



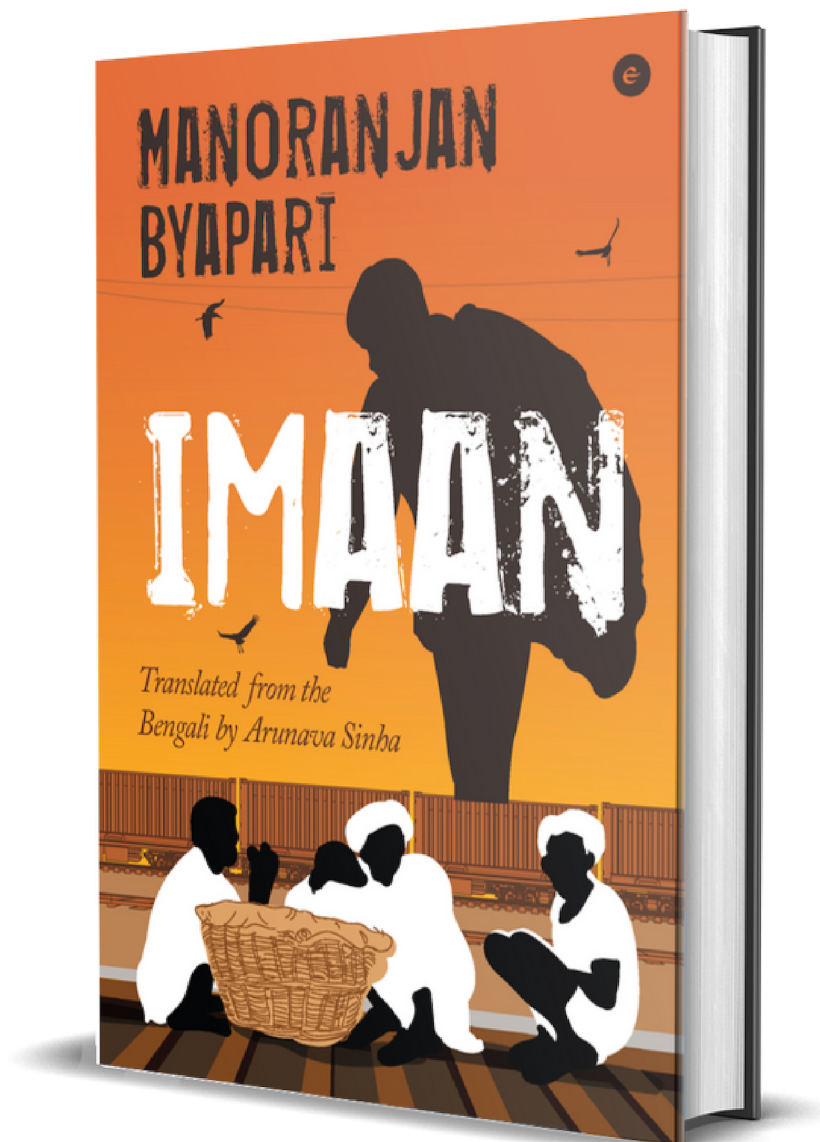
Imaan

by

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CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY
INDIAN WRITERS

1

A deafening cry rang out in the confined air this side of the sky-high wall, signifying a name, a distressed existence, the social identity of an individual. From east to west it drifted, and then to the south, before returning to the east.

Whatever the dictionary meaning of the word Imaan might be, in this case, it was the name of an eighteen-year-old young man. Who was a prisoner. It was him that the raaitar was calling out for in a dreadful tone. I-m-a-a-n Aliiiiiiii.

Sitting in a corner of the juvenile ward, the chhokra file, as it was called there, Imaan had heard the cry but was unmoved, pretending he had not heard it. For it was beyond his comprehension that it was his name, that someone could be actually calling for him by his name. Not once in these eighteen long years had anyone called him by his name for any reason whatsoever. And with time, the very faith that someone could address him by his name had been eroded. The name had gathered the dust of years of disuse, its layers so thick that Imaan Ali was unable to blow them away and seek his own identity beneath them.

It was a long time ago when, trembling with delight at hearing his name being announced by the raaitar Shekhar Roy, he had thrown away the boiled peas served for breakfast and raced towards the kestebil, where prisoners' files were handled. Counting off his age on his fingers, he had calculated that he was sixteen years and seven months old. He had felt hope: he would be released from imprisonment now, and he would take his place in the world of free people that he could see through the window of his ward. All the conditions for his release had been met, which was why the raaitar was calling for him. Before the joy of freedom in his heart, his meal of worm-infested peas had seemed worthless. His friend Cartoon, an inmate of the same ward, had said, 'Quick, the raaitar's calling for you! Looks like your ship's ready to sail.'

But Imaan's hopes were dashed when the guard's baton came down on his back.

'*Kaiko tu aaya idhar?* Who called you, what did you come here for?'

Here, the stick spoke before words could. Along with the blow from his baton, Bapuram, the prison guard, had roared, 'Fuck off! You'll never be released. You'll die in jail.'

'What happened?' Cartoon had asked.

'It wasn't for me,' Imaan had said, rubbing his shoulder where the baton had landed. 'Some other Imaan.' His eyes had flooded with tears. 'I'll never be free. This jail is where I'll live and where I'll die.'

Which was why Imaan felt today that it wasn't him but someone else whom they were calling for. There was no count of how many of the three thousand or four thousand

prisoners here might be named Imaan. It must be one of them. ...

It was late in the afternoon. All the gates leading into the wards had been opened, giving the inmates a chance to take a stroll in the yard outside, which was fenced in with iron railings. They would be allowed a couple of hours here to get some fresh air and sunlight, before being given their dinner and sent back behind the strong metal gates by six in the evening. Then the entire evening and night would pass locked inside the heat and humidity of the ward. The brass locks would be opened again at six in the morning, followed by another two hours outside, including the morning meal. Boiled peas or chickpeas, flattened rice with jaggery, muri ... a different item every day. Sometimes a thin gruel too.

Imaan hadn't been outside today because he was feeling out of sorts. It seemed like he had a fever coming on. He was lying down, waiting for the crowds to thin before going out to collect his dinner. Imaan didn't want to go to the hospital for such an everyday illness. And what use would it be anyway, since just two medicines were available there—a red liquid in a bottle and white tablets. Any cuts or bruises or contusions meant a dab of the red fluid, and everything from malaria or TB to typhoid or simple fever meant white pills three times a day.

At that moment, the thundering cry pierced his eardrums again. Imaan Aliiiiiiii ... But this one was different from the voice that had been reverberating within the enclosed jail compound earlier. There was no mistake, it was his friend Cartoon who was shouting out his name. Soon afterwards,

the cry turned into a chorus as all the fellow inmates of the chhokra file sang a collective song of freedom for a prisoner—‘Come quick, Imaan. You’re going to be released, your papers are here.’

Jail! The harshest and most inhuman word in the world. Shorn of all the rules, regulations and practices of the civilised world, and occupied by heartless, violent, trigger-happy humanoids. All of them are dangerous criminals convicted under various sections of the Indian Penal Code. But then there are some innocent people in jail, too, who have no family or friends outside with the financial muscle to help. The Indian legal system is mighty but expensive—beyond the purchasing power of poor people, who are therefore forced to rot by injustice, without even being tried, in their dark prison cells.

Imaan had had no choice but to spend most of his life so far amongst these criminals, without having committed a crime himself. Ever since he had entered this prison in his mother’s arms at the age of six months, he had had no chance to return to the world of free people. No one had stepped up to secure his release. The enormous universe that lay beyond whatever he could see from the window of the ward was unknown, unexplored.

He didn’t exactly know what charges had brought his mother Zahura Bibi to jail. By the time he was old enough to understand that, there was no one here who knew the facts of the case—some of those who knew had been released before serving their entire sentence, while others had got free early by dying. But Zahura Bibi’s dusty, faded case file must still have been lying somewhere in the jail or in Alipur

Court. It might even have been found if someone were to search for it—but who would look, and why?

There was a particular incident in this jail that was often recounted. A prisoner who had been given a life sentence entered the jail when his daughter was very young. She grew up, studied law, became an advocate, dusted out the old file of her father's case, and went to court asking for a retrial. She fought the new case, had her father exonerated, and secured his release.

But there was no such luck for Zahura Bibi. However, were anyone to stumble on the file, they would learn that a village woman had killed her husband with a blow on the head from a crowbar. The man was involved with many other women, and would come home drunk every night and beat his wife up. One day, she couldn't take it any longer and, picking up whatever was at hand, hit him with it. It turned out to be the crowbar. She was sentenced to ten years in jail. The trial and sentencing hadn't taken long because she had confessed voluntarily.

It was the investigating officer who had given her the advice. 'Look, Zahura Bibi, you did do it after all, so you can't escape punishment, whether heavy or light. But if you confess you did it, the sentence will be shorter. You must tell the magistrate—hujoor, he used to come home drunk every night and beat me up, he had relationships with other women too, I killed him in a rage. The magistrate is a human being too. He can be kind as well. If you cry and tell him the truth, who knows, he might even exonerate you. Or, even if he doesn't do that, he may send you to jail for only a year or two. But if you don't do this, when it's proved you

killed your husband—all these people in the village saw you, they'll definitely give evidence—you could be hanged. Think about it, you have a child ... who will look after him if you're hanged?'

Zahura Bibi had walked to the police station with her baby in her arms soon after killing her husband with the crowbar. The police had arrested her at once, but the trial began two years later. She had spent those two years in the female ward in Alipur Jail, without her case coming up in the courts. No one had come to see her. 'You're not part of the family anymore,' Zahura's abbu and amma had told her the day she eloped with Shohidul. 'We don't care whether you live or die, we'll have nothing to do with you, and you'll have nothing to do with us.'

They had kept their word, not bothering to show up even at her darkest hour. As for Shohidul's family, there was obviously no question of their visiting his killer.

Like many others, Shohidul, too, had built a shack on the bed of the dead Vidyadhari river, and fenced off a small patch of land to grow vegetables on it. With his fishing net, he would go to a nearby river or creek, selling his catch to buy rice, daal, salt and oil. Zahura Bibi was hardworking, too, gathering cow dung and turning it into manure to sell to farmers; she had some hens and ducks too. Between their efforts, they survived. In fact, it wouldn't be wrong to say Zahura Bibi was happy.

But, as they say, happiness is not for everyone. Which was exactly what ensued, as joy turned to ashes for Zahura. Shohidul was already addicted to alcohol, but then everyone hereabouts drank to some extent. The women

sought comfort by telling one another, ‘They’re men, after all. They work so hard all day, their bodies start aching. How will they work the next day if they don’t drink at night?’ Zahura had accepted it too. But what she couldn’t accept was the thing Shohidul had for women. Jolil Molla used to live three or four doors away; Shohidul began an affair with his daughter, Najma. And this led to bitter quarrels. Shohidul began to come home drunk and beat up Zahura. Then came that fateful night, when, during a fight, Shohidul uttered the fatal word: *talaq*. That was it; Zahura Bibi flew into a red-hot rage. Without giving him the chance to pronounce the word the remaining two times, she brought the crowbar down on his head. Shohidul slumped to the floor.

Two years to the trial, and then one year to the verdict. It wasn’t a particularly complicated case, after all, since the accused had confessed to killing her husband. Ten years in jail and a fine of two thousand rupees, with an added six months in lieu of the fine.

Zahura Bibi couldn’t afford to pay the fine, but she didn’t serve ten-and-a-half years either, for she died within three years. She was already suffering from TB, which worsened inside the prison, where medical facilities were not very advanced. The outcome: *kes khallas*.

Imaan was a little child when he entered the jail in his mother’s arms. He could be said to be the youngest person on the subcontinent to have been honoured with the status of a prisoner. He was only six-and-a-half when his mother died. Had someone made an application to the judge, stating that they wanted to take complete responsibility for

this child, Imaan would not have had to stay in prison. But no such application came, and Imaan remained here.

The first time he was let out of jail, it was to be sent to Mullick Juvenile Home, where young vagrants, unclaimed children and underage criminals were held captive. After spending nearly ten years there, he was sent back to Central Jail at the age of sixteen years and three months. The authorities would now decide whether to keep him jailed or set him free—a right that the administrators of Mullick Juvenile Home did not have. And so, Imaan had spent the past two years in this ward.

There were thirty or forty other boys of Imaan's age here, all of them slapped with cases of some sort. So they were taken to the court every fortnight for their trials. Some were found guilty and sentenced, and the others were set free. Some managed to secure their release on bail. Newcomers took the empty spaces they had left behind. Life was in a state of flux here, ebbing and flowing constantly.

Imaan was not a criminal. He had not been accused of anything, nor sentenced. Since no one came to meet him at the end of the month, the raaitar never called out his name. He wasn't sent to the court either. Like a nameless, unknown weed, he languished in a corner of the prison. Days went by, nights, too, and then months and years. Under pressure of work, the jail authorities forgot he was a human, or that he was here, or why he was here. And so, he never received permission to leave the jail and step into the free world outside.

He had heard that when he turned eighteen years and six months, he would be considered capable of taking

responsibility for himself and be released from prison. Imaan didn't know what the world outside was like. Naturally, he was excited about finding out, but along with the anticipation, there was also a trepidation that gnawed away at his heart.

On one occasion, a group of honoured guests were flown to India by the Tourism Department to take a tour of various cities. The idea was that they should go back home and write glowing articles in their newspapers and magazines, leading everyone to believe that India is truly *saare jahan se achha*, so that droves of international tourists would rush to the country. So all the beggars and vagabonds and blind and crippled pavement-dwellers were rounded up and dumped in jail to prevent visual pollution.

After all, what if a filthy, cadaverous beggar were to accost one of the respected guests, while their car was waiting at a traffic signal, and implore them, 'Today no food, give me one rupee, God save you.' This ungrammatical English and horrifying demand would grind the reputation of the country to dust. Hence this preventive measure. The education system in our country is in such a shambles that not even the beggars of posh areas of Calcutta, like Park Street and Chowringhee, had learnt English properly. There are no institutes to provide adequate training. Everything is far more advanced abroad. Those who ask people for money there play the guitar and sing, and are well-dressed; they don't claim they haven't eaten for two days.

But not all of the seventy thousand permanent beggars of Calcutta, not to mention the seasonal beggars and the itinerant beggars, could be caught. Not that the police wanted

to capture all of them; all they wanted to do was send out a message that going out on the streets to beg would mean a shortcut to prison. It worked. As soon as a couple of them were forced into a police van, the rest fled the city, some on trains and buses, some on foot. And those who could not leave had to ignore their hunger and retreat into their hovels.

The beggars were released from jail once the visitors had completed their tour of Calcutta. For nearly two months, they had been housed and fed in jail; it was impossible to host them any longer. It would have been another matter had they committed thefts or robberies; for then, the government would have had no choice. But these people were completely innocent.

When their names began to be called out for release, one of the beggars hid in the toilet, refusing to leave. In a stricken voice, he said, 'Bhai, there are maybe three or four thousand thieves and robbers and murderers and rapists in here, at most. But millions outside. Here, at least, you know who they are. But you cannot identify any of them out there. Every single one outside is a bhodrolok. An honest man is safe here, outside his life is hell. The jail is much better for a poor man. Outside the jail, you can die on the pavement. No one will care. Here, if you say you won't eat, the guard will beat you up and force you. Might even shove a pipe up your nose. Three meals a day assured. Plus a roof, no rain, a blanket in winter. Try sleeping on a platform. No peace. The public will abuse you and kick you. The police will drive you away. Even falling ill here is better. They'll give you a pill. Outside? Nothing. So many dying right in front of hospitals. Without treatment. If someone beats you up here you can

complain to jelaar shaheb or jomadard shaheb. The guilty are punished. No one listens to your complaint outside. Might is right. No one will show you any kindness or spare you. The weaker you are, the worse it is for you.'

The fine picture of the world outside jail that Imaan had woven in his head was shredded to pieces. He concluded that the world on the other side of the tall walls was neither hospitable nor beautiful—not fit for human habitation. Apprehensively, he asked, 'Why does anyone live in such a dreadful place? Why don't they run away?'

When the man replied, despair was written all over his face, the way it is on the body of a prisoner on death row, whose final appeal for mercy has been rejected by the president. 'Where will they run away, bhai? The sea on one side, mountains on the other, deserts on a third, and the military on the fourth, who will kill first and talk later. Where is a man to go? How will he look for a better place?'

He wasn't a beggar by birth but because of circumstances. Classic beggars weep outside front doors, shouting, 'Maago, not eaten in two days, give me your stale rotis.' Those forced into this line by circumstances cannot do this. They wait at railway stations and bus-stands in search of passengers with kind faces, to whom they go up and say, 'I'm in trouble, lost my purse. Can't buy a ticket to get home. Can I please have ten rupees?' He's still begging, but from behind the fig-leaf of self-respect.

Just when Imaan's desire to enter the outside world was almost dead because of what the beggar had said, someone else spoke up. 'There's just one exit out of jail, but hundreds of entrances. Go find out what it's like out there. If you don't

feel like staying, just use one of those doors to return. Free food, shelter and comfort again!’

‘I don’t know how to come back.’

‘Nothing to know, no effort needed. Just get into a train. A week to ten days in jail if the checker catches you without a ticket. Get caught with your hand in someone else’s pocket and you’re assured of food for three months.’

This particular man came into jail at regular intervals, staying nine or ten days each time. Imaan had seen him at least half a dozen times. He had told Imaan that there were some twenty drinking dives in his neighbourhood, which were routinely raided every month. Before every raid, the excise department officials sent word to the owners, reminding them to have a scapegoat ready for arrest. The department had a monthly target of the number of people to be arrested and sent to court. These were the hazards that came with the job—the rules had to be followed. But the dive owners who paid them bribes also had to be protected. This man was a railway porter who sometimes served time in jail on behalf of one of the owners of drinking dives. He was paid for it; the dive owners had calculated it was cheaper to give him a wage for going to jail than to pay a fine.

And so, Imaan had decided he would at least pay one visit to the world outside, much as village people throng to the city to gape at the sights, while city people go to the seaside and the mountains. He wanted to verify all the stories he had heard. He had been waiting to turn sixteen-and-a-half, the age at which he was supposed to be released.

That day had passed a long time ago, but in the absence of anyone to plead his case, his file had remained at the bottom

of the heap. Imaan was neither smart nor bold enough to go up to the jailer or the jail superintendent with a request to look into his case. All he could do was whine before the guards and jomadars, 'When will I be released?'

'As soon as it's time,' they would say, 'what's the hurry? You're getting three meals a day, no work, just wait. You'll find yourself free one of these days.'

A prisoner sentenced to death usually screams and shouts and flails his arms and legs when brought out of the condemned cell, before turning inert when he realises this is the end. So too did Imaan quieten down, knowing that release was distant, that protests would not help. Wake up, headcount, brush your teeth with ash, go to the toilet, collect breakfast, eat breakfast, have a bath, wander about, have lunch, headcount, nap, another headcount, dinner before darkness falls, return to the ward, final headcount of the day—he locked himself into the daily routine all over again. The days went by this way.

Then a journalist, arrested for some misdemeanour, came to jail. He learnt of the teenager named Imaan, forsaken by fate, who had been rotting in jail his entire life without having committed a crime. Securing bail after a week, he wrote a report sharply attacking the inhuman system of justice that had led to this. Published in the most circulated newspaper of the state, it evoked cries of condemnation from everyone, which even reached the ears of the sleeping administration, and forced the faded file from the bottom of the pile to rise to the top. It sailed swiftly from one desk to the next, and finally arrived, after collecting many signatures from various departments, at the jailer's desk. The magistrate had

ordered Imaan Ali to be released with his honour intact as quickly as possible. The jailer had received the documents at about four in the afternoon, and signed them at once. Which was why the raaitar was now looking for Imaan to pass on the good news.

Imaan's friend Cartoon (who had been given that name by the deputy jailer)—skinny, with a mahogany complexion, two enormous protruding teeth, and three RPF cases against him—raced upstairs and dragged Imaan to his feet from his bed to tell him, 'Cock plugging your ear? Can't you hear them call you? *Khallas hukum* is here. Go see the raaitar quickly.'

'Are you sure it's me they are calling?' Imaan still couldn't quite believe it.

'Yes, you cocksucker,' Cartoon said with emphasis, 'it's definitely you.'

Following Cartoon's instructions, Imaan went up to the raaitar, who was so fed up by now, after having called out Imaan's name so many times, that he slapped him at once.

'Do you know how long I've been screaming your name, maadarchod?'

But not even the stinging slap that came with this scolding could make Imaan feel bad now, for the raaitar was saying, 'You'll be free tomorrow. You could have been free today if you'd turned up earlier.'

The siren had been rung for lockup, and everything was closed for the day. Cartoon had followed Imaan from the ward to the iron railing around the kestebil, but he hadn't been able to go farther because a guard was stationed on the spot. He was gazing at Imaan with tears in his eyes. They

had become close friends, sharing their joys and sorrows, ups and downs, over the past two years. Now, with one of them leaving, their friendship would end. The news of Imaan's release was making Cartoon as sad now as it had made him happy earlier. 'Train friends part at the station, jail friends part at the gate.' An old prison saying. A friend who will throw his body between you and the guard's baton is someone you might never see again once you're free. Cartoon knew as much from his own experience, so why blame others? The last time he had got out of jail, he had never returned to visit his friends here despite promises. Today, he felt he should have.

But now he was both delighted and depressed to see Imaan returning towards him. 'What is it?' he asked, disappointment balled up in his throat. 'Why didn't they let you go? What did the raaitar say?'

'Tomorrow.' Imaan spat the word out like a glob of saliva. He was bubbling with confidence now.

'They're letting you go, right?'

'That's what he said.'

'Just one more night then. If they've said they'll release you, then they will.'

They entered the ward together. The headcount jomadar came a little later. The brass padlock was put on the gate once he left. Now the old inmates of the chhokra file gathered around Imaan. The good news had spread like wildfire: our Imaan is leaving tomorrow.

A young man named Komol occupied a corner of the northern end of the ward. A round face, curly hair, fair skin, loveable eyes. He had been here for eight months now,

convicted for theft. He had stolen the cashbox from a grocery store where he worked and taken it home, where the police arrested him. Criminals who don't confess even after being beaten up by people or by the police don't hide the truth when in jail. Komol had said, 'I did steal it. But I was out of luck, and so I got caught. Four thousand, mairi. I'd have bought my dadababu a cycle if the police hadn't got me. We were supposed to have given it to him when he married my sister, but we couldn't. He beats up Didi because he didn't get the cycle. She'd have been saved if I could have got it for him.'

'He beats her up just for a cycle?'

'It's not just.' Komol seemed not angry but sympathetic to his brother-in-law. 'Dadababu has to travel seven or eight miles early in the morning to weigh fish in the wholesale market. There are no buses at that hour, and then he limps a little too, he can't walk all the way. So he'd said at the wedding, whether you can manage anything else or not, get me a cycle. We had said, we can't get you one before the wedding, but definitely within a month. If only I'd known that ...'

What he hadn't known was how difficult it would be to get hold of the money for a cycle. For someone who was barely able to make ends meet in his own family, the main objective of getting married was to get a Raleigh cycle, which he could ride to nearby villages and sell fish and then make enough money to maintain a wife. Naturally, he would lose his head if he didn't get his cycle as promised.

Now, rising from his corner, Komol went up to Imaan. After some hesitation, he asked, 'You don't have anyone of

your own outside, do you? Where will you go, where will you live, what will you eat?’

‘I know nothing about what’s out there,’ said Imaan. ‘Let me get out first, I’ll figure it out after that. One step at a time.’

‘Pay a visit to Mohonpur if possible,’ pleaded Komol. ‘It’s not a long walk, the house is quite close to the station. Will you go? It’ll be of great help. My parents are wonderful people, they’ll take care of you. Tell them to have me released. Any lawyer can get me bail. Tell them to get me bail, even if it means selling everything at home. Once I’m outside, I can buy it all again. It’s been eight months—I can’t stay here anymore.’

Komol was telling Imaan of his suffering—it was like complaining of a common cold to a cancer patient. But Imaan said nothing, he only listened in silence.

‘Tell them, if necessary they can pawn the two kaathas of land in Chorki Malek’s big yard to Gaya Das. I’ll get it back when I get out. Tell them I’ll die in jail if they don’t have me released.’

‘What does your father do?’

‘Both my parents roll bidis. They get paid by the thousand.’

‘How many brothers and sisters?’

‘Two sisters, I’m in the middle.’

After a pause, he continued, ‘I’d thought of finding a boy for my younger sister once Didi’s problem was settled. But that ...’ Komol trailed off into silence.

A little later, Imaan told him, ‘I don’t know what the future holds, but I’ll try to go to your house.’

Cartoon was surprised by Komol’s story, realising he had been deprived of justice and compassion.

When Cartoon was eleven or twelve, he used to live near the Kalighat temple. There were a dozen other boys like him there—orphans, runaways, persecuted by parents, dumped by relatives. They would cluster around the devotees like the older, crippled beggars, asking for money, but also making off with it sometimes, if they got the chance.

Once, the police from Kalighat police station took away five or six of them. They wanted their names and addresses before packing them off to jail. So a police officer seated behind a desk was asking for their fathers' names. In terms of caste and religion, some of them were Kaora Bagdis, some Muslims, some Namashudras. One of the boys said his name was Shadhon Chakraborty. Cartoon and his group didn't care about surnames. They all lived on the same pavement, their existence beset by the same problems.

But the officer was startled. 'You're a Braahmon!' Shadhon nodded in agreement. The officer leapt out of his chair, took a cane leaning against the wall and began to beat the other boys with it, roaring, 'You fucking thieves, you'll die on the same pavement you were born on. It wasn't enough to live like dogs, you had to drag a Braahmon boy into it, too, and turn him into a thief. He's going to hell because of you.'

The officer took the initiative to send Shadhon to a remedial home so that he could get an education and reintegrate into society. The others were despatched to Mallik Fatak Jail, where they would serve their sentences before returning to the pavement.

Cartoon felt that as the son of a Brahmin, Komol deserved the same consideration. A couple of slaps and he could have been set free instead of being sent to jail.

It was natural that Imaan wouldn't be sleeping tonight. When the night ended, the gong at the front gate was sounded five times as usual, followed the next moment by a grotesque shout. 'File! File!' Waking up with sleep-laden eyes, the prisoners squatted in pairs in long rows, exactly in the manner in which people squatted to shit in forests, without their buttocks touching the ground, their weight balanced on their feet. File-sitting, it was called.

A guard came a little later, unlocking the enormous padlock on the iron gate. The jomadar came in with his notebook and pen tucked beneath his arm to do the headcount and confirm that no one had escaped. The count tallied with yesterday's; no one had come in or left. The siren at the gate rang out after he gave the signal to the jail authorities. Yesterday had passed uneventfully, and an uncertain new day was about to begin.

The ward gates were opened wide a little later, with all the convicts being allowed to step outside. Imaan stepped out, too, like he did every day, followed by the usual routine of toilet, collecting ashes from the clay oven to brush his teeth, and then a breakfast of boiled chickpeas. After this came the resonant cry in the confined space: Imaan Aliiiiiiii ...

His heart thumping loudly, a fearful Imaan Ali walked up to the kestebil. 'I'm Imaan Ali, saar.'

'Father's name?'

'Don't know. Mother's name Zahura Bibi.'

This raaitar's name was Poresh. Convicted of rape, he had been here two years. An educated young man, he had managed to lose his head and rape a woman. Of course, the full evidence would be available only once the trial began,

since it would inevitably be insinuated that the young widow from the neighbourhood had actually seduced Poresh. For now, he was a prisoner under trial, working as a raaitar out of choice to pass the time.

Poresh walked Imaan to the jail office, to the desk of the bald deputy jailer, who was sitting there with Imaan and Zahura Bibi's faded, dust-covered file in front of him. The deputy jailer added some notes, and then took prints of all five of Imaan's fingers. Then, stamping a seal on his left wrist, he sent Imaan off to the guard on duty at the gate. 'Release this one first, special case, the newspapers have been writing about him.' And so, he was being let out before everyone else; the others who were due to be freed today would walk out half an hour later. As instructed, the guard on duty at the main gate unlocked a small gate at the side and shoved Imaan out. 'There! Pray to God you never have to come back here.'

The bright morning sunshine seemed to bathe Imaan in a glow as soon as he stepped into the free world outside the gate. A breeze sprung up to kiss his face. Imaan felt he had been reborn, and was taking his first step out of the safety of his mother's protection to enter a new land. This space was unfamiliar. All those creatures he could see in the distance—he had no idea whether they would help him to his feet if he slipped and fell, or whether they would knock him to the ground. All was unknown, everything a source of fear.

Another gate stood a few yards away from the main one, walking out of which would take Imaan beyond the jail limits, into the battlefield, where he would have to fight every minute just to survive, where no one yielded even an

inch to anyone else, where every breath had to be nurtured with care.

Friends and relatives of those who were to be released a little later were gathered around the outer gate, anxiety written large on their faces. Each passing moment was like a century to them. Many of their hearts were quaking with fear; what if the last yard proved as long as a thousand miles? It had often happened that a prisoner had been given bail and all the conditions for release fulfilled, only for their relatives to see them being handcuffed at the gate by policemen from another jurisdiction and being taken away, rearrested, in legal terms.

There was no chance of something like this happening to Imaan. But there were no friends or family waiting for him outside the gate either. Not even the journalist who had played a crucial role in securing his release was there—he had seen the newsworthiness of Imaan’s predicament, written about it, been paid for it, and moved on in search of other news reports that could bring him more money. He, too, had to deal with his children’s school fees, his mother’s rheumatism, his father’s dental problems, new clothes for his family; where was the time to wait at the jail gate?

Had Imaan been a criminal instead of an innocent person, had he been serving a sentence all these years after being pronounced guilty, he would have left today with a good deal of money. Prisoners in jail are paid a small salary for the work they do, which, though paltry, adds up to a reasonable amount when it’s time to leave, ten or twenty years later. But because he had not been convicted of any crime, all that Imaan had got was a stamp on his wrist. As

long as it remained there, he would be allowed to ride on trams and buses without paying a fare.

Not that he hadn't got any money at all—he had twenty rupees, which Gobindo Das, the aged guard on duty at the gate, had given him from his own pocket. The man who had the contract for supplying vegetables to the jail gave the guard on gate duty twenty rupees every day—it had gone to Gobindo Das today. The primary condition for getting money was that the stale and damaged vegetables had to be ignored and not rejected when they were weighed at the gate. No one spotted them—not even the jailer or deputy jailer. And everyone received appropriate compensation for this. A hundred for the jailer, fifty for his deputy, twenty for the guard. But the jailer and deputy jailer were paid only once a month, while the guard was paid every day, since a different person was on duty each time.

Today Gobindo Das had pressed his twenty-rupee note into Imaan's hand, saying, 'Bad money for a good cause for once.'

The stamp on Imaan's wrist said Alipore Central Jail in English. It would take care of his transport for several days, while twenty rupees would last him, if he was thrifty, two days. Imaan had no idea that in just forty-eight hours, he would be facing doomsday, that he would be confronted with hunger and starvation.

Leaving the jail behind him, Imaan walked on. The compass would say he was going northwards. Leaving all his uncertainties behind, Imaan went in search of his true north.

2

The first two trains of the day cut through the darkness as they thundered towards the metropolis from south Bengal, the noise waking up the sleeping city. One of them was known as the ‘fish train’ and the other, the ‘maid train’. The fish train was loaded with covered baskets filled with a variety of fish caught by villagers from streams and rivers, lakes and ponds, fisheries and the sea, meant to nurture the health and the palate of the residents of Calcutta. Rui, katla, bowaal, puti, tyangra, showl, ilish, koi, magur, telapia—a multitude of names. And the maid train was filled with young girls and married women from those same villages, on their way to the houses of the babus to mop the floors, do the dishes, wash the clothes, and perform a hundred other tasks.

The two trains stopped briefly at this station to belch out a number of people of different ages before proceeding as usual towards the heart of Calcutta. Some others had been waiting for these passengers: the rickshaw-drivers and porters, labourers and teashop owners, whose livelihood was linked to the movement of trains, and whose stomachs were filled only when the iron wheels rolled.

With the arrival of the trains, a busy day began, as always. And immediately afterwards, a voice as sharp as a train whistle became audible—‘*Ogo Giril-er baap*, where have you gone, why have you left this unfortunate woman alone in this cruel world?’

The sun hadn’t risen yet; the eastern sky had barely been tinged with red. The high-pitched wailing cut through the greyness, starting in no. 2 rail bosti, grazing the heads of the tiny shacks, and arrowing towards the station. No one else possessed this kind of a voice hereabouts. Everyone realised it was Aamodibala mourning her husband, who had just died. The same husband who had tormented her all their married life. And yet the irony of it was that she had to cry for him now at the top of her voice for fear of being shamed by everyone else if she did not.

Even a few days ago, before he had taken to his bed, the man would come home drunk every night and beat her up. After all these years of consuming alcohol, it was the alcohol that had consumed him. Back then, Aamodi had screamed at him a thousand times, ‘Die, die, you bastard, release me.’ Now that he was dead, she was feeling much lighter, much less burdened. And yet something was pricking at her heart, which was why Bhegai, Gogon and Bishnu, who were sleeping on platform no. 2, were jolted awake by her harsh wailing at dawn. Some of the hooch supplied by Charan that they had drunk with chicken drumsticks last night was still frothing in their bellies. It would continue to do what it was supposed to till it was expelled through the urinary tract. And so, the languorous haze still clung to their bodies. It would have been pleasant not to wake up so soon. However,

they had no choice but to abandon their beauty sleep. This was no time for laziness, for an opportunity for making some cash was here, as the loud mourning signalled. And so they shook off their lethargy and got to their feet.

Everyone knew Jongol Poramanik was going to kick the bucket. He had ruined his liver himself with his constant drinking. Still, he had fought grimly with death for a full five and a half months even after the renowned doctor from KPC Hospital, who charged ten rupees per visit, had given up on him.

The first to abandon the comfortable bed on the platform was Gogon. He hustled the other two, 'Get up, quick. We need to go at once. The fucker's died finally, or that whore Aamodi wouldn't be squealing like a pig. Come on, don't waste time.' The reference to a squealing pig wasn't right, however, for the sound that the pigs made when slaughtered by the cleaners at KPC Hospital was far more grotesque. Unbearable. There was a tune, a rhythm, to Aamodi's wailing. Just like music, crying had its own melody and beat, tempo and metre. It wouldn't appeal to the heart unless these elements came together perfectly. Aamodi's dialogue delivery was quite appropriate in this regard.

It was the rule to lament a near-one's death. Otherwise, the soul could not rest in peace. Moreover, people said vicious things. '*Ki niddoy maagi re mairi!* The bitch is so heartless she didn't shed a single tear when her man died.' And so, Aamodi had flung herself to the floor, flailing her limbs as she wept helplessly, faithfully copying all the heartbreaking scenes she had seen in movies.

Jongol Poramanik was not the kind of person Aamodi should have been shedding tears for. It wasn't just the fact that he used to beat her up on any pretext. After all, there was no house in the slum where a man didn't beat his wife. The only exceptions were those men whose wives beat them. So Aamodi had accepted this. But what she couldn't put up with was his womanising. There was no counting the number of times during their seven or eight years of married life that he had brought a woman into their shanty and taken her to bed with Aamodi watching. He would fetch someone from the station and throw his wife out. 'Go sleep somewhere else, come back in the morning.' That was when she had cursed him repeatedly. 'Die, you bastard, die. I'm pledging a rupee and a quarter for Ma Shetala if only you die of cholera.'

On some nights, when he had passed out from drunkenness, Aamodi had even considered dragging him to the railway lines and dumping him there. No one would suspect anything, so many people were killed this way. An hour of weeping in the morning, and she'd be relieved of all the trouble.

Eventually, she hadn't had to do it herself; God had listened to her prayers and taken on the responsibility. Aamodi was free now, except that she'd have to maintain social mores by crying and fainting once or twice, or else people would say terrible things.

Aamodi had known that the day for tears wasn't too far away. Once the doctor had said there was nothing more to be done, she had begun to picture the whole thing in her head. The crying scene that had caught her fancy was from

the play *Behula's Journey*, where Behula wept buckets with her arms around Lakhinder after his death. But on thinking it over, she had decided that although the tune and dialogue were appealing and it worked on the stage, it would not fit in here. So she had been watching out for which of her neighbours could cry well enough to keep everyone engaged, paying careful attention when Ponchu khuro or Gopen or Hashi mashi from the rail bosti had died. It was paying off today. Anyone who heard her wails, accompanied by carefully curated excerpts from three different dialogues expressing grief, embellished by lines of her own, had to admit this was what mourning should be like. It was worth dying twice over if it could provoke such lamentation.

And so, Aamodi emitted another shriek, '*Ogo paanonath, o my dalling*, if this was what you had in mind, why didn't you kill me first! Your absence has left me with a dead soul in a living body!'

Her neighbour Shudashi had captivated onlookers with the same words and cadences when she had become Ponchu Nayek's freshly minted widow. Many still remembered her spectacular mourning.

Aamodi's renewed crying left Gogon, Bhagai and Bishnu in no doubt that it was time to step up to the task. The noble responsibility of fulfilling their duty, for which they had been born, for which they lived, had sent its summons. Even from this distance they could hear the stricken voice, 'There's no one I can call my own on a day like this. Who will I turn to for help? Who will rescue me?'

The plastic sheet on which these three men had been sleeping had, till yesterday, been the property of a rickshaw-

driver, who would put it up in front of the passenger seat to shield his passengers from the rain. But he was no longer its owner. Folding it and stashing it away in a secret corner of the platform, Bhagai smiled, saying to himself: 'This'll come in useful again tonight unless someone steals from the thief.' Turning to his companions, he said, 'Are you going right now? I need a shit. Go on ahead, or wait if you can. I'll take a dump quickly and come back.'

Gogon, who had woken up before the rest and then shaken them awake, sounded irritated. 'Can't you hold it in? Let's finish our work. Then you can shit your heart out.'

Lighting a bidi, Bhagai took a long drag and emitted a mouthful of smoke. 'There's no telling how long it'll take. Might get stuck, it'll take hours then. How can I hold it in so long? Give me a minute, I'll just go behind the cabin, and be back in no time.'

Gogon grimaced. 'Behind the cabin! Your shit will freeze if Pellad babu is there. He'll pour dirty water on your head if he sees you.'

There was a dense growth of morning glory creepers behind the signalling cabin, which was where ordinary people urinated and defecated. Next to it was a pond, its smelly water a putrid blue in colour. Shit in the bushes and wash up in the pond—that had been the long-standing practice here. But the cabin officer had been creating problems of late. There was a southerly breeze these days, bringing with it the stench of human excretion, making it difficult to remain inside the cabin. Prahlad babu had warned everyone a few days ago not to do 'those things' anymore over there, but with no one paying any attention, he had turned aggressive. The moment

he saw anyone squatting to defecate, he poured a bucket of water on them from the first floor.

Even though this was how people used the morning glory bushes in the daytime, this changed in the evening. No one was desperate to go in there anymore after dark, for fear of their lives, since there was a good chance of being bitten by snakes or scorpions. They did their job directly on the wooden sleepers of the railway tracks. Of course, there was the occasional passer-by, but those who walked and those who squatted maintained the norms of peaceful cohabitation.

When the night grew deeper, the area was taken over by the low-priced sex workers at the station. Their customers were even more withered than they were. There were easy options for entertainment-seekers among the poor to rent cheap rooms by the hour at Diamond Harbour or Ghutiari Sharif. But these customers were so impoverished that even if they could somehow manage to meet the price charged by a sex worker, they could not afford to rent a room. So they were forced to risk their lives and make use of the bushes. But even if they didn't fear snakes and scorpions, it was impossible to tell in the dark where people had chosen to defecate earlier in the day. Kobita had once found her entire back smeared with worm-infested faeces. These days Shondhya, Shobita, Kobita, Maloti and the rest of them carried a plastic sheet to lie on, which they washed in the pond after every use.

Right now, though, Bishnu hustled Bhegai, 'Stop talking and do your stuff quickly. There'll be a screw-up if Shibeen and Netai from no. 1 get there before us. We'll get fuck all.'

‘Is that so easy?’ About to leave, Bhegai stopped and turned back. ‘Do we ever go to no. 1? You think we’ll leave them alone if they create trouble in our area? We’ll beat them up. I don’t care what happens after that. Stick to your own area, don’t get into someone else’s.’ Bhegai tarried no longer; things were getting dire.

Bishnu sauntered up to the tea-stall on the platform. Kali Boshak, the owner, who knew them well, looked at him suspiciously, his eyes radiating revulsion. ‘What do you want?’

‘Two teas and a bundle of Lal Shuto bidi,’ said Bishnu.

‘Get a matchbox too,’ Gogon told him.

‘No credit first thing in the morning, I’m letting you know right now,’ said Kali Boshak sternly.

Summoning up a pinched expression of victimhood, Bishnu said, ‘Who’s asking for credit? Did I mention credit?’

‘Just letting you know in advance,’ said Kali Boshak as impatiently as earlier. ‘What if you drink your tea and then say you have no cash? I can’t squeeze it back out of you, can I?’

Standing up in support of his beleaguered friend, Gogon said, ‘Why’d we ask for tea if we couldn’t pay?’

‘As if you haven’t earlier,’ hissed Kali Boshak. ‘Don’t you talk, Gogon. Remember how you ran away after drinking your tea and eating a bun? I had to chase you.’

‘When?’

‘Try to remember. You shouldn’t have a problem recollecting.’

Gogon remembered. He was famished that day but had no money, and no one was going to give him food on credit either, since he already owed everyone a good deal

of money. Gogon was terrified, for he knew that his hunger would mount as the day went by, and his body would turn limp like a dead fish by the late afternoon. He wouldn't have enough strength to even stand on his feet, and would have to lie down in a corner of the platform by the time night fell. His vision would blur, his limbs would start trembling, his head would start spinning, a storm would rage in his chest, and then his eyes would slowly close, sending him into eternal sleep. So Gogon had decided to take a chance just so he could survive.

Embarrassed by the recollection, he smiled ruefully. 'I'm not the same Gogon anymore,' he said. 'I had no work or money then, but I have a business now. One round with a sack and I can make enough money to maintain a bitch and screw a whore on the side.'

These were the precise words with which Kawar had initiated him into this business. 'Stop fucking around, pick up a sack. One round will get you enough for a wife and a whore.' Many people had often said that Calcutta's streets were lined with money, but no one had ever gone into it deeply enough. Gogon had the answer now. Torn rubber slippers, ordinary plastic bags, discarded water bottles—everything that people threw away as rubbish was in fact valuable. They could not only pay for his meals, but also for his liquor.

Kali Boshak filled two cups of tea from the kettle without wasting more words. Holding out a bundle of bidis, he said, 'Fifteen bucks! Out with it!'

'Are you at least going to let me have my tea or not?' said a peeved Gogon.

Kali Boshak didn't respond but kept a strict eye on them.

Finishing his tea, Bishnu fished out two ten-rupee coins from the folds of his lungi and handed them over, saying in the same tone, 'Five bucks back!'

Kali Boshak slammed a five-rupee coin down on a high shelf. Bishnu was tucking it back into his lungi when Bhegai returned with an abashed smile. 'My goddamn belly was troubling me, but it's better now.' This was followed by a resentful 'What's this—you had your tea without me? Hard-hearted bastards. Come on, get me a cup.'

Bishnu looked at him angrily. 'Are you going to sponge off me all your life? I'm bankrupt, thanks to you. The booze last night, the snacks—you didn't pay for any of it. And now the tea, too. What's going to happen the rest of the day?'

A deflated Bhegai said, 'Don't talk of sponging—it's painful. I ask you because you're a friend with an income, you can afford to spend a little on us. If you don't want to, just say so. But if you talk to me like that, I'm never asking you again. Fuck this liquor—in through the mouth, piss twice, and it's all gone.'

'Enough of the drama,' Bishnu scolded Bhegai. 'Finish your tea quickly. Let's go find out what we can do with Jongol Poramanik's case.'

Aamodi had finally stopped crying and was lying in a dead faint, as the rules demanded. It was necessary to get some rest so that she could resume with renewed vigour after a while. Following the same rules, a neighbour whose husband had also died was sprinkling water on her face, saying, 'He had to go, he's gone, but you're here. Don't cry anymore, be strong. You have a child. You have to hold back

your grief for his sake.’ She was repeating verbatim what she had been told. This was how the wheel went round, for better or for worse.

Bishnu, Bhegai and Gogon started walking along the railway tracks towards no. 2 rail bosti, which was not far from the station. It began at the signal post on the tracks that streaked from west to east like an arrow. To the north of the tracks, after a small clearing which turned into a temporary market every evening, stood the shanties of no. 1 bosti; the number having been acquired by virtue of being the first settlement here. But no. 2 bosti had a far higher population.

Since it was morning, the residents of the numerous huts to the right of the railway lines, just after the end of platform no. 1, had quite justifiably claimed their rights to squatting in the clearing across the tracks to move their bowels. Behind them was a large moss-covered pond, and, beyond it, the road, lined with small shops.

Those defecating here pretended that anyone walking along the railway lines was blind. Not that they were wrong, for no one could indeed see them, as no one so much as cast a glance their way, or, even if they did, looked away at once. No one wants to see rows of bare buttocks when starting their day.

Bhegai remembered coming here one morning as a young boy, along with several other imps just like him, to chuck stones and jeer at those shitting here. Incensed, Palan-er baap had shot to his feet, lifting his lungi and shouting, ‘Come on, you sons of bitches, throw your stones right here!’

Right now, a stream of train passengers were walking along the tracks towards the road on the right that would

take them to the Bagha Jatin crossroad. All of them were daily labourers and porters, also known by another identity—chhotolok, the lowborn.

Perhaps it was because they were the lowborn that they had taken this route, for the bhodrolok, the highborn genteel classes, did not often walk this way, and certainly not at this dangerous hour. The sharp acidic tang of turds and piss was snapping at everyone's nostrils, forcing them to cover their mouths and noses and hurry along as quickly as possible.

There was another route from the station to the Bagha Jatin crossroad, via the bus-stop, which meant a walk of at least three miles, twice as long as this short-cut. Labourers and porters would, in any case, be putting in physical work all day long; they didn't want to expend their energy unnecessarily first thing in the morning.

Gogon, Bhegai and Bishnu were also walking along the railway tracks, their eyes narrowed like that of predators. Once the platform ended, the right-hand side of the railway lines was an endless sea of tiny shanties built with rotting leaves, scraps of wood and gunny sheets, erected on stilts, and stuck to one another in a way that left no scope for privacy. The inhabitants of one hut could feel the neighbouring one shaking in the middle of the night and know what was going on.

The residents of the rail bosti could not go to sleep till the last train in both directions, up and down, had gone by. Even if they did fall asleep, the last train woke them up as it passed, shaking the ground and whistling grotesquely.

There was a story about a village where every family had nine or ten children, while the other villages around it had the usual one or two. Investigations revealed that a railway line went past the village, along which a train passed at top speed at two in the morning. Woken up abruptly, couples would have sex in a bid to tire themselves out so that they could go back to sleep.

In the rail bosti, the shaking of one shanty stirred the hearts and bodies living in the neighbouring shanties, whose shaking then aroused those who lived on the other side.

On the northern side of the railway lines, a mossy lake ran for about a quarter of a mile from the end of platform no. 2—it had probably been created when the soil was dug out to raise the base for the rail tracks. Beyond it lay a patch of land on which nine or ten shacks had been put up. Scattered around the edge of the lake, and reached by walking down the slope from the railway line, they represented the beginning of the settlement known as no. 2 rail bosti, which had been turned upside down this morning by grief.

All the residents here were among the poorest of the poor, working-class people from the lowest strata. Among the men, some pedalled rickshaws, some pulled hand-drawn carts to transport goods, some were porters, and some worked as daily labourers. All the women worked as maids in the houses of the affluent. Neither birth nor death was an occasion for great celebration or mourning, for life itself was like the camel's hump, or the shell on the snail's back, an immovable burden that had to be carried, and which offered nothing but pain. The only desire of their

lives was to lighten this load in any manner possible. They had no time to pay attention to anything else in the world.

Aamodi had finally decided to regain consciousness. How long can you go on having water splashed on your face? The person splashing water knew it had to start gently and then gather pace. The water had to be hurled from one's cupped palm towards the eyes of the target from a distance of two or three feet, four or five times in succession. Only then would it work.

'What's the use of crying,' everyone consoled Aamodi as they tried to edge out and go to work. 'You'll only end up falling sick yourself, but the one who's gone won't come back.' No one was particularly concerned about Jongol Poramanik; a dead man needed no attention. All that remained to think about was his cremation, which someone or the other would cheerfully volunteer to take care of. The dead were more valuable than the living in this slum.

Moharaj lived with his wife Ranibala and two children in a hut on the edge of the railway line, at the head of the path that led to Jongol Poramanik's shanty. The children were entirely Ranibala's doing—Moharaj could claim no credit here. She had carried them in her womb, given birth to them, and fed them. Both the boys were still young, but very naughty, always up to mischief. And yet if Moharaj were to assert a misplaced right over Ram and Baloram as their father and slap them around a little, Ranibala pounced on him like a tigress—'I'm warning you, don't you touch my kids. You're just a turd whom I allow in the veranda. Even if their real father, who used his thing, tries to beat them, I'll break his arm. I carried them for nine months, I feed them

every day—if anyone has to beat them, it'll be me. How dare you even try? Do you pay for their food and clothing?'

It was true that unlike others who had lured women into their homes with promises of fine clothes and money, Moharaj had actually married Ranibala before having his way with her. Winning her heart with his words, buying her bangles and ribbons, a twenty-eight-year-old Moharaj had persuaded a sixteen-year-old Ranibala to run away with him, after which he had married her here on the railway tracks with sidoor and white bangles. His voice thick with emotion, he had said, 'I swear by the gods you are my wife from today. The past is past; I shall never look at anyone else, never mention anyone else. You are my wife now. For better or for worse, our lives will be one.'

Those were heady days of happiness. Ranibala used to work as a cook at a boarding house in South Park. Being pretty, she had had no problems getting the job. Even the shortcomings in her cooking were compensated for by the way she looked.

The boarders had come to the city from places so far away that hardly ever did any of them return home for the holidays. Some of them tried to go for the bird in the hand instead of the two in the bush by groping her and then adding a tip of a rupee or more. But the one who gave her the most money was Shaadhin Shorongi, a clerk at Adorsho Balika Bidyalay.

Before he paid, though, the fifty-five-year-old Shaadhin babu would run his hands over her body and face for quite some time, faint beads of perspiration appearing on his forehead. 'I have a daughter just like you, ma. Identical. The

same nose ... see, this spot on your back ... give me your hand, yes ... the fingers are the same too.' As he spoke, he would touch Ranibala all over. 'That's why I look at you so often and kiss you like this. I'm a father after all, my heart aches for her. You mustn't mind—think of me as your own father.'

Moharaj used to work at One-Armed Paanu's scrapyards next to the railway siding. This was where everything discarded by people for being unusable was traded. All the iron scrap and bottles and old newspapers that ragpickers collected through the day were sold here. It was Moharaj's responsibility to check and measure and weigh everything that was bought.

There were two sides to the enterprise, one of which ran in full view of everyone and the other, away from prying eyes. The first operated by daylight and the second, in the dead of night. Under cover of night, a figure that had all but melted into the darkness would knock softly on the door, and Moharaj would open it as silently as a cat. That was when the clandestine material was delivered, ranging from motor parts and manhole covers to bearings from freight trains and copper wire. Paanu could even accommodate an entire truck or two if it was dismantled.

Several quintals of copper wire, stolen from a high-tension pole somewhere between two stations, had come in one drizzly night. The bark from banana trees had been laid out cleverly across the wires to stop the passage of electricity through them, after which they had been severed with the help of a wire-cutting instrument.

With the last train gone, there was no way to tell whether the overhead wires were live or not. Since the railway police

on duty were doing everything but guard railway property, the thieves used their wire-cutter fearlessly to cut the wires into small lengths, stuffed them into gunny bags, and hid them in the bushes or inside a moss-covered pond. After the police had stopped searching and the commotion had died down, the wires were transported under cover of night to Paanu's junkyard.

Paanu, in fact, used to be an active member of just such a gang, its 'head mistri', as the chief workman was referred to. Once, when he was extracting the bearings from a freight car, the jack slipped and the carriage fell on his arm. He was not the only one to have lost an arm this way. It was a simple but risky operation—clamping the jack on the railway line to lift the carriage a few inches and extract the bearing with two fingers. There was no escape if the jack were to slip at that moment. It was only the two affected fingers that needed to be removed, but the doctor at the hospital inevitably amputated the arm from the elbow or wrist downwards.

After losing his arm and spending several months in jail, Paanu had no choice but to give up on this profession. Formerly known only as Paanu, he now became known in the neighbourhood as 'One-Armed Paanu'. It was after this that he had set up this business, turning from a sheyana into a khaau, from a master thief into a dealer.

Having worked in this line before, he was acquainted with all the sheyanas. Moreover, he had done time in their lair, where he had come to know those of them he hadn't met before. So his enterprise flourished. Like in every other business, Paanu's capital, too, was his honesty. Everyone trusted him enough to leave their stolen goods with him,

which he then sold to suitable buyers and gave the thieves a fair price. He never cheated them. A portion of the takings had to be offered at the local police station too.

‘So you’ve done some business,’ the officer said, smiling.

‘All with your blessings,’ Paanu said deferentially.

‘With whom?’

‘Enjoy your mango, saar, don’t ask where the tree is.’

‘We’ll find out anyway.’

‘That’s all right, but it would be wrong of me to disclose it.’

Paanu was on close terms with the police, but, as the saying goes, a policeman can never be family; he’s perfectly capable of biting the hand that feeds him. And so, the very next morning, after Paanu had received the copper wire, a jeep filled with policemen drove up to his scrapyard. Given the location of the crime, the police knew exactly where the stolen goods would be found eventually. With their informers spread everywhere, they also knew who the thieves were. It was difficult to identify these sources. For all Paanu knew, it could be the driver of the rickshaw-trailer on which the wires had arrived.

Awbodh Shamonto, the paan-chewing second-in-command of the police station, was in the jeep. He was quite fond of Paanu, and was mortified to have to arrest him. Sadly, he said, ‘I have no choice, you have no idea how much pressure there is on us. I won’t keep my job without a few arrests. The order, in fact, was to stage an encounter. The DM is a very strict man who has said, catch them and shoot them; there is no other way to terrorise criminals. Let’s see ... maybe one or two around the middle of the month.

But not you—you don't have to worry. Just arrange for some money, and I'll make sure the charges are light—you'll be released in a couple of years. But it's stolen property, I can't do less than that, I won't fool you. You've looked after me, I'll help you as much as I can.'

Moharaj went to jail, too, on the same charges. Shamonto babu had kept his word, and neither Moharaj nor Paanu had had to serve more than two years. Paanu was a good boss; he had not stinted on paying for Moharaj too. But the sentence came four years later, and they had had to spend that period in jail, too, as under-trial prisoners. When he came out after six years, Moharaj discovered that Ranibala had given birth to twins. And his shanty with walls of thatched bamboo had been replaced by a permanent structure with three-inch bricks. There wasn't even a stool to sit on earlier, and now there was a proper cot, on which the father of the children, Shaadhin Shorongi, was ensconced, sipping ginger tea.

Seeing Moharaj return, Shorongi said, 'I've done my duty. She's so young, where would she go, how would she survive. I've protected her to the best of my abilities. I'm getting on in years. I cannot support two households anymore. I'm glad you're back. It's your household, you can take charge now. You have my blessings.'

Ranibala was no longer the naive, helpless girl who had followed Moharaj from the Gobindopur rail colony—time had matured her. Even though Shaadhin Shorongi wanted to be free of his responsibilities, Ranibala was unwilling to release him. Let him remain. Moharaj wouldn't be able to pull off what she wanted. She needed Shaadhin babu to buy her a couple of kaathas of land near Piali. But wiser

heads in the slum explained to her that you could call an ass your father if you were in trouble, but it wasn't right to call your father an ass. After all, Moharaj is your bhaatar, you're married to him, they told her. It was a relationship over seven lifetimes; it wasn't like a straw in the wind. Shaadhin would remain in Kolkata only as long as he had his clerk's job. As soon as he retired, he would run back to his hometown. Who was going to track him down in Medinipur after that? Don't drive Moharaj away because of him, they advised her. Let your babu stay here, but don't make Moharaj leave.

Despite the harmful proliferation of atheists, religiosity and morals had not yet been obliterated; right and wrong, piety and sin were seen deeply entrenched in the human mind. Ranibala believed in Hindu customs. She believed that her husband was her lord and master. The wife had to return to her husband to broadcast her chastity.

However, Ranibala was now faced with not one crisis but two. Her own problem was that she couldn't possibly have both men in her life. And second, allowing two men in the same house could lead to murder.

So Ranibala was forced to bid Shaadhin Shorongi a tearful goodbye. Escorting him to the station, she said, 'Don't forget us. Send money every month, I'll need it to bring the boys up. I'll come to your school if you don't send the money, don't forget that ...'

Shaadhin Shorongi had no difficulty identifying the threat. Recoiling, he said, 'Of course, I won't forget. I'll bring it myself at the beginning of every month and spend a little time with you. I can do that, can't I? I'd like to see the children too.'

‘Have I ever said you mustn’t?’ Ranibala reassured him. ‘The house is yours—come anytime you want to. I’ll cook whatever you bring, I’ll make whatever your heart desires. Such a long relationship can’t just be ended abruptly.’

Moharaj was now attentively fulfilling his responsibility as a householder while running a business enterprise selling ganja. He had made convenient arrangements at home for smoking, keeping all his equipment in a wooden crate—the bong, hemp, a knife to slice the ganja, a piece of wood as a cutting tray.

A peculiar, stinging smell always swirled around the house, which also acted as an advertisement. Even a stranger who liked his weed could make out there was a dive here.

Moharaj had had to spend the night in the police lock-up after being arrested, and was taken to court only the next afternoon. After which, following conventions, the police asked that he be remanded for five days for interrogation. This was necessary, for there was the risk of being reprimanded by the court afterwards—why wasn’t the accused questioned; he might have revealed the names of other criminals. That night, a loud commotion had woken Moharaj up at around 2:00 a.m. He could tell that someone was being beaten up mercilessly on the floor of the office outside, and the person was shrieking loudly.

One-Armed Paanu was sleeping next to Moharaj on a dusty blanket rolled out on an even dustier floor. ‘They’re beating someone up,’ Moharaj had told him fearfully. Turning over on his side, Paanu had said, without missing a beat, ‘Let them, what’s your problem. Go back to sleep.’

Like a philosopher, he had added the hallowed saying, 'Eat fire, shit coal. That's how the world goes round.'

Still, Moharaj had tried to wake him up. It was his first time in a lock-up; he was terrified. 'Why are they beating him up like that?'

'Must have done something to deserve it,' Paanu had answered, without a change in tone.

'Who is it?'

'How should I know, I'm exactly where you are. What does it matter to us?'

'What if they beat us up too?' Moharaj had asked in panic.

'They won't,' Paanu had answered confidently, 'why should they? We've done as they had asked us to. We've paid every last paisa they demanded. They might have beaten us up if we'd been disobedient, but we haven't.' Illiterate, and therefore unaware that he was citing Isaac Newton, Paanu continued, 'The one who's doing the beating also suffers like the one being beaten up. I've seen Constable Modon pleading with the officer: "I've beaten up four of them, saar. It's someone else's turn now, my arms are aching." It's not very relaxing to beat people up.'

Moharaj hadn't been convinced. His heart was quaking, his body was covered with sweat. Rising to his feet, he went up to the locked door, and looked down the dark corridor leading away from the cell. The office was farther ahead, on the left. That was where the officers had their desks. Moharaj tried to gauge what was going on in there. The victim was shouting, 'I won't do it again, babu. Forgive me this time, I'll never do it again.' The stick continued to be smashed on his back, accompanied by angry growls. 'Why

won't you do it again? Do it. Who's stopped you? But make sure we get our due. It's been six months—even patience has its limits.'

After this had gone on a long time, Moharaj realised that the man being beaten up ran a ganja dive. He used to work at a factory earlier, one of the thousands of factories that had closed down under the administration of the labourer- and peasant-friendly government, making two-hundred thousand workers jobless. The man had had no choice but to become a ganja dealer just to keep his family fed and clothed.

Selling ganja was not wrong, though, but not giving the police their cut from the monthly earnings was. This was the crime the man had committed over the past six or seven months. He had been evading the police, and hence this beating.

Moharaj wasn't going to be like him. After his release from jail, he went to meet the officer-in-charge at the local police station with the intention of starting a ganja dive of his own. 'I'm very poor, babu. I had to do time in jail because I worked for Paanu. But I'm innocent. I'm not going down that road again, for who knows what all might happen. Your kindness knows no bounds. Allow me to start a ganja thek in no. 2 rail bosti. If I can make money, some of it will go to you.'

With a beatific smile, the benevolent officer had said, 'Go into business honestly and fearlessly. Give me three hundred a month, make sure it gets to me by the 10th. That's the last date. You can use my name; no one will trouble you. God above and me below, we're there with you.'

Moharaj had been running his business with a shining reputation since then. Shaadhin babu had contributed the capital, along with, of course, the two-roomed house with three-inch bricks. No one else in the bosti had a house of bricks. Blood was thicker than water, after all. Whenever Shaadhin Shorongi missed Ram and Baloram, he came over for a visit. It wasn't possible to come during the day, for he had work then. So he came in the evening, staying the night and leaving early in the morning. Back when Moharaj had been in jail, Shaadhin babu used to visit during holidays, only to discover that the neighbours had their minds in the gutter—they peeped in through the bamboo walls and giggled all the time. Ranibala had admonished Shaadhin babu, 'I feel ashamed, don't you? What sort of a man are you? You work in a school, so many people know who you are—how can you stand their laughing at you?'

This was why Shaadhin babu had put up the brick walls and the tin roof. He could come and go whenever he pleased now, at any time of the day. The Peeping Toms were thwarted. A veranda ran in front of the two rooms, at the northern end of which Ranibala did the cooking, while Moharaj ran his business at the southern end. The house faced the railway line.

Shaadhin babu had an infirmity, the kind any elderly man could have. So he had to take a pill whenever he came here. The problem wasn't embarrassing, but buying the pill was. What would people think if they saw the revered head clerk of Adorsho Balika Bidyalay buying this particular medicine? His name would be ground into the dirt. So he'd send Moharaj to get it. 'Ask for three-nought-three capsules.

Will you remember the name or should I write it down for you? Ask for hundred mg.’

Shaadhin babu would take the medicine with warm milk in the afternoon or at night. He grew frisky soon afterwards. A little later, he would summon Ranibala. ‘There’s something I have to tell you.’ One of the two rooms was earmarked for him. He would stay in it when he came; it remained locked the rest of the time. Ranibala kept the key, Shaadhin babu never took it. She’d go in there to find out what he had to tell her ...

Moharaj was sitting outside the locked door of that room now, smoking a bidi. Aamodi’s shrieks had woken him up. Not just him but the entire slum. Still, he hadn’t gone up to her door. Considering the reckless way she was crying, her clothes had to be in disarray. It was always thrilling to see a tempting female body, but now was not the time. So Moharaj decided that smoking was the wiser option.

Throwing away his bidi after a final drag, he glanced at the railway lines, where three figures were visible. ‘Vultures flock around dead cows, and these shoytans turn up whenever a man dies,’ Moharaj muttered angrily under his breath. ‘The fucking bastards have arrived to devour Jongol Poramanik ...’

Now he felt it necessary to stand by the helpless and distressed Aamodi, so that no one could cheat the newly widowed young woman. Those swine were sure to give her a bad deal in her hour of grief. She couldn’t possibly think for herself right now. Astuteness at this time was out of the question; she would say yes when she meant no, and forfeit what was hers by rights.

So Moharaj followed the three shadows to Aamodi's front door.

Exhausted from all her crying, she had no more tears to shed. All she could do was whimper melodramatically, 'How will I live now, how will my days and nights pass in your absence? Not a single person is left on this land to wipe my tears or to bring me home when I'm lost ...' Without missing a beat, she added, 'Giril, your uncles are here. They've travelled a long way, get them a mat to sit on.'

The three musketeers were pleased to see that mourning had not made Aamodi forget her manners. One of them piped up, 'No need for a mat or anything. We'll stand, we're fine standing. Cry as long as you want, let it all out. We'll talk business afterwards.'

'Any relatives nearby?' Moharaj asked Aamodi. 'Any way to let them know? Any chance they might turn up?'

'No relatives,' crooned Aamodi. 'All of them live on the other side of the Matla ...'

'Didn't some of them live in the Gopalpur bosti?'

'Used to, not anymore. All gone home. Sonnabitches in the mincipality evicted them.'

'I heard they were all shifted to Lobondanga or some place.'

'Not all. Only those who had voter cards and ration cards. My father and brother used to rent a shack. They had no papers. So they went back home—what else was there to do. My brother drives a rickshaw-trailer in Gosaba.'

'Who's going to go all the way to inform them? And even if they're told, how will they travel so far quickly? The

earliest they can make it here is tomorrow. The corpse will rot. A rotting corpse brings bad luck,' said Moharaj.

Someone, or some people, had many years ago dumped Jongol hereabouts from a train one morning. His father or maybe his mother was the ringleader of a child-trafficking gang; no one knew for sure, though. Like they did from other villages, these gangs sometimes picked up children from the station here and supplied them to the Arab countries for camel races. Who knew, perhaps Jongol had been picked up for this very purpose from some distant village. Maybe the police had shown up, or something had gone wrong with their delivery, but they had abandoned him at the station. The station was generous, it gave shelter to many orphaned, helpless children. It gave birth to many too. And so, it had drawn Jongol into its arms, and the child had grown up amidst the crowd of the unwanted and the redundant. Starting out with begging, he had gone on to washing glasses at a drinking dive and then graduated to driving a rickshaw. He had sprouted like a weed and died as one. Few knew he had been alive all this time; fewer still had anything to gain or lose from his death. Birth and death were insignificant events in this railway slum.

Aamodi was moaning, 'All of you who live here are family, you tell me what I should do. No need to inform anyone else. No one checked on him when he was alive. Who needs them now that he's dead?'

The three musketeers realised that a conversation was looking feasible. Aamodi might be grief-stricken, but she hadn't lost her mind. She could hear, she could understand everything clearly. She was capable of taking decisions too.

After a pause Gogon said, speaking slowly, ‘See, forget the fancy talk, let me get to the point. You know why we’re here. We’re the ones who take away the body no matter who dies. We get the last rites done. So are you willing to hand over Jongol-da’s body to us? If you are, you have no further responsibilities—we’ll take care of things. Flowers, incense, bier for the final journey—everything.’

Moharaj interrupted before Aamodi could reply, ‘Obviously, the body has to go to someone for the last rites. Can’t keep the corpse at home. Whether it’s you or Nitai and Bhoben, it’s all the same. But first, there’s a matter that needs settling.’ Moharaj looked around at the crowd that had gathered. ‘What do all of you think?’

Bishnu was enraged at Moharaj’s seizing the initiative. ‘Who’s going to do the talking,’ he asked acidly, ‘you?’

Moharaj was taken aback by this sudden attack. ‘Why should it be me? The owner of the body will talk to you.’

‘Then what are you butting in for? Shut up.’

‘What kind of talk is this, Bishnu? All of us live here, together in happiness and in sorrow. Remember the floods? Aamodi had waist-high water in her shanty; didn’t I let them stay in my house for three days? Ask her whether I charged for it.’

‘Robbe Bagdi would have charged by the hour,’ someone said in support of Moharaj.

Gogon said, ‘Why bring Robbe into this? Renting his place out by the hour is his business. Ask him and he says his niece and her husband are visiting, or some village connection’s son and daughter-in-law. All of them turn up at night and leave in the morning. We know what’s

going on, just that we don't say anything, and why should we? When no one else speaks up, why should we ask for trouble? Let them do whatever they want, none of my business.'

The sun was climbing, and with it, the heat. Those who wouldn't get a meal if they didn't work every day were disappointed by Jongol Poramanik's timing. You never knew, what if Aamodi insisted she wanted to cremate her husband herself? They wouldn't be able to refuse if she asked them for help, and that would be the end of their wages for the day. And of food too.

But now they were relieved that Gogon, Bishnu and Bhegai had appeared and seemed to be having a cordial exchange with Aamodi. These three would take care of the body, no one else would have to pitch in and lose a day's work. And so, the neighbours stepped up fearlessly to offer their condolences.

'He was a good man. Never thought he'd die this way, our Jongol, I'm so sad.' Passing on their brief consolations in the quickest possible time and at no cost, they left one by one to service their bellies. Some even took the opportunity to feel up Aamodi under the pretext of comforting her. 'Don't cry, Aamodi. Jongol may have gone, but I'm here. Just let me know if you need anything.'

Shibpodo worked at Komol Shamonto's potato godown. He had got married, but his wife had run away, leaving a child behind. He knew the agony of being alone, the sharpest bit being her absence in bed at night, when he simply couldn't sleep. Now it was Aamodi's turn to experience the same pain. Her heart would also twist in the dead of night. Shibpodo

began to think ahead furiously—couldn't two lonely hearts come together now?

He decided not to go to work today, never mind the loss of a day's wages. He would stick by Aamodi. He would take the test of friendship in this troubled time for her and pass it with flying colours.

So Shibpodo said, 'Can you shift a little, Aamodi boudi? Panchi-r ma, help her please? Let me put down a mat here and get Jongol-da out from the room.'

Panchi-r ma said, 'There's an awful stink in there. Jongol pissed and shat all over the place.'

'Everyone shits their guts out when dying,' Shibpodo said confidently. 'The soul doesn't always leave easily. Sometimes it goes out through the mouth, sometimes through the other end. I'll bring him out, I don't care about the smell.'

Aamodi had been wailing in a corner of the yard, where she had flung herself to the ground. It was as much a yard as it was a road; everyone in the slum had equal rights to this space. The inhabitants of the four shacks on the northern side passed through it on their way to and from home. Several people joined hands to bring Jongol out from inside the shack to the yard, and laid him down on a mat spread in the shade of a pair of guava trees that had sprung up on their own.

Bhegai said, 'It doesn't look right for the dead body to be lying here all day. Shall we go get the cot and flowers now?'

The question was meant for Aamodi, but it was Shibpodo who answered: 'Of course. Jongol-da can't be strung up on a bamboo pole like someone run over by a train.'

Moharaj wasn't happy with the way things were going. He shot off a question towards Aamodi. 'Well, Aamodi, something you want to say? Or do you want to give up the body without asking for anything?'

She might have been overwhelmed by her own performance of grief, but Aamodi hadn't lost her common sense. She was quick to catch Moharaj's hint. So she lobbed the ball right back at him. 'What can I say, Mowaraj-da? I'm a mere woman, they say women are half of men. You're my elder brother, you can tell them everything I would, and more. I'm authorising you.'

The young men of the railway slum had staged a performance of *Noti Binodini* some time ago. Aamodi had been to see it, and remembered Girish Ghosh saying the same thing to Ramakrishna Paramhansa.

Moharaj smiled to himself. Aamodi had elevated his status—a fitting reply to Bishnu's slur. His was now the last word in the matter of the late Jongol Poramanik, by virtue of the authority vested in him.

Bishnu was upset. You could bargain with the farmer when buying his harvest directly from him, but there was no such luck if the middleman got in the way, for he would add his commission. And yet there was no option, since Aamodi had authorised Moharaj. So he had no choice but to turn to him. 'All right, what are your terms?'

Clearing his throat, Moharaj said, with the knowledgeable air of a village elder, 'Take Jongol, we're making no claims on him. But we need a cash payment of a thousand and one, and that's my last word.'

The three musketeers exchanged astonished glances. A thousand and one rupees! They had never paid so much for a dead body before. Moharaj had named his price like a cut-throat operator.

‘I’ve been in jail,’ Moharaj began. ‘It taught me many things I’d never learnt outside. I’ve met some of the people who trade in bodies, spoken to them too. They’re the ones who told me how much a body is sold for. I’m not mentioning any figures. It’s none of our business whether you sell a body for five thousand or ten, but Aamodi must get her thousand rupees right now. There are rituals to be observed for ten days. She has to buy rice, fruits, ghee. Then there’s the cost of the last rites—the chheradhho. Whether she does it at home or goes to the temple, the last rites will cost three or four hundred. Jongol died *haate-khola-pode-mala*, he was forever scrounging for money, even his arse was bare half the time. You must give her the money so she can pay for all this.’

The three musketeers were looking glum. They were not going to be able to pull it off as easily as they had expected. Just as schools made students clever, jails, too, turned fools into smartasses who had figured out how the underworld operated. Now that Moharaj had come to know, he couldn’t be deceived any longer.

After a pause, Bishnu said, ‘How can we pay so much? We’ll have to spend a lot too. The cot, the incense, the flowers ... We’ll need some scent too—can you smell him? Climb down a bit so we can take the body away. Let’s settle at five hundred.’

Moharaj was saddled with an enormous responsibility. After some thought, he said, ‘Split the difference. That way,

both of us can be happy. Neither thousand nor five hundred but seven-fifty. The body isn't available at a lower price. Pay seven-fifty and it's yours. Else, leave it here, and I'll see how to handle it.'

Bhorot, who lived at the far end of the slum and claimed he was a baul, was the one with the most financial resources at his disposal. He sang in trains for alms, and lent out the money he earned at high interest rates. Both his sons had grown up now and had decent incomes of their own. They didn't want their father to be begging for a living anymore. They'd tell him, 'We know you had to do it when we were young, but why now?' But Bhorot was unwilling to wind up his main business. He would say, 'You want me to give up what helped me survive, marry, build a house, bring you two up, just because I've made some money now? Being proud of your riches is the first step to losing them.'

Bhorot's elder son ran a paan-bidi shop near the station. He was also an official of the hawkers' committee, which meant he had two sources of income. He was embarrassed by his father's begging. 'Why do you call it begging,' Bhorot would say. 'I'm like the bee collecting honey. Chaitanya himself did it too. I sing for people, they give me money in return. This is what we bauls do. You can't be a baul if you harbour false pride. Singing washes away all pettiness.'

Now Bhorot was at the scene in the hope that Aamodibala would need money. Even if the young men of the slum agreed to take Jongol's body away for the last rites, they would demand cash for hooch and snacks, and for a meal after their return from the crematorium. Did Aamodi have the money? If not, no problem, Bhorot

would lend it to her. He charged ten per cent interest from others—borrow a hundred in the morning, return a hundred and ten the next morning. Delay the repayment, and pay a hundred and twenty-one the next day. But he wouldn't charge Aamodi the same rate; he would settle at seven-and-a-half per cent.

The small businessmen in the slum who sold fish and vegetables used to be captive clients for Bhorot once. But now he had a competitor in the form of Jolodhor, who had a contract for picking up all the dead cattle deposited on the field next to the railway siding. He used to skin them and sell their hide. Jolodhor became flush with cash that one time an epidemic broke out, killing cows and bulls indiscriminately. Some people even claimed he had started it himself, that he had hired people to feed poisoned bananas to cattle. Twenty-two cows had died in one night at Hari Singh's dairy. But it was unlikely to have been Jolodhor, for it needed both courage and political clout to do something like this. People said a private builder with his eye on the land occupied by the dairy set up by Hari Singh, who had come here from Bihar, was behind it. But it was also true that Jolodhor was very wealthy now, and lent money at high rates of interest. He no longer skinned the dead cattle himself; he employed others to do it, who kept half the proceeds. This was the custom nowadays: as soon as low-caste people came into money, they gave up their caste businesses to turn into upper-class gentlemen. Some of them took jobs as cleaners in municipalities and corporations, signing the attendance register and getting other low-caste persons to do the actual work for a pittance, which they paid out of

their own higher salary. Jolodhor dressed in white panjabis and paayjamas these days, the attire of the upper-castes. He took up position on a bench at a tea-stall with his bag of money, where many upper-class people borrowed from him, taking and returning their loans furtively to keep their social prestige intact.

Jolodhor's principle was to charge a higher rate for smaller loans but a lower rate for larger ones. So anyone who borrowed less than a thousand rupees had to pay a hundred rupees as interest the next day, but a loan of a thousand meant an interest of only fifty. Jolodhor would say, 'The money won't lay eggs at home; it has to go into other people's houses. The eggs can be large or small, it doesn't matter.'

This was where Bhorot had lost out to Jolodhor. Some of the hawkers and vendors around the station borrowed as much as they needed in the morning, returning their loans with interest at night. Jolodhor applied the same system to them. Which meant the borrowers took a thousand even if they needed less, because they knew the difference between ninety on nine hundred and fifty on a thousand. They had all shifted allegiance from Bhorot to Jolodhor.

Bhorot was apprehensive today. What if Jolodhor beat him to it? So he had arrived at Aamodi's door early with the money tucked in his bag. But now it seemed she wouldn't need the money after all.

The moneylender in Bhorot was deeply distressed. What times were these, when a man became so valuable after his death? Vultures would fight over corpses once upon a time; today, it was human beings.

He would have to leave. There was no point wasting time here trying to net the big fish while the small fry escaped elsewhere. But he wanted to make his presence felt before leaving, he wanted to make a memorable contribution to Jongol Poramanik's life story. So he said, 'You must negotiate, of course. All I have to say is, don't end with a zero, add a one. Make it seven fifty-one.'

Bhegai looked daggers at him. 'Are you done? We don't need a crowd here, give us some air to breathe. Allow us to do our work, never mind the useless talk.'

Moharaj was fully in charge now; an authorisation was not to be taken lightly. He said, 'So what's your final offer? We don't have much time—it's getting hot now. Are you ready to pay seven fifty-one?'

The three musketeers withdrew to the guava tree to discuss the matter in low voices while they smoked. Eventually Bhegai said, 'Let's settle it here, Moharaj-da. Five hundred and one, all right? If not, we'll go now instead of wasting our time.'

Moharaj glanced at Aamodi, whose eyes signalled silent gratitude. So he nodded, 'All right. Hand the cash over.'

'What, right now?'

'Obviously. Cash on delivery.'

Bhegai pleaded, 'Let us take the body first and get some money. Who carries cash around? All of us are *haate-khola-pode-mala*, you know that.'

'Bhorot-da is right here, borrow it from him. We have to make some payments too.'

'I have the money,' said Bhorot.

Now Bhegai sounded stricken. ‘Don’t you trust us at all, Moharaj-da?’

‘What if you disappear?’

‘By all the gods, we’ll pay you this evening.’

Moharaj was in charge. ‘All right, take the body. But don’t forget what you promised. He who breaks his word is the son of a bastard. Aamodi had better get her money before sunset.’ Now he turned to Aamodi and said solemnly, ‘Here, light this twig and give it to your son. Let him do the mukhagni and then let Jongol’s body go. Let them take it away, no point keeping it here any longer.’

Going up to Moharaj, Bishnu whispered in his ear that the mukhagni should be done carefully; the ritual of touching the mouth of the corpse with a burning twig had better not leave a scar on the skin. Then he told Gogon, ‘Let them do what they have to, we’ll wait. You’d better run to Kaalo-da’s shop for the flowers, incense and cot. Quick.’

Bhegai added a reminder, ‘Don’t forget the scent. Jongol-da has shat and pissed all over himself. Who knew what he ate; the smell is too much.’

Aamodi threw an angry glance at them. ‘What do you mean who knows what he ate? I cooked fresh fish curry for him last night.’

Gogon sped off towards Kaalo’s shop without waiting to hear the rest. The sooner things were done, the better. Delays could lead to unexpected obstacles. When Chandu’s wife died, it was obviously a natural death. Gogon and the rest of them had made the arrangements to take the body away. All that was left was to hoist her into the back of

the small truck, when the police turned up unexpectedly. But why? A post-mortem was necessary. Someone had complained to the police station that Chandu had beaten his wife to a pulp last night.

That was that, the body never came their way afterwards. And yet they had been so hopeful. She had died barely six hours earlier; the corpse wasn't cold yet. It would have taken an hour and a half to get to their destination, enough time for them to do the things they had to. But the body went to the hospital instead, and Chandu, to jail.

Kaalo's shop was directly opposite KPC Hospital. Earlier, he used to pile the cots meant for corpses on the pavement just outside the entrance. But visitors had objected. The sight of the cots apparently frightened patients so much that they got even sicker. Even those not meant to die ended up dying. Although this meant more business for Kaalo, and better population control, he had been moved to a new location in response to the complaints from patients' families.

Kaalo realised when he saw Gogon run up, gasping for breath, that the fish must have swallowed the bait. Smiling with a display of yellowed teeth, he said, 'How may I serve you, saar?' Though not always, nor with everyone, he did use this formal language with a select few customers. It was not deference, however, but mockery. Kaalo derived satisfaction from ridiculing certain people.

Gogon conveyed his requirements. 'Need a cot, not rickety like last time, make sure it's strong. Plus flowers, incense, a white sheet and some scent.'

'What's the white sheet for?' Kaalo taunted Gogon again. 'It's not your father that's died, is it?'

Gogon said, 'Of course not. It's to cover the body with.'

'Got the cash? Or want it for free?'

'Have we ever paid you in advance? All accounts will be settled in the evening, after we take the body home.'

'Pay a bit now.'

'Honest, Kaalo-da, got no cash.'

'Not even ten? Not even five?'

'Not even enough to buy some poison.'

'Just opened the shop, the first sale can't be made on credit. Go find some cash.'

Gogon pleaded desperately, 'You know very well, Kaalo-da, no one will lend us even a rupee. It's just that you love us ...'

There was a hint of a smile on Kaalo's face in response to Gogon's buttering. 'You people are a pain,' he said, taking a one-rupee coin out of his pocket and handing it to Gogon. 'Hold on to this, and give it to me when you've got all you need. Business was bad yesterday, let's see if you can bring me luck today.'

Pausing, he continued, 'Make sure no one sees you returning the cot. People have become chutiyas these days. If they see, they'll raise hell. I'll smash your balls if that happens.'

Once Gogon was back with all the equipment, three or four of the people who were still there lifted Jongol onto the cot. Aamodi had another bout of crying, but this time one could swear she wasn't putting it on. Jongol had been her companion for seven long years, after all. He would neither abuse her anymore, nor beat her up. Weeping, she hiccupped: 'Take a last look at your father, Giril. You'll never see him again.'

With the three musketeers hoisting three corners of the cot, Shibpodo ran towards the fourth one. 'Bolo hori,' screamed Moharaj, and several others echoed the cry that accompanied the dead to their pyres: 'Horibol'. The tranquillity of the morning was replaced by genuine grief now; for some unknown reason, the madman who wandered around with a sack stuffed with scraps of paper began to sob.

Carrying the corpse on their shoulders, they walked a short way along the railway line before lowering it into the shade of the banyan tree beside the ticket counter at the station.

This was the route most of the train passengers preferred on their way to and from work. Bishnu and Gogon took their positions next to the body, the objective being to extract anything between twenty and fifty rupees from every fishmonger or vegetable vendor or liquor supplier who passed. Requests or threats, whatever worked. Many people believed it was good luck to spot a dead body in the morning; the one-, two- and five-rupee coins began to pour in.

A recently constructed temple stood beneath an ancient banyan tree, next to which a row of rickshaws was parked. From Shiva, Kali and Radha to Krishna and Manasa, idols of many deities were present. There was no temple here earlier, there was only the rickshaw line. But the rickshaw-drivers found it impossible to get passengers, the reason being a lethal southern breeze that brought in the kind of smells which made stopping here impossible. Since local trains didn't have lavatories, the passengers who got off at the station used this spot below the tree to relieve themselves.

While the tree received a copious supply of fertilizer, the smell was unbearable.

Very close to the banyan tree was a tea-stall, whose owners had a running feud with the urinating populace on the grounds that their customers were dwindling, and women refused to give them any business. So it was incorrect and inappropriate of them to do what they were doing. As for those dispensing urine, their statement was, 'We believe in tradition. We are merely following in the footsteps of our predecessors who did the same thing here. It is both wrong and unjust to force us to break the tradition.' Sometimes the dispute would turn into fisticuffs.

The controversy might have continued for a long time, when one of the rickshaw-drivers whom the rest considered an imbecile had a brainwave. Without informing anyone, he applied a successful formula to stave off urinating and the resultant stench.

He was on his way back after a trip to Bibek Nogar when he spotted a woman sitting alone in a dark corner of a field. Seized by a vile impulse, he wrapped his arms around her and hoisted her onto his rickshaw. The woman was in fact an idol of the goddess Shitala. Hindu deities had different tastes when it came to being worshipped. Some preferred fresh blood from a goat, and others, fruits. The methods of their disposal after worship were different too. Idols of Durga or Lakshmi or Kali were supposed to be immersed in water, but when it came to Shitala or Manasa, they were meant to be deposited in an open space somewhere.

There was considerable doubt whether worshipping Shitala helped cure small pox or chicken pox, but it had

been established that she could be used effectively to strike fear in the hearts of humans. This fear now played an important role in preventing urination here. The rickshaw-driver placed four bricks in the thick mixture of mud and yellow puddles under the banyan tree, and installed the idol on it. Passers-by stopped pissing the very next day, and soon they even started tossing twenty-five- and fifty-paise coins in this direction. A Brahmin in the area realised the spot's potential, built a temple there, and imported idols of as many different gods as possible. There was no knowing who the favourite god of each of those who walked by was, so it was best to have a pantheon on view to remove all obstacles in the way of the coins. The self-appointed priest and his family were now living happily off the takings.

Gogon, Bhegai and Bishnu sighed with envy sometimes. 'If only we had been born into a fucking Baamun family, we'd have been rolling in money by now.'

When they had lain the corpse down, Bhegai, who also drove a rickshaw, said, 'So I'd better be off for Gobordanga now. You two take care of Jongol. The tyre was leaking, so I'd left it at the garage. If they've repaired it, I'll take the rickshaw, else, a bus ...'

'Tell Mohipal-da to take the body away quickly,' said Gogon. 'He'd better not leave it till the night like he did the last time. And tell him to get a bottle of meletaari maal. That rum last time, oho, I can still taste it!'

Bhegai said hesitantly, 'I'm trusting the two of you and leaving the body here. Don't betray me. Make sure the earnings are shared, don't cheat me—I'll be very upset.'

Bishnu grinned. 'Don't worry, we'll save every paisa of your share for you. Better go now, it's getting late.'

Monkhushi, who seemed half-mad, was one of the beggars at the station. She used to be fair-skinned and healthy, but a drunken man had tried to rape her one night. The half-mad Monkhushi had squeezed his testicles so hard that he had almost died. Two other drunks who were waiting for their turn threw themselves at her to save the first one. Monkhushi was injured slightly in the process, bleeding from the nose and mouth. She had saved herself from being raped, though.

But while Monkhushi had succeeded, another mad woman named Ponchomi had not. One or more people had forced her into an empty freight car of a goods train and raped her. She became pregnant as a result, and gave birth to a child at the appropriate time. But though Ponchomi was the mother, it was Monkhushi who had brought the boy up. Ponchomi could barely keep her clothes on; how was she going to manage a child?

Now, Monkhushi came up to Jongol Poramanik's corpse with the child in her arms. 'When you put the body in the cart, give me the sheet, all right?' she told Gogon. 'I'll use it for my son.'

Gogon snapped at her. 'We'll see, get out of here now, let me do my work. Got no money but wants a ticket!'

The unbearable heat was driving everyone crazy in any case, and Monkhushi was halfway there. Silent at first, she

screamed in response, 'Just see what I do if you don't give it to me.'

'What will you do, what can you do to me?' Gogon lost his temper as well. 'Tear it off if you dare.'

'Oh really?' Monkhusi was spitting fire now. 'All right, I'll tell everyone who this boy's father is. I know everything. Just because I don't open my mouth, doesn't mean I have no idea. It was your doing, you did it. Fucking drunkard, don't know how to keep your cock in when you're pissed!'

'Stop, stop,' Bishnu moaned. 'Shut up, everyone's listening.'

'Then promise to give me the sheet. I'll go on screaming till you promise.'

'You'll get it, nobody else, I promise.'

Gogon felt as though the corpse in front of him was not Jongol Poramanik's but his own, as though the madwoman Monkhusi had at this very moment throttled him to death and dumped his body in the dust, and everyone—from the rickshaw-drivers to the hawkers and porters—was staring at him.

The dead body would slowly rot and start stinking; white insects would infest it. Anyone who saw it would throw up. Gogon's head began to reel. The very world which had seemed so dazzling a short while ago was now drowning in a sea of tar. He couldn't see a way out of the darkness, though the wheels of the train thundering towards him could rescue him from everything. They only had to roll over his body once for all the fear and anxiety and humiliation to vanish. He gazed at the train roaring in from the distance, without taking his eyes off it.