her foot on the ground, and she was smiling at me.

It wasn’t a smile you could see, it was a tender fleeting movement that came suddenly and was gone at the same time, and its going was sad. I thought of the others’ smiles, just as I had thought of their skins: the tonga driver’s friendly, deceptive smile; Daya Ram’s wide sincere smile; Miss Deeds’s cynical, derisive smile. And looking at Sushila, I knew a smile could never change. She had always smiled that way.

‘You haven’t changed,’ she said.

I was standing up now, though still leaning against the tree for support. Though I had never thought much about the *sound* of her voice, it seemed as familiar as the sounds of yesterday.

‘You haven’t changed either,’ I said. ‘But where did you come from?’ I wasn’t sure yet if I was awake or dreaming.

She laughed as she had always laughed at me.

‘I came from behind the tree. The little girl has gone.’

‘Yes, I’m dreaming,’ I said helplessly.

‘But what brings you here?’

‘I don’t know. At least I didn’t know when I came. But it must have been you. The train stopped at Shamli and I don’t know why, but I decided I would spend the day here, behind the station walls. You must be married now, Sushila.’

‘Yes, I am married to Mr Dayal, the manager of the hotel. And what has been happening to you?’

‘I am still a writer, still poor, and still living in Mussoorie.’

‘When were you last in Delhi?’ she asked. ‘I don’t mean Delhi, I mean at home.’

‘I have not been to your home since you were there.’

‘Oh, my friend,’ she said, getting up suddenly and coming to me, ‘I want to talk about our home and Sunil and our friends and all those things that are so far away now. I have been here two years, and I am already feeling old. I keep remembering our home—how young I was, how happy—and I am all alone with memories. But now you are here! It was a bit of magic. I came through the trees after Kiran had gone, and there you were, fast asleep under the tree. I didn’t wake you then, because I wanted to see you wake up.’

‘As I used to watch you wake up. . .’

She was near me and I could look at her more closely. Her cheeks did not have the same freshness—they were a little pale—and she was thinner now, but her eyes were the same, smiling the same way. Her fingers, when she took my hand, were the same warm delicate fingers.

‘Talk to me,’ she said. ‘Tell me about yourself.’

‘You tell me,’ I said.

‘I am here,’ she said. ‘That is all there is to say about myself.’

‘Then let us sit down and I’ll talk.’

‘Not here,’ she took my hand and led me through the trees. ‘Come with me.’

I heard the jingle of a tonga bell and a faint shout. I stopped and laughed.

‘My tonga,’ I said. ‘It has come to take me back to the station.’

‘But you are not going,’ said Sushila, immediately downcast.

‘I will tell him to come in the morning,’ I said. ‘I will spend the night in your Shamli.’

I walked to the front of the hotel where the tonga was waiting. I was glad no one

else was in sight. The youth was smiling at me in his most appealing manner.

‘I’m not going today,’ I said. ‘Will you come tomorrow morning?’

‘I can come whenever you like, friend. But you will have to pay for every trip, because it is a long way from the station even if my tonga is empty. Usual fare, friend, one rupee.’

I didn’t try to argue but resignedly gave him the rupee. He cracked his whip and pulled on the reins, and the carriage moved off.

‘If you don’t leave tomorrow,’ the youth called out after me, ‘you’ll never leave Shamli!’

I walked back through the trees, but I couldn’t find Sushila.

‘Sushila, where are you?’ I called, but I might have been speaking to the trees, for I had no reply. There was a small path going through the orchard, and on the path I saw a rose petal. I walked a little further and saw another petal. They were from Sushila’s red rose. I walked on down the path until I had skirted the orchard, and then the path went along the fringe of the jungle, past a clump of bamboos, and here the grass was a lush green as though it had been constantly watered. I was still finding rose petals. I heard the chatter of seven-sisters, and the call of a hoopoe. The path bent to meet a stream, there was a willow coming down to the water’s edge, and Sushila was waiting there.

‘Why didn’t you wait?’ I said.

‘I wanted to see if you were as good at following me as you used to be.’

‘Well, I am,’ I said, sitting down beside her on the grassy bank of the stream. ‘Even if I’m out of practice.’

‘Yes, I remember the time you climbed up an apple tree to pick some fruit for me. You got up all right but then you couldn’t come down again. I had to climb up myself and help you.’

‘I don’t remember that,’ I said.

‘Of course you do.’

‘It must have been your other friend, Pramod.’

‘I never climbed trees with Pramod.’

‘Well, I don’t remember.’

I looked at the little stream that ran past us. The water was no more than ankle-deep, cold and clear and sparkling, like the mountain stream near my home. I took off my shoes, rolled up my trousers, and put my feet in the water. Sushila’s feet joined mine.

At first I had wanted to ask about her marriage, whether she was happy or not,

what she thought of her husband; but now I couldn't ask her these things. They seemed far away and of little importance. I could think of nothing she had in common with Mr Dayal. I felt that her charm and attractiveness and warmth could not have been appreciated, or even noticed, by that curiously distracted man. He was much older than her, of course, probably older than me. He was obviously not her choice but her parents', and so far they were childless. Had there been children, I don't think Sushila would have minded Mr Dayal as her husband. Children would have made up for the absence of passion—or was there passion in Satish Dayal. . .? I remembered having heard that Sushila had been married to a man she didn't like. I remembered having shrugged off the news, because it meant she would never come my way again, and I have never yearned after something that has been irredeemably lost. But she *had* come my way again. And was she still lost? That was what I wanted to know. . .

'What do you do with yourself all day?' I asked.

'Oh, I visit the school and help with the classes. It is the only interest I have in this place. The hotel is terrible. I try to keep away from it as much as I can.'

'And what about the guests?'

'Oh, don't let us talk about them. Let us talk about ourselves. Do you have to go tomorrow?'

'Yes, I suppose so. Will you always be in this place?'

'I suppose so.'

That made me silent. I took her hand, and my feet churned up the mud at the bottom of the stream. As the mud subsided I saw Sushila's face reflected in the water, and looking up at her again, into her dark eyes, the old yearning returned and I wanted to care of her and protect her. I wanted to take her away from that place, from sorrowful Shamli. I wanted her to live again. Of course, I had forgotten all about my poor finances, Sushila's family, and the shoes I wore, which were my last pair. The uplift I was experiencing in this meeting with Sushila, who had always, throughout her childhood and youth, bewitched me as no other had ever bewitched me, made me reckless and impulsive.

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed her on the soft of her palm.

'Can I kiss you?' I said.

'You have just done so.'

'Can I kiss you?' I repeated.

'It is not necessary.'

I leaned over and kissed her slender neck. I knew she would like this, because that was where I had kissed her often before. I kissed her on the soft of the throat, where



it tickled.

‘It is not necessary,’ she said, but she ran her fingers through my hair and let them rest there. I kissed her behind the ear then, and kept my mouth to her ear and whispered, ‘Can I kiss you?’

She turned her face to me so that we looked deep into each other’s eyes, and I kissed her again. And we put our arms around each other and lay together on the grass with the water running over our feet. We said nothing at all, simply lay there for what seemed like several years, or until the first drop of rain.

It was a big wet drop, and it splashed on Sushila’s cheek just next to mine, and ran down to her lips so that I had to kiss her again. The next big drop splattered on the tip of my nose, and Sushila laughed and sat up. Little ringlets were forming on the stream where the raindrops hit the water, and above us there was a pattering on the banana leaves.

‘We must go,’ said Sushila.

We started homewards, but had not gone far before it was raining steadily, and Sushila’s hair came loose and streamed down her body. The rain fell harder, and we had to hop over pools and avoid the soft mud. Sushila’s sari was plastered to her body, accentuating her ripe, thrusting breasts, and I was excited to passion. I pulled her beneath a big tree, crushed her in my arms and kissed her rain-kissed mouth. And then I thought she was crying, but I wasn’t sure, because it might have been the raindrops on her cheeks.

‘Come away with me,’ I said. ‘Leave this place. Come away with me tomorrow morning. We will go somewhere where nobody will know us or come between us.’

She smiled at me and said, ‘You are still a dreamer, aren’t you?’

‘Why can’t you come?’

‘I am married. It is as simple as that.’

‘If it is that simple you can come.’

‘I have to think of my parents, too. It would break my father’s heart if I were to do what you are proposing. And you are proposing it without a thought for the consequences.’

‘You are too practical,’ I said.

‘If women were not practical, most marriages would be failures.’

‘So your marriage is a success?’

‘Of course it is, as a marriage. I am not happy and I do not love him, but neither am I so unhappy that I should hate him. Sometimes, for our own sakes, we have to think of the happiness of others. What happiness would we have living in hiding from everyone we once knew and cared for. Don’t be a fool. I am always here and

you can come to see me, and nobody will be made unhappy by it. But take me away and we will only have regrets.'

'You don't love me,' I said foolishly.

'That sad word *love*,' she said, and became pensive and silent.

I could say no more. I was angry again and rebellious, and there was no one and nothing to rebel against. I could not understand someone who was afraid to break away from an unhappy existence lest that existence should become unhappier. I had always considered it an admirable thing to break away from security and respectability. Of course, it is easier for a man to do this. A man can look after himself, he can do without neighbours and the approval of the local society. A woman, I reasoned, would do anything for love provided it was not at the price of security; for a woman loves security as much as a man loves independence.

'I must go back now,' said Sushila. 'You follow a little later.'

'All you wanted to do was talk,' I complained.

She laughed at that and pulled me playfully by the hair. Then she ran out from under the tree, springing across the grass, and the wet mud flew up and flecked her legs. I watched her through the thin curtain of rain until she reached the veranda. She turned to wave to me, and then skipped into the hotel.

The rain had lessened, but I didn't know what to do with myself. The hotel was uninviting, and it was too late to leave Shamli. If the grass hadn't been wet I would have preferred to sleep under a tree rather than return to the hotel to sit at that alarming dining table.

I came out from under the trees and crossed the garden. But instead of making for the veranda I went round to the back of the hotel. Smoke issuing from the barred window of a back room told me I had probably found the kitchen. Daya Ram was inside, squatting in front of a stove, stirring a pot of stew. The stew smelt appetizing. Daya Ram looked up and smiled at me.

'I thought you had gone,' he said.

'I'll go in the morning,' I said, pulling myself up on an empty table. Then I had one of my sudden ideas and said, 'Why don't you come with me? I can find you a good job in Mussoorie. How much do you get paid here?'

'Fifty rupees a month. But I haven't been paid for three months.'

'Could you get your pay before tomorrow morning?'

'No, I won't get anything until one of the guests pays a bill. Miss Deeds owes about fifty rupees on whisky alone. She will pay up, she says, when the school pays her salary. And the school can't pay her until they collect the children's fees. That is

how bankrupt everyone is in Shamli.'

I see,' I said, though I didn't see. 'But Mr Dayal can't hold back your pay just because his guests haven't paid their bills.'

'He can if he hasn't got any money.'

'I see,' I said. 'Anyway, I will give you my address. You can come when you are free.'

'I will take it from the register,' he said.

I edged over to the stove and leaning over, sniffed at the stew. 'I'll eat mine now,' I said. And without giving Daya Ram a chance to object, I lifted a plate off the shelf, took hold of the stirring-spoon and helped myself from the pot.

'There's rice too,' said Daya Ram.

I filled another plate with rice and then got busy with my fingers. After ten minutes I had finished. I sat back comfortably, in a ruminative mood. With my stomach full I could take a more tolerant view of life and people. I could understand Sushila's apprehensions, Lin's delicate lying and Miss Deeds's aggressiveness. Daya Ram went out to sound the dinner gong, and I trailed back to my room.

From the window of my room I saw Kiran running across the lawn and I called to her, but she didn't hear me. She ran down the path and out of the gate, her pigtails beating against the wind.

The clouds were breaking and coming together again, twisting and spiralling their way across a violet sky. The sun was going down behind the Siwaliks. The sky there was bloodshot. The tall slim trunks of the eucalyptus tree were tinged with an orange glow; the rain had stopped, and the wind was a soft, sullen puff, drifting sadly through the trees. There was a steady drip of water from the eaves of the roof onto the windowsill. Then the sun went down behind the old, old hills, and I remembered my own hills, far beyond these.

The room was dark but I did not turn on the light. I stood near the window, listening to the garden. There was a frog warbling somewhere and there was a sudden flap of wings overhead. Tomorrow morning I would go, and perhaps I would come back to Shamli one day, and perhaps not. I could always come here looking for Major Roberts, and who knows, one day I might find him. What should he be like, this lost man? A romantic, a man with a dream, a man with brown skin and blue eyes, living in a hut on a snowy mountaintop, chopping wood and catching fish and swimming in cold mountain streams; a rough, free man with a kind heart and a shaggy beard, a man who owed allegiance to no one, who gave a damn for money and politics, and cities and civilizations, who was his own master, who lived at one with nature knowing no fear. But that was not Major Roberts—that was the man I wanted to be. He was not a Frenchman or an Englishman, he was me, a dream

of myself. If only I could find Major Roberts.

When Daya Ram knocked on the door and told me the others had finished dinner, I left my room and made for the lounge. It was quite lively in the lounge. Satish Dayal was at the bar, Lin at the piano, and Miss Deeds in the centre of the room, executing a tango on her own. It was obvious she had been drinking heavily.

‘All on credit,’ complained Mr Dayal to me. ‘I don’t know when I’ll be paid, but I don’t dare refuse her anything for fear she starts breaking up the hotel.’

‘She could do that, too,’ I said. ‘It would come down without much encouragement.’

Lin began to play a waltz (I think it was a waltz), and then I found Miss Deeds in front of me, saying, ‘Wouldn’t you like to dance, old boy?’

‘Thank you,’ I said, somewhat alarmed. ‘I hardly know how to.’

‘Oh, come on, be a sport,’ she said, pulling me away from the bar. I was glad Sushila wasn’t present. She wouldn’t have minded, but she’d have laughed as she always laughed when I made a fool of myself.

We went around the floor in what I suppose was waltz-time, though all I did was mark time to Miss Deeds’s motions. We were not very steady—this because I was trying to keep her at arm’s length, while she was determined to have me crushed to her bosom. At length, Lin finished the waltz. Giving him a grateful look, I pulled myself free. Miss Deeds went over to the piano, leaned right across it and said, ‘Play something lively, dear Mr Lin, play some hot stuff.’

To my surprise Mr Lin without so much as an expression of distaste or amusement, began to execute what I suppose was the frug or the jitterbug. I was glad she hadn’t asked me to dance that one with her.

It all appeared very incongruous to me: Miss Deeds letting herself go in crazy abandonment, Lin playing the piano with great seriousness, and Mr Dayal watching from the bar with an anxious frown. I wondered what Sushila would have thought of them now.

Eventually Miss Deeds collapsed on the couch breathing heavily. ‘Give me a drink,’ she cried.

With the noblest of intentions I took her a glass of water. Miss Deeds took a sip and made a face. ‘What’s this stuff?’ she asked. ‘It is different.’

‘Water,’ I said.

‘No,’ she said, ‘now don’t joke, tell me what it is.’

‘It’s water, I assure you,’ I said.

When she saw that I was serious, her face coloured up and I thought she would throw the water at me. But she was too tired to do this and contented herself with throwing the glass over her shoulder. Mr Dayal made a dive for the flying glass, but he wasn't in time to rescue it and it hit the wall and fell to pieces on the floor.

Mr Dayal wrung his hands. 'You'd better take her to her room,' he said, as though I were personally responsible for her behaviour just because I'd danced with her.

'I can't carry her alone,' I said, making an unsuccessful attempt at helping Miss Deeds up from the couch.

Mr Dayal called for Daya Ram, and the big amiable youth came lumbering into the lounge. We took an arm each and helped Miss Deeds, feet dragging, across the room. We got her to her room and on to her bed. When we were about to withdraw she said, 'Don't go, my dear, stay with me a little while.'

Daya Ram had discreetly slipped outside. With my hand on the doorknob I said, 'Which of us?'

'Oh, are there two of you?' said Miss Deeds, without a trace of disappointment.

'Yes, Daya Ram helped me carry you here.'

'Oh, and who are you?'

'I'm the writer. You danced with me, remember?'

'Of course. You dance divinely, Mr Writer. Do stay with me. Daya Ram can stay too if he likes.'

I hesitated, my hand on the doorknob. She hadn't opened her eyes all the time I'd been in the room, her arms hung loose, and one bare leg hung over the side of the bed. She was fascinating somehow, and desirable, but I was afraid of her. I went out of the room and quietly closed the door.

As I lay awake in bed I heard the jackal's 'Pheau', the cry of fear which it communicates to all the jungle when there is danger about, a leopard or a tiger. It was a weird howl, and between each note there was a kind of low gurgling. I switched off the light and peered through the closed window. I saw the jackal at the edge of the lawn. It sat almost vertically on its haunches, holding its head straight up to the sky, making the neighbourhood vibrate with the eerie violence of its cries. Then suddenly it started up and ran off into the trees.

Before getting back into bed I made sure the window was shut. The bullfrog was singing again, 'ing-ong, ing-ong', in some foreign language. I wondered if Sushila was awake too, thinking about me. It must have been almost eleven o'clock. I thought of Miss Deeds with her leg hanging over the edge of the bed. I tossed

restlessly and then sat up. I hadn't slept for two nights but I was not sleepy. I got out of bed without turning on the light and slowly opening my door, crept down the passageway. I stopped at the door of Miss Deeds's room. I stood there listening, but I heard only the ticking of the big clock that might have been in the room or somewhere in the passage. I put my hand on the doorknob, but the door was bolted. That settled the matter.

I would definitely leave Shamli the next morning. Another day in the company of these people and I would be behaving like them. Perhaps I was already doing so! I remembered the tonga driver's words: 'Don't stay too long in Shamli or you will never leave!'

When the rain came, it was not with a preliminary patter or shower, but all at once, sweeping across the forest like a massive wall, and I could hear it in the trees long before it reached the house. Then it came crashing down on the corrugated roof, and the hailstones hit the windowpanes with a hard metallic sound so that I thought the glass would break. The sound of thunder was like the booming of big guns and the lightning kept playing over the garden. At every flash of lightning I sighted the swing under the tree, rocking and leaping in the air as though some invisible, agitated being was sitting on it. I wondered about Kiran. Was she sleeping through all this, blissfully unconcerned, or was she lying awake in bed, starting at every clash of thunder as I was? Or was she up and about, exulting in the storm? I half expected to see her come running through the trees, through the rain, to stand on the swing with her hair blowing wild in the wind, laughing at the thunder and the angry skies. Perhaps I did see her, perhaps she was there. I wouldn't have been surprised if she were some forest nymph living in the hole of a tree, coming out sometimes to play in the garden.

A crash, nearer and louder than any thunder so far, made me sit up in bed with a start. Perhaps lightning had struck the house. I turned on the switch but the light didn't come on. A tree must have fallen across the line.

I heard voices in the passage—the voices of several people. I stepped outside to find out what had happened, and started at the appearance of a ghostly apparition right in front of me. It was Mr Dayal standing on the threshold in an oversized pyjama suit, a candle in his hand.

'I came to wake you,' he said. 'This storm. . .'

He had the irritating habit of stating the obvious.

'Yes, the storm,' I said. 'Why is everybody up?'

'The back wall has collapsed and part of the roof has fallen in. We'd better spend the night in the lounge—it is the safest room. This is a very old building,' he added apologetically.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I am coming.’

The lounge was lit by two candles. One stood over the piano, the other on a small table near the couch. Miss Deeds was on the couch, Lin was at the piano-stool, looking as though he would start playing Stravinsky any moment, and Dayal was fussing about the room. Sushila was standing at a window, looking out at the stormy night. I went to the window and touched her but she didn’t look around or say anything. The lightning flashed and her dark eyes were pools of smouldering fire.

‘What time will you be leaving?’ she asked.

‘The tonga will come for me at seven.’

‘If I come,’ she said, ‘if I come with you, I will be at the station before the train leaves.’

‘How will you get there?’ I asked, and hope and excitement rushed over me again.

‘I will get there,’ she said. ‘I will get there before you. But if I am not there, then do not wait, do not come back for me. Go on your way. It will mean I do not want to come. Or I will be there.’

‘But are you sure?’

‘Don’t stand near me now. Don’t speak to me unless you have to.’ She squeezed my fingers, then drew her hand away. I sauntered over to the next window, then back into the centre of the room. A gust of wind blew through a cracked windowpane and put out the candle near the couch.

‘Damn the wind,’ said Miss Deeds.

The window in my room had burst open during the night and there were leaves and branches strewn about the floor. I sat down on the damp bed and smelt eucalyptus. The earth was red, as though the storm had bled it all night.

After a little while I went into the veranda with my suitcase to wait for the tonga. It was then that I saw Kiran under the trees. Kiran’s long black pigtails were tied up in a red ribbon, and she looked fresh and clean like the rain and the red earth. She stood looking seriously at me.

‘Did you like the storm?’ she asked.

‘Some of the time,’ I said. ‘I’m going soon. Can I do anything for you?’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m going to the end of the world. I’m looking for Major Roberts, have you seen him anywhere?’

‘There is no Major Roberts,’ she said perceptively. ‘Can I come with you to the end of the world?’

‘What about your parents?’

‘Oh, we won’t take them.’

‘They might be annoyed if you go off on your own.’

‘I can stay on my own. I can go anywhere.’

‘Well, one day I’ll come back here and I’ll take you everywhere and no one will stop us. Now is there anything else I can do for you?’

‘I want some flowers, but I can’t reach them,’ she pointed to a hibiscus tree that grew against the wall. It meant climbing the wall to reach the flowers. Some of the red flowers had fallen during the night and were floating in a pool of water.

‘All right,’ I said and pulled myself up on the wall. I smiled down into Kiran’s serious, upturned face. ‘I’ll throw them to you and you can catch them.’

I bent a branch, but the wood was young and green and I had to twist it several times before it snapped.

‘I hope nobody minds,’ I said, as I dropped the flowering branch to Kiran.

‘It’s nobody’s tree,’ she said.

‘Sure?’

She nodded vigorously. ‘Sure, don’t worry.’

I was working for her and she felt immensely capable of protecting me. Talking and being with Kiran, I felt a nostalgic longing for childhood—emotions that had been beautiful because they were never completely understood.

‘Who is your best friend?’ I said.

‘Daya Ram,’ she replied. ‘I told you so before.’

She was certainly faithful to her friends.

‘And who is the second best?’

She put her finger in her mouth to consider the question, and her head dropped sideways.

‘I’ll make you the second best,’ she said.

I dropped the flowers over her head. ‘That is so kind of you. I’m proud to be your second best.’

I heard the tonga bell, and from my perch on the wall saw the carriage coming down the driveway. ‘That’s for me,’ I said. ‘I must go now.’

I jumped down the wall. And the sole of my shoe came off at last.

‘I knew that would happen,’ I said.

‘Who cares for shoes,’ said Kiran.



‘Who cares,’ I said.

I walked back to the veranda and Kiran walked beside me, and stood in front of the hotel while I put my suitcase in the tonga.

‘You nearly stayed one day too late,’ said the tonga driver. ‘Half the hotel has come down and tonight the other half will come down.’

I climbed into the back seat. Kiran stood on the path, gazing intently at me.

‘I’ll see you again,’ I said.

‘I’ll see you in Iceland or Japan,’ she said. ‘I’m going everywhere.’

‘Maybe,’ I said, ‘maybe you will.’

We smiled, knowing and understanding each other’s importance. In her bright eyes I saw something old and wise. The tonga driver cracked his whip, the wheels creaked, the carriage rattled down the path. We kept waving to each other. In Kiran’s hand was a spring of hibiscus. As she waved, the blossoms fell apart and danced a little in the breeze.

Shamli station looked the same as it had the day before. The same train stood at the same platform and the same dogs prowled beside the fence. I waited on the platform till the bell clanged for the train to leave, but Sushila did not come.

Somehow, I was not disappointed. I had never really expected her to come. Unattainable, Sushila would always be more bewitching and beautiful than if she were mine.

Shamli would always be there. And I could always come back, looking for Major Roberts.

# The Girl from Copenhagen

This is not a love story but it is a story about love. You will know what I mean.

When I was living and working in London I knew a Vietnamese girl called Phuong. She studied at the Polytechnic. During the summer vacations she joined a group of students—some of them English, most of them French, German, Indian and African—picking raspberries for a few pounds a week and drinking in some real English country air. Late one summer, on her return from a farm, she introduced me to Ulla, a sixteen-year-old Danish girl who had come over to England for a similar holiday.

‘Please look after Ulla for a few days,’ said Phuong. ‘She doesn’t know anyone in London.’

‘But I want to look after you,’ I protested. I had been infatuated with Phuong for some time, but though she was rather fond of me, she did not reciprocate my advances and it was possible that she had conceived of Ulla as a device to get rid of me for a little while.

‘This is Ulla,’ said Phuong, thrusting a blonde child into my arms. ‘Bye and don’t get up to any mischief!’

Phuong disappeared, and I was left alone with Ulla at the entrance to the Charing Cross Underground Station. She grinned at me and I smiled back rather nervously. She had blue eyes and smooth, tanned skin. She was small for a Scandinavian girl, reaching only to my shoulders, and her figure was slim and boyish. She was carrying a small travel-bag. It gave me an excuse to do something.

‘We’d better leave your bag somewhere,’ I said taking it from her.

And after depositing it in the left-luggage office, we were back on the pavement, grinning at each other.

‘Well, Ulla,’ I said, ‘how many days do you have in London?’

‘Only two. Then I go back to Copenhagen.’

‘Good. Well, what would you like to do?’

‘Eat. I’m hungry.’

I wasn’t hungry but there’s nothing like a meal to help two strangers grow acquainted. We went to a small and not very expensive Indian restaurant off Fitzroy Square and burnt our tongues on an orange-coloured Hyderabad chicken curry. We had to cool off with a Tamil Koykotay before we could talk.

‘What do you do in Copenhagen?’ I asked.

‘I go to school. I’m joining the University next year.’

‘And your parents?’

‘They have a bookshop.’

‘Then you must have done a lot of reading.’

‘Oh, no, I don’t read much. I can’t sit in one place for long. I like swimming and tennis and going to the theatre.’

‘But you have to sit in a theatre.’

‘Yes, but that’s different.’

‘It’s not sitting that you mind but sitting and reading.’

‘Yes, you are right. But most Danish girls like reading—they read more books than English girls.’

‘You are probably right,’ I said.

As I was out of a job just then and had time on my hands, we were able to feed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square and while away the afternoon in a coffee bar before going on to a theatre. Ulla was wearing tight jeans and an abbreviated duffle coat and as she had brought little else with her, she wore this outfit to the theatre. It created quite a stir in the foyer but Ulla was completely unconscious of the stares she received. She enjoyed the play, laughed loudly in all the wrong places, and clapped her hands when no one else did.

The lunch and the theatre had lightened my wallet and dinner consisted of baked beans on toast in a small snack bar. After picking up Ulla’s bag, I offered to take her back to Phuong’s place.

‘Why there?’ she said. ‘Phuong must have gone to bed.’

‘Yes, but aren’t you staying with her?’

‘Oh, no. She did not ask me.’

‘Then where are you staying? Where have you kept the rest of your things?’

‘Nowhere. This is all I brought with me,’ she said, indicating the travel bag.

‘Well, you can’t sleep on a park bench,’ I said. ‘Shall I get you a room in a hotel?’

‘I don’t think so. I have only the money to return to Copenhagen.’ She looked crestfallen for a few moments. Then she brightened and slipped her arm through mine. ‘I know, I’ll stay with you. Do you mind?’

‘No, but my landlady—’ I began, then stopped. It would have been a lie. My landlady, a generous, broad-minded soul, would not have minded in the least.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I don’t mind.’

When we reached my room in Swiss Cottage Ulla threw off her coat and opened the window wide. It was a warm summer’s night and the scent of honeysuckle came through the open window. She kicked her shoes off and walked about the room barefoot. Her toenails were painted a bright pink. She slipped out of her blouse and jeans and stood before the mirror in her lace pants. A lot of sunbathing had made her quite brown but her small breasts were white.

She slipped into bed and said, ‘Aren’t you coming?’

I crept in beside her and lay very still while she chattered on about the play and the friends she had made in the country. I switched off the bed-lamp and she fell silent. Then she said, ‘Well, I’m sleepy. Goodnight!’ And turning over, she immediately fell asleep.

I lay awake beside her, conscious of the growing warmth of her body. She was breathing easily and quietly. Her long, golden hair touched my cheek. I kissed her gently on the lobe of the ear but she was fast asleep. So I counted eight hundred and sixty-two Scandinavian sheep and managed to fall asleep.

Ulla woke fresh and frolicsome. The sun streamed in through the window and she stood naked in its warmth, performing calisthenics. I busied myself with the breakfast. Ulla ate three eggs and a lot of bacon and drank two cups of coffee. I couldn’t help admiring her appetite.

‘And what shall we do today?’ she asked, her blue eyes shining. They were the bright blue eyes of a Siamese kitten.

‘I’m supposed to visit the Employment Exchange,’ I said.

‘But that is bad. Can’t you go tomorrow—after I have left?’

‘If you like.’

‘I like.’

And she gave me a swift, unsettling kiss on the lips.

We climbed Primrose Hill and watched boys flying kites. We lay in the sun and chewed blades of grass and then we visited the zoo where Ulla fed the monkeys. She consumed innumerable ices. We lunched at a small Greek restaurant and I forgot to phone Phuong and in the evening we walked all the way home through scruffy Camden Town, drank beer, ate a fine, greasy dinner of fish and chips and went to

bed early—Ulla had to catch the boat-train the next morning.

‘It has been a good day,’ she said.

‘I’d like to do it again tomorrow.’

‘But I must go tomorrow.’

‘But you must go.’

She turned her head on the pillow and looked wonderingly into my eyes, as though she were searching for something. I don’t know if she found what she was looking for but she smiled and kissed me softly on the lips.

‘Thanks for everything,’ she said.

She was fresh and clean, like the earth after spring rain.

I took her fingers and kissed them, one by one. I kissed her breasts, her throat, her forehead. And, making her close her eyes, I kissed her eyelids.

We lay in each other’s arms for a long time, savouring the warmth and texture of each other’s bodies. Though we were both very young and inexperienced, we found ourselves imbued with a tender patience, as though there lay before us not just this one passing night but all the nights of a lifetime, all eternity.

There was a great joy in our loving and afterwards we fell asleep in each other’s arms like two children who have been playing in the open all day.

The sun woke me the next morning. I opened my eyes to see Ulla’s slim, bare leg dangling over the side of the bed. I smiled at her painted toes. Her hair pressed against my face and the sunshine fell on it making each hair a strand of burnished gold.

The station and the train were crowded and we held hands and grinned at each other, too shy to kiss.

‘Give my love to Phuong,’ she said.

‘I will.’

We made no promises—of writing, or of meeting again. Somehow our relationship seemed complete and whole, as though it had been destined to blossom for those two days. A courting and a marriage and a living together had been compressed, perfectly, into one summer night. . .

I passed the day in a glow of happiness. I thought Ulla was still with me and it was only at night, when I put my hand out for hers, and did not find it, that I knew she had gone.

But I kept the window open all through the summer and the scent of the honeysuckle was with me every night.

# Binya Passes By

While I was walking home one day, along the path through the pines, I heard a girl singing.

It was summer in the hills, and the trees were in new leaf. The walnuts and cherries were just beginning to form between the leaves.

The wind was still and the trees were hushed, and the song came to me clearly; but it was not the words—which I could not follow—or the rise and fall of the melody which held me in thrall, but the voice itself, which was a young and tender voice.

I left the path and scrambled down the slope, slipping on fallen pine needles. But when I came to the bottom of the slope the singing had stopped and there was no one there. ‘I’m sure I heard someone singing,’ I said to myself and then thought I might have been wrong. In the hills it is always possible to be wrong.

So I walked on home, and presently I heard another song, but this time it was the whistling thrush rendering a broken melody, singing a dark, sweet secret in the depths of the forest.

I had little to sing about myself. The electricity bill hadn’t been paid, and there was nothing in the bank, and my second novel had just been turned down by another publisher. Still, it was summer and men and animals were drowsy, and so too were my creditors. The distant mountains loomed purple in the shimmering dust-haze.

I walked through the pines again, but I did not hear the singing. And then for a week I did not leave the cottage, as the novel had to be rewritten, and I worked hard at it, pausing only to eat and sleep and take note of the leaves turning a darker green.

The window opened on to the forest. Trees reached up to the window. Oak, maple, walnut. Higher up the hill, the pines started, and further on, armies of deodars marched over the mountains. And the mountains rose higher, and the trees grew stunted until they finally disappeared and only the black spirit-haunted rocks rose up to meet the everlasting snows. Those peaks cradled the sky. I could not see them from my windows. But on clear mornings they could be seen from the pass on the Tehri road.

There was a stream at the bottom of the hill. One morning, quite early, I went down to the stream, and using the boulders as stepping-stones, moved downstream for about half a mile. Then I lay down to rest on a flat rock in the shade of a wild cherry tree and watched the sun shifting through the branches as it rose over the hill called Pari Tibba (Fairy Hill) and slid down the steep slope into the valley. The air was very still and already the birds were silent. The only sound came from the water running over the stony bed of the stream. I had lain there ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, when I began to feel that someone was watching me.

Someone in the trees, in the shadows, still and watchful. Nothing moved; not a stone shifted, not a twig broke. But someone was watching me. I felt terribly exposed; not to danger, but to the scrutiny of unknown eyes. So I left the rock and, finding a path through the trees, began climbing the hill again.

It was warm work. The sun was up, and there was no breeze. I was perspiring profusely by the time I got to the top of the hill. There was no sign of my unseen watcher. Two lean cows grazed on the short grass; the tinkling of their bells was the only sound in the sultry summer air.

That song again! The same song, the same singer. I heard her from my window. And putting aside the book I was reading, I leant out of the window and started down through the trees. But the foliage was too heavy and the singer too far away for me to be able to make her out. 'Should I go and look for her?' I wondered. 'Or is it better this way—heard but not seen? For, having fallen in love with a song, must it follow that I will fall in love with the singer? No. But surely it is the voice and not the song that has touched me. . .' Presently the singing ended, and I turned away from the window.

A girl was gathering bilberries on the hillside. She was fresh-faced, honey-coloured. Her lips were stained with purple juice. She smiled at me. 'Are they good to eat?' I asked.

She opened her fist and thrust out her hand, which was full of berries, bruised and crushed. I took one and put it in my mouth. It had a sharp, sour taste. 'It is good,' I said. Finding that I could speak haltingly in her language, she came nearer, said, 'Take more then,' and filled my hand with bilberries. Her fingers touched mine. The sensation was almost unique, for it was nine or ten years since my hand had touched a girl's.

'Where do you live?' I asked. She pointed across the valley to where a small village straddled the slopes of a terraced hill.

'It's quite far,' I said. 'Do you always come so far from home?'

'I go further than this,' she said. 'The cows must find fresh grass. And there is

wood to gather and grass to cut.' She showed me the sickle held by the cloth tied firmly about her waist. 'Sometimes I go to the top of Pari Tibba, sometimes to the valley beyond. Have you been there?'

'No. But I will go some day.'

'It is always windy on Pari Tibba.'

'Is it true that there are fairies there?'

She laughed. 'That is what people say. But those are people who have never been there. I do not see fairies on Pari Tibba. It is said that there are ghosts in the ruins on the hill. But I do not see any ghosts.'

'I have heard of the ghosts,' I said. 'Two lovers who ran away and took shelter in a ruined cottage. At night there was a storm, and they were killed by lightning. Is it true, this story?'

'It happened many years ago, before I was born. I have heard the story. But there are no ghosts on Pari Tibba.'

'How old are you?' I asked.

'Fifteen, sixteen, I do not know for sure.'

'Doesn't your mother know?'

'She is dead. And my grandmother has forgotten. And my brother, he is younger than me and he's forgotten his own age. Is it important to remember?'

'No, it is not important. Not here, anyway. Not in the hills. To a mountain, a hundred years are but as a day.'

'Are you very old?' she asked.

'I hope not. Do I look very old?'

'Only a hundred,' she said, and laughed, and the silver bangles on her wrists tinkled as she put her hands up to her laughing face.

'Why do you laugh?' I asked.

'Because you looked as though you believed me. How old are you?'

'Thirty-five, thirty-six, I do not remember.'

'Ah, it is better to forget!'

'That's true,' I said, 'but sometimes one has to fill in forms and things like that, and then one has to state one's age.'

'I have never filled a form. I have never seen one.'

'And I hope you never will. It is a piece of paper covered with useless information. It is all a part of human progress.'

'Progress?'



‘Yes. Are you unhappy?’

‘No.’

‘Do you go hungry?’

‘No.’

‘Then you don’t need progress. Wild bilberries are better.’

She went away without saying goodbye. The cows had strayed and she ran after them, calling them by name: ‘Neelu, Neelu!’ (Blue) and ‘Bhuri!’ (Old One). Her bare feet moved swiftly over the rocks and dry grass.

Early May. The cicadas were singing in the forest; or rather, orchestrating, since they make the sound with their legs. The whistling thrushes pursued each other over the tree-tops in acrobatic love-flights. Sometimes the langurs visited the oak trees to feed on the leaves. As I moved down the path to the stream, I heard the same singing, and coming suddenly upon the clearing near the water’s edge I saw the girl sitting on a rock, her feet in the rushing water—the same girl who had given me bilberries. Strangely enough, I had not guessed that she was the singer. Unseen voices conjure up fanciful images. I had imagined a woodland nymph, a graceful, delicate, beautiful, goddess-like creature, not a mischievous-eyed, round-faced, juice-stained, slightly ragged pixie. Her dhoti—a rough, homespun sari—was faded and torn; an impractical garment, I thought, for running about on the hillside, but the village folk put their girls into dhotis before they are twelve. She’d compromised by hitching it up and by strengthening the waist with a length of cloth bound tightly about her, but she’d have been more at ease in the long, flounced skirt worn in the hills further away.

But I was not disillusioned. I had clearly taken a fancy to her cherubic, open countenance; and the sweetness of her voice added to her charms.

I watched her from the banks of the stream, and presently she looked up, grinned, and stuck her tongue out at me.

‘That’s a nice way to greet me,’ I said. ‘Have I offended you?’

‘You surprised me. Why did you not call out?’

‘Because I was listening to your singing. I did not wish to speak until you had finished.’

‘It was only a song.’

‘But you sang it sweetly.’

She smiled. ‘Have you brought anything to eat?’

‘No. Are you hungry?’

‘At this time I get hungry. When you come to meet me you must always bring something to eat.’

‘But I didn’t come to meet you. I didn’t know you would be here.’

‘You do not wish to meet me?’

‘I didn’t mean that. It is nice to meet you.’

‘You will meet me if you keep coming into the forest. So always bring something to eat.’

‘I will do so next time. Shall I pick you some berries?’

‘You will have to go to the top of the hill again to find the kingora bushes.’

‘I don’t mind. If you are hungry, I will bring some.’

‘All right,’ she said, and looked down at her feet, which were still in the water.

Like some knight-errant of old, I toiled up the hill again until I found the bilberry bushes, and stuffing my pockets with berries I returned to the stream. But when I got there I found she’d slipped away. The cowbells tinkled on the far hill.

Glow-worms shone fitfully in the dark. The night was full of sounds—the tonk-tonk of a nightjar, the cry of a barking deer, the shuffling of porcupines, the soft flip-fop of moths beating against the windowpanes. On the hill across the valley, lights flickered in the small village—the dim lights of kerosene lamps swinging in the dark.

‘What is your name?’ I asked, when we met again on the path through the pine forest.

‘Binya,’ she said. ‘What is yours?’

‘I’ve no name.’

‘All right, Mr No-name.’

‘I mean I haven’t made a name for myself. We must make our own names, don’t you think?’

‘Binya is my name. I do not wish to have any other. Where are you going?’

‘Nowhere.’

‘No-name goes nowhere! Then you cannot come with me, because I am going home and my grandmother will set the village dogs on you if you follow me.’ And laughing, she ran down the path to the stream; she knew I could not catch up with her.

Her face streamed summer rain as she climbed the steep hill, calling the white cow home. She seemed very tiny on the windswept mountainside. A twist of hair lay

flat against her forehead and her torn blue dhoti clung to her firm round thighs. I went to her with an umbrella to give her shelter. She stood with me beneath the umbrella and let me put my arm around her. Then she turned her face up to mine, wonderingly, and I kissed her quickly, softly on the lips. Her lips tasted of raindrops and mint. And then she left me there, so gallant in the blistering rain. She ran home laughing. But it was worth the drenching.

Another day I heard her calling to me—‘No-name, Mister No-name!’—but I couldn’t see her, and it was some time before I found her, halfway up a cherry tree, her feet pressed firmly against the bark, her dhoti tucked up between her thighs—fair, rounded thighs, and legs that were strong and vigorous.

‘The cherries are not ripe,’ I said.

‘They are never ripe. But I like them green and sour. Will you come on to the tree?’

‘If I can still climb a tree,’ I said.

‘My grandmother is over sixty, and *she* can climb trees.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t mind being more adventurous at sixty. There’s not so much to lose then.’ I climbed the tree without much difficulty, but I did not think the higher branches would take my weight, so I remained standing in the fork of the tree, my face on a level with Binya’s breasts. I put my hand against her waist, and kissed her on the soft inside of her arm. She did not say anything. But she took me by the hand and helped me to climb a little higher, and I put my arm around her, as much to support myself as to be close to her.

The full moon rides high, shining through the tall oak trees near the window. The night is full of sounds—crickets, the tonk-tonk of a nightjar, and floating across the valley from your village the sound of drums beating and people singing. It is a festival day, and there will be feasting in your home. Are you singing too, tonight? And are you thinking of me, as you sing, as you laugh, as you dance with your friends? I am sitting here alone, and so I have no one to think of but you.

Binya. . .I take your name again and again—as though by taking it I can make you hear me, and come to me, walking over the moonlit mountain. . .

There are spirits abroad tonight. They move silently in the trees; they hover about the window at which I sit; they take up with the wind and rush about the house. Spirits of the trees, spirits of the old house. An old lady died here last year. She’d lived in the house for over thirty years; something of her personality surely dwells here still. When I look into the tall, old mirror which was hers, I sometimes catch a glimpse of her pale face and long, golden hair. She likes me, I think, and the house is kind to me. Would she be jealous of you, Binya?

The music and singing grows louder. I can imagine your face glowing in the firelight. Your eyes shine with laughter. You have all those people near you and I have only the stars, and the nightjar, and the ghost in the mirror.

I woke early, while the dew was still fresh on the grass, and walked down the hill to the stream, and then up to a little knoll where a pine tree grew in solitary splendour, the wind going *hoo-hoo* in its slender branches. This was my favourite place, my place of power, where I came to renew myself from time to time. I lay on the grass, dreaming. The sky in its blueness swung round above me. An eagle soared in the distance. I heard her voice down among the trees; or I thought I heard it. But when I went to look, I could not find her.

I'd always prided myself on my rationality, had taught myself to be wary of emotional states, like 'falling in love', which turned out to be ephemeral and illusory. And although I told myself again and again that the attraction was purely physical, on my part as well as hers, I had to admit to myself that my feelings towards Binya differed from the feelings I'd had for others; and that while sex had often been for me a celebration, it had, like any other feast, resulted in satiety, a need for change, a desire to forget. . .

Binya represented something else—something wild, dreamlike, fairy-like. She moved close to the spirit-haunted rocks, the old trees, the young grass. She had absorbed something from them—a primeval innocence, an unconcern with the passing of time and events, an affinity with the forest and the mountains, and this made her special and magical.

And so, when three, four, five days went by, and I did not find her on the hillside, I went through all the pangs of frustrated love: had she forgotten me and gone elsewhere? Had we been seen together, and was she being kept at home? Was she ill? Or had she been spirited away?

I could hardly go and ask for her. I would probably be driven from the village. It straddled the opposite hill, a cluster of slate-roof houses, a pattern of little terraced fields. I could see figures in the fields, but they were too far away, too tiny, for me to be able to recognize anyone.

She had gone to her mother's village a hundred miles away, or so, a small boy told me.

And so I brooded; walked disconsolately through the oak forest, hardly listening to the birds—the sweet-throated whistling thrush; the shrill barbet; the mellow-voiced doves. Happiness had always made me more responsive to nature. Feeling miserable, my thoughts turned inward. I brooded upon the trickery of time and circumstance; I felt the years were passing by, *had* passed by, like waves on a

receding tide, leaving me washed up like a bit of flotsam on a lonely beach. But at the same time, the whistling thrush seemed to mock at me, calling tantalizingly from the shadows of the ravine: 'It isn't time that's passing by, it is you and I, it is you and I. . .'

Then I forced myself to snap out of my melancholy. I kept away from the hillside and the forest. I did not look towards the village. I buried myself in my work, tried to think objectively, and wrote an article on 'The inscriptions on the iron pillar at Kalsi'; very learned, very dry, very sensible.

But at night I was assailed by thoughts of Binya. I could not sleep. I switched on the light, and there she was, smiling at me from the looking glass, replacing the image of the old lady who had watched over me for so long.

## His Neighbour's Wife

No (said Arun, as we waited for dinner to be prepared), I did not fall in love with my neighbour's wife. It is not that kind of story.

Mind you, Leela was a most attractive woman. She was not beautiful or pretty but she was handsome. Hers was the firm, athletic body of a sixteen-year-old boy, free of any surplus flesh. She bathed morning and evening, oiling herself well, so that her skin glowed a golden-brown in the winter sunshine. Her lips were often coloured with paan-juice, but her teeth were perfect.

I was her junior by about five years, and she called me her 'younger brother'. Her husband, who was forty to her thirty-two, was an official in the Customs and Excise Department: an extrovert, a hard-drinking, backslapping man, who spent a great deal of time on tour. Leela knew that he was not always faithful to her during these frequent absences but she found solace in her own loyalty and in the well-being of her one child, a boy called Chandu.

I did not care for the boy. He had been well spoilt, and took great delight in disturbing me whenever I was at work. He entered my rooms uninvited, knocked my books about, and, if guests were present, made insulting remarks about them to their faces.

Leela, during her lonely evenings, would often ask me to sit on her veranda and talk to her. The day's work done, she would relax with a hookah. Smoking a hookah was a habit she had brought with her from her village near Agra, and it was a habit she refused to give up. She liked to talk and, as I was a good listener, she soon grew fond of me. The fact that I was twenty-six years old and still a bachelor, never failed to astonish her.

It was not long before she took upon herself the responsibility for getting me married. I found it useless to protest. She did not believe me when I told her that I could not afford to marry, that I preferred a bachelor's life. A wife, she insisted, was an asset to any man. A wife reduced expenses. Where did I eat? At a hotel, of course. That must cost me at least sixty rupees a month, even on a vegetarian diet. But if I had a simple homely wife to do the cooking, we could both eat well for less than

that.

Leela fingered my shirt, observing that a button was missing and that the collar was frayed. She remarked on my pale face and general look of debility and told me that I would fall victim to all kinds of diseases if I did not find someone to look after me. What I needed, she declared between puffs at the hookah, was a woman—a young, healthy, buxom woman, preferably from a village near Agra.

‘If I could find someone like you,’ I said slyly, ‘I would not mind getting married.’

She appeared neither flattered nor offended by my remark.

‘Don’t marry an older woman,’ she advised. ‘Never take a wife who is more experienced in the ways of the world than you are. You just leave it to me, I’ll find a suitable bride for you.’

To please Leela, I agreed to this arrangement, thinking she would not take it seriously. But, two days later, when she suggested that I accompany her to a certain distinguished home for orphan girls, I became alarmed. I refused to have anything to do with her project.

‘Don’t you have confidence in me?’ she asked. ‘You said you would like a girl who resembled me. I know one who looks just as I did ten years ago.’

‘I like you as you are now,’ I said. ‘Not as you were ten years ago.’

‘Of course. We shall arrange for you to see the girl first.’

‘You don’t understand,’ I protested. ‘It’s not that I feel I have to be in love with someone before marrying her—I know you would choose a fine girl, and I would really prefer someone who is homely and simple to an M.A. with Honours in Psychology—it’s just that I’m not ready for it. I want another year or two of freedom. I don’t want to be chained down. To be frank, I don’t want the responsibility.’

‘A little responsibility will make a man of you,’ said Leela; but she did not insist on my accompanying her to the orphanage, and the matter was allowed to rest for a few days.

I was beginning to hope that Leela had reconciled herself to allowing one man to remain single in a world full of husbands when, one morning, she accosted me on the veranda with an open newspaper, which she thrust in front of my nose.

‘There!’ she said triumphantly. ‘What do you think of that? I did it to surprise you.’

She had certainly succeeded in surprising me. Her henna-stained forefinger rested on an advertisement in the matrimonial columns.

Bachelor journalist, age 25, seeks attractive young wife well-versed in household

duties. Caste, religion no bar. Dowry optional.

I must admit that Leela had made a good job of it. In a few days the replies began to come in, usually from the parents of the girls concerned. Each applicant wanted to know how much money I was earning. At the same time, they took the trouble to list their own connections and the high positions occupied by relatives. Some parents enclosed their daughters' photographs. They were very good photographs, though there was a certain amount of touching-up employed.

I studied the pictures with interest. Perhaps marriage wasn't such a bad proposition, after all. I selected the photographs of the three girls I most fancied and showed them to Leela.

To my surprise, she disapproved of all three. One of the girls she said, had a face like a hermaphrodite; another obviously suffered from tuberculosis; and the third was undoubtedly an adventuress. Leela decided that the whole idea of the advertisement had been a mistake. She was sorry she had inserted it; the only replies we were likely to get would be from fortune hunters. And I had no fortune.

So we destroyed the letters. I tried to keep some of the photographs, but Leela tore them up too.

And so, for some time, there were no more attempts at getting me married.

Leela and I met nearly every day, but we spoke of other things. Sometimes, in the evenings, she would make me sit on the charpoy opposite her, and then she would draw up her hookah and tell me stories about her village and her family. I was getting used to the boy, too, and even growing rather fond of him.

All this came to an end when Leela's husband went and got himself killed. He was shot by a bootlegger who had decided to get rid of the excise man rather than pay him an exorbitant sum of money. It meant that Leela had to give up her quarters and return to her village near Agra. She waited until the boy's school term had finished, and then she packed their things and bought two tickets, third-class to Agra.

Something, I could see, had been troubling her, and when I saw her off at the station I realized what it was. She was having a fit of conscience about my continued bachelorhood.

'In my village,' she said confidently, leaning out from the carriage window, 'there is a very comely young girl, a distant relative of mine, I shall speak to the parents.'

And then I said something which I had not considered before; which had never, until that moment, entered my head. And I was no less surprised than Leela when the words came tumbling out of my mouth: 'Why don't *you* marry me now?'

Arun didn't have time to finish his story because, just at this interesting stage, the dinner arrived.



But the dinner brought with it the end of his story.

It was served by his wife, a magnificent woman, strong and handsome, who could only have been Leela. And a few minutes later, Chandu, Arun's stepson, charged into the house, complaining that he was famished.

Arun introduced me to his wife, and we exchanged the usual formalities.

'But why hasn't your friend brought his family with him?' she asked.

'Family? Because he's still a bachelor!'

And then as he watched his wife's expression change from a look of mild indifference to one of deep concern, he hurriedly changed the subject.

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## Susanna's Seven Husbands

Locally, the tomb was known as 'the grave of the seven times married one'.

You'd be forgiven for thinking it was Bluebeard's grave; he was reputed to have killed several wives in turn because they showed undue curiosity about a locked room. But this was the tomb of Susanna Anna-Maria Yeates, and the inscription (most of it in Latin) stated that she was mourned by all who had benefited from her generosity, her beneficiaries having included various schools, orphanages and the church across the road. There was no sign of any other grave in the vicinity and presumably her husbands had been interred in the old Rajpur graveyard, below the Delhi Ridge.

I was still in my teens when I first saw the ruins of what had once been a spacious and handsome mansion. Desolate and silent, its well-laid paths were overgrown with weeds, and its flower beds had disappeared under a growth of thorny jungle. The two-storeyed house had looked across the Grand Trunk Road. Now abandoned, feared and shunned, it stood encircled in mystery, reputedly the home of evil spirits.

Outside the gate, along the Grand Trunk Road, thousands of vehicles sped by—cars, trucks, buses, tractors, bullock carts—but few noticed the old mansion or its mausoleum, set back as they were from the main road, hidden by mango, neem and peepul trees. One old and massive peepul tree grew out of the ruins of the house, strangling it much as its owner was said to have strangled one of her dispensable paramours.

As a much-married person with a quaint habit of disposing of her husbands whenever she tired of them, Susanna's malignant spirit was said to haunt the deserted garden. I had examined the tomb, I had gazed upon the ruins, I had scrambled through shrubbery and overgrown rose bushes, but I had not encountered the spirit of this mysterious woman. Perhaps, at the time, I was too pure and innocent to be targeted by malignant spirits. For malignant she must have been, if the stories about her were true.

The vaults of the ruined mansion were rumoured to contain a buried treasure—the amassed wealth of the lady Susanna. But no one dared go down there, for the

vaults were said to be occupied by a family of cobras, traditional guardians of buried treasure. Had she really been a woman of great wealth, and could treasure still be buried there? I put these questions to Naushad, the furniture maker, who had lived in the vicinity all his life, and whose father had made the furniture and fittings for this and other great houses in Old Delhi.

‘Lady Susanna, as she was known, was much sought after for her wealth,’ recalled Naushad. ‘She was no miser, either. She spent freely, reigning in state in her palatial home, with many horses and carriages at her disposal. Every evening she rode through the Roshanara Gardens, the cynosure of all eyes, for she was beautiful as well as wealthy. Yes, all men sought her favours, and she could choose from the best of them. Many were fortune hunters. She did not discourage them. Some found favour for a time, but she soon tired of them. None of her husbands enjoyed her wealth for very long!’

‘Today no one enters those ruins, where once there was mirth and laughter. She was a zamindari lady, the owner of much land, and she administered her estate with a strong hand. She was kind if rents were paid when they fell due, but terrible if someone failed to pay.’

‘Well, over fifty years have gone by since she was laid to rest, but still men speak of her with awe. Her spirit is restless, and it is said that she often visits the scenes of her former splendour. She has been seen walking through this gate, or riding in the gardens, or driving in her phaeton down the Rajpur road.’

‘And what happened to all those husbands?’ I asked.

‘Most of them died mysterious deaths. Even the doctors were baffled. Tomkins Sahib drank too much. The lady soon tired of him. A drunken husband is a burdensome creature, she was heard to say. He would eventually have drunk himself to death, but she was an impatient woman and was anxious to replace him. You see those datura bushes growing wild in the grounds? They have always done well here.’

‘Belladonna?’ I suggested.

‘That’s right, huzoor. Introduced in the whisky-soda, it put him to sleep forever.’

‘She was quite humane in her way.’

‘Oh, very humane, sir. She hated to see anyone suffer. One sahib, I don’t know his name, drowned in the tank behind the house, where the water lilies grew. But she made sure he was half-dead before he fell in. She had large, powerful hands, they said.’

‘Why did she bother to marry them? Couldn’t she just have had men friends?’

‘Not in those days, huzoor. Respectable society would not have tolerated it. Neither in India nor in the West would it have been permitted.’

‘She was born out of her time,’ I remarked.

‘True, sir. And remember, most of them were fortune hunters. So we need not waste too much pity on them.’

‘She did not waste any.’

‘She was without pity. Especially when she found out what they were really after. Snakes had a better chance of survival.’

‘How did the other husbands take their leave of this world?’

‘Well, the Colonel Sahib shot himself while cleaning his rifle. Purely an accident, huzoor. Although some say she had loaded his gun without his knowledge. Such was her reputation by now that she was suspected even when innocent. But she bought her way out of trouble. It was easy enough, if you were wealthy.’

‘And the fourth husband?’

‘Oh, he died a natural death. There was a cholera epidemic that year, and he was carried off by the *haija*. Although, again, there were some who said that a good dose of arsenic produced the same symptoms! Anyway, it was cholera on the death certificate. And the doctor who signed it was the next to marry her.’

‘Being a doctor, he was probably quite careful about what he ate and drank.’

‘He lasted about a year.’

‘What happened?’

‘He was bitten by a cobra.’

‘Well, that was just bad luck, wasn’t it? You could hardly blame it on Susanna.’

‘No, huzoor, but the cobra was in his bedroom. It was coiled around the bedpost. And when he undressed for the night, it struck! He was dead when Susanna came into the room an hour later. She had a way with snakes. She did not harm them and they never attacked her.’

‘And there were no antidotes in those days. Exit the doctor. Who was the sixth husband?’

‘A handsome man. An indigo planter. He had gone bankrupt when the indigo trade came to an end. He was hoping to recover his fortune with the good lady’s help. But our Susanna mem, she did not believe in sharing her fortune with anyone.’

‘How did she remove the indigo planter?’

‘It was said that she lavished strong drink upon him, and when he lay helpless, she assisted him on the road we all have to take by pouring molten lead in his ears.’

‘A painless death, I’m told.’

‘But a terrible price to pay, huzoor, simply because one is no longer needed. . .’

We walked along the dusty highway, enjoying the evening breeze, and some time later we entered the Roshanara Gardens, in those days Delhi's most popular and fashionable meeting place.

'You have told me how six of her husbands died, Naushad. I thought there were seven?'

'Ah, the seventh was a gallant young magistrate who perished right here, huzoor. They were driving through the park after dark when the lady's carriage was attacked by brigands. In defending her, the young man received a fatal sword wound.'

'Not the lady's fault, Naushad.'

'No, huzoor. But he was a magistrate, remember, and the assailants, one of whose relatives had been convicted by him, were out for revenge. Oddly enough, though, two of the men were given employment by the lady Susanna at a later date. You may draw your own conclusions.'

'And were there others?'

'Not husbands. But an adventurer, a soldier of fortune came along. He found her treasure, they say. And he lies buried with it, in the cellars of the ruined house. His bones lie scattered there, among gold and silver and precious jewels. The cobras guard them still! But how he perished was a mystery, and remains so till this day.'

'And Susanna? What happened to her?'

'She lived to a ripe old age. If she paid for her crimes, it wasn't in this life! She had no children, but she started an orphanage and gave generously to the poor and to various schools and institutions, including a home for widows. She died peacefully in her sleep.'

'A merry widow,' I remarked. 'The Black Widow spider!'

Don't go looking for Susanna's tomb. It vanished some years ago, along with the ruins of her mansion. A smart new housing estate has come up on the site, but not before several workmen and a contractor succumbed to snakebite! Occasionally, residents complain of a malignant ghost in their midst, who is given to flagging down cars, especially those driven by single men. There have also been one or two mysterious disappearances.

And after dusk, an old-fashioned horse and carriage can sometimes be seen driving through the Roshanara Gardens. If you chance upon it, ignore it, my friend. Don't stop to answer any questions from the beautiful fair lady who smiles at you from behind lace curtains. She's still looking for her final victim.

## A Love of Long Ago

Last week, as the taxi took me to Delhi, I passed through the small town in the foothills where I had lived as a young man.

Well, it's the only road to Delhi and one must go that way, but I seldom travel beyond the foothills. As the years go by, my visits to the city—any city—are few and far between. But whenever I am on the road, I look out of the window of my bus or taxi, to catch a glimpse of the first-floor balcony where a row of potted plants lend colour to an old and decrepit building. Ferns, a palm, a few bright marigolds, zinnias and nasturtiums—they made that balcony stand out from others. It was impossible to miss it.

But last week, when I looked out of the taxi window, the balcony garden had gone. A few broken pots remained but the ferns had crumpled into dust, the palm had turned brown and yellow, and of the flowers nothing remained.

All these years I had taken that balcony garden for granted and now it had gone. It shook me. I looked back at the building for signs of life but saw none. The taxi sped on. On my way back, I decided, I would look again. But it was as though a part of my life had come to an abrupt end. The link between youth and middle age, the bridge that spanned that gap, had suddenly been swept away.

And what had happened to Kamla, I wondered. Kamla, who had tended those plants all these years, knowing I would be looking out for them even though I might not see her, even though she might never see me.

Chance gives and takes away and gives again. But I would have to look elsewhere now for the memories of my love, my young love, the girl who came into my life for a few blissful weeks and then went out of it for the remainder of our lives.

Was it almost thirty years ago that it all happened? How old was I then? Twenty-two at the most! And Kamla could not have been more than seventeen.

She had a laughing face, mischievous, always ready to break into smiles or peals of laughter. Sparkling brown eyes. How can I ever forget those eyes? Peeping at me from behind a window curtain, following me as I climbed the steps to my room—the room that was separated from her quarters by a narrow wooden landing that

creaked loudly if I tried to move quietly across it. The trick was to dash across, as she did so neatly on her butterfly feet.

She was always on the move—flitting about on the veranda, running errands of no consequence, dancing on the steps, singing on the rooftop as she hung out the family washing. Only once was she still. That was when we met on the steps in the dark and I stole a kiss, a sweet phantom kiss. She was very still then, very close, a butterfly drawing out nectar, and then she broke away from me and ran away laughing.

‘What is your work?’ she asked me one day.

‘I write stories.’

‘Will you write one about me?’

‘Some day.’

I was living in a room above Moti Bibi’s grocery shop near the cinema. At night I could hear the soundtrack from the film. The songs did not help me much with my writing, nor with my affair, for Kamla could not come out at night. We met in the afternoons when the whole town took a siesta and expected us to do the same. Kamla had a young brother who worked for Moti Bibi (a widow who was also my landlady) and it was through the boy that I had first met Kamla.

Moti Bibi always sent me a glass of kanji or sugar cane juice or lime juice (depending on the season) around noon. Usually the boy brought me the drink but one day I looked up from my typewriter to see what at first I thought was an apparition hovering over me. She seemed to shimmer before me in the hot sunlight that came slashing through the open door. I looked up into her face and our eyes met over the rim of the glass. I forgot to take it from her.

What I liked about her was her smile. It dropped over her face slowly, like sunshine moving over brown hills. She seemed to give out some of the glow that was in her face. I felt it pour over me. And this golden feeling did not pass when she left the room. That was how I knew she was going to mean something special to me.

They were poor, but in time I was to realize that I was even poorer. When I discovered that plans were afoot to marry her to a widower of forty, I plucked up enough courage to declare that I would marry her myself. But my youth was no consideration. The widower had land and a generous gift of money for Kamla’s parents. Not only was this offer attractive, it was customary. What had I to offer? A small rented room, a typewriter, and a precarious income of two to three hundred rupees a month from freelancing. I told the brother that I would be famous one day, that I would be rich, that I would be writing bestsellers! He did not believe me. And who can blame him? I never did write bestsellers or become rich. Nor did I have parents or relatives to speak on my behalf.

I thought of running away with Kamla. When I mentioned it to her, her eyes lit up. She thought it would be great fun. Women in love can be more reckless than men! But I had read too many stories about runaway marriages ending in disaster and I lacked the courage to go through with such an adventure. I must have known instinctively that it would not work. Where would we go and how would we live? There would be no home to crawl back to for either of us.

Had I loved more passionately, more fiercely, I might have felt compelled to elope with Kamla, regardless of the consequences. But it never became an intense relationship. We had so few moments together. Always stolen moments—on the stairs, on the roof, in the deserted junkyard behind the shops. She seemed to enjoy every moment of this secret affair. I fretted and longed for something more permanent. Her responses, so sweet and generous, only made my longing greater. But she seemed content with the immediate moment and what it offered.

And so the marriage took place and she did not appear to be too dismayed about her future. But before she left for her husband's house, she asked me for some of the plants that I had owned and nourished on my small balcony.

'Take them all,' I said. 'I am leaving, anyway.'

'Where are you going?'

'To Delhi—to find work. But I shall come this way sometimes.'

'My husband's house is on the Delhi road. You will pass that way. I will keep these flowers where you can see them.'

We did not touch each other in parting. Her brother came and collected the plants. Only the cactii remained. Not a lover's plant, the cactus! I gave the cactii to my landlady and went to live in Delhi.

And whenever I passed through the old place, summer or winter, I looked out of the window of my bus or taxi and saw the garden flourishing on Kamla's balcony. Leaf and fern abounded and the flowers grew rampant on the sunny ledge.

Once I saw her, leaning over the balcony railing. I stopped the taxi and waved to her. She waved back, smiling like the sun breaking through clouds. She called to me to come up but I said I would come another time. I never did visit her home and I never saw her husband. Her parents had gone back to their village. Her brother had vanished into the great grey spaces of India.

In recent years, after leaving Delhi and making my home in the hills, I have passed through the town less often, but the flowers have always been there, bright and glowing in their increasingly shabby surroundings. Except on this last journey of mine. . .

And on the return trip, only yesterday, I looked again, but the house was empty and desolate, I got out of the car and looked up at the balcony and called Kamla's



name—called it after so many years—but there was no answer.

I asked questions in the locality. The old man had died, his wife had gone away, probably to her village. There had been no children. Would she return? No one could say. The house had been sold. It would be pulled down to make way for a block of flats.

I glanced once more at the deserted balcony, the withered, drooping plants. A butterfly flitted about the railing, looking in vain for a flower on which to alight. It settled briefly on my hand before opening its wings and fluttering away into the blue.

# A Little Song of Love

The wild rose is blooming  
And new leaves shine green,  
The sky when it's open  
Is ultramarine.

Sleep well, my darling,  
Keep dreaming, stay warm,  
The blackbird is singing  
To tell us it's dawn.

The wild geese are winging  
Their way to the north,  
And I know from their calling  
It's time we went forth.

The spring sap is rising  
As we set out together,  
And you'll be my sweetheart  
For ever and ever.

# We Must Love Someone

We Must Love Someone  
If we are to justify  
Our presence on this earth.  
We must keep loving all our days,  
Someone, anyone, anywhere  
Outside our selves;  
For even the sarus crane  
Will grieve over its lost companion,  
And the seal its mate.  
Somewhere in life  
There must be someone  
To take your hand  
And share the torrid day.  
Without the touch of love  
There is no life, and we must fade away.

## The Room on the Roof (Extract)

In his room, Rusty was a king. His domain was the sky and everything he could see. His subjects were the people who passed below, but they were his subjects only while they were below and he was on the roof; and he spied on them through the branches of the banyan tree. His close confidants were the inhabitants of the banyan tree; which, of course, included Kishen.

It was the day of the picnic, and Rusty had just finished bathing at the water tank. He had become used to the people at the tank and had made friends with the ayahs and their charges. He had come to like their bangles and bracelets and ankle-bells. He liked to watch one of them at the tap, squatting on her haunches, scrubbing her feet, and making much music with the bells and bangles; she would roll her sari up to the knees to give her legs greater freedom, and crouch forward so that her jacket revealed a modest expanse of waist.

It was the day of the picnic, and Rusty had bathed, and now he sat on a disused chimney, drying himself in the sun.

Summer was coming. The litchis were almost ready to eat, the mangoes ripened under Kishen's greedy eye. In the afternoons the sleepy sunlight stole through the branches of the banyan tree, and made a patchwork of arched shadows on the walls of the house. The inhabitants of the trees knew that summer was coming; Somi's slippers knew it, and slapped lazily against his heels; and Kishen grumbled and became more untidy, and even Suri seemed to be taking a rest from his private investigations. Yes, summer was coming.

And it was the day of the picnic.

The car had been inspected, and the two bottles that Kapoor had hidden in the dickey had been found and removed; Kapoor was put into khaki drill trousers and a bush-shirt and pronounced fit to drive; a basket of food and a gramophone were in the dickey. Suri had a camera slung over his shoulders; Kishen was sporting a Gurkha hat; and Rusty had on a thick leather belt reinforced with steel knobs. Meena had dressed in a hurry, and looked the better for it. And for once, Somi had tied his turban to perfection.

‘Everyone present?’ said Meena. ‘If so, get into the car.’

‘I’m waiting for my dog,’ said Suri, and he had hardly made the announcement when from around the corner came a yapping mongrel.

‘He’s called Prickly Heat,’ said Suri. ‘We’ll put him in the back seat.’

‘He’ll go in the dickey,’ said Kishen. ‘I can see the lice from here.’

Prickly Heat wasn’t any particular kind of dog, just a kind of dog; he hadn’t even the stump of a tail. But he had sharp, pointed ears that wagged as well as any tail, and they were working furiously this morning.

Suri and the dog were both deposited in the dickey; Somi, Kishen and Rusty made themselves comfortable in the back seat, and Meena sat next to her husband in the front. The car belched and lurched forward, and stirred up great clouds of dust; then, accelerating, sped out of the compound and across the narrow wooden bridge that spanned the canal.

The sun rose over the forest, and a spiral of smoke from a passing train was caught by a slanting ray and spangled with gold. The air was fresh and exciting. It was ten miles to the river and the sulphur springs, ten miles of intermittent grumbling and gaiety, with Prickly Heat yapping in the dickey and Kapoor whistling at the wheel and Kishen letting fly from the window with a catapult.

Somi said: ‘Rusty, your pimples will leave you if you bathe in the sulphur springs.’

‘I would rather have pimples than pneumonia,’ replied Rusty.

‘But it’s not cold,’ said Kishen. ‘I would bathe myself, but I don’t feel very well.’

‘Then you shouldn’t have come,’ said Meena from the front.

‘I didn’t want to disappoint you all,’ said Kishen.

Before reaching the springs, the car had to cross one or two riverbeds, usually dry at this time of the year. But the mountains had tricked the party, for there was a good deal of water to be seen, and the current was strong.

‘It’s not very deep,’ said Kapoor at the first riverbed, ‘I think we can drive through easily.’

The car dipped forward, rolled down the bank, and entered the current with a great splash. In the dickey, Suri got a soaking.

‘Got to go fast,’ said Mr Kapoor, ‘or we’ll stick.’

He accelerated, and a great spray of water rose on both sides of the car. Kishen cried out for sheer joy, but at the back Suri was having a fit of hysterics.

‘I think the dog’s fallen out,’ said Meena.

‘Good,’ said Somi.

‘I think Suri’s fallen out,’ said Rusty.

‘Good,’ said Somi.

Suddenly the engines spluttered and choked, and the car came to a standstill.

‘We have stuck,’ said Kapoor.

‘That,’ said Meena biting, ‘is obvious. Now I suppose you want us all to get out and push?’

‘Yes, that’s a good idea.’

‘You’re a genius.’

Kishen had his shoes off in a flash, and was leaping about in the water with great abandon. The water reached up to his knees and, as he hadn’t been swept off his feet, the others followed his example.

Meena rolled her sari up to the thighs, and stepped gingerly into the current. Her legs, so seldom exposed, were very fair in contrast to her feet and arms, but they were strong and nimble, and she held herself erect. Rusty stumbled to her side, intending to aid her; but ended by clinging to her dress for support. Suri was not to be seen anywhere.

‘Where is Suri?’ asked Meena.

‘Here,’ said a muffled voice from the floor of the dickey. ‘I’ve got sick. I can’t push.’

‘All right,’ said Meena. ‘But you’ll clean up the mess yourself.’

Somi and Kishen were looking for fish. Kapoor tooted the horn.

‘Are you all going to push?’ he said, ‘or are we going to have the picnic in the middle of the river?’

Rusty was surprised at Kapoor’s unusual display of common sense; when sober, Mr Kapoor did sometimes have moments of sanity.

Everyone put their weight against the car and pushed with all their strength; and as the car moved slowly forward, Rusty felt a thrill of health and pleasure run through his body. In front of him, Meena pushed silently, the muscles of her thighs trembling with the strain. They all pushed silently, with determination; the sweat ran down Somi’s face and neck, and Kishen’s jaws worked desperately on his chewing gum. But Kapoor sat in comfort behind the wheel, pressing and pulling knobs, and saying ‘harder, push harder’, and Suri began to be sick again. Prickly Heat was strangely quiet, and it was assumed that the dog was sick too.

With one last, final heave, the car was moved up the opposite bank and on to the road. Everyone groaned and flopped to the ground. Meena’s hands were trembling.

‘You shouldn’t have pushed,’ said Rusty.

‘I enjoyed it,’ she said, smiling at him. ‘Help me to get up.’

He rose, and taking her hand, pulled her to her feet. They stood together, holding hands. Kapoor fiddled around with starters and chokes and things.

‘It won’t go,’ he said. ‘I’ll have to look at the engine. We might as well have the picnic here.’

So out came the food and lemonade bottles and, miraculously enough, out came Suri and Prickly Heat, looking as fit as ever.

‘Hey,’ said Kishen, ‘we thought you were sick. I suppose you were just making room for lunch.’

‘Before he eats anything,’ said Somi, ‘he’s going to get wet. Let’s take him for a swim.’

Somi, Kishen and Rusty caught hold of Suri and dragged him along the riverbank to a spot downstream where the current was mild and the water warm and waist-high. They disrobed Suri, took off their own clothes, and ran down the sandy slope to the water’s edge. Feet splashed ankle-deep, calves thrust into the current, and then the ground suddenly disappeared beneath their feet.

Somi was a fine swimmer; his supple limbs cut through the water, and when he went under, he was almost as powerful; the chequered colours of his body could be seen first here and then there, twisting and turning, diving and disappearing for what seemed like several minutes, and then coming up under someone’s feet.

Rusty and Kishen were amateurs. When they tried swimming underwater, their bottoms remained on the surface, having all the appearance of floating buoys. Suri couldn’t swim at all, but though he was often out of his depth and frequently ducked, managed to avoid his death by drowning.

They heard Meena calling them for food and scrambled up the bank, the dog yapping at their heels. They ate in the shade of a poinsettia tree, whose red long-fingered flowers dropped sensually to the running water; and when they had eaten, lay down to sleep or drowse the afternoon away.

When Rusty awoke, it was evening and Kapoor was tinkering about with the car, muttering to himself, a little cross because he hadn’t had a drink since the previous night. Somi and Kishen were back in the river, splashing away, and this time they had Prickly Heat for company. Suri wasn’t in sight. Meena stood in a clearing at the edge of the forest.

Rusty went up to Meena, but she wandered into the thicket. The boy followed. She must have expected him, for she showed no surprise at his appearance.

‘Listen to the jungle,’ she said.

‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘That’s what I mean. Listen to nothing.’

They were surrounded by silence; a dark, pensive silence, heavy, scented with magnolia and jasmine.

It was shattered by a piercing shriek, a cry that rose on all sides, echoing against the vibrating air; and, instinctively, Rusty put his arm around Meena—whether to protect her or to protect himself, he did not really know—and held her tight.

‘It is only a bird,’ she said, ‘what are you afraid of?’

But he was unable to release his hold, and she made no effort to free herself. She laughed into his face, and her eyes danced in the shadows. But he stifled her laugh with his lips.

It was a clumsy, awkward kiss, but fiercely passionate, and Meena responded, tightening the embrace, returning the fervour of the kiss. They stood together in the shadows, Rusty intoxicated with beauty and sweetness, Meena with freedom and the comfort of being loved.

A monkey chattered shrilly in a branch above them, and the spell was broken.

‘Oh, Meena. . .’

‘Shh. . .you spoil these things by saying them.’

‘Oh, Meena. . .’

They kissed again, but the monkey set up such a racket that they feared it would bring Kapoor and the others to the spot. So they walked through the trees, holding hands.

They were barefoot, but they did not notice the thorns and brambles that pricked their feet; they walked through heavy foliage, nettles and long grass, until they came to a clearing and a stream.

Rusty was conscious of a wild urge, a desire to escape from the town and its people, and live in the forest with Meena, with no one but Meena. . .

As though conscious of his thoughts, she said: ‘This is where we drink. In the trees we eat and sleep, and here we drink.’

She laughed, but Rusty had a dream in his heart. The pebbles on the bed of the stream were round and smooth, taking the flow of water without resistance. Only weed and rock could resist water; only weed or rock could resist life.

‘It would be nice to stay in the jungle,’ said Meena.

‘Let us stay. . .’

‘We will be found. We cannot escape—from—others. . .’

‘Even the world is too small. Maybe there is more freedom in your little room than in all the jungle and all the world.’



Rusty pointed to the stream and whispered, 'Look!'

Meena looked, and at the same time a deer looked up. They looked at each other with startled, fascinated eyes, the deer and Meena. It was a spotted cheetal, a small animal with delicate, quivering limbs and muscles, and green antlers.

Rusty and Meena did not move, nor did the deer; they might have gone on staring at each other all night if somewhere a twig hadn't snapped sharply.

At the snap of the twig, the deer jerked its head up with a start, lifted one foot pensively, sniffed the air; then leapt the stream and in a single bound, disappeared into the forest.

The spell was broken, the magic lost. Only the water ran on and life ran on.

'Let's go back,' said Meena.

They walked back through the dappled sunlight, swinging their clasped hands like two children who had only just discovered love.

Their hands parted as they reached the riverbed. Miraculously enough, Kapoor had started the car and was waving his arms and shouting to everyone to come home. Everyone was ready to start back except for Suri and Prickly Heat, who were nowhere to be seen. Nothing, thought Meena, would have been better than for Suri to disappear forever, but unfortunately she had taken full responsibility for his well-being, and did not relish the thought of facing his strangely affectionate mother. So she asked Rusty to shout for him.

Rusty shouted, and Meena shouted, and Somi shouted, and then they all shouted together; only Suri didn't shout.

'He's up to his tricks,' said Kishen. 'We shouldn't have brought him. Let's pretend we're leaving, then he'll be scared.' So Kapoor started the engine and everyone got in, and it was only then that Suri came running from the forest, the dog at his heels, his shirt tails flapping in the breeze, his hair wedged between his eyes and his spectacles.

'Hey, wait for us!' he cried. 'Do you want me to die?'

Kishen mumbled in the affirmative, and swore quietly.

'We thought you were in the dickey,' said Rusty.

Suri and Prickly Heat climbed into the dickey, and at the same time the car entered the river with a determined splashing and churning of wheels, to emerge the victor.

Everyone cheered, and Somi gave Kapoor such an enthusiastic slap on the back that the pleased recipient nearly caught his head in the steering wheel.

It was dark now, and all that could be seen of the countryside was what the headlights showed. Rusty had hopes of seeing a panther or a tiger, for this was their

territory, but only a few goats blocked the road. However, for the benefit of Suri, Somi told a story of a party that had gone for an outing in a car and on returning home, had found a panther in the dickey.

Kishen fell asleep just before they reached the outskirts of Dehra, his fuzzy head resting on Rusty's shoulder. Rusty felt protective towards the boy, for a bond of genuine affection had grown between the two. Somi was Rusty's best friend, in the same way that Ranbir was a friend, and their friendship was on a high emotional plane. But Kishen was a brother more than a friend. He loved Rusty, but without knowing or thinking or saying it, and that is the love of a brother.

Somi began singing. Then the town came into sight, the bazaar lights twinkling defiance at the starry night.



# The Message of the Flowers

Apple Blossom	It's Spring, and apple blossom time Stands for temptation, Give in to it!
Bluebells	Stand for constancy and calm. For troubled souls they act as balm Ring out the old, ring in the new!
Carnation	Ah, a woman's love comes with this flower. Cherish the moment!
Crysanthemum	When red, it's love. When white, it's youth. When bronze, it has the ring of truth.
Cornflower	How delicate you are!
Daisy	The power of innocence.
Daffodils	You purify the air. You're chivalry, gratitude and care.
Eglantine	Sweet brier-rose, the flower of poets. Keats called you rain-scented, dew-sweet.
Forget-me-not	Your name says it all. And I'll remember to remember.
Geranium	Especially the scarlet kind, They say scarlet is a sign of folly. In that case, you're my folly.
Honeysuckle	Who can resist your sweet fragrance? I want to be near you.
Ivy	You are friendship, fellowship and fidelity. You stand for permanence.
Jasmine	Flower of perfection, You stand high in my affection.

Lemon Blossom	What made me think of you today? You stir up memories of love and play.
Magnolia	Champa, Queen of the garden You bring good fortune.
Nasturtium	How can I forget you, humble friend? You gladden my heart to winter's end.
Oleander	Red or white You're the poet's delight.
Poppy	You're my scarlet lady— Extravagant, effervescent, evanescent!
Quercus	Q had me in a quandary Until I looked out of my window And saw my old friend the oak tree staring hard at me!
Roses	Of roses there are many kinds— The moss, the musk, the Eglantine; Roses speak of faithfulness, The red rose of voluptuousness.
Snapdragon	Your sweet scent fills the air and draws me to you; I'd follow you anywhere.
Tulips	I was offered a tulip, they said it stood for fame I'll settle for the Thorn-Apple, if to you it's just the same.
Urtica	The common nettle: You ignore it at your peril!
Violet	Modest and sweet— I look for you in quiet corners.
Wallflower	Wallflower bright against my wall, You are the sturdiest flower of all!
Xerophyte	You thought you'd fool me, Mr X I looked you up, I must confess In the desert you exist Where other plants like you persist. . .
Yellow Iris	You speak of passion—love's dream ends.
Zinnia	You bring me thoughts of absent friends.

## Delhi Is Not Far (Extract)

We lay on our island, in the shade of a thorn bush, watching a pair of sarus cranes on the opposite bank prancing and capering around each other; tall, stork-like birds, with naked red heads and long red legs.

‘We might be saruses in some future life,’ I said.

‘I hope so,’ said Suraj. ‘Even if it means being born on a lower level. I would like to be a beautiful white bird. I am tired of being a man, but I do not want to leave the world altogether. It is very lovely, sometimes.’

‘I would like to be a sacred bird,’ I said. ‘I don’t wish to be shot at.’

‘Aren’t saruses sacred? Look how they enjoy themselves.’

‘They are making love. That is their principal occupation apart from feeding themselves. And they are so devoted to each other that if one bird is killed the other will haunt the scene for weeks, calling distractedly. They have even been known to pine away and die of grief. That’s why they are held in such affection by people in villages.’

‘So many birds are sacred.’

We saw a bluejay swoop down from a tree—a flash of blue—and carry off a grasshopper.

Both the bluejay and Lord Siva are called Nilkanth. Siva has a blue throat, like the bluejay, because out of compassion for the human race he swallowed a deadly poison which was meant to destroy the world. He kept the poison in his throat and would not let it go any further.

‘Are squirrels sacred?’ asked Suraj, curiously watching one fumbling with a piece of bread which we had thrown away.

‘Krishna loved them. He would take them in his arms and stroke them with his long, gentle fingers. That is why they have four dark lines down their backs from head to tail. Krishna was very dark-skinned, and the lines are the marks of his fingers.’

‘We should be gentle to animals. . . Why do we kill so many of them?’

‘It is not so important that we do not kill them—it is important that we respect them. We must acknowledge their right to live on this earth. Everywhere, birds and animals are finding it more difficult to survive, because we are destroying their homes. They have to keep moving as the trees and the green grass keep disappearing.’

Flowers in Pipalnagar—do they exist?

I have known flowers in poetry, and as a child I knew a garden in Lucknow where there were fields of flowers, and another garden where only roses grew. In the fields round Pipalnagar I have seen dandelions that evaporate when you breathe on them, and sometimes a yellow buttercup nestling among thistles. But in our mohalla, there are no flowers except one. This is a marigold growing out of a crack in my balcony.

I have removed the plaster from the base of the plant, and filled in a little earth which I water every morning. The plant is healthy, and sometimes it produces a little orange marigold, which I pluck and give away before it dies.

Sometimes Suraj keeps the flower in his tray, among the combs and scent bottles and buttons that he sells. Sometimes he offers the flower to a passing child—to a girl who runs away; or it might be a boy who tears the flower to shreds. Some children keep it; others give flowers to Suraj when he passes their houses.

Suraj has a flute which he plays whenever he is tired of going from house to house.

He will sit beneath a shady banyan or peepul, put his tray aside, and take out his flute. The haunting little notes travel down the road in the afternoon stillness, and children come to sit beside him and listen to the flute music. They are very quiet when he plays, because there is a little sadness about his music, and children especially can sense that sadness.

Suraj has made flutes out of pieces of bamboo; but he never sells them, he gives them away to the children he likes. He will sell anything, but not his flutes.

Sometimes Suraj plays his flutes at night, when I am lying awake on the cot, unable to sleep; and even when I fall asleep, the flute is playing in my dreams. Sometimes he brings it with him to the crooked tree, and plays it for the benefit of the birds; but the parrots only make harsh noises and fly away.

Once, when Suraj was playing his flute to a group of children, he had a fit. The flute fell from his hands, and he began to roll about in the dust on the roadside. The children were frightened and ran away.

But they did not stay away for long. The next time they heard the flute play, they came to listen as usual.

As Suraj and I walked over a hill near the limestone quarries, past the shacks of the Rajasthani labourers, we met a funeral procession on its way to the cremation ground. Suraj placed his hand on my arm and asked me to wait until the procession had passed. At the same time a cyclist dismounted and stood at the side of the road. Others hurried on, without glancing at the little procession.

‘I was taught to respect the dead in this way,’ said Suraj. ‘Even if you do not respect a man in life, you should respect him in death. The body is unimportant, but we should honour it out of respect for the man’s mind.’

‘It is a good custom,’ I said.

‘It must be difficult to live on after one you have loved has died.’

‘I don’t know. It has not happened to me. If a love is strong, I cannot see its end... It cannot end in death, I feel... Even physically, you would exist for me somehow.’

He was asleep when I returned late at night from a card game in which I had lost fifty rupees. I was a little drunk, and when I tripped near the doorway, he woke up; and though he did not open his eyes, I felt he was looking at me.

I felt very guilty and ashamed, because he had been ill that day, and I had forgotten it. Now there was no point in saying I was sorry. Drunkenness is really a vice, because it degrades a man, and humiliates him.

Prostitution is degrading, but a prostitute can still keep her dignity; thieving is degrading according to the character of the theft; begging is degrading but it is not as undignified as drunkenness. In all our vices we are aware of our degradation; but in drunkenness we lose our pride, our heads, and, above all, our natural dignity. We become so obviously and helplessly ‘human’, that we lose our glorious animal identity.

I sat down at the side of the bed, and bending over Suraj, whispered, ‘I got drunk and lost fifty rupees, what am I to do about it?’

He smiled, but still he didn’t open his eyes, and I kicked off my sandals and pulled off my shirt and lay down across the foot of the bed. He was still burning with fever, I could feel it radiating through the sheet.

We were silent for a long time, and I didn’t know if he was awake or asleep; so I pressed his foot and said, ‘I’m sorry,’ but he was asleep now, and did not hear me.

## Moonlight.

Pipalnagar looks clean in the moonlight, and my thoughts are different from my daytime thoughts.

The streets are empty, and the moon probes the alleyways, and there is a silver dustbin, and even the slush and the puddles near the bus stop shimmer and glisten.

Kisses in the moonlight. Hungry kisses. The shudder of bodies clinging to each other on the moonswept floor.

A drunken quarrel in the street. Voices rise and fall. The nightwatchman waits for the trouble to pass, and then patrols the street once more, banging the lathi on the pavement.

Kamla asleep. She sleeps like an angel. I go downstairs and walk in the moonlight. I met Suraj coming home, his books under his arm; he has been studying late with Aziz, who keeps a junk shop near the station. Their exams are only a month off. I am confident that Suraj will be successful; I am only afraid that he will work himself to a standstill; with his weak chest and the uncertainty of his fits, he should not walk all day and read all night.

When I wake in the early hours of the morning and Kamla stirs beside me in her sleep (her hair so laden with perfume that my own sleep has been fitful and disturbed), Suraj is still squatting on the floor, reading by the light of the kerosene lamp.

And even when he has finished reading he does not sleep, but asks me to walk with him before the sun rises, and, as women were not made to get up before the sun, we leave Kamla stretched out on the cot, relaxed and languid; small breasts and a boy's waist; her hair tumbling about the pillow; her mouth slightly apart, her lips still swollen and bruised with kisses.

I have been seeking through sex something beyond sex—a union with all mankind.



## Who Kissed Me in the Dark?

This chapter, or story, could not have been written but for a phone call I received last week. I'll come to the caller later. Suffice to say that it triggered off memories of a hilarious fortnight in the autumn of that year (can't remember which one) when India and Pakistan went to war with each other. It did not last long, but there was plenty of excitement in our small town, set off by a rumour that enemy parachutists were landing in force in the ravine below Pari Tibba.

The road to this ravine led past my dwelling, and one afternoon I was amazed to see the town's constabulary, followed by hundreds of concerned citizens (armed mostly with hockey sticks) taking the trail down to the little stream where I usually went birdwatching. The parachutes turned out to be bed sheets from a nearby school, spread out to dry by the dhobis who lived on the opposite hill. After days of incessant rain the sun had come out, and the dhobis had finally got a chance to dry the school bed sheets on the verdant hillside. From afar they did look a bit like open parachutes. In times of crisis, it's wonderful what the imagination will do.

There were also blackouts. It's hard for a hill station to black itself out, but we did our best. Two or three respectable people were arrested for using their torches to find their way home in the dark. And of course, nothing could be done about the lights on the next mountain, as the people there did not even know there was a war on. They did not have radio or television or even electricity. They used kerosene lamps or lit bonfires!

We had a smart young set in Mussoorie in those days, mostly college students who had also been to convent schools and some of them decided it would be a good idea to put on a show—or old-fashioned theatrical extravaganza—to raise funds for the war effort. And they thought it would be a good idea to rope me in, as I was the only writer living in Mussoorie in those innocent times. I was thirty-one and I had never been a college student but they felt I was the right person to direct a one-act play in English. This was to be the centrepiece of the show.

I forget the name of the play. It was one of those drawing-room situation comedies popular from the 1920s, inspired by such successes as *Charley's Aunt* and

*Tons of Money*. Anyway, we went into morning rehearsals at Hakman's, one of the older hotels, where there was a proper stage and a hall large enough to seat at least two hundred spectators.

The participants were full of enthusiasm, and rehearsals went along quite smoothly. They were an engaging bunch of young people—Guttoo, the intellectual among them; Ravi, a schoolteacher; Gita, a tiny ball of fire; Neena, a heavy-footed Bharatnatyam exponent; Nellie, daughter of a nurse; Chameli, who was in charge of make-up (she worked in a local beauty saloon); Rajiv, who served in the bar and was also our prompter; and a host of others, some of whom would sing and dance before and after our one-act play.

The performance was well attended, Ravi having rounded up a number of students from the local schools; and the lights were working, although we had to cover all doors, windows and exits with blankets to maintain the regulatory blackout. But the stage was old and rickety and things began to go wrong during Neena's dance number when, after a dazzling pirouette, she began stamping her feet and promptly went through the floorboards. Well, to be precise, her lower half went through, while the rest of her remained above board and visible to the audience.

The schoolboys cheered, the curtain came down and we rescued Neena, who had to be sent to the civil hospital with a sprained ankle, Mussoorie's only civilian war casualty.

There was a hold-up, but before the audience could get too restless the curtain went up on our play, a tea-party scene, which opened with Guttoo pouring tea for everyone. Unfortunately, our stage manager had forgotten to put any tea in the pot and poor Guttoo looked terribly put out as he went from cup to cup, pouring invisible tea. 'Damn. What happened to the tea?' muttered Guttoo, a line, which was not in the script. 'Never mind,' said Gita, playing opposite him and keeping her cool. 'I prefer my milk without tea,' and proceeded to pour herself a cup of milk.

After this, everyone began to fluff their lines and our prompter had a busy time. Unfortunately, he'd helped himself to a couple of rums at the bar, so that, whenever one of the actors faltered, he'd call out the correct words in a stentorian voice which could be heard all over the hall. Soon there was more prompting than acting and the audience began joining in with dialogue of their own.

Finally, to my great relief, the curtain came down—to thunderous applause. It went up again, and the cast stepped forward to take a bow. Our prompter, who was also curtain-puller, released the ropes prematurely and the curtain came down with a rush, one of the sandbags hitting poor Guttoo on the head. He has never fully recovered from the blow.

The lights, which had been behaving all evening, now failed us, and we had a real blackout. In the midst of this confusion, someone—it must have been a girl, judging

from the overpowering scent of jasmine that clung to her—put her arms around me and kissed me.

When the light came on again, she had vanished.

Who had kissed me in the dark?

As no one came forward to admit to the deed, I could only make wild guesses. But it had been a very sweet kiss, and I would have been only too happy to return it had I known its ownership. I could hardly go up to each of the girls and kiss them in the hope of reciprocation. After all, it might even have been someone from the audience.

Anyway, our concert did raise a few hundred rupees for the war effort. By the time we sent the money to the right authorities, the war was over. Hopefully they saw to it that the money was put to good use.

We went our various ways and although the kiss lingered in my mind, it gradually became a distant, fading memory and as the years passed it went out of my head altogether. Until the other day, almost forty years later. . .

‘Phone for you,’ announced Gautam, my seven-year-old secretary.

‘Boy or girl? Man or woman?’

‘Don’t know. Deep voice like my teacher but it says you know her.’

‘Ask her name.’

Gautam asked.

‘She’s Nellie, and she’s speaking from Bareilly.’

‘Nellie from Bareilly?’ I was intrigued. I took the phone.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘I’m Bonda from Golconda.’

‘Then you must be wealthy now.’ Her voice was certainly husky. ‘But don’t you remember me? Nellie? I acted in that play of yours, up in Mussoorie a long time ago.’

‘Of course, I remember now.’ I was remembering. ‘You had a small part, the maidservant I think. You were very pretty. You had dark, sultry eyes. But what made you ring me after all these years.’

‘Well, I was thinking of you. I’ve often thought about you. You were much older than me, but I liked you. After that show, when the lights went out, I came up to you and kissed you. And then I ran away.’

‘So it was you! I’ve often wondered. But why did you run away? I would have returned the kiss. More than once.’

‘I was very nervous. I thought you’d be angry.’

‘Well, I suppose it’s too late now. You must be happily married with lots of

children.'

'Husband left me. Children grew up, went away.'

'It must be lonely for you.'

'I have lots of dogs.'

'How many?'

'About thirty.'

'Thirty dogs! Do you run a kennel club?'

'No, they are all strays. I run a dog shelter.'

'Well, that's very good of you. Very humane.'

'You must come and see it sometime. Come to Bareilly. Stay with me. You like dogs, don't you?'

'Er—yes, of course. Man's best friend, the dog. But thirty is a lot of dogs to have about the house.'

'I have lots of space.'

'I'm sure. . .well, Nellie, if ever I'm in Bareilly, I'll come to see you. And I'm glad you phoned and cleared up the mystery. It was a lovely kiss and I'll always remember it.'

We said our goodbyes and I promised to visit her some day. A trip to Bareilly to return a kiss might seem a bit far-fetched, but I've done sillier things in my life. It's those dogs that worry me. I can imagine them snapping at my heels as I attempt to approach their mistress. Dogs can be very possessive.

'Who was that on the phone?' asked Gautam, breaking in on my reverie.

'Just an old friend.'

'Dada's old girlfriend. Are you going to see her?'

'I'll think about it.'

And I'm still thinking about it and about those dogs. But bliss it was to be in Mussoorie forty years ago, when Nellie kissed me in the dark.

Some memories are best left untouched.



# Topaz

It seemed strange to be listening to the strains of 'The Blue Danube' while gazing out at the pine-clad slopes of the Himalayas, worlds apart. And yet the music of the waltz seemed singularly appropriate. A light breeze hummed through the pines, and the branches seemed to move in time to the music. The record player was new, but the records were old, picked up in a junk shop behind the Mall.

Below the pines there were oaks, and one oak tree in particular caught my eye. It was the biggest of the lot and stood by itself on a little knoll below the cottage. The breeze was not strong enough to lift its heavy old branches, but *something* was moving, swinging gently from the tree, keeping time to the music of the waltz, dancing...

It was someone hanging from the tree.

A rope oscillated in the breeze, the body turned slowly, turned this way and that, and I saw the face of a girl, her hair hanging loose, her eyes sightless, hands and feet limp; just turning, turning, while the waltz played on.

I turned off the player and ran downstairs.

Down the path through the trees, and on to the grassy knoll where the big oak stood.

A long-tailed magpie took fright and flew out from the branches, swooping low across the ravine. In the tree there was no one, nothing. A great branch extended halfway across the knoll, and it was possible for me to reach up and touch it. A girl could not have reached it without climbing the tree.

As I stood there, gazing up into the branches, someone spoke behind me.

'What are you looking at?'

I swung round. A girl stood in the clearing, facing me. A girl of seventeen or eighteen; alive, healthy, with bright eyes and a tantalizing smile. She was lovely to look at. I hadn't seen such a pretty girl in years.

'You startled me,' I said. 'You came up so unexpectedly.'

‘Did you see anything—in the tree?’ she asked.

‘I thought I saw someone from my window. That’s why I came down. Did *you* see anything?’

‘No.’ She shook her head, the smile leaving her face for a moment. ‘I don’t see anything. But other people do—sometimes.’

‘What do they see?’

‘My sister.’

‘Your *sister*?’

‘Yes. She hanged herself from this tree. It was many years ago. But sometimes you can see her hanging there.’

She spoke matter-of-factly: whatever had happened seemed very remote to her.

We both moved some distance away from the tree. Above the knoll, on a disused private tennis court (a relic from the hill station’s colonial past) was a small stone bench. She sat down on it: and, after a moment’s hesitation, I sat down beside her.

‘Do you live close by?’ I asked.

‘Further up the hill. My father has a small bakery.’

She told me her name—Hameeda. She had two younger brothers.

‘You must have been quite small when your sister died.’

‘Yes. But I remember her. She was pretty.’

‘Like you.’

She laughed in disbelief. ‘Oh, I am nothing to her. You should have seen my sister.’

‘Why did she kill herself?’

‘Because she did not want to live. That’s the only reason, no? She was to have been married but she loved someone else, someone who was not of her own community. It’s an old story and the end is always sad, isn’t it?’

‘Not always. But what happened to the boy—the one she loved? Did he kill himself too?’

‘No, he took a job in some other place. Jobs are not easy to get, are they?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never tried for one.’

‘Then what do you do?’

‘I write stories.’

‘Do people *buy* stories?’

‘Why not? If your father can sell bread, I can sell stories.’

‘People must have bread. They can live without stories.’

‘No, Hameeda, you’re wrong. People can’t live without stories.’

Hameeda! I couldn’t help loving her. Just loving her. No fierce desire or passion had taken hold of me. It wasn’t like that. I was happy just to look at her, watch her while she sat on the grass outside my cottage, her lips stained with the juice of wild bilberries. She chatted away—about her friends, her clothes, her favourite things.

‘Won’t your parents mind if you come here every day?’ I asked.

‘I have told them you are teaching me.’

‘Teaching you what?’

‘They did not ask. You can tell me stories.’

So I told her stories.

It was midsummer.

The sun glinted on the ring she wore on her third finger: a translucent golden topaz, set in silver.

‘That’s a pretty ring,’ I remarked.

‘You wear it,’ she said, impulsively removing it from her hand. ‘It will give you good thoughts. It will help you to write better stories.’

She slipped it on to my little finger.

‘I’ll wear it for a few days,’ I said. ‘Then you must let me give it back to you.’

On a day that promised rain I took the path down to the stream at the bottom of the hill. There I found Hameeda gathering ferns from the shady places along the rocky ledges above the water.

‘What will you do with them?’ I asked.

‘This is a special kind of fern. You can cook it as a vegetable.’

‘It is tasty?’

‘No, but it is good for rheumatism.’

‘Do you suffer from rheumatism?’

‘Of course not. They are for my grandmother, she is very old.’

‘There are more ferns further upstream,’ I said. ‘But we’ll have to get into the water.’

We removed our shoes and began paddling upstream. The ravine became shadier and narrower, until the sun was almost completely shut out. The ferns grew right down to the water’s edge. We bent to pick them but instead found ourselves in each

other's arms; and sank slowly, as in a dream, into the soft bed of ferns, while overhead a whistling thrush burst out in dark sweet song.

'It isn't time that's passing by,' it seemed to say. 'It is you and I. It is you and I. . .'

I waited for her the following day, but she did not come.

Several days passed without my seeing her.

Was she sick? Had she been kept at home? Had she been sent away? I did not even know where she lived, so I could not ask. And if I had been able to ask, what would I have said?

Then one day I saw a boy delivering bread and pastries at the little tea shop about a mile down the road. From the upward slant of his eyes, I caught a slight resemblance to Hameeda. As he left the shop, I followed him up the hill. When I came abreast of him, I asked: 'Do you have your own bakery?'

He nodded cheerfully, 'Yes. Do you want anything—bread, biscuits, cakes? I can bring them to your house.'

'Of course. But don't you have a sister? A girl called Hameeda?'

His expression changed. He was no longer friendly. He looked puzzled and slightly apprehensive.

'Why do you want to know?'

'I haven't seen her for some time.'

'We have not seen her either.'

'Do you mean she has gone away?'

'Didn't you know? You must have been away a long time. It is many years since she died. She killed herself. You did not hear about it?'

'But wasn't that her sister—your other sister?'

'I had only one sister—Hameeda—and she died, when I was very young. It's an old story, ask someone else about it.'

He turned away and quickened his pace, and I was left standing in the middle of the road, my head full of questions that couldn't be answered.

That night there was a thunderstorm. My bedroom window kept banging in the wind. I got up to close it and, as I looked out, there was a flash of lightning and I saw that frail body again, swinging from the oak tree.

I tried to make out the features, but the head hung down and the hair was blowing in the wind.

Was it all a dream?



It was impossible to say. But the topaz on my hand glowed softly in the darkness. And a whisper from the forest seemed to say, 'It isn't time that's passing by, my friend. It is you and I . . .'



# Love Lyrics for Binya Devi

1

Your face streamed April rain,  
As you climbed the steep hill,  
Calling the white cow home.  
You seemed very tiny  
On the windswept mountainside;  
A twist of hair lay  
Strung across your forehead  
And your torn blue skirt  
Clung to your tender thighs.  
You smiled through the blind white rain  
And gave me the salt kiss of your lips,  
Salt mingled with raindrop and mint,  
And left me there, where I had come to fetch you—  
So gallant in the blistering rain!  
And you ran home laughing;  
But it was worth the drenching.

2

Your feet, laved with dew,  
Stood firm on the quickening grass.  
There was a butterfly between us:  
Red and gold its wings  
And heavy with dew.

It could not move because of the weight of moisture.  
And as your foot came nearer  
And I saw that you would crush it,  
I said: 'Stay. It has only a few days  
In the sun, and we have many.'  
'And if I spare it,' you said, laughing,  
'What will you do for me, what will you pay?'

'Why, anything you say.'

'And will you kiss my foot?'

'Both feet,' I said; and did so happily.  
For they were no less than the wings of butterflies.

3

All night our love  
Stole sleep from dusty eyes.  
What dreams were lost, I'll never know.  
It seemed the world's last night had come  
And there would never be a dawn.

Your touch soon swept the panting dark away—  
Some suns are brighter by night than day!

4

Your eyes, glad and wondering,  
Dwelt in mine,  
And all that stood between us  
Was a blade of grass  
Shivering slightly  
In the breath from our lips.

But grass will bend.

We turn and kiss,  
And the world swings round,  
The sky spins, the trees go hush  
Hush, the mountain sings—

Though we must leave this place,  
We've trapped forever  
In the trembling air  
The last sweet phantom kiss.

5

I know you'll come when the cherries  
Are ripe;  
But it is still November  
And I must wait  
For the green fruit to blush  
At your approach.  
And meanwhile the tree is visited  
By robber bands, masked mynas  
And yellow birds with beaks like daggers,  
Determined not to leave one cherry  
Whole for lovers.  
But still I wait, hoping one day  
You'll come to stain your lips  
With cherry-juice, and climb my tree;  
Bright goddess in dark green temple,  
Thrusting your tongue at me.

6

Slender waisted, bright as a song,

Dark as the whistling-thrush at dawn,  
Swift as the running days of November,  
Lost like a dream too sweet to remember.

~

# On Fairy Hill

Those little green lights that I used to see twinkling away on Pari Tibba—there had to be a scientific explanation for them. I was sure of that. After dark we see or hear many things that seem mysterious and irrational. And then, by the clear light of day, we find that the magic and the mystery have an explanation after all.

I saw those lights occasionally, late at night, when I walked home from the town to my little cottage at the edge of the forest. They moved too fast to be torches or lanterns carried by people. And as there were no roads on Pari Tibba, they could not have been cycle or cart lamps. Someone told me there was phosphorus in the rocks and that this probably accounted for the luminous glow emanating from the hillside late at night. Possibly, but I was not convinced.

My encounter with the little people happened by the light of day.

One morning early in April, purely on an impulse, I decided to climb to the top of Pari Tibba and look around for myself. It was springtime in the Himalayan foothills. The sap was rising—in the trees, in the grass, in the wild flowers, in my own veins. I took the path through the oak forest, down to the little stream at the foot of the hill, and then up the steep slope of Pari Tibba, Hill of Fairies.

It was quite a scramble to get to the top. The path ended at the stream at the bottom of the slope. I had to clutch at brambles and tufts of grass to make the ascent. Fallen pine needles, slippery underfoot, made it difficult to get a foothold. But finally I made it to the top—a grassy plateau fringed by pines and a few wild medlar trees now clothed in white blossom.

It was a pretty spot. And as I was hot and sweaty, I removed most of my clothing and lay down under a medlar to rest. The climb had been quite tiring. But a fresh breeze soon revived me. It made a soft humming sound in the pines. And the grass, sprinkled with yellow buttercups, buzzed with the sound of crickets and grasshoppers.

After some time, I stood up and surveyed the scene. To the north, Landour with its rusty red-roofed cottages; to the south, the wide valley and a silver stream flowing towards the Ganga. To the west were rolling hills, patches of forest and a

small village tucked into a fold of the mountain.

Disturbed by my presence, a barking deer ran across the clearing and down the opposite slope. A band of long-tailed blue magpies rose from the oak trees, glided across the knoll and settled in another copse of oaks.

I was alone, alone with the wind and the sky. It had probably been months, possibly years, since any human had passed that way. The soft lush grass looked most inviting. I lay down again on the sun-warmed sward. Pressed and bruised by my weight, the catmint and clover in the grass gave out a soft fragrance. A ladybird climbed up my leg and began to explore my body. A swarm of white butterflies fluttered around me.

I slept.

I have no idea how long I slept. When I awoke, it was to experience an unusual soothing sensation all over my limbs, as though they were being gently stroked with rose petals.

All lethargy gone, I opened my eyes to find a little girl—or was it a woman?—about two inches tall, sitting cross-legged on my chest and studying me intently. Her hair fell in long black tresses. Her skin was the colour of honey. Her firm little breasts were like tiny acorns. She held a buttercup, which was larger than her hand, and she was stroking my skin with it.

I was tingling all over. A sensation of sensual joy surged through my limbs.

A tiny boy—man?—also naked, now joined the elfin girl, and they held hands and looked into my eyes, smiling. Their teeth were like little pearls, their lips soft petals of apricot blossom. Were these the nature spirits, the flower fairies I had often dreamt of?

I raised my head, and saw that there were scores of little people all over me. The delicate and gentle creatures were exploring my legs, arms and body with caressing gestures. Some of them were laving me with dew or pollen or some other soft essence. I closed my eyes again. Waves of pure physical pleasure swept over me. I had never known anything like it. It was endless, all-embracing. My limbs turned to water. The sky revolved around me, and I must have fainted.

When I came to, perhaps an hour later, the little people had gone. The fragrance of honeysuckle lingered in the air. A deep rumble overhead made me look up. Dark clouds had gathered, threatening rain. Had the thunder frightened them away to their abode beneath the rocks and roots? Or had they simply tired of sporting with an unknown newcomer? Mischievous they were; for when I looked around for my clothes I could not find them anywhere.

A wave of panic surged through me. I ran here and there, looking behind shrubs and tree trunks, but to no avail. My clothes had disappeared, along with the fairies—

if indeed they were fairies!

It began to rain. Large drops cannoned off the dry rocks. Then it hailed, and soon the slope was covered with ice. There was no shelter. Naked, I clambered down as far as the stream. There was no one to see me—except for a wild mountain goat speeding away in the opposite direction. Gusts of wind slashed rain and hail across my face and body. Panting and shivering, I took shelter beneath an overhanging rock until the storm had passed. By then it was almost dusk, and I was able to ascend the path to my cottage without encountering anyone, apart from a band of startled langoors who chattered excitedly on seeing me.

I couldn't stop shivering, so I went straight to bed. I slept a deep, dreamless sleep through the afternoon, evening and night, and woke up next morning with a high fever.

Mechanically I dressed, made myself some breakfast and tried to get through the morning's chores. When I took my temperature, I found it was 104. So I swallowed a Brufen and went back to bed.

There I lay till late afternoon, when the postman's knocking woke me. I left my letters unopened on my desk—breaking a sacrosanct ritual—and returned to my bed.

The fever lasted almost a week and left me weak and feeble. I couldn't have climbed Pari Tibba again even if I'd wanted to. But I reclined on my window seat and looked at the clouds drifting over that bleak hill. Desolate it seemed, and yet strangely inhabited. When it grew dark, I waited for those little green fairy lights to appear; but these, it seemed, were now to be denied to me.

And so I returned to my desk, my typewriter, my newspaper articles and correspondence. It was a lonely period in my life. My marriage hadn't worked out: my wife, fond of high society and averse to living with an unsuccessful writer in a remote cottage in the woods, was pursuing her own, more successful career in Mumbai. I had always been rather halfhearted in my approach to making money, whereas she had always wanted more and more of it. She left me—left me with my books and my dreams. . .

Had it all been a dream, that strange episode on Pari Tibba? Had a too-active imagination conjured up those aerial spirits, those siddhas of the upper air? Or were they underground people, living deep within the bowels of the hill? If I was going to preserve my sanity, I knew I had better get on with the more mundane aspects of living—going into town to buy groceries, mending the leaking roof, paying the electricity bill, plodding up to the post office and remembering to deposit the odd cheque that came my way. All the routine things that made life so dull and dreary.

The truth is, what we commonly call life is not really living at all. The regular



and settled ways which we accept as the course of life are really the curse of life. They tie us down to the trivial and monotonous, and we will do almost anything to get away, ideally for a more exalted and fulfilling existence, but if that is not possible, for a few hours of forgetfulness in alcohol, drugs, forbidden sex or even golf. So it would give me great joy to go underground with the fairies. Those little people who have sought refuge in Mother Earth from mankind's killing ways are as vulnerable as butterflies and flowers. All things beautiful are easily destroyed.

I am sitting at my window in the gathering dark, penning these stray thoughts, when I see them coming—hand-in-hand, walking on a swirl of mist, suffused with all the radiant colours of the rainbow. For a rainbow has formed a bridge for them from Pari Tibba to the edge of my window.


I am ready to go with them to their secret lairs or to the upper air—far from the stifling confines of the world in which we toil. . .

Come, fairies, carry me away, to experience again the perfection I did that summer's day!



# Acknowledgements

My publishers and I would like to acknowledge Penguin Books India for permission to reproduce copyright material—An extract (p. 73 to 80) from *Delhi Is Not Far*, chapter twelve from *The Room on the Roof* and the story 'On Fairy Hill' from the collection *Dust on the Mountain*.

The background of the entire page is a vibrant, repeating pattern of butterflies and flowers. The butterflies are in various colors, including orange, blue, and purple, with detailed wing patterns. The flowers are also diverse, with shades of pink, purple, and blue, and some have prominent stamens. The overall aesthetic is romantic and delicate.

*'Once I saw her,  
leaning over the balcony railing,  
I stopped the taxi and waved to her.  
She waved back, smiling like  
the sun breaking through clouds.'*

Suffused with warmth and passion,  
the stories in *Falling in Love Again*  
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of romantic love—fleeting, intimate, joyous,  
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the range of feelings that are  
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