Other town

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For Baba and Dadubhai

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgement.....	iii
Summary.....	vi
 Part I: Other Town.....	 1
Chapter I.....	2
Chapter II	7
Chapter III.....	18
Chapter IV	33
Chapter V	51
Chapter VI.....	61
Chapter VII	76
Chapter VIII.....	91
Chapter IX.....	105
Chapter X	123
Chapter XI.....	136
Chapter XII	144
Chapter XIII	162
Chapter XIV	171
Chapter XV	184
Chapter XVI.....	192
Chapter XVII.....	205
Chapter XVIII	220
 Part II: Public Bodies, Private Desire: Space and the Transgressive Body.....	 237
 Abstract	 238
 I. Introduction: A Woman after Dark	 241
II. The Nation and the Feminine	249

III. Public Women and the Colonial City	258
IV. Gazing at the Private: Reading <i>Love, Sex aur Dhokha</i>	264
V. Domestic Wives and Literary Prostitutes: Reading <i>Dev D</i>	279
VI. Naming and Shaming: <i>Other Town</i>	288
VII. Conclusion: Sluts and Goddesses	297
VIII. An Afterthought on the Telling: Linguistic Choices in <i>Other Town</i>	303
Works Cited	312

Summary

This thesis is divided into two parts: the first part consists of the creative component of this thesis— *Other Town*— a novel, and the second part consists of the critical exegesis titled, “Private Bodies, Public Desires: Space and the Transgressive Body.”

Other Town is the story of Lalee, a commercial sex worker in the red light district of Shonagachhi, in Kolkata, India. When her next door neighbour, Mohamaya, is violently murdered one January night, Lalee is drawn into a series of events that threaten her survival in Shonagachhi. With limited resources and a varied cast of characters, ranging from an erotica writer, a pimp, a printer, and several social workers, policemen and prostitutes, Lalee negotiates the boundaries of freedom.

Though *Other Town* is a work of fiction, its concerns are reflective of contemporary issues of gendered violence in Indian society. The novel makes references to recent cases of rape, Bollywood heroines, prostitution, sex-trafficking, Hindu goddesses and social activism— to conjure a picture of what it means to be a gendered subject in present-day India. To situate these issues, “Private Bodies” charts a network of overlapping cultural, sociological and historical factors that have shaped the normative perception surrounding women in Indian societies, with particular focus on Calcutta.

The spatial dynamics of a red-light district within the bounds of a largely middle-class city where prostitution is illegal, gives rise to pertinent questions about the relationship between the individual and the collective, the public/private divide, and notions of purity, especially in the context of female, sexually active and reproductive bodies. The concerns of *Other Town* are reflected and expanded in “Private Bodies” as it discusses reportage and media portrayal of gender violence, women-centric social activism, technological mediation and voyeurism of gendered bodies, and representation of women in popular culture.

“Private Bodies” starts with a discussion of “India’s Daughter,” a BBC documentary, now banned, made on the brutal rape and death of a young woman in Delhi in 2012. It then moves to historically contextualize Indian attitudes towards women’s bodies and space through a discussion of nineteenth century nationalism and its feminine iconography. It also brings under discussion colonial laws implemented in Calcutta during the nineteenth century attempted to regulate venereal disease, through a demarcation of space and the prostitute’s body. Two contemporary Bollywood films feature in this following sections as cultural artefacts that represent women in popular culture and imagination, concerned primarily with themes of surveillance, purity, and the public/private divide. In conclusion, I look at present day women-centric activism in India and Shonagachhi, and discuss the slut/concludes with a section titled, “An Afterthought on the Telling” in which I discuss linguistic choices and dilemmas, as they arose while writing *Other Town*, from a critical framework of Indian English writing.

Other Town

Chapter I

Lalee had learned the word Phantasy. This made Tilu Shau very jealous. Tilu Shau, obscure writer of erotic fiction, was born Trilokeshwar Shau on the fifteenth or seventeenth of July circa 1970 and was generally known to his small circle of acquaintances and peers as Tilu Shau. He had been called many other names by people who would not be too excited to be known as his ‘acquaintances and peers’, but that was another matter entirely. Tilu Shau had always been a slight man. This in itself should not have mattered too much in the grand scheme of things. Gandhi was a slight man; Napoleon, (as far as anyone knew) was a small man. But august as the company of small men might have been, Tilu Shau was never quite reconciled to it. It has recently become de rigueur to blame mothers for everything, therefore one might speculate that Tilu Shau’s troubles began because his mother could not remember exactly when during her two day labour pains the tiny wrinkled body of Trilokeshwar Shau touched the earth; or, he didn’t quite touch the earth, but plopped unceremoniously into the hands of the buxom nurse with the prominent rabbit teeth who scrunched up her nose and bared her teeth at him and said “eh ma,” in a nasal falsetto, before holding him up for his mother’s benefit, who we are led to believe, croaked a little. Such was the music of his passage onto this earth. His father however was proud of him. It’s a pity he’d live long enough to have no reason to be proud of his son anymore, but at the time of his birth, overcome with paternal pride, his father foisted upon him the name ‘Trilokeshwar’— God of three realms. The family name however could not be remedied. Still, there were all kinds of benefits in being low caste these days. At least he’d get a government job, his father had thought.

Not only did he fail spectacularly at getting that government job, he also started writing erotic novellas at a dangerously tender age. Not long after, it occurred to Tilu Shau that delved as he had into the mysteries of the human soul, he was still a single, unattached man whose life was unadorned by a woman's touch. He tried all the available routes for a while till one of them brought him to Lalee's door. That was a long time ago. And now, Lalee had gone ahead and learned the word Phantasy. It was the way her mouth arranged itself when she said it: how she ducked her chin as she moved her neck to a decidedly sexual angle, the curl of the upper lip, a momentary half sneer baring an incisor. It beguiled Shau. Lalee made him pay for what she called the 'Phantasy Spayshaal' before she'd let him through the door.

"Since when?" he asked. After all he had been coming to Lalee for quite a few months now. Every Thursday and Saturday like clockwork, and sometimes if he had a small windfall, Wednesdays too. But today when he came, right on the dot at seven, Lalee turned up her nose (gall of the woman), and dragged on her cigarette. (Where did she get that?) And said he needed to pay extra for what he was about to do. This was an outrage. He'd been on the special rate for returning custom and now this. Almost double. The bitch.

"Why?" he asked, and she said, "*Phantasy jhinishey rate beshi aache*" Fantasy things are going to cost you more. Tilu Shau didn't realise that his particular sexual predilections came under 'fantasy' ratings. He decided not to quibble over Lalee's pronunciation. If she wanted to replace her F's with Ph, that was her business entirely. But Lalee went on to give him the break-down of her new rates for Fantasy (mild/ small-scale), Fantasy Special and Fantasy Double Decker. In the ensuing silence when Shau was afraid to ask what the last package entailed, Lalee took the opportunity to inform him that what he had been doing all along was very much Fantasy Special rate and that he owes about a few thousands in back pay. Tilu Shau's heart sank to his stomach. He had always known that his pocket and his

penis shared a magical connection. When he got paid, days few and far between, he was quite tangibly delighted to meet her. A lifetime of meticulous lower middle-class-ness had instilled in Tilu Shau a careful need to get value for his money. This meant that he made his erections last longer. He'd never spent money on viagra. Shau simply broke the one big note into several small ones and squirrelled them away, and the days he wanted to see Lalee, he waved the notes tantalisingly in an area quite close to his trouser pockets and like a practised tease, tucked them in. Like a snake-charmer's flute it kept the snake up and alert, and with careful virtuosity, the venom in the teeth. It was a rope trick, but one he was proud of; it was all in the geography.

This, coupled with the look of unmitigated awe that glazed Shau's eyes every time he sneaked a look at Lalee's bursting décolletage, (not that Shau was aware of it. But women are good at noticing things like this, collecting them, and storing them away for future use) encouraged Lalee to have a sense of unprecedented control and power when it came to Tilu Shau. Consequently, she had no respect for him. Tilu had not realised this before. He assumed that Lalee would be flattered, happy. It meant a few extra minutes sometimes, at others, an extra finger up the hole. But his romantic devotion had backfired. Although Lalee herself was enough to give Tilu a lifetime's worth of erections, it was the thoughtfulness behind his preparations that should have earned him some special treatment if there was any justice in the world. Sadly, there wasn't. And Lalee treated Tilu with the contempt of the strong towards the weak. She didn't have to please him. She only had to drop the end of her saree and there he was, saluting away to her glory. Her indifference burned a hole in Tilu's heart.

But it never stung more than it did that evening, when bold as brass, sucking on that cigarette, she demanded double the rate. Fantasy? Fucking fantasy! This was the problem

with English words, you stuck one on and it started costing fucking more. He tried to put it out of his mind, but in the middle of a particularly stinging larrup, his heart started hurting. All these months, and here he was with not even a five percent discount. And then came the jealousy, not in a tidal wave as he had feared, but trickling in like the dripping of the leaking tap he heard every morning and every night in the rat hole he called home. Who taught you this word? She said it's none of his business.

This was not a good answer at the time. Shau was slipping off character. Which sonofamotherfuckingbitch taught you that damn word? She hedged. She told him he must pay for what he gets, that nothing is free in the world. Nobody did it better than her. Shau knew this was true. She was hiding one fact with another. How come this had never occurred to her before? She was happy enough to do what he wanted for the regular fee. Where did this fantasy crap come from? She grabbed his nuts in a vice. Shau whimpered. There were tears in his eyes and Lalee's face remained frozen in contempt. He no longer knew if he was crying from pleasure or pain. Why did he have to love a nasty bitch? He could have eaten better with the money. Lord knows there wasn't much of it. Under his leaking roof, when it rained, he moved the bed around in a room that couldn't hold two lizards at the same time. He felt sad for himself. Someone, after all, had to. Unsure and out of breath, he shouted at her, *khaanki maagi, chutiya maagi*, whore. She slapped him. Then she stopped and grabbed him by the neck. In the heart of rage, anger and bubbling self-pity, Tilu Shau was intensely aware of her beauty, it pierced through the fog of his pain. She was riding him like the autumnal goddess rides her lion, him—Trilokeshwar Shau, the poorest excuse for anything. She was resplendent. Her black and brown skin, dark coils of oiled hair reached down her back and spilled onto his navel, her breasts hanged loose as she moved. She grabbed his throat and bit as if to draw blood, then she pressed tighter and tighter. He couldn't breathe. She smiled as though it was an act of mercy. She might have

loosened a tooth with that slap. The traitor in him whispered that double the rate was, after all, worth it. In pain and pleasure Tilu Shau whimpered and sighed, but someone a wall's width away started screaming absolute bloody murder.

Trilokeshwar ran stark naked with his clothes gathered to his chest, down Lalee's street and into the dark alleys of Shonagachhi. After the scream, Lalee bolted from her perch faster than a fourteen-year-old's ejaculation. Confused and almost climaxing, Tilu had to remember to breathe. Then he followed Lalee as she walked out of the door, hastily wrapping a loose robe around her body. Tilu stood there naked, dazed, Lalee's back blocked his view but he could see the blood trickling in a line slowly towards Lalee's feet. She turned around and pushed him aside. "Get the fuck out of here, now," while he stood, open mouthed like a dead fish on the monger's slab. She hissed "NOW." More people began to gather. Tilu Shau grabbed his clothes and ran out of Lalee's hovel embarrassed and terrified. What had happened, exactly? He was too scared of Lalee to ask her. He felt ashamed at his own lack of courage, of manhood, his inability to face a difficult situation. He realised that even though it was cold and he was naked, and running through the streets of a whore pit, pushed aside by a woman he undeniably and hopelessly loved, he still had a raging erection. He also realised in the burnt-out bottom of his tattered heart that if Lalee was somehow in trouble, he'd fail her. He stopped and fell to his knees. Alone and crouching on the streets, Tilu Shau came. He, as always, had failed, in some obscure but primal way. Tilu Shau cried a little for himself in the streets of Shonagachhi on a cold January night.

Chapter II

The next morning at ten, Samsheer Singh, officer-in-Charge of Burtolla police station, pushed open the tin door to the lavatory. He had to sidle sideways to fit into the narrow confines of the makeshift toilet. Fed up with the generational graffiti, unflushed cigarette ends and the stench of the communal toilet that the rest of the station used, Singh had decided to install his own special lavatory. Like a lot of men with omnipotence over a limited universe, Singh meant to make most of the power vested in him. In his case, the universe of his omnipotence began and ended in the small confines of Burtolla Police Station.

A healthy childhood diet of gram flour and fresh milk had resulted in Singh's six feet frame. A sporting adolescence of Indian wrestling had endowed him with bulging muscles on his torso and decent lower body strength. His father used to say to him when he was just a lad, "Beta, you'll be a police officer one day." He looked good in the uniform, and his old father was very proud of him the day he landed the job of police Constable. And then, the reality of the job sank in. The lower rung of law enforcement did not differ much from the lower rung of petty criminals. Both abounded in the same kind of bottom-feeders and petty thieves who had drifted into one or the other line of work through sheer vagaries of chance. As such, the antagonism between cop and thief was merely theoretical. But since both copper and criminal knew only too well the other's predilections, a wary symbiosis held sway. Spending his days in company of such men would have been more bearable for Singh, had Burtolla station not been only a kilometre away from Shonagachhi Lane. He still remembered the day he found out that his first posting was to be in this famed hall of

sex work. The thought of keeping the peace among pimps, prostitutes, procurers, brothel-runners and sex traffickers had kept him sleepless. But his father, always an astute man, reminded him that an enterprising man could always find a ladder to climb wherever he may find chaos. And a place like Shonagachhi, the largest and oldest town of ill repute was a temple to chaos. His old father had departed this vale of tears many years ago, but his advice had held Singh's hand throughout his career.

Still, Singh had a modest amount of ambition. And before long, the daily brush with men who were so far beneath him began to rankle in his beefy heart. So he sat the exam and made officer grade. When the time came and he was made officer in Charge of his old station, he was pleasantly surprised to realise that he didn't mind not being transferred elsewhere. It was familiar, and now that he was an officer, whatever could go wrong?

At the moment, Samsheer Singh was having trouble with his bowel movement. He thought it was a state of affairs known only to him. He was wrong. The constabulary knew where to find him in a pinch. Most conversations took place across the barrier of a ply wood door with tin hammered on the ends. All that was visible of Samsheer Singh on these occasions were his shiny booted feet. Such a conversation was in progress now. Chinmoy Naskar(26) had joined the fine body of men at Kolkata Police only a few months ago. On the proud day he earned his badge, he also learned that his first posting would be in Burtolla station, a fact he diligently hid from his old mum.

"Sir?" he called tentatively. Naskar had the kind of velvety voice that would have better suited a singer of romantic duets. It had a buttery, ingratiating quality that made every word sound like a proposition. The kind of voice, one can't help feeling, that earns its owner a ding across the ear from all righteous people. His were the harmonics Samsheer Singh least liked to hear when he was, as it were, checking the plumbing.

“What is it Naskar?”

“Ah, sir, please don’t mind me disturbing you sir.”

Samsher grunted and something plopped.

“I mean, sir, I know you’re busy sir”

All Naskar got was silence. Then a sharp shooting ‘ding,’ followed by a sigh of relief.

“I mean, I wouldn’t disturb you sir, but sir, Constable Ghosh said sir...”

Samsher retorted “Naskar, what is it?”

“Umm, sir, it’s a prostitute sir...” Naskar trailed off again.

“What does she want?”

“Ah, sir, if you could come out sir...I think sir...”

“Oh just listen to whatever she has to say and then send her on her way Naskar, why do I have to tell...”

“No, sir,” Naskar interrupted. “I mean sir, I was thinking we should get Maity sir, but sir....”

“Naskar!”

“Murder sir, murder,” Naskar gave up and yelped the dreaded word.

A moment later the water started running. The latch on the tin door had a tendency to act up on crucial moments, so Naskar had to lend his young ears to some expletives only a policeman would know. Samsher Singh appeared corporeally to his corporal, sucking on a bleeding index finger and said,

“What?”

Naskar tried again. He had a promising start with “Umm,” then he proceeded to a placating “sir,” drawing out the first syllable and modulating towards the end. Under Singh’s impatient glare the survival centres of his brain kicked his legs to a start and he blurted out “I’ll get Constable Ghosh sir,” and ran for it.

Constable Balok Ghosh (probably 47, for some time now) was the kind of man every established civic body had at least one of on its payroll. They are usually in the department longer than the furniture and the tea urn, have deep familiarity with the minutiae of the law especially in the form of precedents, scandals and libellous anecdotes, are the invisible and undetectable cause of a vast number of misunderstandings and fisticuffs and have prescient knowledge of everyone's embarrassing personal problem. Balok Ghosh had all these qualities. In addition, he also bore a strong physical resemblance to the station's ancient tea urn. He was the yeast without whom the bread of Burtolla station would not rise to its present glory. Samsher Singh liked Balok Ghosh and as a tribute to his seniority and knowledge addressed him as "Balok da." He appeared before Singh, squashing a bidi under his sandals.

"Murder?" asked Singh. "What kind of murder?"

This was a legitimate question. In Singh's considerable years of service he had seen and heard of a number of deaths and killings. However suspicious the circumstances of the death might be, not all deaths came under the purview of the law. Singh had never actually been required to investigate a murder, but he knew a variety of categories that such untimely deaths might fall into: there is, for instance, your basic death by fracas, death by gang war, death by suicide (such as the naive might unwittingly commit by borrowing large sums of money from taciturn men and adopting a cavalier attitude about repayment), death by arrangement and death by activism. The plain old murder however is a much rarer thing. When it did happen and the men of Burtolla were required to take an interest in it, they tried to keep the wear and tear to a minimum, to preserve the health and happiness of all concerned.

Ghosh replied calmly, “*Khoon* sir, murder. Straight up, no question.”

Singh’s eyes narrowed, “Who?”

“*Rendi magi* sir. Prostitute.”

Neither of them had asked for the name of the deceased. It was unimportant. Instead, Singh asked, “Whose girl?” Most of the women belonged either to the pimps or the madams. Get hold of the handler and solve the problem, was the police’s rule of thumb. The girls with no handlers were the tricky ones.

“One of Shefali mashi’s girls,” Ghosh provided. “So it’s most likely that Chintu would be her pimp.”

Singh thought about this for a moment. He knew Shefali mashi. The woman ran her own kingdom in a five storey building called The Blue Lotus. No one knew the actual number of women she had in there. In a place like Shonagachhi where each building had anywhere from twenty to fifty rooms and countless girls within, it was hard to keep track of people. She had never bothered with the law but kept the machine well oiled enough that the law didn’t bother her. Singh had never liked the large, autocratic woman.

“But Chintu is in jail. Saw him dragged in a week ago,” he said to Constable Ghosh.

“Yes, and it looks like he won’t be out for a while. He shouldn’t have fucked with foreign tourists.”

Singh shook his head, “Oh I don’t know. The American he tried to sell stuff to apparently has left without a trace. They dropped the charges. Bose over at the Park Street station thinks that the American was a dealer as well. They won’t be holding Chintu in there much longer. He’s no use to anyone inside the lock up.”

“But he’s not here now,” said Ghosh, looking out of the window.

Singh nodded thoughtfully. Without the pimp, the natural order of things was compromised. The hierarchy of bribes, cuts, rates and negotiations that the Shonagachhi sex industry ran on, was left in absolute disarray. The girls all got other pimps or their own customers, cut deals with other police officers. Ghosh allowed a few moments for Singh to mull it over, then he asked,

“Shall I get Maity, sir? He’ll have heard it by now.”

“Hmm, yes, yes. Get Maity.”

Rambo Maity, thirty-four, was a natty man. Various items about his person gleamed even as he sat ill at ease on the hard backed governmental chair. His normal air of debonair suaveness was a tad shaken up by the events of the day. Or perhaps his discomfiture was to be blamed on the regulation portrait of Gandhi smiling at him from the wall behind Samsher Singh’s desk.

Rambo Maity was a pimp on the rise. Until recently he had been a bottom feeder, a flounder in the vast sea of Shonagachhi Lane. But Singh had always found him an amiable informer, a weather cock that proved useful in judging which way the wind was blowing. Of late, he seemed to be doing well. His general beggarly manner had dissipated, as did his customary penury. Nowadays his catalogue was laminated. He had the largest collection of Virgin College Girls on his list. Last month he even had his business card printed and proudly presented Singh with one. It had colours on it that even the gay pride parade hadn't heard of and showed a rather voluptuous woman in a wet saree aiming her pyramid breasts at the viewer. On the downside, you couldn't fan an ant with it. Maity had economised on paper. He looked upon the local police force as an errant but loveable nephew looks upon an ageing uncle, who, if handled carefully is almost certain to leave packets of inheritance

behind. Since one of the greatest pitfalls of humanity is its obsessive desire to respond to every form of affection that bread crumbs its way through the winding dark woods of life, Singh in his turn had been unable to resist the Rambo charm. Though occasionally the police made pretences of bringing him in to ‘help with the enquiries’, even arrested him informally and with a touch of indulgence whenever the situation demanded that they put up a show for the media and the bespectacled lady activists who periodically stormed their peaceful lives with slogans and cameras, threatening to write a bare all expose’ in the Sunday supplement, but there was no real malice in their hearts towards one another. They understood it for the charade it was.

Rambo shifted his weight in the chair. Samsher Singh coughed theatrically.

“So,” he said.

Rambo gave him an oily smile. He hadn't bothered to take off his gold rimmed aviators.

“So who did this?”

“Who did what?”

“Look Maity, quit fooling around. I’m not going to play games today. Tell me what’s up and you can leave.”

“Haven’t got a clue still,” Maity brought out a packet of Marlboros and offered one to Singh.

Singh narrowed his eyes. “Still on the winning streak, eh?”

“Heh heh heh,” Maity gave him a toothy grin. “It’s your blessing is what it is.”

“My blessings are not constant Maity, they might change very shortly.”

“What? No! You wouldn't do that to me.” Rambo said in mock terror.

Singh looked tired. He didn't feel like dancing around Maity at the moment.

"Something happened at The Blue Lotus today, yes? It used to be your old play ground, as I remember. Chintu had something to say about your excursions there, yes? As I remember you weren't too sad when we brought Chintu in."

Maity moved his hands in a simultaneous gesture of denial and reconciliation. "No, no, no," he said, "it wasn't like that. It's just a bit of...you know...professional territory thing... but I assure you..."

Singh raised his hand and interrupted Maity, "I'm not interested. I just want to know what happened there today." He looked straight at Maity, "Now are you going to cooperate or not?"

Maity gave him a wan smile, "Cooperate. That's always a good word." He shifted his weight, "Okay. I don't know."

"You don't know?" Samsher Singh replied in a level tone.

"Honestly boss, I don't."

"Do you at least know the girl?"

Maity didn't answer. He looked to a point just beyond Singh's shoulder, as if the answer was written somewhere on the wall.

"Maity," Singh started but was interrupted.

"Well, yes, okay. I know the girl, but why all the fuss? She's just some girl, hadn't even been there a year. This kind of thing happens, why upset things now?" He looked sideways and flung away a half smoked cigarette on the floor and squashed it under his shiny trainers.

"I've known you long, Maity."

"That's what I'm talking about boss."

"I know you well."

“Practically related.”

“And you’re squirming.”

“What? No! Shit happens boss, occupational hazard. Happens everyday.”

“And you always know about it. Because if you didn't know which girl got beat up by whom and which customer got shirty and which madam didn't pay up to which gang you’d be dead or maimed years ago.”

Maity took off his sunglasses and wiped them carefully with the corner of his green silk shirt.

“I’m making enquiries,” Maity mumbled.

“And?”

Maity looked up, “Look, it’s no use asking me. Just between us, it doesn't look good. No one’s talking about it much, at the moment. It’s not one of the regular fuck-ups. The gangs are not involved, as far as I can tell. So it seems like it could only be a customer. At least, that’s what they are saying.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

“I don’t know. They, they... people who say things after such incidents. The girls, the word on the street...whatever...” Maity trailed off.

“So some random motherfucker came and killed a girl? No one saw this customer come in or go out or heard the girl’s screams?”

“Yeah,” Maity looked uncomfortable.

“And you believe that? In Shonagachhi? You know the structure, you know the red tape. Hell it’s worse than the Tax Department. Do you believe some random pube of a man could come and do that and leave, vanish into thin air? You’d be hosing minced dick-meat off the pavement.”

“Well, you’ve got her pimp in custody,” Maity said sulkily.

“Oh don’t give me that,” Samsher Singh said loudly. “Shefali mashi is a piece of work. Chintu is no more than a cardboard bogey man. It doesn’t matter if Chintu is in lock-up, if Shefali mashi doesn’t know about this murder then that’s fucked up.”

“Okay, okay, I know. But you know what a stupid fuck Chintu is. And since it involves a *bokachoda* white sahib, he’s not going to get out soon either. *Bnara* everybody deals to foreign tourists, but only a fucktard like Chintu gets caught.”

Samsher Singh resisted making any comments and had the good grace to look elsewhere. Fraternising with the criminal classes was all very good, in fact a large part of the unwritten job specification was the ability to do Human Resource Development and Public Relations with the criminal classes, but there were one or two awkward and touchy subjects since, technically, they were on what one might be called opposing teams. The line was a mere suggestion in the wind, but it was still there.

“Would it help, if Chintu were to, er... come out?” Singh said quietly.

“Couldn’t say,” Maity looked slightly panicked and confused, he was not on amicable terms with Chintu. “Maybe, but honestly boss, this is way above him. He wouldn’t be much help. I don’t think he’s got much to do with this.”

“How come he doesn’t know what’s happening with his girls? If in this motherfucking business you pimps don’t know what’s happening to your girls, who the fuck is supposed to know? Us?”

“*Arrey* boss, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. This is not good. It’s going to drag, this one. Also,” and he paused for effect, lowered his voice and leaned in, as if spilling the secrets of a freemasonry he had sworn to protect, “also, boss, I’ve been hearing this, sort of in the wind, you see, that the girl was involved with the Sex Workers’ Collective.”

Samsher Singh struck the desk with his fist in frustration and winced a little bit, “*Bnara* one thing doesn't end and the other is already kicking at your balls. Women's fucking League. Fucking lady-activists delivering angry lectures all over the place again. *Sala* I should have transferred to traffic control when I had the chance. Daily thousand Rupees in traffic tickets even at Junior Constable level.”

Both men looked dejected, morose. Each swatting listlessly at the flies of gloom that hovered around them.

As an afterthought Singh added, “What happened to her? I mean, how was she killed?”

“Acid sir. Motherfucker emptied the whole bottle on her and then pushed the bottle through her neck.”

“She died from the acid?”

“Hard to tell. Shefali mashi is a very efficient woman. Not many people got to see the body or for too long. I just heard this from someone, don't know how true it is,” Rambo shuddered for a minute.

“I don't know why they have to go and do that,” Rambo complained. “One moment things are all good and then someone has to go and do that. The world is out to get me, that's what it is. My astrologer warned me, but I wouldn't listen.”

Once Rambo had left, Samsher Singh sat wondering why Rambo would take this murder as a personal affront.

Chapter III

Mohamaya. That was the girl's name. She was barely twenty. Lalee had shut her door after a point because she could not take it anymore. A lot of people didn't know the girl's name. She was quiet, fresh out of a village and among thirteen thousand prostitutes in Shonagachhi, who remembered anyone's name? So when people turned up to see the show, they asked Lalee, "What was her name?"

"Mohamaya, Mohamaya, Mohamaya," she kept repeating, "we called her Maya."

It took a series of unfortunate events to land up here, to become one among the thousands who disbursed sex for small and large amounts of money on a daily basis, sometimes it took only one event. In her time Lalee had seen wives, mothers, girls, of all shapes and sizes join the numbers. Each of them had their own stories. They didn't necessarily tell each other, but they knew. They could feel the shape of it.

Her stomach gave a turn. Not this again, she thought. For the last week or so, she had been throwing up, getting abdominal cramps and in general had felt dizzy. Normally, her health never faltered. It was one of the things she was slightly proud of. She had always been tough, a childhood of poverty will do that to you, but this life in Shonagachhi required all the strength a woman could have. Quite apart from the violence, the lack of nutrition, medication, and peace of mind contributed to early deaths. She had survived all that life had thrown at her so far, and felt oddly annoyed whenever she suspected her body was letting her down. There was another point of worry. She had missed her monthly appointment with mother nature. It wasn't always up to the girls to induce the customer to wear a condom. In the old days when she was still green and under the thumb of her

erstwhile madam, she had on occasions had to do the job without any protection, if the client insisted and paid enough. When she thought about it sometimes, she couldn't believe how naive and inexperienced she had been. She hadn't even heard of AIDS. In time, more and more social work organisations had gained access to the curiously porous but jealously guarded world of Shonagachhi. Had distributed pamphlets, given out free condoms. Lalee had learned. And to this day she was thankful to the invisible gods who she didn't dare to believe in, but felt inclined to thank that she hadn't been the one whose body had turned against itself, dying inch by inch. She knew a few who had been diagnosed with AIDS. In a city of pariahs, they were another breed of untouchables. In time it didn't matter. So many of them died ever so frequently. You didn't need AIDS. Life took care of it.

She had never been very regular with her periods. And every time her fears of pregnancy turned out to be false, she offered up silent prayers to any God who might care enough to listen. In time, when not one pregnancy scare turned out to be real, Lalee began to believe that she was barren. She thought this to be an extraordinary stroke of luck. Over the years she had gained some modicum of autonomy, some regulars like Tilu Shau, had summoned the courage to find a better life, even if it was by doing the same thing that she had done almost all her life. She could insist now that her customers wear condoms, and hope for the best. Except on those days when the rent had been unpaid for too long and she had had to give away more money than she could afford.

This recent bout of sickness had begun to turn over that old fear of pregnancy, and other diseases she may not know of— diseases that were far too common for women like her.

She began taking off her saree, blouse and petticoat and dropping it in the red plastic bucket she kept by the door of her makeshift toilet. Stepping into the cramped, dark space, she let the tap run noisily and sat under it.

A loud voice was calling her name outside the mesh covered window. She tried to keep herself from retching, pulled a loose kaftan around her body and walked out of the bathroom wiping her damp hair with a towel.

Malini was standing outside, still calling her name. Lalee pressed down on the half curtain on the window and showed her face.

“Open the door,” said Malini.

Lalee opened the door and let Malini in.

“I’ve been calling out to you for ten minutes, where were you?” She asked. Then taking a look at Lalee’s damp, asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes,” Lalee replied.

Malini sat cross-legged on the bed without waiting for an invitation. Never one to waste time on small talk, she got straight to the point.

“We’re going to have a demonstration about Mohamaya’s death,” she stated. “And we want you there.”

Lalee sighed inwardly. Her involvement with the local Sex Workers’ Collective was perfunctory at best. If pressed, she would admit that on principle she supported the existence of the Collective, but couldn’t bring herself to believe in its more optimistic goals.

“What am I going to do there?” She asked.

“Be present,” said Malini. “You don’t have to do anything, if you think what happened to her was wrong then you should be there to protest, to raise awareness about the condition we women live in here at Shonagachhi.”

Lalee smiled mirthlessly, “But who cares about one prostitute’s death? You can demonstrate all you want but...”

Malini interrupted, “Sex worker.”

“What?”

“Sex worker. You said prostitute.”

“Let’s call a spade a spade. It doesn’t change if you give it a different name.”

“It does actually,” Malini uncrossed her legs, “but I’m not here to talk about that. Yes, you’re right, no one cares. But we do. And whatever you think of us or our work at the Sex Worker’s Collective, if we don’t speak for ourselves, no one will.”

Lalee kept quiet, not wanting to get into yet another debate about activism. Malini was one of Shonagachhi’s success stories. Or as close to a success story as it got. She was a largish woman of about forty and commanded a certain matronly respect from the younger girls in the area. She was famous within Shonagachhi’s boundaries as an outspoken, stern advocate of prostitutes’ rights. Oh, Lalee corrected herself mentally, sex worker’s rights. Malini began her journey as most women in the profession did, as a Chukri, working for an older madam with virtually no freedom and no money. In time she had bought herself from her madam, gotten rid of her pimps and now managed her own regular clients with a cell phone. All this was well known as Malini’s spiel for younger more disadvantaged prostitutes. What was less widely known was that Malini was financially stable, had two kids in college and was building a house in the outskirts of town with the money she had saved in the Sex Workers’ Collective over the years. From where Lalee stood, Malini was a lot more privileged than the likes of her.

Malini said in a more conciliatory tone, “You should really come more regularly to the Collective’s meetings you know, we could use someone like you.”

“I’ve a lot more to deal with than you Malini, I don’t have the time.”

“It’s the inclination that matters,” Malini said. “Anyway, I know you saw her just after she died...”

“Murdered,” Lalee murmured.

“What?”

“Just after she was murdered, not died.”

“Yes, you saw her, so I need you to give a speech at the demonstration.”

“Speech? Are you mad?”

“No I’m not. Who’s better suited to tell people what happened to her?”

“There were some others who saw her too, ask them,” Lalee replied impatiently.

“Fine, fine. I’m not going to force you into doing anything that you don’t want to do. I only wish you could see that your help matters, your voice matters.”

Lalee stood up from the chair she was sitting on as an indication that this conversation was over.

Malini lowered her legs from the bed but made no sign of getting up. Instead she asked, “Was Mohamaya her real name? Or just one for the business?”

Lalee never knew if that was her real name, or if it was something she had called herself. The girls did that sometimes, out of shame or out of some vague idea of separating their histories, their timelines, like an imaginary equator that divides their lives before and after. This is who I was, this is who I am now. They took up names like Rosie or Suzy, they thought were sexy. But Mohamaya was an old-fashioned name of the Goddess, and Lalee suspected it was her real name.

Aloud she said, “I don’t know. But it doesn’t sound like a name for the job.”

Malini nodded in agreement. “Besides,” Lalee continued, “she came only a year ago, maybe she hadn’t caught on the fake name business. You should know, I saw her going to the Collective’s meetings sometimes.”

Malini said, “I never thought of asking you know. I mean, when does anyone ask that kind of thing. I thought her friends might know.”

“I wasn’t her friend,” said Lalee.

“Yeah well, I guess some of Shefali mashi’s girls would know more about her. She seemed like a likeable young woman. Not very bright if I’m honest, but nice enough.”

“Why don’t you ask one of them to give a speech about her?” Lalee sat down again since Malini clearly wasn’t going anywhere.

“Because they work for Shefali mashi,” Malini said as if explaining the obvious to a child. “You know what she thinks of the Collective and what she’d do if one of her girls came and gave a speech.”

“Why? She let Mohamaya come to the collective frequently.”

“Yes, but a murder hadn’t happened then. Things are...tense now. And if I know that woman, she wouldn’t like too much attention on the murder. Bad for business and so on. She’d have no flying customers or newbies for months. People don’t want to take a chance on a place where a murder has recently taken place.”

“In this place?” Lalee smiled mirthlessly, “She could probably get some weirdos to pay double for that room.”

Malini stood up from the bed with a frown, “You’re just too cynical. But I wish you weren’t right. Knowing her, she might be thinking the same thing.” She paused, “But we’re not letting it go. The younger girls are all making posters now. We want justice for Mohamaya.”

Lalee didn’t say anything. As much as she would’ve liked to believe that Mohamaya would get justice, the whole thing only seemed like a sham to her.

“And one more thing,” Malini said as she put on her slippers, “have you heard anything about her babu?”

“Whose Mohamaya’s?”

“No mine,” Malini rolled her eyes. “Of course Mohamaya’s. Who else have I been talking about?”

“No. I didn’t even know she had a babu.”

“Girls like her always do,” Malini shook her head, “they never learn.”

Lalee had a sudden wave of nausea sweep over her. She bent forward with a hand over her mouth and suppressed a strong desire to retch.

Malini bent forward to hold Lalee, “What is it? What is it?” she queried.

“Blood. It’s that smell of blood,” Lalee mumbled.

“What blood? There’s no smell of blood,” Malini looked around as though she had somehow overlooked the pool of blood under her feet. She frowned slightly and said, “Are you sure you are fine? No need to see a doctor?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Lalee replied. She just wanted Malini to leave.

Once she had shut the door behind Malini, Lalee felt breathless. She knew she was imagining it and there was no trace of blood in her room, but the smell stuck with her, and with it came the nausea. Women of course, know the smell of blood. But the kind that flows from opened veins has a heavy sweetness, a metal whiff like the water from the public taps with too much iron in it. And then it turns rotten, with a hint of fish in the stink. The ants come in droves. Lalee considered splashing the area around her room with some carbolic acid, the home remedy for snakes. But she let go of the idea as soon as she realised that barely twelve hours ago a bottle of acid was used to kill a young girl next door. Instead, she filled up her plastic bucket and took a bath. Afterwards she lit cheap incense in front of her various gods in the alcove. There was Kartik, the patron God of prostitutes, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of success.

The events of the preceding night had derailed her. She tried to maintain her composure, to keep her head, but Mohamaya’s death was never far away from her

thoughts. She looked around her room: one desk and chair, an alcove on the walls, a spotted mirror hanging next to it and a double sized bed. She was renting the room from Shefali mashi. Shefali mashi, who ran The Blue Lotus next door, had once been her madam. In time Lalee had bought herself from Shefali mashi, but she was still Lalee's landlady. Lalee didn't consider Shefali mashi to be a friend, no one did, but she had given Lalee a few extensions on the rent over the years. It was a complicated relationship that Lalee preferred not to examine. Hatred and respect and codependency all existed in a tight, interwoven tangle. She was grateful to have escaped that life under Shefali mashi as a Chukri at The Blue Lotus, but some part of her wondered if life outside the bounds of her first brothel would have been even worse.

In the early days, she could not imagine a life worse than the one she led in The Blue Lotus. But in time when she got used to it, she began to fear the world outside it. At least she was alive, fed and making a living. She had to remind herself that she was lucky, given how lost women generally fared in the world. Women who had for one reason or another no money, no family and no strength in the world. Though she had managed to rid herself of a madam, she still had Chintu. As Shefali mashi's henchman, Chintu knew everyone in Shonagachhi, and though not particularly bright, was a serviceable pimp.

Lalee's phone began to ring in a wheedling imitation of a Bollywood song. It was Rambo Maity.

"Hello?" said Maity on the other end of the line.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Why do you always sound annoyed?" Maity asked.

"Is that what you called to ask?"

"Of course not. Anyway, you're free now?"

“Why?” Lalee frowned.

“Got a customer from Delhi. First time in town, wants to try some local delicacies, think you can do it?”

“What time? If it’s more than two hours I won’t take less than fifteen hundred.”

“Eeh...” Maity laughed, “think you’re one of the busty fair chicks at Neelkamal huh? Even less than half is way more than your normal rate,” he continued sniggering.

“Why do you care? You’re getting your percentage. Whatever I ask from him is my business.”

“Yeah, right. I don’t care. Looks rich so try to be nice and get a good tip.”

“You’re going to teach me now what to do with a customer?”

“Don’t know why I try. Anyway, he has the directions and your number, and he’ll be there soon.”

“Would it kill you to give me some more notice?”

“Look I got you a good customer, don’t complain. And I need to see you, so come along after you’re done.”

“Why? And why can’t you come here?”

“It’s not safe. The less people who know about us the better. See me at the bar above Lighthouse in New Market. Okay?”

“Fine. It better be something good. Or I’m losing one evening’s worth of pay for nothing.”

“Oh, and bring two recent photographs of yourself.”

“Why?” Lalee asked suspiciously. “Are you putting a marriage ad for me in the papers?”

Rambo laughed. “Bring me some good ones. You know, the kind of picture that makes you look hot,” and he rang off.

Lalee wondered what this new demand was about. She worked for Rambo sometimes, but she didn't trust him in the least. Even before Chintu was caught dealing cocaine to some American tourist, Lalee had done one or two jobs via Rambo Maity. She hadn't meant to in the beginning, and was quite aware of the kind of fracas it would cause if Chintu came to know about it. Pimps guarded their territories jealously and Chintu's association with Shefali mashi had added a degree of power to his natural blood thirstiness. For one thing, Rambo himself wasn't too keen to be discovered poaching on Chintu's girls. Lalee wondered at times why she had kept Chintu on; it was an unspoken agreement when she left Shefali mashi's henhouse and Lalee didn't upset the status quo. Besides, without a pimp she would have to go back on the streets. On the streets you had to lower your rates and deal with all sorts of mongers—johns who were on the lookout for a bargain and sometimes had weird tastes. When business was down in The Blue Lotus, Shefali mashi had occasionally sent her and other girls out on the streets, and she had her fair share of mongering experience. Once a man demanded that she wear nothing but flower garlands. He had stared at her for hours and instead of fucking her had beaten her black and blue with his belt. Even though this happened inside The Blue Lotus within earshot of Shefali mashi and her twenty-five girls, no one did anything while she screamed. Later, once the nightmare was over and Lalee was lying silently in bed, curled up in pain, Chintu and Shefali mashi had robbed the man clean, taken his clothes, his credit cards and beat him out of Shonagachhi. Lalee hadn't known whether to despise them for not protecting her or be grateful for the vengeance. But whatever her feelings had been, she knew it wasn't the last of such experiences.

So she kept Chintu on. It saved her from being on the streets. Even after paying mashi's rent and Chintu's thirty percent, Lalee was left with some money and a certain

amount of security. But it wasn't a lot of money and she barely had any savings. Every few months a new bunch of girls trickled into the neighbourhood. In the early days she felt sad for these new girls; they cried incessantly through the night, waited relentlessly for a lover, a father, a brother, a husband or a mother to show up and take them home. Now, each new consignment made her look into the mirror. She wasn't getting any younger and though Shonagachhi was home to women of all shapes and ages, it was a precarious life for ageing women. Some new brothels had opened up, employing only busty, fair and tall Punjabi girls, Rajasthani girls and girls from Kashmir. The non-Bengali clientele reputedly went to those more desirable, expensive girls. So when Rambo came knocking on her door, cajoling, convincing, offering an opportunity so slick as to be slightly farcical, Lalee didn't think of Chintu. It was a playful experiment at best, it was hard to take Rambo seriously. At first she did a stray job or two. Rambo's clients tipped well and were safe, and Chintu hadn't noticed since most of Rambo's business came to Lalee through her cell phone.

Another wave of nausea took her by surprise. Lalee wondered if she should see the local doctor. She had been careful, but since her periods were hardly regular, it was difficult to be sure. If she was indeed pregnant, she'd have to take a hard decision quickly. There was no earthly reason to keep the child. Was there? She wondered.

Her phone began to ring once more. It was an unknown number. Lalee answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello, I'm standing at the entrance to Shonagachhi, beside Ram Bahadur's *paan* shop. You know the place?"

"Yes, but who are you?"

"Oh Maity gave me your number."

“Oh, okay.”

“So where is your place?”

“Once you enter you just keep walking straight till you reach Neelkamal. You know the building? Okay, so keep walking and enter the third alley to the right. You’ll see a five storey building called The Blue Lotus. No, not there, it’s a small place next to it. Just knock.”

Lalee let the well-built man of about thirty-five inside. He smiled at her and looked about the room. Lalee thought it wasn’t quite what he expected.

“So what’s it going to be?” She asked.

“What’s the hurry?” he smiled and started walking towards her.

“I find it useful to negotiate terms before we start,” Lalee said not budging from her place or looking away.

“Okay then, what do you do?”

“I do everything except anal and creampie. Condoms are a must. Are you carrying your own? If not, that’s extra. Alcohol and snacks is extra and dance is extra. It’s seven hundred and fifty an hour. Oh and phantasy stuff is extra too.”

The man smirked, “What ‘phantasy’ do you like?”

Lalee returned a cold smile.

“Okay, okay,” he laughed, “what’s your name?”

“Rosa,” said Lalee.

“So Rosa, seven hundred and fifty seems a bit much, don’t you think? I might be new here but I’m not new to the game.”

“It’s my usual rate,” Lalee shrugged.

“Sure it is,” the man laughed a little dismissively, throwing a casual glance around the room.

“Look, I don’t know what Rambo told you but those are my terms, take it or leave it.”

“A dance and two hours. I’ll give you thirteen hundred. And you throw in a glass or two of whiskey.”

“Sorry, can’t,” Lalee said flatly.

“Fourteen hundred and if we don’t haggle anymore I can promise you a good tip.”

Lalee didn’t say anymore. She walked over to her desk and hit play on the second hand CD player she had bought from Shefali mashi a few months before. She grabbed a glass and a bottle of whiskey from her cupboard and placed it in front of him. He settled down on the bed. She walked to the middle of the room and began swaying to the generic club music. The guy took off his shoes and whiskey in hand, joined her.

He kept touching her as they danced. “I like this,” he said, “you dance well,” Lalee smiled and pushed him aside. He took it as a sign of playfulness and though a little surprised lay back on the bed.

Half hour later Lalee sat down beside him and began unbuttoning his pants. “Have a glass, on me” the guy motioned towards the open bottle of whiskey, “I like my girls tipsy.” Lalee poured herself the tiniest amount and continued undressing him.

“So what’s your story?” He asked.

Here it comes, thought Lalee. The question that was asked most in these situations.

“What do you mean what’s my story?” Lalee smiled at him, knowing what he meant.

“I mean how did you come here? What’s it like here?”

“Perhaps you should ask me again when you know me better,” she said, touching him.

He closed his eyes for a second, “I’m sure I will. But tell me the story anyway.”

“It’s depressing,” she said, “it’ll spoil your mood.”

“On the contrary,” he put his hand on Lalee’s back, fingers groping around her bra’s steel clasp, “a good story sets the mood.”

“I am a runaway.” Lalee put her mouth on the bright waist band of his boxers, “I wanted to become an actress,” she slid a finger under his boxers.

“And?”

“I knew a man from the city who came to my village, he said he’d give me a part in a television serial,” she pulled his boxers down, “so I ran away from home.”

“How did that work out for you?” He smiled, looking at Lalee’s hands on his thighs.

“As you can see. I was nineteen and my father was arranging a wedding for me.”

He took Lalee’s hand and put it on his genitals, “Then?”

“Then I came to Calcutta, went to the Tollygunge studios and tried to look for the man. I had his number, so I called him and he came to meet me.”

“Did you get the part?”

“I got one.” Lalee said before biting his lips, “The one I am playing now,” she smiled again.

He put his arms around Lalee and pinned her down on the bed.

Rambo Maity went home to take a shower and change before meeting Lalee in the evening. There were one or two business matters to take care of before he met Lalee. Even though it was January he felt he needed a shower just to wash the grime off his skin. Inside his one bedroom apartment it was much cooler than the street. He poured himself a glass of cold water from his fridge and debated if he should take a shower after all. Now that he

was inside the apartment, it felt quite chilly and dank. His old mother would have warned him against taking an untimely shower in January. He changed out of his pants and his green silk shirt and pulled his pyjamas from the chair. A soft ping and a blinking light on his computer screen made him sit down again. The device was transmitting. A dark young woman, her long hair obscuring her face and parts of her back was sliding the boxers off a well-built man. Maity leaned back, put his feet up on the computer table and settled down to watch the rest.

Chapter IV

Tilu Shau slept fitfully on his old rickety bed in the dilapidated ancestral home at Sovabazar, barely a kilometre away from Lalee's room. He was having a dream; it was March of 1495 and he was sailing in a barge down the River Hoogly. Some people say there are no colours in a dream, but Tilu saw clearly the ripples on the dark grey waters and the latticed shadows the tall tropical trees cast upon it. His ornate barge moved gently in the breeze as he puffed on his Hookah. He twirled his luxurious moustache with one hand and in a fit of pleasure kicked the Hookah-bardar crouching at his feet. The skinny dark man in a flimsy loin cloth took this kick from his master in bent gratitude. Tilu recognised this scene from the folk poem *Manasa Mangal*. In the logic of dreams Tilu Shau knew he was Chand Saudagar, the wealthiest merchant of his times sailing to Sri Lanka to trade silks, gems and spices. But before that he would worship at the feet of the dark goddess, the great Kali of Kalighat some three hundred years before the East India Company would christen it Colegot. Small villages that dotted the banks of the Hoogly sailed past his large, ornate ship. The villagers stared at the passing leviathan. Kumarhatta, Kakinara, Paikpara, Icchapur, Rishra, Kamarhati, Kalikata—settlements now swallowed by the metropolis, were passed in succession and his ship sailed on towards the tiger infested abode of Kali.

Although it seemed like a pleasant dream, it wouldn't end well. Tilu Shau knew well the poem of *Manasa*; in his hubris the proud and wealthy Chand Saudagar refuses to worship the wild, vengeful swamp goddess *Manasa*. In retribution *Manasa* sends her snakes to destroy all that Chand Saudagar holds dear. From the banks of the River Hoogly Tilu Shau's dream changed course, suddenly he was in a room alone with a woman—her hair flowing like a dark halo behind her, and snakes crawling all over her body. He

couldn't tell if it was the goddess Manasa or Kali, but the terrifying spectre grew larger and larger till Tilu Shau lay dwarfed at her feet. He looked up to see Lalee's giant face on a dark, snake-infested body. She opened her mouth to swallow him and a giant red tongue obscured his world.

Tilu Shau woke up with a start. It took him a couple of minutes to realise the he had been dreaming. He was scared to close his eyes lest he see Lalee's giant face and her red tongue descend upon him. In his head the rhythm of the poem played on and on but he could not remember the words. Whether it was the research for his latest novel or it was the events of last night, Tilu couldn't tell. Perhaps it was a mix of both, but what he knew for sure was that dwelling on a nightmarish Lalee would accomplish nothing.

He walked bleary-eyed to the tap outside his room. In the distant past, this was a narrow corridor connecting various rooms. A lengthy court case between the many claimants to the house had waged on for at least three generations and was set to carry on for quite a few more, with the result that odd corners were now serving as kitchenettes and washrooms. With each generation the number of claimants had only grown. Originally, three brothers fought for the sole ownership of the house; as they had children and their children had children and so on and so forth, all that had happened was that many lawyers in the city made a respectable income from the litigious clan who fought as a matter of tradition for increasingly small areas of inheritance. Tilu Shau's father was one of these many claimants. After his mother's death, Tilu's father now was the sole occupant of the room next door. Father and son had not spoken to each other in many years. His father's efforts in making Tilu Shau a successful man had not yielded the desired result. After he had paid a considerable sum of money to admit Tilu in a mechanical engineering course, Tilu had diligently failed his way out of school. Undeterred, his father tried to bequeath the

family business of automobile spare parts to Tilu Shau. Since it felt a lot like engineering to him, Tilu demonstrated a lack of skill and interest so spectacular that his own father had to fire him. Once his father's health failed him, the business changed hands and Tilu was left to make what living he could on his own.

This he had done by writing four novellas for Ma Tara Publishing Works in the ever popular sister-in-law series— a safe and dependable option for the untried erotica writer. So far he had produced *The Naughty Sister-in-Law*, *Sister-in-Law in the Moonlight*, *After the Bath* and *Monsoon has come, Sister-in-Law*. In an idle moment he had even began a translation of *Sister-in-Law in the Moonlight*, which he thought was the most romantic and playful of his four novels. During the writing of that book, he began to do some 'research' on the topic, but his area of study was primarily confined to Lalee's room. But of late, he began to feel an itch to make it as a writer. Writing erotic fiction under a pseudonym was all very well, but when all's said and done, where was the glory? The fame? Would he go down in history for the sister-in-law series? Well, yes perhaps, with a certain portion of the reading public, but his heart desired a more mainstream adoration. And with fame, he might even have Lalee by his side. Such delusions of grandeur fuelled his recent days as he toyed with new ideas for his new book.

He made a hundred beginnings. Some were poems, some were in prose, even some fragments of a play, but they didn't stick. For years he had fantasised that his major work would be in the form of an epic poem, but the heroic couplet began to give him trouble after forty or so verses. Eventually Tilu Shau went back to prose as his most natural literary form. He even had a brief spell of aggressive reading at the National Library going through its dusty old tomes about a by-gone era. His father would have been surprised by his son's tenacity, but the more Tilu learned about old Calcutta, the more he realised that his next

book had to be historical fiction. He was going to set the story in a Calcutta of the past, but what the story was going to be, he hadn't a clue.

For a while, he became quite obsessed with these accounts, anecdotes and historical records. Of course, everyone knew that Calcutta was a British invention, and for years he had been content to know it as Calcutta, eschewing the bengali "Kolkata." But then he began reading about all the names it had been called before it was Calcutta, and where their boundaries lay. In time, it seemed to him that it did not matter what names we gave to places, politics be damned. Once this place had been Dihi Kolikata, a small village of no importance at all, and then it had been 'the settlement,' as the first colonial settlers had called it before it was christened 'Calcutta'. When he found out the Chowringhee, the most god awfully congested and populated thoroughfare of modern Calcutta was a jungle even in the early 1800s, it blew his mind. He read somewhere that native servants of those grand British houses on Chowringhee would strip their european uniforms and run through that jungle every evening among the bandits and the tigers back to their homes, and sometimes they failed to return in the morning. The Chowringhee he knew had no resemblance to that primal space. An enormous thoroughfare, old imposing buildings, bus depots, hundreds of small and large business and thousands of people crossing its street had quite taken away any chance of encountering tigers. Bandits however had to evolve into petty thieves, pick pockets, insurance agents or failing all, Members of Parliament. Tilu remembered Holwell, noting dryly in 1752, that there was no need to fret over Chauringi Road which only led to the pagan temple of Caly at Colegot and to Dee Calcutta. But there was a native market held on the road that might be of cultural interest. So many names, thought Tilu Shau, for one spit of land. Calcutta, Golgotha, Colegot, Dihi Kolikata, Khal-khatta or whatever her true name was, was spilling her tales to him. He need only listen attentively. Now all that remained for him to do was to spew it all out in rhyme and meter, and glory would be born.

He tried telling Lalee some of these amazing anecdotes from the past; it was his heartfelt wish that Lalee respect his writing career, but she laughed at his story. The woman didn't believe him at all, it broke his heart. He wished he could give her a book he had written, but found himself strangely ashamed of his sister-in-law series. A new book, a good book, that he could be proud of. A book he could give Lalee.

The memory of a giant, red-tongued Lalee not quite faded from his memory, Tilu lit the kerosene stove and began making himself some tea. He had overslept and though he had nowhere particular to be, felt vaguely guilty for this indulgence. Partly out of writerly discipline, partly to distract himself from the nightmarish events of the previous night, Tilu Shau walked steaming mug in hand towards his desk and opened the curtains.

Within an hour, Tilu Shau was hard at work on his first historical novel. While he struggled with sentence construction, his hero Obinash, fought a dozen Thugees in the jungle infested Chowringhee some hundred and fifty years ago. Obinash was very much like Tilu Shau except for his six feet three inches frame, stunning good looks, incredible strength and great thirst for adventure. A homegrown Indiana Jones, Obinash was braving indescribable odds in his pursuit of a forty carat diamond that had been stolen by dacoits from a local king's palace. Obinash was at the moment deep in the territory of Thugees armed with nothing but his hunting crop. The deadly Thugees were gypsy robbers who would throw a noose around their prey and strangle him to death. While some historical records show Thugees as an organised group of itinerant tribes travelling through South Asia between the 13th and 19th centuries other records say they were disenfranchised farmers under the British rule, who left with no land and no other means of sustenance,

took to robbing and murder with nothing more than a loose kerchief as a weapon. Needless to say, Tilu Shau found the first version better suited to the demands of his fictional universe. He was hoping to start a series describing Obinash's many spectacular adventures.

This morning, his writing wasn't going as well as he'd hoped. The events of the night before and the cursed image of Lalee was flooding his mind. Every five minutes or so, Obinash's great perils notwithstanding, Tilu Shau's mind drifted off to the small room in Shonagachhi. The leader of the Thugees threw a deadly garrotte at Obinash— Tilu Shau thought of Lalee's lips dangling a long white cigarette— Obinash grabbed it long before it could reach his neck— Lalee turned around and looked Tilu deep in the eyes— Obinash pulled at the noose so hard that the leader fell flat on the ground and— Lalee, lay like an exquisite silken rug under Tilu and closed her eyes in pleasure— Obinash landed heavily on top of the Thuggee and with one blow broke the man's jaws— someone screamed, Lalee ran— Obinash wiped the blood from his knuckles— Lalee's back obscured his view, a red stream trickled sluggishly towards Lalee's feet. Even in his room in Sovabazar Tilu Shau could smell the acid and the blood, a curious smell at once pungent and sweet; he put his head on the table.

Lalee was impossible to ignore. He felt angry that he had so little self control when it came to her. Tilu Shau felt an irresistible urge to go see her at Shonagachhi. What if she was in trouble? What happened last night? What if the same thing ended up happening to Lalee? That woman didn't know what was good for her. This is when Tilu should be at her side, protect her from harm. It all sounded plausible in his head but the minute Lalee appeared before his eyes, he lost the plot. In the beginning he had justified his visits to her

in the name of research. A good author needs to know his subject matter. But he couldn't deceive himself anymore. He could have gone to other girls in Shonagachhi but by some strange alchemy the only door he ever knocked on was Lalee's. And would the woman reward such loyalty? No. What a fool he was to love a woman like Lalee. He toyed with the idea of visiting Lalee that very moment. But what if Shonagachhi today, after the murder of that girl, was unsafe? What if he was ambushed by some gangs, beaten and robbed? The more he thought about it, the more nameless dangers he conjured and the less appealing Shonagachhi seemed. Besides, the rates Lalee was charging now would bankrupt him. He needed money. He debated if he should call his publisher and ask him about the money owed to him for his last erotic novella. It was perhaps best to just show up. Giving advance notice to a man like Amulyaratan Chakladar could only get in the way of full payment. But once he walked to the bus stop to go to College Street he found himself quite inexplicably sitting in a bus bound for Shonagachhi.

The man wasn't lying about leaving a generous tip. After two hours, Lalee had nineteen hundred in her purse. He had been a good client and the generous tip had softened her a little bit towards Rambo as well.

She went for a shower again. It was a leftover habit from her early days in this job that had stuck. After each client, she showered ritually. Once upon a time she took this time to cry under running water, after which she would stand quietly washing as assiduously as possible the stink of strange men from her skin. Now, it was only a ritual, a tic she indulged without much significance. She dried herself and pulled on a pair of jeans and a loose, long shirt. It was already a little after six and she wanted to get Rambo out of the way as soon as possible.

As she walked the length of her street, she saw a group of women gathered around a makeshift stage, Malini was sitting on a plastic folding chair. She noticed Lalee and held her gaze. Lalee looked away, feeling vaguely guilty. About thirty people had gathered around the stage. A young girl in a pale pink salwar kameez and a long braid, was speaking into the microphone.

“She was a mother to two children. She came here to provide them with a good education, food and health. She...was one of us,” the girl said, the words catching in her throat. Lalee tried to remember who the girl was but couldn’t.

“If we don’t speak up, no one will.”

Well-taught Malini, thought Lalee.

“If this can happen in a house with twenty-five other girls, think how safe you are. Think, if this might not happen to you.”

Of course this might happen to you, no one is going to cry if it does, thought Lalee wryly.

“This is the time to protest against such acts. Sex work is work like any other and we demand job safety.”

Good luck with that, thought Lalee, as she made her way out of the crowds. She couldn’t help looking at Malini, who, she noticed was looking at her. You’ve got to give it to her, thought Lalee, in a few hours she has managed to round up people, hire a microphone and some chairs and even found some speakers, Woman Power, indeed. But she still couldn’t place the girl who Malini had rounded up to give the speech. She must be one of Mohamaya’s friends. They looked about the same age. If this was a girl from The Blue Lotus, Shefali mashi wasn’t going to like it very much.

Lalee walked to the end of road where Shonagachhi's world ended and the workaday chaos of the rest of Calcutta began. She waited at the corner for the bus to the metro rail station.

By seven, Rambo Maity and Lalee were sitting on a sticky red table with cloudy glasses perspiring in front of them. The injudicious whiskey of the afternoon had left Lalee queasy though the periodic waves of nausea had abated by the evening. Lalee had refused Rambo's half hearted offer of alcohol and ordered a lime soda for herself. The first thing she noticed about the bar Rambo had chosen was that everything there was red. The lights, the walls, the neon signs, the menu, the fairy lights around the walls were all red, as were the plastic roses on each table. A voluptuous singer in tight gold pants was singing Bengali romantic hits with an accompanying band that grated on Lalee's ears. It was an old bar in Chowringhee where gloomy degenerates drank quietly in various shadowy corners. Maity was grinning fixedly at Lalee. She narrowed her eyes,

"So why do you need my pictures?"

"Isn't it obvious? To get you clients?"

"We've been managing well without pictures till now."

Rambo shook his head, "No, no, you see, the good clients, they want to see the girl before they commit. See this?" Rambo pointed towards a black folder on the table, "That's my catalogue. All my girls are in there with a short description of each, what they will and won't do, vital stats, etc."

Lalee couldn't resist the urge to take a look. Each page had two pictures of the same girl, and the opposite page had a short paragraph of details about the girl. Lalee thought

about it, and decided to play along. If she was going to work with Rambo, there was no point in resisting him.

“I’ve got these two,” she put two pictures of herself on the table.

Maity, who was sitting with his arms around the chair and his feet splayed underneath, lifted his torso lazily to pick up the proffered photographs.

“Nah, nah, this wont do. You have to get a professional to take it.”

“Why what’s wrong with it?”

“What’s wrong with it? Everything! You want to make it into the big game? Well, you have to bring your game up. Clothes, makeup, phone, bag, walking talking everything!

That’s how it’s done. Don’t you see those girls in Park Street?”

“No, I don’t have time to get out of Shonagachhi.”

“Of course you don’t, but you have to. Thats not where the big game is. These people I’m talking about, they don’t want some two bit rendi from Shonagachhi my girl, they want english.”

Lalee gave him a cold look, “I can’t become a *memsahib*.”

“I don’t mean literally. We have other girls for that. Russian girls, Anna Marie, oh you should see her. Doesn't say much, just smiles. Speaks English but pretends she doesn’t. Only smiles and talks dirty in Russian, heavy tips. In tips alone she makes ten thousand a month. Lives in Park Street too. Bought a car last month.”

Lalee listened. Rambo made it sound so desirable. All she was aware of was how ill-suited she was to this world. Part of her told her she’d never make it. But she’d come this far, she’d just have to go the rest of the way.

“So what should I do?”

“First, go to a beauty parlour. Second, go shopping.”

“I don’t have the money and I don’t have the time. Besides, I shouldn’t be spending anything on this, It was your idea, your cut is way above Chintu’s, so you pay.”

“Why should I pay?” asked Rambo, incredulity in his voice, “You’re the one getting the rich clients. If even one of them becomes your regular, I’ll get nothing out of it.”

A wave of nausea swept over her. For a few seconds her face distorted. Rambo stopped what he was saying and looked at her narrowly. “You okay?”

“Yes, yes, must have been something I ate.” Lalee reached out for the dirty glass of water left on the table.

“As I was saying,” Maity resumed, “if you want this, you’ll have to invest in it.”

Lalee was still struggling with the urge to retch so she remained quiet.

Maity continued, “There was a raid last month in Neelkamal, you remember? Do you know how much they recovered from there? Two lakhs, yes madam, two lakhs. In cash.” He smiled triumphantly as though reporting a personal victory. “That is how much they had sewn into the mattress. So don’t think I’m a fool. I know you girls beaver away and save up for a rainy day. This client I send you in the afternoon, do I know how much you made from him? If I had to guess...”

Lalee gathered up her things and stood up with her handbag swaying from her shoulders.

“Oi oi, stop,” Maity hollered. “Uff, you have too much,” he made vague hand gestures in the air, “too much...pride,” he finished. “Would it kill you to bend once in a while?”

“I don’t know about you but I bend all over,” said Lalee. “Now, if you don’t want to pay, I’ll do what I can and we’ll just have to see.” Lalee turned to go.

“Oh wait a minute will you? I haven’t even told you what I wanted to see you about.”

Lalee turned around but didn’t sit.

“I’ve got a job for you, a good job.” Rambo leaned forward. “Bengali businessman, middle-aged, very rich. He’s closing a deal tomorrow and wants to treat his business associate. So I thought of you.”

“How much and for how long?”

“Oh he doesn’t do it by the hour. It’ll be for the whole night but see,” he lowered his voice, “I want to make sure he gets five star treatment.”

Lalee put a hand on her temple, “Maity, how much?”

“Three thousand plus tips and a night at The Park Hotel,” he leaned back in his chair and smiled.

Lalee blinked. It was a good offer, a lot better than anything she had done ever. There had been rich clients once in a while, but it was never out of Shonagachhi, never outside her room or those of The Blue Lotus.

“And he wants me?” She asked.

“It’s your job to make him want you,” Rambo replied sagely. “I didn’t have a picture to show him. But he trusts my judgement.”

“Your judgement. Mustn’t be a very good businessman then.”

Maity pretended not to hear her, “So you’ll take the job?”

“Yes”

“And you’ll do a good job?”

Lalee just gave him a cold look.

“Okay, okay *baba*, forgive me for asking. Just be on your best behaviour will you?

And yes, do you have any good clothes?”

“What are ‘good clothes?’” asked Lalee tartly.

“You know what I mean. The kind of stuff you see those girls wearing in Park Street nightclubs. Something like that.”

“No, I don’t. Because I don’t go to Park Street nightclubs. You want Shonagachhi clothes? I have those.”

Rambo threw up his hands, “It’s just impossible to talk to you!” Then he said, “Which Shonagachhi are you talking about? Have you seen the girls at Neelkamal, or that new place around the corner from Ram’s pan shop? They look like models!”

Maity’s comment touched a nerve. It was true that Shonagachhi had changed a lot in recent years. Perhaps everyone in their time felt that about a place they knew. Shonagachhi had always been multiethnic; Nepali, Bhutanese and Bangladeshi girls were quite common as were Bihari girls. In recent times, a lot of Punjabi and Rajasthani girls had moved into Shonagachhi, reportedly from Delhi. Neelkamal, an expensive brothel of high repute, only employed these girls. Apparently business was safer here. Once in a while Lalee wondered if she’d make the cut at Neelkamal.

“They might, I don’t. So if you don’t give me some money, I can’t promise you that your precious client will be satisfied.”

“I don’t know man,” said Rambo morosely, “I don’t know what’s going on with my stars. My mother’s astrologer told me I should wear this sapphire and it’ll change my luck. Make me a millionaire. But instead I’m bleeding money. can’t trust nobody these days, not even your astrologer.”

Lalee let him groan out the sad song that would preface any parting of money. He sighed and took out his wallet and passed a pale yellow five hundred rupee note to Lalee, taking care to brush past her fingers.

“Five hundred?” Said Lalee “What kind of clothes do you expect me to get for a measly five hundred?”

“*Arrey* Madam, you fake it. You think these girls have pots of money in the beginning? They fake it. You buy second hand stuff, you have a running credit account with the beauty parlour, you buy things that look good but from the footpath and you haggle like hell. And then when you hook one client well and good, you’ll get the payment in kind. He’ll buy two of every kind, one for you and one for the fat wife.”

“Don’t expect anything spectacular, that’s all I’m saying.”

“It’s coming out of your next client, just so you know. And if that bugger doesn’t want to pay this extra five hundred that I am so kindly giving you right now, you’ll have to make up the difference.”

“Fine,” Lalee turned to leave.

“Tomorrow at nine, at The Park Hotel lobby, remember,” Rambo called after her.

“And Lalee,” he paused, “take good care of yourself. You’re my investment now. You’re going in the catalogue,” he sniggered.

Lalee felt a sudden burst of anger. She walked straight out of the bar, past the singer swaying to the music and straight into the street. Not many people were around. She looked in her purse and found one bent cigarette. She looked for a lighter but couldn’t find one. She debated if she should ask someone on the street but decided against it.

Rambo’s client sounded lucrative. She was feeling a little nervous about entering this new world Rambo offered. She hadn’t given much thought to whatever happened outside of Shonagachhi. Surviving in those hovels, building your client base, haggling, fighting, clawing out potential rivals who poached on your customers or gave a cheaper rate, getting out of the clutches of Madams and dealing with pimps took up all the energy she had. She didn’t have the space to think about what happened to other women in the game who were not part of the Shonagachhi industry. Girls like herself were scattered in and around

Kalighat at Calcutta's most famous temple, in Hatibagan, in Bagbazar, in Park Circus, Park Street. The map of the city pimps and dealers looked at was dotted in red, that was all they could see.

But that is not where the big game was, as Rambo Maity was wont to say. Shonagachhi, was of course, the biggest and oldest gig in town, but those smaller hamlets of prostitutes didn't make much, lived in shanties, banded together, fashioned rough families out of whoever was around, clawed each others' eyes out and got on as best as they could. That was a horizontal shift Lalee didn't want to make. But the ones who wore better clothes and high-heels, had better hairstyles and could afford night creme, were called out to fancy hotels, were called companions, call girls or escorts and danced in night-clubs— Lalee felt both intrigued and intimidated by that world. And now, if she dared put her faith in Rambo, she had a doorway to that world.

It was time to make that switch. A couple of months earlier, she saw a face in her speckled square mirror. It had a harshness about the mouth, a cold set to the eyes, the hair was coarse and stuck out like an argument. She could be any age her customers wanted her to be. But in reality, she was nearly thirty. It wasn't a great age to be in Shonagachhi. Even if a quarter of what Rambo hinted at was true, she could work with that.

She draped the shawl around herself, it was getting chilly this close to the vast expanse of the Maidan. In the distance she could see the white marble dome of the Victoria Memorial, though the angel atop the dome was obscured in darkness. The memorial stood in the eerie silence of its vast gardens, and glowed in the reflected streetlights through the January fog. Lalee couldn't stop looking at it, it seemed so haunted and remote that it was difficult to believe that lovers and families gathered in its grounds during the day, especially in the winter. The first time she had seen it, she was just a girl. She had looked

out of the bus window for as long as she could see it, craning her neck in the process, till her father had asked her firmly not to put her neck out of a moving bus. She realised that after all these years she had never actually been to see the Victoria Memorial. One of these days she'd come, she promised herself.

A voice by her side startled her, "How much my darling?" Lalee looked at the burly man who had turned up at her side, a strong smell of country liquor hit her.

"More than you can afford," she said and moved away.

The man came after her, calling out "Darling, sweetheart, don't go, come on." Lalee started walking faster, the man ran after her, "Beautiful, don't go, I'll give you a night you wont forget."

Lalee clutched her bag and almost started running. She had the five hundred from Rambo and some small change of her own. As much indifference as she had affected when Rambo gave her the money, she knew only too well that she couldn't afford to lose the five hundred that he gave her. It was a lot of money for a girl like her. The man ran after her and his voice changed, "*Saali rendi magi*, you won't respond to me if I'm nice. I'm not good enough for you, eh? I know how to make you whores scream. Come here and I'll show you what fucking is. You won't be able to walk, you fucking piece of...."

By now Lalee was running straight into Maidan. It occurred to her that of all the places she could go on a cold January night, the least safe of the them was this vast field in the middle of the city that transformed into a meat market at night. On the other side of the road all the shops were long closed, only a few people were milling about, a few cooks were cleaning out their pans and grills in small wayside eateries and occasionally yellow taxis zoomed by. Lalee didn't stop to think, she just ran into the fog of the Maidan.

When she looked back, the man wasn't there. She stopped to catch her breath, maybe the drunk man had given up the chase or had fallen somewhere. Lalee looked around, panting. She heard someone snigger but couldn't see anyone around her.

"Look Dolly, new bird in town," a voice said.

Lalee stood up straight and tensed, "Looks like there's stiff competition tonight," the voice said again.

Lalee couldn't figure out if the voice was male or female, then she saw two people approaching from the fog. One wore a tight blue skirt and a shiny red top. The other one wore dark skinny jeans and a black plunging top. They were tall, broad shouldered and had squarish faces with prominent Adam's apples.

One of them said in a gruff voice, "Come out to do some poaching tonight, eh princess? Well, we got some news for you," she smiled.

Lalee didn't say anything but looked around cautiously to see if any more of their friends were hiding in the shadows.

"You see," the stranger began, "this is our turf, and we're not interested in sharing."

Even though Lalee was scared, she couldn't help feeling annoyed and replied before thinking, "So? It's not your father's property. I can go wherever I like."

"Can you?" the stranger came towards Lalee and suddenly gripped her hand, twisting it behind her back. Lalee turned around to hit back, but was blocked by the other one.

"Don't even think about it," the one who was twisting Lalee's hand said. She whimpered.

"Fuck you," Lalee said through the pain.

A hard punch hit her on the chin and she fell to the ground. "We could kick fifty kinds of shit out of you right here and now. That man who was chasing you? Yes, we saw, he'd have nothing on us. Now here's the deal, we don't like you cunt, and you're going to leave."

“I’m the same as you, I work to make my living. If you have regulars I’m not going to poach on them,” Lalee said feeling both angry and cautious.

“How dare you say that?” the voice growled and Lalee couldn’t think what she might have said that was so offensive.

“You and I are not the same and will never be. We were born different and we’ll die different. Don’t ever say to someone like me that you and I are the same.”

“Have it your way. I don’t have time for this,” Lalee said feeling around her chin. It felt swollen and hurt quite a lot. The one who was silent this whole time, and who had punched Lalee reached for her handbag that had fallen to the ground. Lalee growled, “Don’t you dare. I’ve done nothing to you.”

“What’re you going to do eh?”

Lalee moved to hit at the woman standing with her bag but was forcibly pushed aside. She took the five hundred rupee note from Lalee’s bag and the change as well. “Consider it a fine,” she said and tossed the empty bag at Lalee. “And let that be a warning. Come along Dolly, let’s not waste any more time.”

Lalee sat there for a minute feeling foolish, and angry and sad, all at once.

Chapter V

The next day when Rambo Maity reached College Street, it was a little past noon. He turned from the main road onto a small alley, not very far from the old Coffee House. He kept walking till he reached the end of the lane. On his left, an oldish man dozed on a battered, two legged stool under a peeling tin sign board—Ma Tara Printing Works. A young boy of about fifteen was carrying bundles of paperbacks roughly tied together with coir ropes. Rambo was sweating even in January. He took off his red baseball cap with the NYC logo that a pigeon had seemingly relieved itself on and patted his brow with a handkerchief. Rambo coughed theatrically and the man who had been dozing woke with a start.

“Oh, it’s you,” said the man sourly.

“Wake up Mr. Chakladar,” said Maity with a forced camaraderie.

Mr. Chakladar on the other hand didn’t seem inclined to return it. “Oh, you want to collect your stuff?” he muttered and shuffled to his feet. “I’ll need the cash upfront, mind you.”

Before Rambo could get another word out, the older man barked into his face, “Don’t know what your game’s been boy, seeing you for a few months now, getting fatter than a goat before slaughter. But you can’t fool me son, you can’t fool me. I’ve seen far too much of life and I know just what happens to fat goats.”

Rambo deflated. “You’re a right ray of sunshine when you wake up, aren’t you,” he grumbled. “Did I say I wasn’t going to pay? Calling me a goat...” Rambo sulked. “Have I

refused to pay? Can't do any honest entrepreneurship in this fucking city. Bloody communists all over the place..."

"Oh no you don't," the older man wagged a finger under Rambo's nose. "You don't get to call me a communist. Never been one, never will be. Now, where's the money?"

"I need to look at the product first," sulked a beaten Rambo.

"Oh, 'product' eh? 'Product?' Here's your product son, wouldn't pay a farthing for that lot. Bhoga?" He gestured to the young boy and he ran forward with ten large sheets of photographs.

"You wouldn't? Really?" asked Rambo, genuinely surprised.

The older man conceded. "Now, I mean. I would have, mind, when I was young. But Viagra? Nah, I don't like trust those things. Who knows what will happen? Maybe it never goes down again, and what would I do then, huh?"

"I've told you a hundred times," Maity enunciated each word, "that is not going to happen."

"I'm not taking any chances," said Chakladar with grumpy finality.

Rambo flipped through the pages. Two largish pictures lay vertically one after another on each page punctuated by a small box of description. Both the boy and Chakladar were looking attentively at the pages. When Chakladar realised that his young employee's eyes had glazed over, he gave a pointed cough and Bhoga slunk back to the gloom of Chakladar's printing shed. Rambo closed the catalogue with a snap and then turned to the old proprietor of the printing press who was staring at him like a shark.

"All right, all right," Rambo found himself blurting out, and then carried on mumbling, "I'm not going to run away, man, have some faith, here you go. One and half thousand wasn't it?" he counted out the money from a bundle of notes.

“One and a half?” the old man repeated in a level tone, then without warning snatched up the ten sheets full of call girls from Maity’s hands and started walking back to the shop.

“Wha...” Rambo had barely opened his mouth to exclaim when Chakladar’s rant stopped him once again.

“No,” Chakladar wagged a skeletal finger inches away from Rambo’s face. “No, no, no...I don’t deal with people who can’t keep their word. I knew you were a shifty one Maity, may you be forgiven. In broad daylight we agreed on two thousand, not one paisa less. No sir. I don’t deal with thieves and robbers.”

Rambo leaned his back against the wall. The old man had clearly just gotten started. We may not be good at anything very much, but by gods we can argue, thought Rambo with a touch of undefined pride.

“Oh give it a rest,” he mumbled and thrust another couple of hundred rupee notes in Chakladar’s pocket.

Chakladar was so taken aback that he could no longer continue with the rant he had only just begun. He wondered if the Earth still moved on its usual axis, since in his long observation of Rambo Maity, he had never once known him to fork out cash if he could help it. And he was very good at helping it. Most of the time he was broke, so shaking him upside down might cause a few rotten teeth to tinkle out but certainly wouldn't produce any money. His business associates, from what Chamar had been able to observe, looked on Maity’s unpaid debts as an opportunity to train new recruits. These recruits had the unlimited pleasure of learning how to beat fifty kinds of crap out of a human body in the fast moving world of business relations. Lately, it seemed to Chakladar, that Rambo’s scars had moved on from being a map of recent events to objects of historical interest. He had wondered how that state of affairs had come about. Perhaps he had acquired a better class of enemy. To Chakladar’s mind, who was probably more astute than he got credit for, it

only meant that the implements of retribution that awaited Maity were smaller, more expensive and vastly more efficient. He shuddered. Rambo Maity was rapidly becoming a man to watch from a distance.

His manner towards Maity changed considerably. For one, he softened. A wheedling voice can have many varying uses. You could use it to complain loudly and incessantly so people simply did what you wanted them to do just because they couldn't stand that metaphorical finger-scratching on the blackboard of their souls, or you could use it to be ingratiating with. The printer didn't go as far. Rambo wasn't as important as all that. He showed potential, at the moment, but he'd just like to keep Rambo where he could see him.

He frowned at a distant crow pecking at something in the open sewer, apparently lost in thought. This new Rambo Maity had given him pause, which was, he'd be the first to admit, a difficult thing to do. He let his gaze fall on Rambo and asked eventually, "Tea?" Without waiting for his answer Chakladar called for Bhoga who was still laboriously stacking small thin paperbacks and tying them around with twine.

"Bhoga, run along and get two teas, the special ones." Then looking around he added, "But first put a chair out here."

When a plastic folding chair had been produced, unfolded and conscientiously brushed with Bhoga's handy towel, Rambo Maity sat down with the old printer, took off his baseball cap and sunglasses, and wiped the sweat off his brow.

"You could have sent out for some Coke. It's too hot for tea."

"It's never too hot for tea. Don't know how you kids are raised these days. In my time we didn't have all this Pepsi Cola thing. And we managed fine."

Rambo pointed at the tin signage above the shop and said, "That's nearly falling off. Why don't you get a new one? A flex vinyl one? No one does this paint on tin job anymore.

Don't you see the shops around you? They can even get your face on that thing, and your name, in big letters.”

“Yeah, yeah, got to get that done. Not a bad idea altogether. These tin things rust too much. And the paint peels in this heat. Know anyone?”

“You. You are a printer you know.”

“Yeah, we don't do that sort of thing. Got to get special machinery and ink to print on vinyl. I just do paper jobs. It's how we have always done things. Family business for generations. My son's been saying the same thing, diversify etc, etc., but I say to him, what about the initial costs? How long will that take to recover, eh? Besides all my customers are for the paper stuff see, who's going to go out marketing a new line of stuff? So if you know someone, I might have a word with him.”

“Nah, not in my line of work.”

“Speaking of which,” the printer began subtly, “we have a new writer, interested in, you know, your line of work.”

“He's a pimp on the side?”

“No, no,” Chakladar moved his hands, “just good at the stuff...you know...those kinds of things.”

Rambo eyed the brightly-coloured stack of paperbacks lying in a neat heap on the corner. The one on the top showed a custard-coloured woman of generous proportions curled up under a full moon. Her maroon saree falling off her naked body in unseen lusty winds. Coils of dark hair spelled out the title “Cursed Love: Union of The Living and The Dead.”

“Do you read this stuff?” Rambo asked Chakladar.

“Me?” Chakladar looked offended, “Of course not!” he exclaimed. “I have taste. But he's doing this new supernatural series,” the printer said conversationally, pointing at the

stack of paperbacks, “some English film with vampires and whatnot has become a hit, he says, so now everyone wants stuff like that. Dead people fucking big women, hah...”

Chakladar chuckled. “Whatever will they think of next.”

Rambo couldn't tell whether the printer was for or against dead people fucking big women, but he reckoned it probably didn't matter to Chakladar much. What kind of porn his discerning readership wanted to jerk-off to, was their business, as long as Ma Tara Printing Works was publishing the biggest hits of the season.

“Got a good artist too,” the printer continued, “young boy, he was starving almost. Came looking for work. Thought I'd try him out. He's doing good work. And I've got him exclusively, see that title he did with the hair? All the letters spelled like that— ‘Cursed Love,’ with hair!”

He looked at Rambo with such obvious expectation that he hadn't the heart to disappoint him.

“Yes, yes. Very nice, I expect he works for cheap too,” he added, unable to resist the small barb.

“Oh you know how it is, overheads, costing, it's very hard for the small business man in this communist-eat-communist city,” he sighed theatrically. Then he looked at Rambo and continued in more slippery tones, “Got some new clients too, the new books are doing well. You don't want to hang around? Probably talk to them? Could be good for business, that could,” he added conscientiously.

Rambo sighed. Okay, so this was what it was about. The old man was angling for information. But Chakladar was one of nature's corkscrews and took way too long to come to the point. In the past, which wasn't so long ago and the memory of those empty-pocketed days was still fresh on his mind, Rambo Maity was known to hang around Ma Tara Printing Works, sidling up to customers who bought those cheaply-coloured porno

novellas and whisper things like, “Real, live ones sir. Better than reading. Get the real thing, cheap rate. Promise, best virgin college girls, Anglo-chicks, whatever you like....”

They were poor men. Slaking their lust thirst in an imaginatively rendered tale of forbidden love in stylised language is all they could afford. But sometimes Rambo had been successful. One or two of them had steady, if small jobs and could afford the measly two, three hundred that Maity could haggle out of them. Some of the others, men without means living off the edge of whatever gamble life threw their way, came back to him later. They remembered the promise. When a windfall of some sort happened they came back for the real virgin college girls, the anglo-chicks, their minds having had time to embroider the fantasy of mini-skirt wearing, english-speaking meaty-thighed girls just like the ones they watched go past every minute of every day and dreamed of fucking in the night.

He had done decent business out of Ma Tara Printing Works, he couldn't deny. That was one reason the old printer hated him. Rambo thought it was quite funny that the old printer was trying to use this link, the cause for so much of their past tension, as an entry point into the more recent and favourable Life and Times of Rambo Maity, Pimp.

He took out the two photos of Lalee from his shiny black folder and handed them to the printer. He had asked Lalee to get professional photographs taken, with better clothes and what not, hell he even gave her money for it, but there was no point in waiting. In his profession, time was quite literally, money. And the photographs weren't all that bad. They had a kind of rustic charm.

“Could you do a separate page with these two and I'll just attach it to the catalogue?”

he asked the printer.

“What, these?” The printer looked at him. “Looks like the old stuff. Not as, what you may call it, ‘posh’ as the rest of your girls.”

“Yeah, I’ll get some new ones soon. But no point waiting till you’ve redecorated is there? If you have garage space, start renting it. Not wait for the painter to swing by, I always say.”

“Okay, if you like. I’ll charge you for it mind. Nothing comes for free,” he said sagely and added, “could do you a brochure. Quite the thing these days I understand, a brochure. You can’t be running around with that bulky catalogue, maybe just a leaflet, with the best girls to hand out to people. Give them a taste. Could print your name and number and everything on it.”

Rambo liked the sound of it. The business card was all very well, but the brochure might be a better idea. He narrowed his eyes, “How much is it going to cost me?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Tell you what, I’ll do you a sample, see the work and then decide. You know me, my work speaks for itself, you see the quality of the design, paper, ink and then we’ll talk. My son got a computer you know, he does all the designing on the computer machine now. All very neat and modern.”

“Yes, but don’t make it too expensive. I’m not actually made of money,” Rambo said.

“Sure could have fooled me,” said the printer with an awkward laugh, “but come on, how long have I seen you hanging around here, you didn’t look like you got enough to eat. And now look at you. Well, everyone has their trade-secrets, or secrets anyway. Here’s the tea. Bhoga, get a table and put them on here.”

This Bhoga did, sneaking a glance at the pictures of Lalee in the printer’s hand.

“Eh, she’s very dark,” Bhoga scrunched up his nose.

“Who the fuck asked you?” Rambo said.

“Go do something useful,” the printer dismissed Bhoga who skulked away gazing at the pictures till he could. He had spent an inspirational and highly motivational ten days leafing through Rambo’s new catalogue over and over again as it was being set. It had

made a deep imprint on his young and agile mind. Bhoga was secretly a voracious reader and had a formidable vocabulary that would have impressed a Sanskrit Pundit of the old school. This was entirely due to the fact that he had made a detailed candle lit study of every porno paperback Ma Tara Printing Works had ever published, and of these, there were a great many. And since the proud heritage of porno paperbacks is using a high flown stylised and Sanskritized Bangla that has survived in these perilously modern times, what Bhoga graduated with was a considerable vocabulary, highly trained imagination and a vast theoretical knowledge of what humans did in their spare time. Though it might be that his notion of the human anatomy was just a tad bit larger than life, and an exaggerated expectation of the things it could possibly be persuaded to do. As great as having an active imagination is for a growing lad too poor to be part of the internet generation, pictures always help. And Rambo's catalogue had come as a blessing. But mostly what it taught Bhoga was that he needed to be very rich while he was still young to really test his theoretical knowledge on the touchstone of experience. As such he felt he knew what he was talking about.

"He's right you know," Chakladar continued unsolicited, "still I suppose you've got all sorts. So some people like dark girls? Like African girls?"

"No, no," Rambo muttered absently, "that's for cold countries, where the girls are white as snow. Hair so blonde that it's almost white, they like darker girls I suppose. Here, it's generally fair girls, white girls, Russians, North Easterners, Nepali, Thai girls...."

"So why this one?"

Rambo opened his mouth to answer and then realised he needn't answer to Chakladar about anything, and having realised that went ahead anyway, "She's got spirit, er..." and here he floundered, not sure what he meant exactly, "the girl's got something, I mean,

there's something about her...you know, got that thing..." Rambo was waving his hands in thin air.

"Yeah, I know," said the printer sullenly. "I know what you mean. She's got that thing."

"Yeah," said Rambo, still lost on thought, "that thing." He was just turning this over in his mind when a loud crash confirmed that the time has indeed come to leave rusty shop signs behind and move with the times. The tin signage of Ma Tara Printing Works lay lopsided on the street, half of it face down in the drain, along with the proprietor's name.

He turned around and faced the scowling old printer and said, "Your name's mud," and laughed far too loudly for Chakladar's comfort.

Chapter VI

Lalee stood in front of her spotted mirror with a small bottle of mercurochrome in her hands. She was surveying the damage. It was not easy coming home with virtually no money in the middle of the night. And when she finally reached, sleep hadn't come easy. Nature hadn't designed Lalee to take humiliation lying down. It was at once her greatest strength and her worst weakness. She lay on her bed watching the light break through the grey smog outside, her mind a rage of anger, shame and panic. She had lost five hundred rupees. It was a big sum. More than that, it was her ticket to getting better clients via Rambo Maity. A rummage through the rusty biscuit tin that she hid behind the miniature idols of her various gods and goddesses in the small alcove by the mirror had produced the money from Rambo's client yesterday and a little less than two hundred Rupees in small notes. Lalee stood for a long time with the money in her hand, wondering if she should spend any of this on clothes. It was such a flimsy thing— clothes, and what would she do if she was suddenly sick, couldn't work and had to pay rent? Instinctively she put a hand round her stomach. What if she was pregnant? Where would all the money come from? At some point she had drifted into sleep and awoke sometime around noon with a raging pain in her head and her face swollen in places. There was a bruise on her chin, her lips were cut in the corners and her wrists were black where she had been held. Lalee was wondering whether she ought to put some mercurochrome on her lips and her jaw, but the bloody thing was so red and stain-prone that she'd never get it off her face. She didn't want to be in pain and looking like a painted monkey at the same time. No, it'd have to be Dettol and some cover up job with makeup. The Shonagachhi whores didn't have much makeup.

Since a vast majority of them earned less than a hundred Rupees per customer, especially when they started out, they didn't spend time or energy getting dolled up for customers. It wasn't until much later that one could charge more, or solicit in better areas and demand a fixed rate, or at least refuse the penny fucks unless business was terribly slow. A girl at the local beauty parlour who shaped her eyebrows for cheap had given her some makeup the parlour had no use for anymore. It was a kindly gesture, except that most of the makeup was out of date, a few shades too light for Lalee's skin and almost empty. She began slapping it on to her face, wincing every time she hit a sore spot.

There was a hesitant knock on the door. Lalee paused and wondered who it might be, and tried to remember if she had an appointment she had forgotten about. A veteran of Shonagachhi, Lalee didn't run to open the door. It wasn't a pleasant hour in this part of town. This was the time of day when grouses were settled, gangs turned up to extort their pound of flesh or the police came by to gently show the world that against all evidence, they earned their keep. If nothing, Lalee thought, Malini might have come by again with some new scheme for her. At The Blue Lotus, she had made friends, laughed and cried with girls like herself who'd come to this life one way or the other. Now, she couldn't find it in herself to be involved in other people's lives. She was aware that many people in Shonagachhi, like Malini, did not take Lalee's aloofness well. As if Lalee was slighting them personally. This, coupled with her natural abrasiveness had not made her very popular of late. At times she regretted this lack of companionship, missed the camaraderie of being part of something. But then she'd think of people like Mohamaya— not one among The Blue Lotus' twenty-five girls, Chintu or Shefali mashi was there when the girl was killed, and it'd fill Lalee with a disaffection. Lately, it seemed to Lalee that Shonagachhi was pulling away from her as much as she was pulling away from

Shonagachhi. That was fine with her. She wanted to leave behind this stinking hovel, this shit hole of a red light area and all principalities thereof. In the new life she was planning for herself there was no room for people from here. She could not imagine that she'd miss this existence in any possible way. Also, the less people knew about her and Rambo Maity, the better. It wouldn't do to upset Chintu or Shefali mashi even though every once in a while Lalee wanted to do just that. When Rambo was a penniless pimp trying to harass, cajole, negotiate and trick by turns, he was barely noticeable in the background drama. There were hundreds like him. They were the vultures in this war field, but his sudden wealth and the almost magical self-possession that came with it was having a strange effect on these people.

After the events of last night, she felt a bit jumpy. In the few minutes that these considerations were running through her head the knocking on the door had stopped for long enough that Lalee thought she'd been imagining it. She stood absolutely still for a minute listening for the knock. And then it came. She went to the door and tried to see through the crack where the tin had rusted and split. All she could make out were canvas shoes, jeans and a plump arm. She opened the door.

On the other side of the door, Diti Banerjee was going through regressive stages of anxiety and self-doubt. She felt, not for the first time in the last twelve hours, that an undergraduate degree in sociology was a mistake. In her cresting and falling waves of regrets, she had averaged on that. It began with her deep apprehension of the task that she had been sent to do today and then steadily worked its way backwards through her short life's decisions, such as— shouldn't have interned, shouldn't have tried to pad the resume', shouldn't have taken up sociology, shouldn't have gone to college, high school was a

mistake, should have paid more attention in biology class, etc. She chanted this litany standing in front of Lalee's door with a clear plastic file clutched against her ample bosom like a shield.

What Lalee saw was a plump bespectacled young girl, dressed in a kurta and jeans with a name tag around her neck that she couldn't read because the girl had her arms tightly wound around herself. Fucking social workers again, Lalee thought. She took one look at Diti's file and papers and said, "Don't have the time, come later," and shut the door.

Diti had just opened her mouth to start the spiel that she had been coached so assiduously by the volunteer organisation and practiced herself in front of the mirror, and before she could make her vocals chords work, she was back to standing in front of a closed door. Diti, though not quick on her feet, was in her own way a determined girl. She took time to come to her decisions, and indeed sometimes arrived by accident, but she did not give up easily. For a moment, she looked at the various questionnaires that she had diligently crafted and which now nestled in her plastic folder. In the wild throes of inspiration, she had thought how innovative, insightful and piercing her questions were. How they balanced empathy and a keen questioning mind in such a manner that anybody would spill their secrets, amazed at how Diti could have such a grasp of the matter. It was an easy thing to feel in the comfort of her own bedroom when the only audience was her threadbare soft toys. Standing in front of Lalee's unopened door, she felt like an imbecile, and worse, an imposter. The fact of the matter was, Diti realised as soon as she got off the bus, that 'nice girls' simply didn't come to places like this. Her mother would kill her if she found out. As for her father— she didn't even want to imagine it. He'd go mental, absolutely berserk. They were okay with it when she announced that she was going to

intern with a very well known volunteer organisation but they hadn't asked what kind of work the organisation did. For them, the words “social-work” was a semantic symbol that conjured up hazy images of giving money to beggars and finding school books for pavement dwellers. Laudable acts, no doubt, but something that was looked askance at by the respectable middle class. They felt that while these things were all very well for rich housewives to spend time on, a decent middle class girl should get on with passing her exams and avoiding men. But a few snide remarks aside, they had left her to it, mostly because Diti had explained that an internship on her resume would greatly increase her chances of getting a job.

Of course, they had no idea that Diti would be sent to spread awareness in Shonagachhi. It was pure chance that Diti was allotted a negligible post in the Shonagachhi mission being carried out by Sampurna at the time. Her boss, whom Diti thought of as the ‘The Dragon Lady,’ was a gruff, formidable woman with a permanent frown. While junior members at Sampurna retained some of the charitable constitution that had first led them to such work, the bosses seemed to have burned their sweet temper in the zealous fires of doing good. Diti was constantly plagued by the notion that she was somehow letting everyone down, and the wrath of The Dragon Lady is what she feared the most. Lalee’s slamming door had managed to take away what was left of her self esteem and confidence.

Inside, Lalee’s old battered cellphone had started vibrating on the table like an epileptic having a fit on cocaine. It twanged like her now frayed temper. When she answered, Rambo Maity barked, “Been ringing for two minutes, what were you doing? Anyway, got a job tonight, okay? Can do?”

Lalee mumbled, trying to keep up with what was happening.

“What?” yelled Maity, “can’t understand you. Is it a bad line? Fucking government cellular service. Listen, about tonight. I need you to remember that it’s not like your usual two penny jobs. Don’t be late and please, make an effort, okay?”

Lalee was about to give an importunate answer when Rambo interrupted her. “Can't hear a fucking thing. You better be good and ready madam, I gave you five hundred Rupees for this. I expect to see returns. So nine at The Park Hotel lobby.”

Lalee managed to squeeze a word in edgewise, “The one on Park Street?”

“Yes, of course, how many Park Hotels are there?”

“But,” Lalee interjected, “it’s a fancy hotel. I’ve never been there.”

“Heh, welcome to your new life Missy. See you at nine. Don't be late. These people don't like to be kept waiting or it'll be my head on the plate. A Russian girl will be with you tonight, her name is Svetlana. Okay? Okay.”

Before Lalee could say anything, anything at all, the line went dead. Fuck me, new life indeed, she thought. Just my luck that I am here to greet it with a fucking swollen face. She looked around her room and tried desperately to remember all the clothes she had, and if any of them would be serviceable for tonight. She walked over to her bed and pulled out a tin trunk and began to rummage through it, when it occurred to her that someone was still knocking on the door.

Lalee opened the door with an expression of severe annoyance that made Diti retreat a few steps.

“I just told you I don’t have the time,” she said.

Determined to get the spiel out of her mouth now that the door was open, Diti said, “Umm... I’ve come from Sampurna, we are a volunteer agency and I am here to tell you

about your legal rights and here I have some..." she tried to open her file and continue speaking at the same time, with the result that all of her papers scattered on to the street.

Lalee sighed, what imbeciles they send these days, she thought.

"Questionnaires," said Diti, holding them up by the handfuls as if they would explain everything, "questionnaires for you to fill." Then thinking that the word 'questionnaires' might need some explanation Diti added, "That is a page full of questions, for you to, umm answer."

Lalee stared at her for a second. This round-faced girl had to be the most gormless one she had encountered to date. Of all the doors in all of Shonagachhi, this one had to knock on mine, Lalee thought.

"I made up the questions myself," Diti added helpfully.

"Oh well done," Lalee said with so much sarcasm that Diti's ears burned red with embarrassment.

"And I'm supposed to fill it all out for you, eh? Tell you all about myself and all about this business, because I just have nothing better to do than fill up the data files in your office?"

Diti opened and closed her mouth several times, but found to her dismay that she had nothing to say to this obviously angry woman. Lalee had just about had enough; in the best of times she had little sympathy for social workers and now her face was throbbing in places, she had lost five hundred rupees and she was feeling extremely nervous about the job tonight. Diti's eyes, round with apprehension, only served to unleash the rant that was broiling up inside her since the fracas of last night.

"Why? Why would I do that? Are you going to pay me? At least the customers know the rules. They pay for our time. And you social workers turn up whenever you like and expect us to spill our secrets, give up our time so that you can make reports about us and

fund more missions to come and bother us. What do you think? That we're animals in a zoo for you to come around with your clip boards and pens and make notes about? Or that we're some kind of entertainment? You look like a proper girl, are you in college?"

Diti nodded in mute terror.

"Know what we call that in this area? Virgin college girl. Know how much you're worth around here? Who'd miss you eh, if you were never seen again? Do your parents know you're here? How long do you think it'll take me to summon some people and give you a promising start to your new career here in Shonagachhi?"

It had not occurred to Diti that these were empty threats, that no woman in the competitive world of Shonagachhi would be that bothered to increase the general competition by one unless they were getting very well paid for it. Diti was scared, genuinely deep down scared. Not only by Lalee's threats, but with the gently congealing terror of realising for the first time that she was all alone in front of a ramshackle shed in Shonagachhi with a feral looking prostitute at midday, and she was completely and utterly out of her depth. Staring at Lalee's face, Diti blurted out before she had any time to think, "You're hurt."

The unwarranted wave of anger left Lalee as suddenly as it had come, leaving her feeling guilty and ashamed in the face of Diti's slowly widening eyes. Lalee breathed out. You ought to be ashamed of terrorising a young girl, she told herself, and with those threats. In truth, she wouldn't wish a life of Shonagachhi on her worst enemy, much less threaten a young girl who had only come to do her job. She took a good look at Diti; glasses, sneakers, backpack, and countless therapeutic stones on her slightly plump fingers. It happened sometimes, when Lalee saw a girl blessed enough not to be in her shoes,

something stirred within. Afterwards, she hated herself for the bile she knew she was carrying around. At those times she reminded herself that housewives died as frequently as prostitutes, students and children as often and brutally raped as whores. It had taken her time, but she understood this rage better now than she did in the early days. The overwhelming wave of anger and frustration at the way the world worked, at the cards that were handed to her and what had followed; if she accorded any place to that she would drown in bile, as she often had in the small hours of daylight when she lay stark naked facing herself inside herself. The dark rage, and the subsequent profound sadness. No time for that now, she reminded herself.

“Yes, I am,” Lalee said to a still staring Diti. She wanted to make it up to this girl, to reach out somehow and apologise of her behaviour, but couldn’t find the words. After her outburst and assertion that she had no time to spare, it would seem strange if she offered to fill out the questionnaires.

Diti said in a soft voice, “I have some antiseptic and some bandages in my bag, do you want some?”

Lalee was not prepared for such an offer. But it gave her an opportunity to smooth things over. She asked, “You carry bandages in your bag?” And after further thought, added, “What did you think was going to happen to you here?”

Diti sighed inwardly. The travails of being the only daughter of a hypochondriac father had its moments. Other girls carried makeup in their handbags, Diti carried portable first aid. Regularly curated and updated by her father who rifled through her handbag without warning in an absent minded and innocuous way that Diti found deeply violative but hadn't the heart or vocabulary to address. The concept of personal privacy hadn't infiltrated the Banerjee household. In all the time that she had been lugging the first aid bag, she couldn't remember it being useful to herself save on one or two minor occasions. It was usually in

the service of others around her, such as when someone in her class was asking for an aspirin or a pain killer or an anti-nauseating thing or a band aid in the total hope of not finding one, Diti would take out her big bag of medicine supplies and hand over the needful. This had earned her the nick name ‘hospital,’ and probably also contributed to her lack of popularity. It is only because she went to a reputable college full of decently brought up youngsters that she did not earn the nickname ‘drug lord’.

She began taking out the bottle of antiseptic, a roll of gauze and cottonwool from her bag. Closer to, it was impossible to ignore the signs of violence on Lalee’s face. One side of her lower lip was swollen and her chin had an unmistakable dark bruise. Diti didn't dare ask Lalee what had happened to her. Now that she had regained some composure, she refrained from saying anything at all. But her imagination was throwing up images of unspecified atrocities as she applied antiseptic to cotton, cut out a piece of gauze, carefully placed the cotton on the gauze and held it up to Lalee.

Lalee was touched, and given her behaviour towards this girl, felt all the more guilty. She mumbled a ‘thank you’ as she took the cotton from Diti, who in turn blushed deeply being as unused to being thanked as Lalee was to charity.

Diti looked around for something to say, “Were you packing?” she pointed at the open trunk still at the foot of the bed.

“No,” Lalee said, “I was just looking for some clothes. I have this...thing in the evening,” she said. Then she thought for a minute and asked, “You wouldn’t happen to know where I could find some sexy clothes, would you?”

Diti felt quite baffled by such a question. If anything, she’d suppose that Lalee would know far more about sexy clothes than she did. “Erm... I don’t know, maybe you could go to New Market or A.C. Market?” she hazarded. Her mother, very helpfully, had bought every article of clothing Diti owned.

“No, I’m trying not to buy anything. I don’t want to spend money,” Lalee said.

“Couldn’t you borrow something from a friend?” Diti had heard such things happened between women friends, though her mother thought it sacrilegious.

“I don’t think that’ll work,” Lalee said and left it at that. “Anyway, what was it that you wanted to fill out?”

Diti was surprised that Lalee showed any interest in the questionnaires, but she didn’t want to let the opportunity go. She took out a few papers out of her file and said, “I have this leaflet to give you. We’re trying to raise awareness about women’s legal rights here and I also have some questionnaires I would like you to fill.”

“Why are you doing this?” Lalee asked.

Several replies came to Diti, most of them from the volunteers’ handbook, but she paused and then decided to go with the truth.

“I’ve been volunteering at Sampurna, and need to get a reference from them. I’m going to apply to colleges abroad. I really need a good letter from them, and it’s not going so well...umm,” she trailed miserably.

Lalee looked at her and said, “Abroad?”

“America,” replied Diti.

“Oh,” Lalee said, “you want to go to America.” In any other circumstance, such an admission would have only worked to piss Lalee off. It would be a perfect opening for her to be catty, sarcastic and mean. The lack of opportunities in her own circumstances didn’t make Lalee very charitable towards people who had slightly more than her. Kindness was in short supply in the life Lalee led and she normally felt that she needed all of it for herself. But looking at this girl, her round bespectacled face, her various astrologically potent rings, and red stringed amulets tightly wound around her wrists, stopped her from

being her naturally vitriolic self. She touched the antiseptic soaked cotton to her jaw again.

Hope was a good thing. Everyone needed something to look forward to.

“Okay, what is it that you actually have to do?” Lalee said, before this whole new and unnatural altruism drowned her in its path. “I don’t have much time, mind. I have something big tonight.”

“Well, for now, I mean the agency has this campaign going, umm awareness campaign. I’m supposed to tell you about your legal rights, like I said.”

“Fine, tell me about my rights then,” Lalee said absently, and turned around to look through her trunk once more.

Diti cleared her throat and was just about to begin when there was another knock on the door. Suddenly afraid that it might be a customer and that she’d be in the middle of it, Diti darted a scared look at Lalee. Lalee on the other hand felt extremely annoyed that today of all days the whole world needed a word with her.

Grumbling under her breath she went to the door and parted it just a little. Outside Malini stood flanked by two girls, one of whom Lalee had seen give a speech in the demonstration after Mohamaya’s death. She met Malini’s eyes and had to open the door wider.

“Oh?” she said.

“Can we come in or are you busy?” Malini tried to look inside.

Lalee thought having Diti around might serve some purpose after all. Malini was an activist type. Maybe she’ll be happy enough with Lalee’s contribution to Sampurna's representative that she won’t stay too long.

Malini stared directly at Diti and Diti instinctively buried her head in the questionnaires in front of her.

“She has come from Sampurna, with some questions for me,” Lalee put forth both as excuse and appeasement.

“You’re with Sampurna? What do you do?” Malini asked Diti.

“Intern,” mumbled Diti.

“You know Deepa madam?”

“Yes,” Diti replied. Deepa Marhatta was her much dreaded boss and a universally feared senior women’s rights activist.

“Good, good,” Malini turned to Lalee.

“We’re having a candle light march, the media has been informed. We need you to come.”

“For what?” asked Lalee.

“For Mohamaya of course. ‘Justice for Mohamaya’— is what we’re calling it.”

“I’d be there but today I have an appointment.”

“Lucky for you then, it’s tomorrow,” Malini said firmly.

Lalee searched for an excuse. Malini wasn’t going to take no for an answer. This time she had even brought reinforcements. She noticed Diti was staring at her wide eyed. In the collective stare of four pairs of eyes, Lalee relented.

“Okay. I’ll be there,” she said.

“Good, it’s at seven in the evening. We gather at the Collective’s office around six-thirty.”

After Malini left with her entourage, Lalee turned her attention back to Diti.

“What were you saying?”

“These questionnaires? We're supposed to give them to you. That's what they want to see, once I get back. My boss, I mean, she'll want these. It really depends on how many we can get filled out.”

“And how many do you have already?” Lalee continued half-attentively, now preoccupied with not only what to wear but also how to avoid the march altogether.

“Umm, none.”

“Why?”

“Umm...”

“Oh stop mumbling girl, you'll never get to America mumbling like that.”

“I mean, I was scared to come here,” Diti said. “I mean if my parents found out...” she couldn't bring herself to complete the sentence, “so, I didn't end up finishing the project.”

“I see. Anyway, you were going to tell me about my rights. Go on, tell me, I'm listening,” Lalee said as she started bunching up her long dark hair in a bun standing in front of her cracked spotted mirror. “Go on,” she repeated while stretching a bobby pin with her teeth and pinning an old fashioned wave of hair behind her ear.

Diti took out a garish yellow handout from her folder and began reading like a schoolgirl giving a presentation in class. “Ten rights all women should know: number one: You cannot be arrested after sunset.”

“Whaa...?” Lalee asked, slipping out of her nighty and hoping on one foot, one end of the dress caught in her ankle.

“You cannot be arrested after sunset,” reiterated Diti earnestly.

Lalee was standing in front of her, naked except for a rather shapeless colour drained maroon panty on her bum. Diti had never seen anyone get naked in front of her except young children and her extremely old grandmother when she was given a bath by the ayahs. Even when she took swimming lessons as a teenager she had gone to the genteel

middle-class sort of establishment where shower cubicles were modestly panelled off to give the girls privacy. That someone could, so unselfconsciously strip herself in front of a stranger was an act she could not fathom.

She instinctively averted her eyes as Lalee pulled on a bra and leaned forward to do the clasp. A yellowing saggy thing, but Diti was surprised to note that it was same as the ones Diti's mother bought for her, with a small embroidery rose bud dropping on the cleavage.

She lost her thread, in the face of Lalee's nakedness. It was impressive, even to Diti. Lalee was taller than Diti, dark and had long hair that uncoiled all over her back though it had been gathered in an unceremonious bun at the moment. Lalee's shoulder bones jutted out of her back.

"Can't be arrested after sunset? Ha. Have you tried saying it to anyone else around here? Good, because they'd laugh at you."

"It's the law, they can't arrest women after sunset. It says here."

"And who'll protest if they do?"

"Your lawyer?" Diti said, not even convincing herself.

Lalee looked incredulous and amused at the same time. Diti added hurriedly, "It's number two, see, you have right to free legal aid," and waved the yellow bill like Moses' commandments. "Number three is you cannot be called to the police station," Diti added for good measure.

It took a lot to silence Lalee, but the sheer volume of incredulity she felt at the naïveté of this girl, made her quite unable to argue the point further. She blinked a few times and then said, "Well, go on. This is unbelievable."

Chapter VII

For the second time that day, Diti found herself in unfamiliar territory. Shonagachhi was quite enough adventure for one day, but Diti had trailed after Lalee as she left to find a dress for the evening. As she sat next to Lalee on a bus, unaware of where she was going, Diti searched for a good reason to justify this impromptu trip. She was only halfway through the list when Lalee said she had to leave, and rather than lose the opportunity, now that she was here, Diti just prolonged the conversation. Lalee's responses of disgust, delight and annoyance were quite expressive and Diti was acutely aware of the stares she was receiving as she walked with Lalee to the main road. Her heart almost stopped when she thought she had spotted a distant aunt walking towards her. It wasn't her aunt, but the anxiety and paranoia of being in Shonagachhi came back to Diti. So when the bus came and Lalee moved towards it, Diti climbed after her on an impulse. There was an awkward moment as Lalee looked at her, sighed and said, "Still not done with the list? Fine, go on," in a resigned sort of way.

The bus was empty and they sat on side by side seats. Lalee said, "So are there any more rights I should know about or will you start with your questions now?"

Lalee had said this quite innocently, but Diti felt she was being gently ridiculed. After a minute she said quietly, "You don't really believe me, do you?"

"It's a bit far fetched, I have to say. I mean..." Lalee began conversationally, but Diti interrupted her in a hurt tone of voice.

"Why would I make this all up? Why would they create an organisation, not make any profit out of it and send false information out to you?"

“Well, I’m not saying it’s false information, am I?”

“But you don’t buy it either,” Diti said, “I can tell.”

Lalee didn’t reply immediately, then she said, “Listen, I don’t disbelieve you; the intentions and profits of your organisation I’ll leave out of this discussion for the moment,” Lalee raised her hand again as Diti fidgeted, “no, let me finish, Shonagachhi is a better place today than it used to be, and a better place for us, because of some of those NGOs. It wasn’t easy for them to break through. Trust doesn’t come easy and it’s not easily given there either. But those people earned it, every day, in many ways, and because of them and because we let them, we live in a slightly better world. So yes, I don’t doubt that there are organisations and people out here in this city that probably give a fuc... eh... give two hoots about us, but don’t ask me to bet on it. Now, about the laws you were telling me about: honestly, I’m happy you told me. But I also know that none of it will matter. Most girls don’t know this stuff and as long as they don’t know, they can’t protest.”

Diti’s eyes sparkled, “Exactly. That’s why it’s important to let people know. Now you know. And We’re trying to spread awareness so that more and more girls, not only in Shonagachhi but everywhere, know what rights they have.”

“Yes, and that’s a good thing. Like AIDS. Organisations like yours spread that awareness, gave out free condoms, got free check up vans stationed outside our doors. That was a good thing. But you know what really happens, even today? A girl asks her customer to put on a condom, he goes to the whore next door.”

“Then she has to demand that he use a condom too,” said Diti doggedly.

“Yes, but that’s the only way it works. Maybe the whore next door hasn’t eaten properly in two days, maybe her child has a fever. Yes, we do have children, they live with us, in that shit hole, sleeping or doing their homework while their mothers are in the next

room, doing what we do. So tell me now,” Lalee paused, “sorry what was your name again?”

“Diti.”

“Diti, tell me again, will she refuse the customer or take a chance and earn the money? Money that means precious food, rent, pimp’s cut, police’s bribe, doctor’s fees or medical bills. Even if the girl next door refuses, the one next to it won’t. There will always be someone who’s hungry or desperate enough to not refuse.”

Diti was silent.

“It’s not a secret,” Lalee continued, “I’m not telling you anything new. The senior people in your company know all about this. Sampurna? wasn’t it? They know all right, they’ve been around for a long time. These people who have earned their stripes in this job know this and work around it. Doesn’t help with optimism, but then, what does.”

Diti was staring at her feet. She looked up and out of the window. Suddenly she was feeling that she had been sent on a fool’s errand, and the whole thing was an elaborate sham.

Lalee continued, but in a soft tone of voice, “So now you see? Even if I knew about these rights, it doesn’t really help me. If a police car turns up outside my door at 2 am and a couple of drunk officers try to manhandle me into the jeep, It wouldn’t matter if I told them that I cannot be ‘arrested,’ after dark. Simply because they’re stronger than me, in every way you can imagine. And arresting is a picnic compared to what I’d imagine happening if such an incident occurred. And Diti, there’s far worse things than police cars and arresting. Far far worse. Hell, it’s a blessing to be in custody if the OC is a decent sort and if you know what else waits out there for you,” Lalee stopped, exhausted.

Diti was still staring outside the window. Eventually she said, “So are you saying that I should stop going around distributing this? I mean, I still have to, because of the job, But if it doesn’t make a difference....”

“No, of course you shouldn’t stop,” Lalee replied, with a little more passion than she had intended. “I mean, you can stop if you like,” she said giving a little shrug, “but I don’t think it’s a waste.”

“Why?”

“Because if you tell them for long enough, they’ll all know, and come to believe it. Then one day when one of those rights is violated, someone will protest. At first it will not work, but the opposite number will know that we know, and one day, after perhaps years, it will work.”

“You think so?” Diti said.

“Maybe, might be. How should I know? Perhaps it will. Anyway, I’m not supposed to know these things, you educated, upper class people are supposed to.” She laughed, “Gutter rats like me are just supposed to be pleurably dirty in bed and then disappear into thin air after the customer is done. Trouble is, we don’t.”

“You’ve been there a long time?” Diti asked tentatively.

“Yes.”

Diti had a lot more to say, a lot more to ask, but couldn’t find the right words for it.

Lalee got up and said, “I’m getting off here, my stop,” and started walking towards the exit.

“Wait,” Diti yelled after her.

Lalee stopped.

“I mean,” Diti said, suddenly aware that she was the centre of attention, “I can get off here too. I don’t know where this bus goes anyway. Will you mind if I came along?”

Lalee rolled her eyes, “If you must.”

When they were walking towards the New World Fashions Store with Diti trailing behind her, Lalee felt it was a good thing that the girl came along. It’d probably make her errand easier.

New World Fashion Store did a roaring trade in all kinds of clothing for the entire family. A gust of cold air hit them in the face as Lalee opened the glass door. An old man in a white kurta, white cap and pan-stained mouth got up from a stool on the other side half a minute too late to open the door for them. Diti gave him an awkward smile, and the man returned an odd look. In his book, well brought up girls were not to smile at strangers like that. Diti noticed that they were the only two women above the age of seven who were not wearing a black burqa. As Lalee walked purposefully ahead of her, Diti caught herself wondering if any one knew she was a prostitute, and felt ashamed of herself.

But it was not an easy thought to dislodge. Lalee wasn’t the first prostitute Diti had seen. They were around, though not very much in the world Diti and her family inhabited. Once, on her way home in the family car after a watching a classical music recital which had run unexpectedly late, she noticed a few prostitutes standing around the shadowy grounds of the Lake Club. At a red traffic light, a couple of ladies walked up to the car in front of theirs. They were wearing short dresses and fishnet stockings, but had rather deep voices. Diti had stared at them, confused about how sex with a transvestite would work, or who would willingly pay for it. Her mother looked away and her father stared fixedly on the road, both embarrassed to witness such negotiations in the presence of their daughter. As one of them bent forward to the rolled down window, her black panties flashed. Diti

remembered looking away and feeling vaguely ashamed. Till then she had thought that transvestites, or hijras as they were called in Bengali, went to the house where a baby was born, banging on their drums, singing and dancing in their ill-fitting saris and blouses. Very uncomfortably the homeowners would pay them to go away. If the baby turned out to be a transvestite, they'd claim it as their own and take it away to raise. Her grandmother had once told her— that being blessed by hijras as a baby was lucky, or that the first clay to be laid on the idol of Durga before the autumn festival, had to come from a whorehouse. Before today, she hadn't given much thought to these stories.

She was only a teenager at the time. It was different now, she'd gone to work with Sampurna on her own, without her parents' consent and she'd walked into Lalee's home knowing what she did for a living. But that was Shonagachhi; though she didn't have enough courage in the beginning to show up at Shonagachhi, she had read Sampurna's reports on it. All of them said the same things— a makeshift town that had almost been created as needs dictated. A wall here, a roof there, an adjoining shed, a semi private bathroom— it was not a town constructed but a network that grew, like the swampy mangrove jungles of the Sunderbans. A floating, interconnected mushroom farm of a settlement, with more of it hidden than what could be seen. In Shonagachhi, Lalee was just another prostitute, but here in 'the outer world,' walking behind her, Diti kept wondering involuntarily if anyone around them also knew. Could they make out? Could they tell? Lalee wasn't made-up, and she wasn't wearing, you know, that kind of clothes. Diti had been surprised to see that unlike the night fairies of Lake Road she'd witnessed from her car, most girls and women in Shonagachhi wore what she thought of as 'normal' clothes, like any other lower middle-class woman. Not revealing, alluring, flashy clothes that she hadn't realised she'd expected them to wear. Walking with Lalee in an old Muslim part of town, made Diti feel paranoid in a way that she would have been able to justify. She was

looking around furtively, scanning the faces around her and feeling doubly self conscious. Everyone it seemed to her, was giving them funny looks. Lalee meanwhile had wandered to the Ladies' section with almost offensive nonchalance. Diti sidled closer to her.

"What do you think of this?" Lalee asked holding up a black lacy top.

"It's nice?" Diti hazarded.

Lalee left the garment with a sigh and began hunting through the sale bin.

Diti said, "What do you have tonight?"

Lalee was quiet for a few moments, wondering how to reply, "A job. At a nice place," she said, "I need to find something nice to wear."

Diti looked around the store, "Why did you come here? If you wanted to buy something there are nicer places than this."

Lalee smiled at her, "There's one very good reason for it," and left it at that. "How long will you work for Sampurna?" she asked, changing the subject.

"I don't think they'll keep me on if I can't get the reports done or the questionnaires filled out."

"It's not like they're paying you," Lalee said, "if you want, I can help you." Still rooting through the bin, she added, "I mean, I don't have a lot of time to spare, so you'll have to work around it. You can come by tomorrow but if I have a customer you'll have to wait."

"Really? I'll come," Diti said.

"Found it," Lalee held up a red garment that looked too small to Diti.

"How about this?" Lalee said looking at the price tag.

"How much is it?" Diti asked.

"Too much, but we'll see."

Diti hesitated for a moment and then said, “Umm, I have some money, you know, it’s not much but if you really need it...” When Lalee didn’t respond, Diti added, “It’s kind of my pocket money, so you can have it. It won’t be a problem.”

“I’d help you anyway,” Lalee said, “you don’t have to pay me. You need this stuff to study further, right? That’s a good enough reason for me.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Diti added hurriedly, “I mean, I wanted to tell you before. Before you said you’d help me that is. I don’t really need the money. I don’t go out that much.”

“You should. You’re in college. You should have fun.”

Fun had hitherto not been a regular feature in Diti’s life. She had about a few hundred Rupees to spare. She got a daily allowance from her mother for bus fares and lunch and tea, and because her mother was no fool it was exactly commensurate with her basic expenses in the normal course of a day. And because there is some rebellion hidden deep in every barely-adult heart, Diti had sought other ways of circumventing her mother’s hawk-eyed gaze. It was a long cherished dream of her parents, like every other middle class Bengali family, that their child would excel at one artistic endeavour. To this end, Diti had been enrolled in a classical dance institute where she had found out quite soon that she had no talent for dancing. The institute however was small and homely. Unable to tell her parents that she didn’t want to learn dancing after all, Diti continued to spend her Saturday afternoons at the institute, helping out with small organisational errands like scheduling classes and avoided any actual dancing. The monthly fee of three hundred Rupees accumulated in a secret pouch she carried around her at all times. She mostly used it thus far to buy books and on one occasion, some makeup that she had never ended up using. It was this secret stash of wealth that she offered Lalee, fearing that Lalee might need bailing out or planned to shoplift clothes from this store. It was one of the more unpleasant of the

paranoid thoughts that had occurred to Diti when she walked in after Lalee. She didn't want to be bailed out of jail by her family. That would be the end of her adventures.

With the red dress in hand, Lalee walked purposefully towards the cash counter. Diti followed, "Aren't you going to try it on? It looks a bit...small," she said.

"Good," said Lalee, "that should do the trick."

At the till, a man in a nondescript brown shirt was sitting behind the glass partition on a white formica stool. As he rang up the purchases, Diti noticed that Lalee was looking fixedly at a middle-aged man, in another corner of the shop who was very obviously ignoring her. The screen showed a bill of eight hundred and ninety, but Lalee did not pay attention to that, continuing to stare at the man at the other corner. Diti felt acutely uncomfortable. Many of the store attendants were taking an interest in Lalee's strange behaviour. She opened her bag and whispered, "Here, how much do you need? Lets just pay and get out of here," fumbling with the cash.

"Just wait," Lalee said quietly. After an interminable minute which Diti spent panicking, she saw a young shop boy was walking up to the cash counter with a chit of paper. A couple of other customers were queuing up behind them and peering above Diti's shoulders to see what was going on. The man at the cash took a look at the chit, put Lalee's clothes in a packet and quietly handed it over to her. Without looking back, Lalee walked straight towards the door.

Diti half-ran, half-stumbled out after Lalee. She threw a backward glance at the shop and said to Lalee, "What was that about?"

"What was what?" replied Lalee, not looking at her.

"What did you do? Did you do something wrong? They're not going to come after us, are they? You didn't pay," Diti said without pausing for breath.

Lalee smiled and said, “Oh relax, it’s fine,” so nonchalantly that it worried Diti even more.

“But what did you do?”

“Nothing. The owner is a client of mine. Sort of a regular,” Lalee said, looking satisfied, “I just had to remind him that.”

Diti was still staring at her as if she couldn’t believe it. Lalee said, “It’s not a big deal. He once left a card at my place. I’ve been seeing him for years, though he doesn’t come very often. I don’t think he expected to see me there,” she chuckled.

“Isn’t that a bit like...like blackmail?” Diti said doubtfully.

“No, it’s not. I didn’t threaten him, did I? I didn’t say a thing.”

Diti did not know how to respond to this, so she kept quiet. They had long left Marquis Street on which New World Fashion Store was located and were now walking the length of Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road. Most of the population was muslim and Diti felt as if she was in a different country altogether. Only a handful of women were on the street and all of them were wearing a Burqa. Diti felt odd, singled out and hyper conscious of herself. She did not consider herself prejudiced, much less religiously orthodox, and she felt ashamed of her own unease. Her family considered themselves liberal and secular, but perhaps some fears get ingrained in an unthinking, callous way. Running jokes, avoidance, “They’re not like us” or “they do things differently”— seep through the liberal cracks. Add to that stories of communal riots and the partition, and you’ve got yourself the modern secular person. Diti realised that Calcutta may be a city, but in so many ways it was still a village. The Muslims had their part of town, as did the Hindu Bengalis, the Anglos, the Gujratis and Rajasthanis and the Parsees. Though very little of the Parsee community had survived in the city. But to be fair the rich had their part of the town too, as did the poor and the middle class. Oh, and red light districts. She wondered how there were and if

anyone really new. Layer upon layer upon layer, thought Diti. It amazed her that having spent her entire life in this city she had never come to these parts of town, much less Shonagachhi. Before she could finish her train of thoughts, the very familiar Park Street lay right in front of them. Diti felt like an explorer, having arrived at a familiar road by entirely unfamiliar streets.

Lalee alighted from the bus one stop before her destination. Even though it was January, the oppressive heat inside the bus, the smell of sweat and the lurching slow motion of the vehicle, had made her severely nauseous. She felt she could not hold it in anymore, and if she didn't get out now, she'd retch all over the other passengers. She pushed her way to the front and stumbled out of the bus as soon as it had slowed to a halt. Immediately she felt a sharp shooting pain in her abdomen which disappeared as soon as it had come and left her feeling dizzy. She began to feel better as she walked slowly towards home in the almost-cool air of January. Calcutta after all never had the luxury of seeing a real winter. The most it managed was a season of not-so-hot. Lalee remembered the winters of her childhood in the village she was born. It was much colder than Calcutta. A thick fog lay on the fields on winter mornings and nights. It was drier there, a place of arid red earth. Winters made her think of home, the real home. She remembered how the air had a hint of tin, even in early Novembers.

Turning from the main road into the alleys of Shonagachhi she saw children lazily hanging out in the streets. The light had begun to fade from the sky but it wasn't dark yet. Soon, the face of Shonagachhi won't include children. The lights would come on, and upbeat music would float out of the brothels as the girls thronged the street, cajoling,

calling, negotiating, laughing. The children were one aspect of Shonagachhi that people who came for the first time didn't expect. As they didn't expect the old men and women, servants, grocery shops and tea stalls. Once a customer—a boy barely nineteen years old—a college student from what he had told Lalee, remarked how he was completely surprised to see the children and the grocery shops here. At first Lalee had smiled at him and said, "Well, you've come during the afternoon. At night, you don't notice these things that much," but had been unable to resist adding, "what did you expect to see in a place where women have sex with men five, six times a day? It is how babies are made, you know." The young man reddened, and Lalee had felt she could have held her tongue.

A girl of about seven or eight was sitting on a short wall with her legs dangling in front of her. In a pink frock and pig tails she looked even younger. She eyed Lalee as she walked past. On an impulse Lalee stopped in front of her and asked, "What are you doing outside? Where's your mother?" The girl jumped off the wall in a flash and dashed into the alley behind her. In half a minute she could be seen no more. Lalee, slightly puzzled by this strange desertion, heard a hoarse cackle behind her. She turned around and saw the old midwife, the Dhai Ma, of her neighbourhood. They helped the women of Shonagachhi give birth. Of course, in these days, the women preferred to go to the hospitals if they had a bit of money or were modern in their temperament. Especially the younger ones, and the government hospitals, thought horribly unprepared to do their job, were cheap. But some of the older mothers to be and the ones who had already had one experience with government hospitals put their faith in the Dhai Ma instead. At least, it would be in the comfort of their own homes, in the hands of someone they knew instead of a doctor who didn't know them and quite possibly didn't much care if they lived or died.

The older woman pointed at her belly and said, "At long last, eh? Lalee rani?" and beamed at her with a mouth that had lost most of its front teeth.

“What are you talking about?” replied Lalee with sudden annoyance.

The old woman smiled even wider. She nodded suggestively towards Lalee’s breasts and said, “The left one is slightly larger than the right one, yes? My eyesight is not what it used to be. But you know what that means? It’s a girl,” she announced as if a birth had already occurred. “Everywhere else they run after the boys, not here. Mark my words, the daughters stand by you in your old age. The sons won’t. Look at me, did my son do anything for me? No, in the end...” Lalee started walking before the old woman had finished her sentence. If Lalee had stayed any longer she would begin to mouth off at the old woman, who Lalee knew, meant no harm.

The old woman called after Lalee’s retreating back, “Come see me tomorrow when you have some time. I’ll make sure you have no trouble in the coming months.”

The words raged around Lalee’s head as she walked home. After the initial feelings of sudden anger, her brain seemed to have gone into repeat mode. Turning over the old woman’s words in her head, till they meant nothing, till they became big blobs of words spoken without any purport, any context.

She rounded the corner where the narrow alley bent towards her home and saw a man standing by the door, half hidden by the dusk. She couldn’t see his face. As she neared, Tilu Shau looked up at her.

“What are you doing here?” Lalee asked.

“I’ve...I’ve been waiting for you,” he replied.

“You could have called. I have to go on another appointment, so come later,” Lalee turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

Tilu Shau was standing by the doorway blocking it, “You’re doing business outside now?” he said. “Since when? Where are you going?”

Lalee didn’t like his proprietorial tone. “That’s none of your business,” she said and tried to close the door.

Tilu Shau held the door before it could close. “Lalee please,” but what it was he wanted from Lalee he couldn’t say. After a few seconds all he managed to say was, “I need to talk to you.”

“About what?”

Tilu didn’t have a clue. What could he tell Lalee? That he didn’t want her to spend time with other clients? That he wanted her to be with him? That he loved her?

“Look, I’ve really got to go okay? If you want a session call me tomorrow,” she said.

Tilu did not know what to say anymore. He walked away from Lalee’s door and faded into the dusk.

Lalee closed the door, feeling entirely perplexed by Tilu’s unannounced arrival and strange manner. Whatever it was, there wasn’t time for it anymore.

She looked at her cellphone. Almost seven o’clock and two missed calls from Rambo Maity. Maity could wait. She had no desire to talk to him at the moment. She stood once more in front of her speckled mirror. The swelling, thankfully, had gone down, and the faint bruises were not so noticeable against the natural darkness of her skin. Only careful observation would reveal them. Lalee sighed. No one looked at a whore’s face that closely, well, except the really weird ones. A wealthy businessman wasn’t going to spend time looking at her face minutely, she thought. And then as she took her clothes off for a quick bucket bath, her glance rested casually on her breasts. Was the left one larger? She remembered an old saying of her mother’s— left one swells for a girl and the right one for

a boy. She sat under the tap holding her arm over her stomach and for the first time in years, thought about her mother.

Chapter VIII

Park Street had been renamed Mother Teresa Sarani quite a while ago. But the pig headed populace of Calcutta continued to call it by its Colonial name despite the best efforts of the Mayor and the Road Renaming Committee. But Park Street had once been Burial Ground Road and would be called by another name in a century or so. Once upon a time the first chief justice of the Supreme Court of Calcutta, Sir Elijah Impey's Deer Park ran amok where now Calcutta's busiest high street did a roaring trade. The main purpose of the thoroughfare at that time being passage to the cemeteries that lay beyond it. Reportedly, there were only two houses in the area at that time, and it is to Sir Impey's park that the street owes its name.

The current mayor of Calcutta, after attending a ceremony where he was asked to unveil the statue of Mother Teresa in Naples, promptly renamed Park Street after the sainted lady once he came back. If the papal sanctification had been carried out properly the street should have been called Beata Teresa Sarani, but the mayor, having judged that Beata might be too much for even a race as pretentious as the Bengalis, had wisely stuck to the more homely 'Mother.' Besides, Bengal was a very Mother centric place. The chief festival was the Durga Puja and in Kalighat was one of the oldest temples in India dedicated to the dark goddess Kali. Countless poems had been written for centuries personifying Bengal as a woman and countless Bengali movies had been made in veneration of the all-sacrificing, ever-loving, no-faults-at-all, human Mother. A popular legend held that Bengali males believed their mothers to be virgins as well.

Along with such prestigious buildings such as The Asiatic Society, The Queen's Mansions and The Park Hotel, Park Street was home to the most desirable night clubs in

Calcutta since the fifties and the sixties. Tales of gentlemen's clubs such as The Golden Slipper are even now told by rheumy eyed octogenarians whose faces grow warm at the memory of its forgotten nights. Since age is apt to embroider its treasures, one cannot be certain if indeed Park Street of the past had been superior to the Park Street of the present, but in a city where sentimentality was one of the main hobbies of the populace, who would argue? Though places like The Golden Slipper were long gone, a lot of Park Street's iconic restaurants still stood at the same places doing very solid business. And The Park Hotel's night club 'Tantra' could assuage any hurt that the disappearance of the Golden Slipper had caused.

The Park hotel was right on the pavement. So partygoers and beggars were only separated by a thin line. Lalee arrived twenty minutes before nine. Before entering the hotel she stopped and took out a small mirror from her handbag. She looked critically at her face. The bruises were barely visible now, even though they still hurt. She pressed a hanky over her nose to soak up the beads of perspiration and looked critically at herself. Even in January it was too warm to look good. Still, it wasn't a bad job done given that twelve hours ago she was looking like the neighbourhood drunk's wife who walked into doors a lot. She worried that the generous amount of makeup she had slapped on to her face would start melting and then remembered that this was a posh one, so from now on out it was air conditioning all the way. It also occurred to her that she hadn't eaten anything all day. Lalee had a bottomless appetite. She was bred from the stock that understood the value of meals, and going hungry for her was far too close to reality to be a fad. She unzipped her bag and took out a ten rupee note. Normally, she stored her money in her bra; she didn't trust this putting your money in handbag business. It didn't seem safe. Anyone could snatch it and run away right? Well, they could try.

She walked over to the hole in the wall kiosk next to the hotel's entrance and ordered a double egg roll. A young boy on the other side of the counter said, "Fifteen," and extended his hand. Lalee started saying, "Fifteen? That's robbery, fifteen for a double egg roll? It was ten only yesterday." The boy ignored her and continued to stare at the distance. Lalee went on, "You can charge these Park Street prices to other people young man, I know...." The boy looked at her and interrupted, "Arrey madam, if you want to eat you eat, otherwise don't okay? I got a long line here. This is the best Kathi roll shop in Calcutta. We don't put potato filling, our double mutton roll is world famous, huh..." and looked away, grumbling.

Lalee hated being condescended at. Most people had no real power, so they made the most vicious use of whatever power they had. If an office clerk could make you wait two years and have you wear out the soles of your shoes trying to cajole whatever was rightfully yours from the clutches of his grubby paperwork, he'd see no reason to do otherwise. If your local *paan* shop could make you wait ten minutes under a hot sun while he pretended he couldn't hear you loud and impatient call for Pepsi, Cigarette and one piece sweet *paan* please without betel nuts, he'd have no reason to respond. Lalee decided not to argue further. She needed some food and handed over the extra five Rupees.

She always enjoyed watching how they made the rolls—the way they flipped the flattened oily dough up in the air and frothed the egg mixture before frying them together. When she looked away from the cook's greasy counter her gaze fell on Tilu Shau standing a few yards away, not looking at her. Lalee froze on the spot. Has he gone absolutely mad? Lalee thought. Was he following her around? She couldn't think of any reason for him being there. She felt scared for a second but quickly reminded herself that this was Tilu Shau after all. The idea of him being dangerous was laughable. Besides, he may have some

business here of his own. Perhaps he was as embarrassed as she was to see her here. He was wearing dirty blue jeans and a bedraggled shirt far too long for his short frame, inspecting the array of pirated books being sold on the footpath not two meters away from where Lalee stood. He kneeled forward peering at the books through his glasses. The bookseller was watching him with a dispassionate gaze. Sellers never got unduly solicitous over customers in this city. It gave trade the incurious philosophical air that the communist city was famed for. Crass business, it seemed to say, is not what we're into. If money changed hands, it was a fact of life, like somebody going to the lavatory. You didn't have to get excited about it.

He picked up a book, an english book, Lalee noted, and began flipping the pages, at which point the bookseller reluctantly got up from his perch atop the street railing and sauntered towards him.

"Chillies?" queried the roll-maker.

"Sorry, what?" said Lalee, her reverie broken.

"Do you want chilli and onions? Only nowadays a lot of the ladies don't want onions because of bad breath and suchlike," he intoned.

"Bad breath," mumbled Lalee, it had not occurred to Lalee this far that it could be bad business move for someone who was professionally intimate on a regular basis. But what works for Whores probably doesn't work for Escorts.

"Oh okay," she said, "no onions then, but lots of chillies."

"You like it hot eh," the man smirked obscenely behind the glass divider.

"Just make the roll," Lalee said wearily, trying to turn the other way from Tilu Shau.

She pulled down the hem of her dress. Diti was right, it was too small. Every time Lalee took a step, the dress moved a few inches upwards. Lalee had to pull it down every

ten minutes. Besides, the dress hugged her body tightly, emphasising all the wrong areas, Lalee thought. People on the street were giving her odd looks, though Lalee knew it was nothing special. Even if she wore a sari, some people would still stare. It was a Bengali thing.

“Your roll, madam,” the boy said handing it over. Even wrapped in paper the grease stuck to her hands and the thing was too hot to hold. She saw Rambo Maity walking towards her.

He was in his usual flamboyant clothes, but Lalee was more interested in the svelte beauty draped on his arms. She was tall, blond and extremely white. Lalee thought she’d need sunglasses just to stare at her. Fuck me! A real mem. You have gone up in the world Rambo Maity, you bottom feeding tapeworm, you’re dealing in white bodies now.

The girl gave Lalee an arch smile and lisped a ‘hello’ at her but Lalee was too busy staring at her to respond.

“Here on time, I see,” said Rambo Maity, looking mighty pleased with himself, “this here is Ms. Svetlana, she’s from Russia, now say hello like a good girl.”

Lalee mumbled a “Hi,” at the girl. Rambo looked at her critically, “What’s that you’re wearing?”

He looked Lalee up and down. “That thing cost you five hundred Rupees? Looks like fifty to me,” he said suspiciously. He moved slightly closer to Lalee, “What have you been up to?” He grabbed Lalee’s chin and turned it one way and another trying to catch the neon white light of the roll shop.

Lalee slapped his hand away.

“Fuck off, Maity.”

Rambo paused for a moment and then turned around. "Svetlana, my darling, this is Rosa, she'll be your friend tonight. I'll be around as you know, but I know you're a pro. You're the best there is," he smiled glibly.

Svetlana took the compliment graciously and gave a light tinkling laugh that made Lalee nauseated to her stomach. Then together they walked into The Park Hotel's driveway.

As soon as she entered the lobby, Lalee noticed how Svetlana became a part of that glittering space. Her own skin was stinging in the accusatory lights of the expensive hotel. Everywhere, like a punishment or penance, were mirrors. Wherever she turned her head, her own face looked back at her. In the space of her own hovel, she knew where she stood. But here? She felt as nervous as she had on her first day.

Svetlana said, "I am going to have a ciggy Rambo Darling. You know how I like to warm up," and left.

Rambo gave her a greasy little smile and turned to Lalee once Svetlana's heels clicked clacked away towards the smoking room.

"Rosa? Since when am I Rosa, Maity?" Lalee hissed. It was a name she sometimes used for a flying customer, but she had never told Rambo about it. Lalee felt annoyed, it wasn't Rambo's place to give her new names.

Rambo moved closer and gripped her wrist, leaned forward and in the manner of a man whispering something naughty said, "Now see here 'Rosa' look around you, this is a classy place, yes? Much better than the likes of you have ever seen, yes? Now I know where you come from, I know what you are. But I'm a friend, see? If you want to get out of that gutter, then get you act together. Nobody with a name like Lalee would make it in this world."

He Paused to take a breath and Lalee instinctively moved to wrench her arm free from his grip. But she realised that his grip on her wrist had redoubled to the point of hurting.

“Rule number one, Rosa: Do not misbehave, unless you’re being paid to do so. Rule number two, Rosa: Do not use ‘bad’ language, and I say this with a straight face knowing who I’m talking to, unless you’re being paid for it. I’m not a violent man. I don’t sleep with my girls, I don’t hurt my girls. But one thing I do, Rosa, is invest in my girls. Do you know what investment means? It means a thriving business relationship which is beneficial for both parties. Yes, both parties. I have a job to do and so do you. You’ve seen Svetlana, that’s what I’m delivering here. Now look at you. I paid you to look a certain part. You’ve failed. You, of all people should know there’s no free lunch. If I gave you money, I did so for a reason. So far, you’re a bad investment. You show up in two penny prostitute clothes with bumps on your face. What you did as Lalee is your business, what you do as Rosa is mine. And I don’t like to see it damaged. Now, you’re an intelligent woman, give me one reason I should carry on and trust one of the richest clients I have seen in a while with what’s turning out to be a bad investment,” he began to lead Lalee out of the main glass doors and took out a packet of Marlboros.

He gave one to Lalee and found his lighter. Lalee spread her hand for the lighter, palm forward. “No,” mumbled Rambo through the white stick dangling from his lips, “lean forward, slightly,” which Lalee did and Rambo lit it for her. Lalee flashed him a sexy half smile, the flame lighting up her dark eyes. “Thanks,” she rasped.

“There. See, there’s my reason. Be nice, or pretend to be at any rate, you might find it pays. Less of the thorny, more of the sexy.”

“You’re a talker Maity. I know the job.”

“The job, yes. The trappings? No. But you learn quick, I have no doubt. Observe,” he gestured towards the lobby still very much visible through the glass doors. A sleek

Svetlana was cat walking towards the main enclave, presumably looking for them, without doing anything so unsure as actually looking. Eventually she spotted them and flashed big pretty smile.

Rambo gave Lalee a sidelong glance. “No cattiness, okay? Never ends well, girls being catty on a job.”

Lalee felt mildly affronted, “I’m never catty.”

“Sure, sure,” said Rambo placatingly and the two of them walked inside and joined the beautiful dazzling Svetlana from Russia.

The two men were sitting on a large table in one corner of the cavernous bar. It was dark where they sat, carefully hidden away from the mood amplifying spot lights. Rambo herded the ladies towards the table. Lalee noted a large glass bottle propped up on a metal bucket with a white cloth draped around its neck. She could make out two shapes lounging in armchairs on opposite sides of the round wooden table. There was food. The roll hadn’t been enough. She unconsciously salivated a little at the sight of the apparently untouched food, and swallowed her hunger.

Two men, she noticed. The one on the outside and therefore more illuminated by the mood lighting was a man of about thirty-five. His clothes were quite ordinary, he wore glasses and his hair was smoothed into a neat side part.

“Maity, come,” said the other person from his cavernous gloom, his gruff voice could not have belonged to a young man. An expansive hand gestured towards two seats.

Rambo urged the two ladies to sit down while he went on a short hunt to get another chair for himself. If he waited a few minutes, one of the waiters would no doubt arrange for an extra chair, but Rambo was eager to please and no one stopped him from going.

Svetlana spent the time smiling archly at the person hidden in the gloom but Lalee still couldn't make him out from where she stood behind Svetlana.

Rambo Maity returned lugging a rather heavy looking chair. The man Lalee had noticed, said to Rambo, "On time, eh. And you've got us both Black and white, nice contrast," and began laughing at his own joke.

Svetlana looked away from him, her smile freezing up just for a second. But in a way that seemed to suggest that as interesting as this man was, she was more interested still in the older gentleman sitting on the other side of the table. She slid smoothly beside him and put an arm around the man.

Lalee saw that she was right. The man was definitely in his fifties, quite a bit older than his friend. Slightly portly, with a roundish face, he spoke softly and with authority. He was clearly used to being obeyed, and didn't need to raise his voice. Lalee noticed that he was wearing a shirt, sleeves folded up to his elbows as though he was getting ready to do some heavy digging, an expensive looking chrome watch dangled from his left wrist. Svetlana had slipped in his arms like a rabbit in a hutch. It occurred to Lalee that Svetlana was water like in that capacity. In the presence of any male, she seemed to be able to drape herself or mould her body around theirs. She wondered idly if Svetlana was one of those elastic ladies who could touch the back of her own head with her feet.

The older gentleman was smiling at Lalee, as though he knew the measure of her already and was vaguely amused. It made Lalee uncomfortable, but Rosa rose to the occasion.

"Gentlemen, this is Svetlana and this is Rosa, my two best ladies," announced Rambo Maity with insufferable pomp.

“Ooh Cava! I like it,” Svetlana announced and reached out for the cooling bottle in the ice bucket. Magically, a young man in a black waistcoat, bow tie and a white shirt appeared to place two wine glasses in front of the two ladies. The younger man on the table, Lalee noticed was sticking to his whiskey.

“One large Rum,” Rambo told the waiter.

“Would you like it with some coke, sir?”

“No, just ice. On the rocks.”

The older gentleman, untangled his arm from Svetlana and pushed a basket of french fries towards Lalee, “You can call me Mr. Ghosh. Rosa? Wasn’t it?”

“Yes, er..thanks,” Lalee said. So far, she’d not been on her best form. Svetlana was leaving her miles behind in the best hooker race. Time to pull up her stockings, or perhaps, pull them down further.

Mr. Ghosh waved a hand and another waiter materialised filling the ladies’ wine glasses, and just as he was done, the previous waiter returned with Rambo’s rum.

“This is my associate Shamik. A bright boy, I’m sure one of you ladies will have a great time with him tonight,” said Mr. Ghosh and the younger guy looked up from his drink and winked at Lalee.

“All arrangements have been made, Maity?” enquired Mr. Ghosh.

“Yes, sir. Of course. With us, you never have to worry about service sir. It’s all arranged, First class all the way,” Maity replied.

“Us? You and who else Maity? I thought you worked alone.”

“Figure of speech sir, figure of speech. I might be one man, but this is my ‘& Co.’ sir.”

“Capital. And now perhaps you can go finish you drink somewhere else, among your friends, Maity,” said Mr. Ghosh, without missing a beat.

Rambo blinked twice, which in the circumstances, were a commendably short space of time for him to change mental gears.

“Of course Sir, of course. Whatever was I thinking.”

“Couldn’t say.”

“Will make myself scarce this moment sir, and I’ll see you later sir?” The question mark hung in the air like greasy upturned hands of pimps everywhere. But since no one was paying him any attention at this time, least of all Mr. Ghosh who’d swatted Rambo out of his universe, he paused for a second and left the party.

Lalee felt a twinge of vulnerability as Rambo disappeared out of sight. However much she despised him, Rambo was after all the only person she knew here in this company. As soon as she thought this, she mentally slapped herself. She'd been in this business for seventeen years. If whores went around wishing for caring hand-holders, they'd never get anything done. This was what she wanted, after all. This, was finally happening.

In her own space, that she'd clawed out of the shit and dump of Shonagachhi, she felt more empowered. More in control, which finally, is the only asset a whore has, she thought. Anyone can give you sex, but power and dominance and desire and pliability, for that you need someone who owns herself and the space around her. And for the first time in more than a decade she'd have to make a new space.

Svetlana was whispering something into Mr. Ghosh's ears that he found amusing. Lalee saw her playfully bite Mr. Ghosh's earlobe before withdrawing and he patted her, she noticed, on the thigh. The younger man, Shamik, was fiddling with his phone.

Lalee adjusted her face and let Rosa come out.

“So, Mr Shamik,” she said and leaned towards him, “letting the wife know, were you?”

“Now, now, my dear girl,” said Shamik, mock-admonishing her, “no personal details. Isn’t that the rule of the game?”

“Depends, which game are we playing?”

“One I hope you’re good at,” he said and dragged his chair closer to hers, glancing just for a moment at Mr. Ghosh, which didn’t escape Lalee’s notice.

Ah, so that was it. Mr. Boss-man had chosen the white girl. Big surprise. Anyway, Lalee didn't care which one she got. They were all the same, in the end. In fact, the self-important ones were much worse. She'd take a younger, less stuffy one any day.

Lalee was debating if she should reach out for the desultory leftovers on the table. She sipped her drink slowly, eyeing the drooping french fries and some meatballs in congealing sauce. The gentlemen had clearly finished their dinner or didn't seem to need one and these accompaniments had been bought to provide some variation on the general theme of single malts. She felt hungry, but also self-conscious. Somehow it felt inappropriate, to eat with a customer, though she could not explain why that should be so except that the years in Shonagachhi had left their own groove in her working persona. But hunger, that was a different beast. In an off-hand way, she had known of girls who willingly starved themselves and she could never take it seriously. She was convinced that those girls had never known real hunger, or starvation. There was no place in her heart that would accord them that realisation, or that close an acquaintance with life.

Absently, she began fiddling with the fries. They were cold and stiff, already wizened in the cold air of the AC. Her date for the night was once again engrossed on his phone, the glare from the screen reflected on his glasses. He was frowning in deep concentration. Lalee watched him, and decided as John's go, this one wasn't that bad looking, even

seemed a decent sort. She had seen worse. Years in Shonagachhi had given her a sort of danger radar— an invisible pair of eyes, some extra body sense that picked up the psycho signals without knowing how. It was best to trust those instincts. God knows however fine your senses were, girls were never safe in this job. Violence was a given, as sure as the familiar uncertainty of where the next meal would come from. Even if you knew that the customer you were about to take back into the shack or had been handed over to, was a bad sort, what could you do? To not be abused wasn't a choice, and it made her incredibly, overwhelmingly angry whenever someone suggested that it was.

Mohamaya. She realised that she was thinking about the dead girl again. What had she wanted? Lalee wondered. She wished she had known the girl better, knew her story, her dreams. 'The Dream' in Shonagachhi was of course, to leave that life, and most commonly, to be married honourably to a man who would love and respect her and have children who would have a different, much better life away from the filth of their mothers' lives. But every one of them knew how hollow that was, even though they regularly participated in their own deceptions. Played into the hands of the babu's who said they loved them, and would marry them. But they, more often than not turned abusive, or ran away with their money, so that one day again, the girl would be back on the streets of Shonagachhi or crying at the feet of their old madam, coming back to the only existence they knew. Lalee had seen so much of that in her time she couldn't feel sorry for those girls anymore. It was anger, anger all the way.

Svetlana's tinkling laughter made her come back to the immediate. She had gotten up and was looking indulgently at her companion. Mr. Ghosh moved slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, with assuredness of the rich. In her daily life she didn't meet many of them, but sometimes they came for a taste of the Other, the grotesque poverty that was

titillating in its own right. When he pushed back his chair, his young associate was already on his feet, smiling at Lalee like a concussed hyena. Svetlana took Mr. Ghosh's pudgy arm, and draped herself around it as they made their way through the maze of chairs in the tasteful low lighting of the posh bar. They took the elevators. Lalee and Shamik stood slightly awkwardly behind Mr. Ghosh and Svetlana. Lalee felt somewhat nervous. Riding an elevator always made her feel as though her heart was dropping into her stomach. At the fifth level, the elevator stopped and Mr. Ghosh stood to the side and said, "Well Shamik, here is your floor, I'm sure Svetlana will take very good care of you."

They all stood still for just a second too long, but Svetlana didn't need any longer to respond to this change of plans. She planted a light kiss on Mr. Ghosh's cheek, gave him a bright smile and turned to a very surprised Shamik. She took him by the hand, and stepped out of the elevator as the door closed on Lalee and Mr. Ghosh.

Chapter IX

Rambo Maity stepped outside the hotel for a smoke. He had been experimenting with brands. He tried getting used to Marlboro first but the white was as good as smoking air and the red tasted as foul as the cheapest local roll up to him. Then he tried Camel, but whether it was the picture of the Camel on the pack or not, it tasted like camel shit to him. At the moment he was trying out India Kings, and this vanity patriotism was so far passing muster. He had noticed that ever since he had been making a bit of dough, his body had become sensitive. It complained a little more loudly about uncomfortable temperatures, smells, unsavoury tastes etc— a luxury he hadn't been able to afford earlier. Being rich, in Rambo's experience was a wholesome existential experience; as in it affected your entire physical, emotional and spiritual existences. He lit an extra long, special filter, unique blend India King with a dragon shaped lighter which not only breathed fire but also played "London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down, London Bridge is..." while doing so. Rambo Maity blew a perfect ring and strolled towards the *paan* shop a few feet away.

Normal people, thought Rambo, tended to think of the city as having designated red-light areas, if they thought about it at all, and these were the well known whore pits that those normal people avoided, denied, visited, went on a dare, etc. But for someone like him, the entire city was something that happened between whore pits, which were indeed more numerous and proliferating than those normal people knew or suspected. Whores go everywhere. For example, the footpath he was standing on wasn't so much a Park Street

pavement on which many reputable restaurants and watering holes opened their doors, but a sort of hallway for the giant red light area that it was to Rambo Maity.

Thinking about this, Rambo reached the shop. The *paan* shop did very good business as such pavement establishments on Park Street tended to do; the dressed and prepared betel leaves were more expensive by half than anywhere else in the city and were stuffed with a large number of artificially coloured, flavoured, violently sweetened plasticky goop. Rambo liked this shop. The *paanwallah* knew him too; they were to the Park Street pavements what old butlers are to society houses, or knowing concierges to iconic New York Hotels. This particular one, located just out of Karnani Mansions, was a regular haunt of Rambo's, as it was of every other middling pimp who wasn't totally down and out. Lakshmi Pandey, the owner of the shop and Karnani Mansions recording angel, greeted Maity with a broad smile. With rather more drama than necessary, he started assembling a sweet betel leaf with all the aplomb of a miracle worker. In a minute he looked up and Pandey's smile broadened even more than it had for Rambo.

He boomed, "Oh, *Aaiye, Aaiye* Officer sahib. You have forgotten your old servant." Rambo Maity was sucking pleasurably on his cigarette and gazing thoughtfully into the dark bowels of Karnani Mansions. He turned around to look at Pandey's new favourite customer.

Samsher Singh was sitting in a police jeep with a slightly plump, bald man with a drooping moustache, Maity instantly recognised this to be the Inspector-in-charge at the Park Street Police Station. Rambo knew him as Inspector Bose, his first name having momentarily escaped him. Behind them was old Constable Balok Ghosh.

"Ah, Maity," Singh said sourly.

“So, Maity,” began the Park Street inspector, who was in better spirits than Singh, “long time no see, eh? You’ve been doing well, I hear? My boys no longer need to bring you in kicking and screaming? Oh you’ve reduced our work-load by half hah, but it’s not good to forget old friends. You should drop by sometimes, tell us what’s happening. Otherwise we have to find out on our own and it’s too much work. Ha, ha, ha, wasting public resource and public’s hard earned money.”

Inspector Bose irritated Rambo, but he faked a smile and said, “I’m your humble servant. Anything I can do to help I’ll always....”

A sulky Singh interrupted Rambo, “Oh cut it out, you only talk when your ass needs saving. The important thing that people tend to forget about lock-ups is that no one can get in. That’s way more important than the not getting out business,” he looked at Rambo, “for some people.”

Rambo wondered vaguely what had happened to put Singh in a bad mood.

“Anyway, what are you doing here?” Singh barked, and then nodded towards Pandey who was sending a young boy towards the police jeep with a couple of *paans* and a packet of Gold Flake cigarettes, “Two Pepsis Pandey, it’s too bloody hot, even in January.”

“Just some business sir, just some business, a poor man’s got to eat,” Rambo said.

“Well, go eat somewhere else, we’re shutting down this Karnani Mansions business,” Inspector Bose said. “*Mairi*, you guys won’t leave anything untouched, a historical street, an icon of our great city, but you people have to taint that as well.”

“Sir,” Maity began, “Park Street business was on even before I was born sir, and will continue long after I’m gone, It was what it was sir, we didn't really....”

The Inspector waved at Karnani Mansions, pushing a *paan* in his mouth, “You people are worse than rats. I mean these are old fucking buildings, some dead white British fuck probably made it, well thanks very much but what do you people do? Make a sex racket.

You see a room, you make sex racket. I mean, man, it's terrible. We sealed a room, and what happened, eh Balok da, tell him what happened," he sucked his cola through a white straw.

Constable Balok Ghosh, who was sitting in the back of the jeep with an extremely old and rusty rifle, said, "What to say, sir. He knows of course. These guys know everything."

"I bet he does. *Sala* we sealed a room because one of your colleagues had a tidy business going and the neighbours were complaining, turns out that the madam somehow got a court order to reopen the room. The residents posted private security guards on each floor to stop the pimps and johns, but somebody bribed the guards to look the other way when customers come. They made a rule to close the doors of the building at eight p.m." He waved at the direction of the building, "And now *sala* customers are going through that corridor, climbing up that wall, sliding through a broken window and getting up on that cornice to get into the flat," and paused for a long noisy cola intake.

"Which cornice?" Rambo asked, turning around.

"*Arrey*, that one over Mocambo."

"Really?" Maity said admiringly, Mocambo was one of the most well-known, if old, eating establishments in Calcutta.

"Yeah, so now, not only the residents are complaining but also Mocambo and people who come to eat there. You know what a long queue there usually is for the restaurant? They all see people hop on and off above them. Imagine."

Maity wasn't a very imaginative person so he didn't try.

"Sir," Balok Ghosh coughed, "if you forgive me speaking out of turn I want to say something."

"Of course, of course, we're a democracy, go on," said Inspector Bose.

“These neighbours sir, I mean they have some nerve complaining. First, half of them are the ones running the sex rackets.”

“Now, now, Balok da, you cannot go maligning people,” Bose interrupted him, “or you’ll have a defamation case against you. I have seen perfectly legit families living in there, old families, old grandmothers even.”

“Yes sir, living here for generations, and how much rent do they pay? Not more than two hundred. While in the whole city you won’t find a family apartment for less than seven-eight thousand at least.” Balok Ghosh was warming up to his subject. The injustices heaped upon the toiling poor while the idle rich who lived in grand mansions in Park Street, burned holes in his heart. It gave him some comfort to know that the mansion they lived in for next to nothing was a crumbling, dark and dingy, rat-infested edifice, very well-known to a certain type of populace as a sex den. He felt they shouldn’t complain so much. After all, they weren’t paying the rent he was.

“That’s true,” said Bose, “but the owners are sitting on millions, millions I tell you.”

Rambo wanted to edge away but couldn’t find a polite way of doing so. So he dithered a bit but stayed mostly where he was. Samsher Singh hadn’t said anything during this long exchange on the present Park Street situation and Rambo was wondering why Singh was here at all. It came under Inspector Bose’s jurisdiction of course, but Singh was way off, in Shonagachhi area. Rambo knew they were friends, as men of slightly questionable integrity doing a dirty job in the same city could be friends, he didn’t think Samsher Singh would be officially involved in any investigations the Park Street Station would be conducting. It was more likely that they had come for a shared whisky or two at Oly pub. Policemen needed to live too.

On an impulse he said, “So what are you doing here sir?”

“O, Oho ho ho ho,” exclaimed inspector Bose gleefully, his eyes shining with petty malice. “We’re being questioned, are we? Eh Maity? Think these streets belong to you? Too big for your boots boy, too big for your boots. We go through five like you on a daily basis down at the station.”

“Of course, sir of course,” Rambo affected great innocence. “I would never dream of giving offence, I only meant,”

“Reconnoitring. Know what that means Maity?”

Singh looked up from his smartphone and made a tutting sound, frowning at his friend. “What you telling him that for?”

“Hah, big secret, he might as well know. If he tells a few of his chums, we’ll have less people to surprise, scare and chase away. I get a nasty pain in my hip when it rains a bit, I can’t be running around.”

“You should see this old *baba* my wife found,” Singh said off handedly, “he makes herbal medicine. People come to him from all over the place.”

“You know some of these *babas* have this really potent stuff,” Bose responded with enthusiasm. “Afghanistani, old herbal magic, if you take a little bit, your penis stands up for like five hours, sometimes twelve, I heard. Total Eiffel tower.”

“What? Where do you get this bullshit from?” Singh interrupted.

Bose went on, undeterred, “*Arrey*, I know. These sex *babas* come from the middle east. I got a tip, naturally I ignored it. All sort of nut cases roaming around everywhere and all fuckers have a mobile phone. Nothing to do? Give the police an anonymous phone call. *Sala*, if I ever lay my hands on one of those bastards I’ll work him like... anyway, I ignored it, but then I got a call from the head office, they thought it was a good thing to go around once and shake up this *baba*. I wanted to see what the hoopla was about, so I went. He’d taken two rooms in that hotel, in Dharamtolla. Can’t remember the name at the

moment, turns out he's an arms dealer. We didn't find anything though, but I heard whatever his real job, his sex stuff worked. One dose, eight hours penis up."

"You just said five," Singh said, exasperated.

"*Oi holo*. Potato, potata, Same thing."

Rambo said, "But that's in Dharamtolla, not here."

"*Arrey*, that's just side information, not relevant. We have orders, understand Rambo? We have to make this city safer, save these iconic streets from becoming another Shonagachhi."

At this, Samsher Singh visibly bridled. Then looking at Rambo, he started a harangue, "Know what's been happening in your own streets Maity? I told you the other day, be straight with me, don't know why I bother. Everyone knows you guys are the worst sort of double crossers."

"Sir I've never..."

Singh held up a hand, "Forget it. There's a candle light vigil in Shonagachhi tomorrow. And you didn't think it was necessary to mention to me eh? Good thing I have backup informers. Not that any of you shitters are reliable in the least."

"What?" said a very perplexed Maity, quite at sea now.

"Heh," said Inspector Bose and spat out a large blob of red betel juice which splattered on the asphalt. "Didn't know eh? Rambo Maity, the enlightened whores of Shonagachhi are marching on its streets tomorrow with candles in their hands in protest of the murder of that girl. How did that happen again?" he enquired of Singh.

"Acid," murmured Singh.

"Aw, old fashioned. It's like the nineties again. Remember Singh? Every two months there was an acid attack. All jilted lovers, broken affair cases."

“What would you know,” said Singh Sulkily. “You got the posh station, all you have to deal with is rich businessmen and posh call girls. In your streets they all walk in stilettos, in mine they’re murdered,” he might have gone on but Inspector Bose interrupted again.

“That’s what you think. You know that rape case that happened a last month?”

“Which one? There are always so many.”

“*Arrey* the one we got all involved in. I tell you, this woman won’t back down. We didn’t want to take the FIR at first, naturally. Some anglo-Indian chick came to a night club and got into a car with some men, and now she says it’s rape. Who’ll believe her? So of course we didn’t want to take it, but she threatened to go to press, so we had to take the complaint.”

“Yes, so?”

“I wish it ended there. No, she’ll fight the case she says. She says they gang raped her and tortured her, but the people she’s incriminating are powerful, so it’s already getting media attention and all. She’s even got two daughters.”

“What was a mother of two doing at a Park Street nightclub with men anyway?” murmured Singh from his seat.

“Of course, then you know what the local MP said,”

“No. what did he say?”

“She. She said, it was a misunderstanding between a lady and her client.”

The penny dropped for Maity. But prostitutes normally don’t insist on filing FIRs or pressing charges.

Inspector Bose lit a cigarette, offered the packet to Singh and took out his phone. With his cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth, he said to Rambo, “Wait a minute, I think there’s a picture of her somewhere, ah there it is,” Rambo walked to the other side of

the jeep to Inspector Bose, deftly avoiding the blob of betel juice on the street and took a look at the picture.

“No don’t think I’ve seen her. But you know, I can’t know everybody. There’s new girls coming everyday.”

“Coming?” Singh gave him a sharp look.

Shit. That wasn't good. There are some things you didn't speak of, openly. It's not that the police didn't know. Of course they knew, they knew everything. If they didn't know half the things that happened in the trade would not happen. But you didn't talk about it all the same. Except with the ones who were, so to speak actively involved in the comings and goings of the new girls. He channelled the conversation elsewhere quickly.

“No, if you ask me, she doesn't look like one of the girls,” and thankfully, Singh let it go.

“So after that stupid MP made that comment the women’s lib is up in arms, as is the victim herself,” Bose continued. “Man, I tell you, a rape victim, but she’s not trying to hide or forget it or something. It’s like she actively wants people to know what has happened. I’ve never seen such a thing. And of course the stupid media and the ‘lesbians lib’” Bose laughed at his own joke, “is capitalising on it. Pushing her forward, egging it on and we’re under pressure to at least try to catch these people. Apparently there’s CCTV footage as well.”

Rambo was listening with a strange bemusement. It wasn’t that he didn’t know the shape of things, but to actually be an audience to this prolonged conversation was quite a thing. Of course, as soon as he had walked over to Inspector Bose, he knew the secret to his chattiness: he was plainly stinking of whiskey. And not very good stuff, he reckoned. But you had to be loyal to something, even if it was only a brand.

Bose carried on, “No shame, no sir. She won’t back down. Nothing left of modesty....”

Singh said something that Rambo didn’t catch.

“What?”

“I said, if she’s the one hiding surely there’s something wrong with that.”

Bose blinked a couple times, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she gets raped and tortured, and she has to hide, that doesn’t make sense,” he took a look at his colleague’s face and said, “yes, yes I know what you mean, that’s what happens, But logically see, if it’s those guys who committed the crime and have a FIR filed against them, they should do the hiding, no?”

Bose stared at Singh and then burst into laughter, “Did you hear that Balok da? Your sir’s gone mad. He’ll join the lesbian liberation movement any time now. Be careful or you’ll lose your boss. He’ll run around Shonagachhi trying to rescue every girl standing on the street, and where’ll you lot be then eh? No more income. You’ll have to finally live on your salaries.” Inspector Bose laughed and laughed for a long time, alone.

Lalee had never seen a room like that before. A giant bed lay in the middle, all cream and muted gold, something so very elegant that even the colours whispered. Two chairs and a moderately big wooden table were arranged in front of a wall that was all glass. It was this that Lalee saw, as soon as the Mr. Ghosh had opened the door. One wall was all glass, and a semi-glittering city lay beyond it. She walked straight towards it and looked down and felt herself get nauseous for a second. Shop signs and traffic lights and dark

ochre cabs lined the street. She felt like a ghost; a hovering spirit, sweeping through a dark painted city, making everything still.

Mr. Ghosh took off his shoes, walked over to the desk and poured himself a glass of whiskey. Lalee turned around. A cut glass tumbler stood next to the bottle, all ready with a paper cover laid neatly on top, and a shiny steel box contained big chunks of ice. Mr. Ghosh pushed one of the glasses towards Lalee. It was quite a large one.

“Can't abide those tiny fiddly bottles. So annoying,” he said, “at least they know what I like here.”

Lalee sat down on the bed, which she realised was the softest thing her bottom had ever touched. The mattress must have been the width of an elephant, and everything from the bed clothes to the linens was made of the softest cotton. She had no idea that cotton could be that soft. She noticed that the duvet, was folded and tucked into the giant mattress. She couldn't fathom the reason for this. Surely a duvet was supposed to be used? It looked like it would take some effort to yank it out. She got up while Mr. Ghosh was pouring his drink, and began to take her dress off.

Mr. Ghosh went and sat on the armchair at the corner of the room. There was a tall standing lamp beside it. The yellow light reflected off his glasses. He gave Lalee a wan smile.

“What's your hurry? We're going to be here for a while.” He gestured towards the glass he had left on the desk for Lalee. “I hope whiskey's acceptable? I've been told ladies don't like it, but I don't consider anything else worth drinking.”

Lalee smoothed her dress and picked up the glass. She was still standing and sipping her drink when Mr. Ghosh said, “Relax, there's no need to be formal.”

“No, of course. I just thought you'd like to get on with business.”

“Business is what I do all day, Rosa. This is not business. Besides, what I hate most is to hurry. It's one of the reasons I decided to be rich, rich people seldom have to hurry.” He smiled a little as a new thought struck him, “The very rich and the atrociously poor, they can go at whatever pace they like.”

Lalee smiled and tried to look interested. If there's one thing a man of power liked, it was to have women listen to him, to show an interest. She'd learned that long ago.

“So, tell me your story,” said Mr. Ghosh.

Fuck me twelve ways to Sunday, thought Lalee. One of those.

“What do you mean, my story?” She said, sipping her whiskey, being dramatic. She knew what he meant and the kind of story he wanted. But there was no harm in letting the conversational push and pull go its way.

“Who you are, what's your real name, how you came to this...,” he raised the glass a little towards Lalee, “this...life, work, tell me. I like to know the people I spend time with.”

“How much time are you planning on spending then?” Lalee said, moving towards him.

“That depends, on how this night goes,” Mr. Ghosh uncrossed his legs.

Lalee knelt down before him and began to toy with his belt buckle, looking at him and smiling, trying to gauge how he liked it.

He gently took Lalee's wandering fingers and held them. “Pull up a chair” he told her, “let's talk.”

Yes, definitely one of those, the tell-me-your story variety. She'd heard of the king in One Thousand and One Nights who ordered his wives to tell him a story every night and then beheaded them. She thought him to be slightly better than customers like this. The story of how the girls came to be where they were was no less a part of the erotic experience to these people. They sat there absorbing the words and Lalee imagined them

emotionally masturbating, as though they had seen life, heard a fallen woman's story, ah how darkly romantic that sounds. Let's talk my big black ass, she thought.

She pulled up the chair, but went and sat at his feet anyway, resting her chin on his knees.

"Tell me," he murmured, taking a few strands of Lalee's dark hair in his fingers and examining them, as though it was of some scientific significance.

"Well, it's not so different from the stories of the girls who end up in Shonagachhi. I was born in a small village, and my father was a farmer. I was the eldest, I had three sisters and one brother, all very young when my father killed himself."

"Why?" Mr. Ghosh frowned.

"The usual. We had a drought, my father borrowed money from the moneylender, the next year there was a drought again, my father borrowed more money and it all added up till there was no way for him to pay any of it back, or feed us, for that matter," she paused.

"I remember starving, I remember hunger."

Mr. Ghosh withdrew his hand and gathered them on his lap, frowning in concentration at Lalee's unfolding narrative.

Lalee paused an appropriate second, and then continued, "After he died, my mother sent me to my aunt's in Calcutta, to find work, perhaps as a maid in someone's house. This aunt I had never seen before. One day, she told me we were going to visit some relatives who would help me find work and brought me to Shonagachhi. She left me there and said she'd be back in the evening to collect me."

"Then?" Mr. Ghosh urged.

"Evening changed to night and she never came," Lalee continued, she had the story down pat. "I waited all night and cried all of the next day. The people in the house that she brought me to, a woman of about forty and a couple of young girls— they were at first nice

to me, they told me my aunt had sold me for five thousand rupees and that that money would go to my family, that it'd feed my brother and sisters, and that perhaps my brother would go to school and have a respectable job someday. They explained to me that it was for the best. But when I didn't stop crying, they beat me. Never in the face, or the thighs or the stomach, there are rules about beatings in brothels. They'd cane me on my shins and calves, sometimes, on my back."

She stopped, but Mr. Ghosh didn't say anything. He went and poured himself some more whiskey even though he hadn't finished all that was left in his glass. "And?" he said softly.

"At first I didn't know what was happening. I was young, but it wasn't very hard to figure out. In the beginning I would cry, I would beg those men who came for me to leave me, to not touch me. They'd laugh if they were a good sort, but mostly they'd hit me. They were desperate men. Boatmen, truckers, labourers, men who lived by strength or cunning and they'd paid with money I imagine wasn't easy for them to come by either. They were not about to let me go."

Mr. Ghosh took her glass, poured some more whiskey in it. Even though Lalee had hardly had time to sip her drink, the two gulps she had taken previously were big ones and the glass was half empty.

"Go on," Mr. Ghosh said, pushing the glass towards Lalee. Lalee smiled to herself, yes, he was definitely that kind of customer. But she could do this in her sleep.

"One night, business was slow and I saw my madam, or mashi as I called her, passed out drunk in front of the TV," Lalee began. "None of the other girls were paying me any attention, so I just got out of the door and ran, and ran," she paused. "I had no idea where I was going, I just ran as fast as I could. It was winter and quite late. Then I saw a traffic

policeman, sitting inside a road kiosk. I ran to him and told him everything and asked him to help me, and he said he'd take me to the police station and help me."

"And?" Mr. Ghosh prompted her again, "You escaped?"

Lalee laughed, "They raped me. He and a Constable. I was there all night. In the morning, I came back to the brothel, to the mashi."

"Did she hit you?"

"No, I expected it, but she didn't. She wasn't a bad person. She fed me and taught me things, she protected me, in her own way. She just said she had a bad hangover and never asked me what happened."

"That sounds strange," said Mr. Ghosh.

"Not really. Do you think I was the first of her girls who'd tried to run away? A lot of girls try that sort of thing. When they see what's outside, they come back." Lalee picked up her glass once more, "Some of them even go home, and their family won't accept them anymore. Some are more intelligent, they don't waste energy trying to escape, at least not quite as simply as running away."

She smiled at him in a way that suggested that if story time was over, they could get on with the main order of business. Mr. Ghosh didn't seem to object this time, though he periodically broke apart to drink his whiskey. This slowed the proceedings a little but Lalee was nothing if not accommodating, especially towards a client like Mr. Ghosh. She found him to be a decent lover, though that mattered so little in the scheme of things. She did notice however that whenever she tried to take control, Mr. Ghosh seemed to find it amusing, and let her carry on for a short while as a man would tolerate certain antics of his pet cat, but he eventually subdued her, sometimes impatiently. After a few times of this, Lalee gave in and was nothing but compliant, reciprocating and malleable.

Once or twice Mr. Ghosh touched those parts of her face that were still stolen but she deftly redirected his fingers elsewhere. She didn't feel them hurt anymore and the swelling had gone down almost to nothing. Whatever it was he noticed or realised, Mr. Ghosh did not press the matter nor was the circumstance opportune for any more queries that he might have wanted to make. Lalee made sure of that. There was such a thing as being good at one's job after all. And so it was that the unfortunate state of her dented face did not come up one way or the other on the first night of her life as a highly paid prostitute and a load was lifted off her mind. She had been tense until then, thinking that she might fail, that Rambo Maity or his client might reject her. But whatever medication that Diti had administered had done its job much beyond Lalee's expectations, and for that she felt grateful.

Afterwards as Mr. Ghosh snored on his back, Lalee sat beside him with her legs sprawled in front of her. She thought of the long road that had taken her to where she was at that very moment. At one time she would have thought it impossible, that she would spend a night in an expensive room like this. How much would a room like this cost per night? Ten thousand? Fifteen thousand? She looked at the quiet, middle-aged man snoring on the bed and tried to imagine having that kind of money to spend on a night of fun. Most of the girls she knew didn't earn that much in a month. She wondered how much Mohamaya had earned, if she had ever been in a room like this, if she missed her children. Ever since the murder, her thoughts kept turning towards this young girl she had hardly known, and each time she felt angry. No one knew better than her that it could be anybody. It could have been her in stead of Mohamaya. To the rest of the world, the whores of Shonagachhi and of shanty meat markets like that were interchangeable. But what did that

matter. The more one got used to money, what you could buy with it became less and less important.

She slipped silently to the floor, taking care to replace the sheets on Mr. Ghosh's broad back. His glasses were placed precariously on the edge of the bed. Lalee took them carefully and put them on the bed side table. She poured herself a larger drink and then put it down again as a thought struck her. She hadn't forgotten the old midwife's words. Ever since she had yelled advice at Lalee retreating back, the suspicion that she might be pregnant after all these years began to grow. But instead of going to visit the midwife as the old woman had suggested, Lalee had gone to a medical store on her way to the Park Hotel and asked for a pregnancy test. She was surprised to find out the price. For some people, herself among them, it was pricey. She had bought the thing and the shopkeeper had wrapped it in a brown paper bag, as if carrying it outside in broad daylight might constitute public indecency.

The shy brown package was sitting in her bag. One way or the other, she felt afraid to know conclusively whether she was carrying life within her. Now, she put down her glass of whiskey, glanced at the snoring Mr. Ghosh and went to the toilet with the package in hand. With depressing speed, two pink lines appeared on the screen. She waited the stipulated five minutes, then another and then another, in the hope that one of those lines would disappear and leave her scot free. But the lines remained. She could buy another test, go to the doctor, or even to the midwife, but she felt the innocuous white stick was telling the truth. Her body had begun to change. She came out of the toilet and pushed the momentous revelation aside. Mr. Ghosh turned in his sleep with a muffled "Hfftspl..." Lalee felt herself smiling at the inconsequential little slapstick comedy, desperate to grab the minutest of details to keep her mind away from the knowledge.

She tiptoed to the giant glass wall, hugged her knees, rested her chin on them and watched the street below. For as long as she had been in this city, she had thought of Park Street as an almost mythical place of gaiety and opulence. Even the prostitutes here had better clothes, hair, money and english names. Now at this hour the street below looked ramshackle. From the fifth floor, Lalee had a good view of the bedraggled old colonial buildings that people who came to wine and dine on Park Street forgot to look up at. Underneath them, the lighted shopfronts and posh restaurants had long ago closed shop and gone home. On those pavements, homeless people were curling up in tight balls having wrapping themselves with anything they could find. Ochre taxis were few and far between, their drivers milling around after parking their cabs on the side of the streets. Drunks and party goers erupted intermittently from The Park Hotel. And just as unexpectedly, she saw him again. Tilu Shau was staring right up at the hotel. She hid behind the curtains instinctively. The heavy curtains slid and Mr. Ghosh turned in his sleep, making odd noises. Lalee held her breath. But a few moments later when she looked out again, Tilu was still standing there but no longer looking upwards. It wasn't clear to Lalee exactly what he was doing from such a distance, but the ridiculousness of her own behaviour struck her. Of course, a man standing on a pavement couldn't very well see a person five floors above him through a glass wall. Besides, the glass would look opaque from the outside, surely?

She returned to watching the small man, noticing his dark skin and slowly thinning hair. Nothing to write home about. But the forlorn way he stood on the pavement alone under the yellow light of street lamps, made Lalee strangely melancholy. She felt like an alien in this elegant, air conditioned room. Nothing in here fit her in any way. But the small bedraggled creature on the pavement was as familiar and as comfortable as home.

Chapter X

It was quite late in the night when Tilu Shau came back home. The previous evening he had been waiting a long time outside Lalee's room in Shonagachhi when he finally saw her walking towards him. He couldn't understand himself anymore; in the two hours that he waited for her out on the street, a number of feelings— some he didn't even know existed— tumbled around his head with slow, depressing repetition. He had never felt so powerless, so needy in his life. When Lalee finally came, he didn't know what to say to her. There was so much to say, and so little that he could articulate or even understand. And then when he realised that Lalee was going out for an appointment, an inchoate fear possessed him. He couldn't explain why he felt afraid; Tilu Shau knew Shonagachhi probably as much as Lalee did and Tilu knew Lalee in Shonagachhi. Tilu knew the Lalee of Shonagachhi. Outside, would she be the same Lalee anymore? Then it fell in place for him: the longer cigarettes, the higher rates, the new hardness in her eyes— she was moving away from him, becoming someone he didn't know. In a daze, Tilu had followed her to Park Street, saw her go into the fancy hotel. When she finally saw him on the pavement standing in front of the books, he didn't run or hide, he just turned his eyes from her. But he couldn't leave. Till late he stood outside the hotel on the pavement, thinking about Lalee and wondering why he felt so possessed by her.

In the morning, it seemed like a rather bad dream. Tilu Shau had never had to deal with any emotion more complicated than envy or desire, and last night's madness— yes, there was no other word for it— seemed unreal in the light of day. He blinked in the sunlight pervading his dank, dilapidated room. Somewhere above him his uncle, a man he

had not seen in ten years, was coughing his lungs out. Within half an hour he would hear the man dragging the old cast iron buckets outside to the tap, fill it with water and drag the heavier bucket back to his bath. This was the usual background noise to Tilu's mornings. Loud maids, egregious verbal spats and smell of cooking from twenty different makeshift kitchens of the same house. No one however cooked for him. After his mother's passing, his father had employed a maid who came in twice a day and cooked and cleaned for him. Since father and son were no longer on speaking terms, no such service had been extended to Tilu. He fended for himself and didn't mind. He dragged himself to the hotplate plugged into the only power socket in the room and started to boil a large mug of water. Once he steeped the Taj Mahal Assam Tea for a good seven minutes, he brought the mug out to the balcony, sipping and looking out into the street. Three boys were playing football below. Watching them play, the previous night seemed all the more fantastical to Tilu. The wrenching anxiety he had felt over Lalee subsided to a dull benumbing of remembered pain, as if all one needed to cure oneself of love was a good night's sleep. He looked at the pages lying scattered on his desk. Obinash's antics felt more real, more urgent than Tilu's own life. He wondered idly if he could write a story about himself, about a man's love for his mistress, then he dismissed the thought. Who one earth wanted to read a failed one sided love story?

The boys on the street were screaming "Goal! Goal!" His uncle upstairs began dragging his heavy bucket of water. Tilu felt at peace. Once or twice his thoughts turned to Lalee, but he wanted to ignore them. Once he finished his tea, he gathered up his papers in a cloth bag and took a bus to College Street. He had to see Amulyaratan Chakladar and prod him for some money he was owed. Prompt payment was considered bad business policy and therefore a generous amount of pleading and prodding was expected of the one who was owed money.

When he arrived at the by-lane off College Street where Ma Tara Printing Works was located, he saw a very hot and bothered Amulyaratan Chakladar shouting invectives at a sweating boy who was currently raising a garishly printed flex sign over the shopfront bearing the company name. Amulyaratan Chakladar was overseeing matters with his usual bad humour. Tilu Shau stood next to the old man and watched the proceedings with interest but Chakladar was so busy supervising everything that he did not register Tilu's presence for a few minutes.

At last when he looked at Tilu, his face contorted in vague disgust, he said, "Aw, it's you," and looking sideways, started yelling, "Bhoga, O Bhogaaaa...."

When Chakladar's youngest employee arrived, he said, "Here, show him the latest lot."

Bhoga grinned widely when he saw Tilu Shau. This young boy from God knows where was about the only person who treated Tilu with some respect. Consequently, Tilu had a soft spot for him. Once Amulyaratan had buggered off to harry someone else, Bhoga led the way to the back office, with Tilu in tow.

"Syaar," he said with that elongation of the 'i' peculiar to Bengalis, "I have been reading all your books syaar, very good." He made a gesture with his forefinger and thumb, "A+," and added virtuously, "very educating."

Tilu was pleased but slightly perplexed at such praise from an unlikely quarter. Still, no writer should ever tire of praise, and on that principle, he enquired: "Ah, you mean *The Night of Bengal?*"

Bhoga looked at him blankly, "No, never heard of it. What is it?"

“Oh, sorry, I meant *After the Bath. The Night of Bengal*, of course, is going to be my next book.”

“Really?” Bhoga’s eyes widened. “What’s it about?”

“It’s going to be the first book of an adventure series.” Tilu Shau felt a warmth spread over him. It was a genuine pleasure to talk to a fan. “You see, I have this character Obinash.”

“Sounds like a clerk in the tax department,” Bhoga said.

“Oh he’s anything but,” Tilu’s eyes shone with excitement. “He’s an explorer.”

“What’s an explorer?”

Tilu Shau had to think a little bit about this. He had assumed that anyone reading an adventure series would have a pretty good idea of what an explorer is. “A person who sort of goes from one place to another, exploring.”

Bhoga still looked quizzical.

“A place like...like...” Tilu tried to think of a most exotic, adventurous land, “like Thailand.” Tilu Shau tried desperately to invent extemporary adventure for his audience of one. “Say he goes to Thailand and gets mixed up with an international gang stealing the king’s jewels...something like that,” he finished lamely.

“You mean the king’s...jewels?” Bhoga pointed to a particular area of his anatomy.

“No, no, jewels like diamonds and rubies.”

“Aw,” said Bhoga, clearly less impressed. “Everyone goes to Thailand these days.”

“Okay, Africa then.” To both Tilu and Bhoga Africa was one giant country, well, forest.

“So you mean to say there’s an actual job like that? People become explorers? Like dentists and accountants?”

“No, no,” said Tilu shaking his hands impatiently. “If it was a job it wouldn’t be special. Some people are like that— adventurous.”

“Okay, so where is Obinash going? Thailand or Africa?”

“Nowhere, he’s right here, in Calcutta.”

To appease a visibly disappointed Bhoga, Tilu hastily added: “It’s a historical book Bhoga. It takes place in the first half of the nineteenth century. The British have settled in but the city is still rife with dacoits and thugees. Obinash must find the Rajah of Munsigarh’s priceless diamond before it is lost for ever.”

Bhoga was thoughtful, at length he said, “You could call it *Broad of Bengal*.”

Tilu opened his mouth to disagree but stopped himself. Maybe, it was’t such a bad title.

“When will you be done with it?” asked Bhoga.

“God willing, before next week.”

Bhoga smiled with genuine pleasure, “Oh if Chakladar babu agrees to do it then you can have it out for the book fair. We can have a new book for the fair. You know Ma Tara Printing always has a stall next to the snack car from Bijoli Grill, and their fish fry is the best syaar, best. Don’t know if it is all the extra dust from the fair ground but it never tastes like that outside of the book fair. Except during the Durga Puja of course, but then I find that the mix chowmein is best. During the Puja they usually stint the meat in chops and cutlet. Why should a man eat a fish fry with only a sliver of fish I ask you....”

“Yes, yes,” Tilu stemmed his flow anxiously, pushed back his glasses with the knuckle of his index finger and asked, “but which book of mine were you referring to?”

“What?” Bhoga blinked.

“Er...earlier you said you liked my book. Which one?”

“Why, the sister-in-law series of course syaar. I’m on the last one. Only five pages in.”

“You like it?”

“My favourite is the first one *syaar*. You know that part when she curves her finger slightly upwards like this and she...”

“Yes, yes, I know which one you mean,” Tilu said quickly.

“Nice *syaar*, scientific. I like to know things like that. Might be useful someday.” He frowned slightly, “But *syaar*, if you don’t mind, I didn’t like the third one *syaar*.”

“*After the Bath?*”

“Yes, too many trees and country roads and lanterns. I mean I like description. I get it, because I work in publishing and all that, and I love your description. But if you give me a book called *After the Bath*, I ask myself, what will you be describing?” Bhoga upturned his palm in a gesture of reasonable debate, “What does the reader expect you to describe? If you take my advice,” he said with some importance, “I don’t like her moans of pleasure drowned out by the sound of jackals outside the window. Less countryside, more sister-in-law— that’s my advice.”

At this time they had reached the small pile of books tied crossways with twine, so Tilu could not continue this enlightened literary conversation with Bhoga anymore. Tilu stood in front of his latest novella in the sister-in-law series, stacked in high piles. The cover showed a large, unnaturally fair woman baying at a full moon. Her long flowing dark hair covered a portion of her ample bottom, a saree of some sort was slipping from her shoulders revealing a rather large, biologically inaccurate side-boob. Her red mouth was open, chin tilted towards the moon. It would be hard to say whether she was in ecstasy or in the process of transforming into a werewolf, but the code ‘sister-in-law’ was enough for the discerning reader. A small sigh escaped Tilu Shau. If only Lalee could see his creation.

“Marvellous cover, no *syaar*?”

“A little too much?” Tilu said tentatively, he felt perhaps unjustly that the artist had tried to outdo him.

“What? No! These days you have to grab the attention of the customer *syaar*, too many people in the market. On this street alone there are at least four to six people in the erotic novel business. We’re lucky to have this artist. He’s pure gold.”

Just at that moment Amulyaratan Chakladar was walking briskly towards them with his customary sour face. He glanced casually at the two men and mumbled, “Don’t know what the world is coming to these days, all he does is put up one blasted banner above my door and he wants three hundred Rupees. Says it’s the going rate. They bleed you night and day, I tell you...” and so mumbling he went inside. In a moment he motioned towards Tilu to come inside. He was trying to open a heavy wooden box with an equally old key and looking irritable, “So you want the money for the last instalment I guess. Well, wait a moment here while I settle up with the flex banner thugs first.” Chakladar took a bundle of hundred rupee notes bound together by a rubber band from the cash box, locked it most carefully once again and hurried out of the dingy counter that served as his front office.

Tilu sat down on a wobbly three legged stool and having nothing more to occupy himself with resumed thinking of his great work once again. He felt carefully excited about this new book. He had a feeling that it would be a good one. It was fun to write too, a change of pace from his usual erotica. Of course, he’d have to continue reading up on the historical times he set his story in, but he doubted that his readers would take him to the cleaners if he did get some facts wrong. Maybe Obinash should have a love interest. A grand dame as unattainable as any king’s jewels, then perhaps he could call it “*Broad of Bengal*”. That was a good title. Bhoga was an undiscovered gem. Perhaps Obinash’s lady

could be modelled on Lalee. She was after all the only woman Tilu had any intimate knowledge of. But the thought of Lalee made him a little melancholy once again.

A man in flashy clothes joined Tilu Shau in the publisher's waiting room. He removed his sunglasses and taking out a handkerchief of the most garish green began wiping his brow. They heard Chakladar walking briskly towards them, hands waving in the air, shouting at a young man trailing behind him.

"No, no, no. I have given you three hundred, which is already more than what they first said, I'm not going to give you anything more. For what uh? It's your job to put that thing up, why should I give you *bakhshish* for doing your job? Everyone asking for tips for a job they're paid to do. This is daylight robbery it is...."

"*Arrey* Mr. Chakladar, don't get so worked up. You'll have a heart attack one of these days if you're not careful," said the newcomer in a loud voice.

"Heart attack? Of course I'll have a heart attack. Have you gone to the market recently? I have a heart attack every time my wife sends me to the grocer's," replied Chakladar in indignation. "At least you don't have that problem Maity."

Rambo Maity laughed "Why? I have to eat too."

"I meant the wife problem," muttered Chakladar disappearing behind the counter rooting through the stacks of dusty yellowing books and papers. In a few seconds he remerged with two large laminated plates, each showing a dark woman in various states of undress, lounging on a bed.

"Here, and that'll be a thousand," said Chakladar as he handed the photographs to Rambo Maity.

"What? A thousand?" exclaimed Maity, "What for?"

And as the two men haggled with each other over price and exclaimed how each was trying to take advantage of the other's innate innocence, Tilu saw lying on the dirty countertop the image of the woman he was beginning to realise he was hopelessly in love with. It was Lalee, unmistakably Lalee. Was it really her or was he seeing her everywhere like a mirage? He took another long look at the man who was haggling with Chakladar now. Was this man, this Maity, Lalee's pimp? But her pimp was Chintu, as far as Tilu knew. Suddenly Lalee's Park Street appointment and higher rates made more sense. This new man was Lalee's ticket to a new life.

Tilu reached out to the pictures and picked them up from between the two men who were still trying to win at the game of outrage. Rambo Maity, never a man to neglect business, stopped remonstrating with the old man. He held up a hand as if to call a time out and turned to Tilu.

"Like her, eh?" he said to Tilu with a long practiced smoothness that came to his aid wherever business was concerned.

"Who is she?" Tilu asked Rambo Maity, he just needed to be sure.

"Her name is Rosa. You have a very good eye, great choice."

Tilu looked again at the pictures. Was this really some other girl? No, this was Lalee, it was definitely her. Tilu couldn't not know that face, the hard line of that jaw. "Rosa," he repeated in a bemused voice.

"Yes," Rambo slid from his chair and was standing next to Tilu in a matter of seconds. He put a hand on Tilu's shoulder "She's fantastic. You have to meet her only once and you'll want to see her again and again. Are you free today? I can arrange a meeting for you," Rambo began to take out a small diary from his pocket, "mind you, she's very busy. People adore her, I don't know if she is free, but you seem like a nice gentleman, a gentleman of taste."

Chakladar shook his head and scurried away to do something else. He didn't like how Maity was doing business within his premises while at the same time trying to cheat him out of his fair remuneration. Still, people had to eat and Chakladar had better things to do than mind Rambo Maity. He heard Rambo saying, "She's not cheap but she's worth it. I promise you, not one of my clients have ever had one word of complaint." What fuss over a two penny whore, thought Chakladar, leave it to Maity to sell a hovel for the price of a Taj Mahal.

Tilu had taken a dislike to Rambo. He was affronted by Rambo's seeming familiarity with Lalee, as if he, Tilu Shau, had not made love to this woman for the last five years, left on her bed the better part of his meagre earnings. This man, this peacock Tilu had never meet before, pimping Lalee was sacrilegious. But he couldn't resist the idea of continuing the conversation. "I don't have much cash," he mumbled.

"She won't go below thousand, her normal rate is two. I'm just giving you a discount since you are an associate of Mr. Chakladar here, oh where did he go?" Maity looked at the door, "Ah well, what do you say?"

"I don't have a thousand Rupees."

"That you'll give to her when you meet her. Plenty of ATMs on the way. Right now you just need to give me five hundred," he smiled broadly, "my humble commission."

Tilu was still turning this new information in his head. He failed to answer Rambo.

"Okay, I give you a special price— four hundred, no more. Fine? I'll set up your appointment." Rambo Maity hurried out of the room before Tilu could change his mind.

Ugly suspicions began to assail Tilu. Who was this man? Did he and Lalee have a special relationship? Was he something more than her pimp? His heart skipped a beat. This flashy man, still young, could he be her lover, her babu?

No, she wouldn't do that. Tilu tried to convince himself. She wasn't that kind of person. She never trusted anyone and whenever Tilu had tried to wheedle personal information out of her, tried to learn if she had a lover, Lalee had always dismissed the idea. She had no patience with that particular breed of Shonagachhi's men who lived on their women's earnings. She wouldn't take a babu, Tilu desperately tried to hold on to that belief.

Chakladar walked in and stared at Tilu, as if he had quite forgotten he was there. After a few seconds he said, "Bhoga showed you the latest stock we got?"

Tilu nodded.

"If these sell well, how soon can you give me the next one?"

"I was kind of thinking we can do something a little different."

Chakladar's eyes narrowed. He didn't like creativity.

"It'll be good, a thriller-adventure story, set in colonial Calcutta," Tilu added hastily, preparing a sales pitch on the spot.

"You won't write the sister-in-law series anymore?"

"I'm not saying no," Tilu said carefully, "just taking a short break. The next one will sell, I can promise you that."

"It better," said Chakladar emphatically. "Show me the manuscript, but I can't promise anything."

"Once you read it you won't be able to say no."

Chakladar went over to his cash register. "I don't know whose face I saw today when I woke up, I must have opened my cash box fifty times today, at least your payment is

legitimate, the only one of today. The rest of them are out to loot me, I tell you simply loot me dead,” he counted out the money and handed it over to Tilu. “Your last payment. Now we’re square.”

As Tilu counted out the notes, Chakladar said, “Roped you in, has he?”

“Who?” Tilu said.

“Rambo Maity, who else? Always hanging around here, trying to get clients. Must be doing better than me,” Chakladar walked out of the room shaking his head, calling out for Bhoga.

Alone once more in the room, Tilu picked up the two pictures of Lalee Rambo had left on the counter top. She was wearing a long oversized white shirt, the buttons were done up in a haphazard way so that much of her chest was exposed without actually showing her breasts and the shirt flagged asymmetrically on her thighs. She certainly was very dark, and the white shirt she wore like a shroud only accentuated it. Her legs were lean, and her long black hair fell to her thighs. She was looking at the camera with a rather supercilious half smile upon her lips. Much of her sexiness looked fake in the picture, but there was something sincere in that look with which she was gazing at the lens, a frank anger in her eyes, or so he fancied. Rosa, he thought, the name didn’t sit easily on her skin. A sliver of sunlight fell on the picture, and Tilu had to avert his eyes. She seemed so distant, so far away from Tilu Shau and his world. He wanted to touch her, to feel his skin against hers. If she saw him again, he’d just want to lie down next to her, to sleep with her through the night and see her face in the morning.

Rambo Maity walked back into the room and gave him a disgusting smile.

“Can’t stop looking at her eh? That’s Rosa, she’s a blight sent to torment the souls of men, I tell you,” he laughed. “But what better blight have the gods set upon us mere

mortals than the soft flesh of a lady eh? Fear not, you don't have to wait long to meet this vision in person. At four today you'll have the rendezvous. You know Shonagachhi right? Just walk past the first big *paan* shop you see. You'll come to a big building, that's The Blue Lotus. Her room is right next to that. You can't miss it. Give me a call if you get lost, and now, do you have the money?"

Tilu hesitated a little. Pay money to this interloper to see Lalee? His own Lalee? But she may not meet Tilu if he just walked in without an appointment, especially after yesterday. If he paid this man, she couldn't deny him a meeting, could she? Tilu handed him four hundred.

Rambo thanked him glibly, "Don't worry. Everything will be fine." He gave Tilu a dazzling smile, put on his sunglasses with some flourish and said, "I'll see you again, yes?" and walked out of Ma Tara Printing Works.

Chapter XI

Samsher Singh put one hand over his face. “Why? Why must it be me? In which of my previous lives have I been so evil that it all comes to bite me in the ass,” he moaned.

“What’s her name?”

“Deepa Marhatta, sir,” said Constable Balok Ghosh in a weary voice. “We told her you’re busy, but it’s no use, she won’t listen.”

Samsher Singh groaned behind his hand.

“If you take my advice sir, and I know it’s not my place, but,” he said kindly, “I think you should hear her out sir, she won’t leave. Her type of women usually don’t. Harder to shake off than Syphilis, if you excuse my language sir.”

Samsher Singh looked tired and fed up as he met the Constable’s eye. “Well, I guess, send her in.”

Deepa Marhatta entered the room in a state of incandescence. Even before the proceedings began, she had taken a violent exception to the callous and unprofessional attitude of the police.

“Yes, Madam, what can I do for you?” Singh said with a hard and unsympathetic face.

“What you can do for me is your duty officer,” said a very forthright Ms. Deepa Marhatta.

“Well, it’s generally the duty of the conscientious public to inform us what our duty is, so please inform me madam, once again, what my duty is in whatever situation it is that you have in mind.”

“You know that two days ago a woman was murdered in Shonagachhi?”

“No, madam, this is the first time we are hearing about any such occurrence,” Singh said with a perfect poker face.

“Of course. Of course you’re hearing it for the first time. I wish to lodge a police report about the matter.”

“Well madam, it is certainly a right that you can exercise if you choose to, certainly you can. But you know how these things work.” He opened his hands in an expansive gesture hoping that the lady would help him fill in the blanks that he was not saying.

Deepa Marhatta had not spent two decades in the social work sector for nothing. She sat silent, her face giving nothing away. “No, sir, I don’t know how these things work. I know there has been a murder and I wish to lodge a First Intelligence Report since I rather assume that there’s been no official intimation made to the police.”

“Madam,” Samsher Singh swivelled in the chair once or twice, “it’s very difficult to track down these things. She might have just run away with her babu or some young man who promised to marry her. You can’t trust them. The first man who comes around and says, ‘hey I’ll make you my wife,’ they rush after him and give him all their money and they are never seen again.” He paused, and grew more confident in the apparent silence of the woman sitting opposite him, “What can we do madam? Can’t run after every whore in the country trying to stop her from making a fool of herself,” he smiled.

“You can do this officer, you can take down a complaint lodged by me Deepa Marhatta, resident of Flat no. 4B/1 Ballygunge Circular Road, Calcutta 700019, that Miss Mohamaya Mondol, twenty-three, known to me personally was murdered by a person or persons unknown on last Friday the third of January at The Blue Lotus in Shonagachhi. A bottle of Carbollic acid that she kept in her own bathroom to deter snakes in the monsoon was smashed on her face and then pushed into her throat. She died as a result of those

intentionally inflicted wounds,” she paused. “And now will you please take down what I have just said.”

Samsher Singh made a move to indicate some vague physical activity, “Well, madam, if you must. We’re here to serve you.” He raised himself slightly and looked around for a minute, then he shouted, “*Eai*, Balok da, Balok da?”

The Constable materialised by the side of Singh’s desk. “Yes sir,” he said stoically.

“Please take this lady to Naskar and take down a FIR.” He indicated Deepa who sat in her chair looking at him with frank disgust.

“Yes sir,” repeated Balok Ghosh and went and stood beside Deepa.

She looked at Singh and said in a low voice, “I know you know that she was killed. You know why? Because every man in a khaki uniform in the area of Shonagachhi has earned off their backs. Either directly, or by fining the johns or getting a cut from the girls, the madams and their pimps. You know everything that goes on there. For example, you know very well that a fresh consignment of girls has arrived very early this morning. A full load, from Nepal, Bangladesh, Bihar and even a few from Myanmar. You want to know how I know? Because we have been waiting at various posts outside Shonagachhi. There are girls as young as seven in there...” she paused. “Seven, do you have any children officer? A seven year old girl. Speaking from a life-time’s experience, I’ll give her a year. They don’t always survive beyond that. But I needn’t tell you that, you already know.” And with that, she walked off majestically leaving a very open mouthed Samsher Singh staring at her. Constable Balok Ghosh gave him an understanding look and rushed after Deepa Marhatta.

Samsher Singh sat on his chair swivelling for a few minutes, his mood entirely spoiled by this distasteful encounter. Yes, it was true that they knew. But what did they expect him

to do? Rush in single-handed and save the whole society from ruin and injustice? When the fingers are pointed, maximum numbers will turn towards the girls of the red light district when it comes to ruining society. It's not for nothing that they put them in one corner, in these floating towns where they can remain among their own folk and not be a part of what you may call mainstream society. And I'm their fucking keeper, am I? Thought Singh. Just like the *nawabs* in the olden days used to employ the castrated *khojas* to guard their harems. Hah, that felt about right, he thought, it almost felt like he was everyone's eunuch to shit on.

The phone began to ring. Chinmoy Naskar, who was sitting on his desk patiently taking down Deepa's report, picked it up and immediately looked like he had had an electric shock. He stood up straight and almost saluted. Then realising that his telephonic interlocutor could not possibly see this mark of deference, squeaked in a high pitched voice, "Yes sir, right now sir, please hold on sir." Covering the mouthpiece with one hand, he motioned towards Samsheer Singh and began mouthing something that Singh did not get. But Naskar gestured frantically towards the phone on Singh's desk and he picked it up.

"Deputy Commissioner of Police (north) speaking. I have just had a call from the Chief Minister's Office. Have you seen today's papers man?" A male voice barked on the phone.

"No sir, I mean I just arrived sir, it's very early...I was just going to..."

"What? It's because of your lackadaisical attitude that the media gets to dump this sort of shit on us, don't you realise? Take a look at the papers."

Singh was fumbling through the junk on his desk with one hand trying to find the day's newspaper. On the bottom half of the first page a headline announced that a candle light march was going to take place in Shonagachhi. A large picture of women gathered

around a makeshift dais listening to someone speaking into the microphone accompanied the story. An old woman was holding up a placard with the words, “Our lives matter.”

The voice carried on, “Of course the media will jump on it. Would those jackals let such a golden opportunity pass? The police force is the villain in everyone’s story. Anyway, this won’t just end here, you hear me? If they are going ahead with this candle light march there’ll be more protest marches and you can be sure it’ll get full coverage in the media. They’ll generate round the clock interest in this thing. And five overnight experts will be debating the case hotly on prime time news tomorrow. One of those rabid feminists will be present I expect.” The man continued, “Now look here, I don’t want the police to appear like an army of chumps. It’ll not just be about this murder, they’ll drag human trafficking, sex rackets, police complicity, bribery, everything into it.”

“But sir, you know very well that whenever we have any trafficking information we crack down on it and organise rescue missions...” Singh protested vociferously but even he couldn’t bring himself to deny the charge of bribery. It’d be too bold-faced a lie.

“Save it,” the DCP said curtly. “You personally may not be mixed up in that officer but the media’s portrayal of the police in that particular story is hardly going to be sympathetic. Anyway, I want you and your men to make a show of effort. Okay? What have you done so far?”

Singh suddenly felt he was on firmer ground here. Somewhat relieved he said, “We took down a FIR sir, this morning. Er...it is about the murder of the girl in Shonagachhi, right sir?”

“Of course it is. Don’t be such an imbecile. Read the newspaper, man. Two or three high profile NGOs have gotten behind this incident. One of those has headquarters in Delhi and some international visibility. They are trying to give it as much media coverage as possible. Once there is public interest in the matter, things won’t remain buried for long.

So as long as there is scrutiny and limelight on the issue I want the police force to show initiative and get some positive press.”

“Er, does that mean we have to make an investigation sir?” Singh asked.

“Of course! Are you stupid or what? At least there needs to be some appearance of the police making an investigation. Consider myself personally involved in the matter Singh. The Crime Branch will also be involved. We can’t have negative media feedback again so soon after the Park Street rape case. You understand?”

“Yes sir, of course, you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“See to it, Singh,” the DCP hung up.

Samsher Singh resumed his position on the chair, his face once again buried in his hand. Chinmoy Naskar piped tentatively from his desk, “Sir, do you want any tea? One strong cuppa?”

“Yes please, Naskar.”

When the tea had been placed on Singh’s desk, and the spill carefully wiped away, he asked Naskar, “Did someone go there after the murder happened?”

“Yes sir. They don’t like us interfering but Balok da went.”

“Send him in.”

When Balok Ghosh came into the room, Singh said, “You went to The Blue Lotus when that...thing...happened, Balok da?”

“Yes sir, I went with Junior Constable Biswas sir. She was dead, of course. The thing happened around midnight I think, we went around two in the morning. They didn’t want to hand over the body but since there were no relatives and it was a murder case I told them the body has to go to the police morgue sir. I called and people from the Knatapukur police morgue came and took it away.”

“Evidence? Did you seal the crime scene?”

Balok Ghosh gave a shrug. “No sir, things had been somewhat cleaned away by the time we arrived. You know how it is, they take care of their own business. Everyone swore that some client did it but no one had seen him, or any other person enter. She was soliciting as usual in front of the building, and there’s always a lot of people around. Son of a bitch broke an entire bottle of carbolic acid on her face and then pushed the bottle into her throat. Broken glass was found next to her.”

“What happened to that? Did you take it?”

“No sir. They said they had thrown it already. They even moved the body, cleaned up the blood. Didn’t want to leave it for two hours I suppose.”

Samsher Singh gave a long sigh, “No one normally files a FIR in these cases. Is that Marhatta woman going to press the case?”

“Oh yes sir, very definitely. I know the type, she isn’t going to back down, especially when the media is getting charged up about this.”

“They’re on it, are they?”

“Biswas is on duty in the kiosk outside Shonagachhi, on the big crossing in Sovabazar sir. He said two media vans came in today about an hour ago. They’re going to get their money’s worth out of this.”

Singh groaned. “And no evidence of any kind? The bottle could have had fingerprints, man!”

Balok Ghosh shrugged again, as if to say that he had seen a lot of fingerprints in his time and didn’t think much of them. “Well, it’d be the case of needle in a haystack sir. How many people will you be running after? The fingerprint is hardly going to be matched and there would probably be a dozen different sets of prints anyway.”

Singh nodded, fingerprints and clues and body lines only worked in American television serials, or when someone really high profile got murdered and the Central Bureau of Investigation led probes. Then the Special Branch and the Crime Branch all became super efficient to bring the criminal to justice. It was hardly going to happen for a Shonagachhi killing.

“Who informed the police about the crime?”

“Biswas was on duty sir, he saw some johns running away, commotion and shouting, so he went to see what the matter was, then two girls told him what had happened. I don’t think the NGOs came till the morning. Though I’m pretty sure they knew on the night itself. Some of those girls there are in constant touch with them, call them on cellphones, etc.”

Singh nodded, “Is the body still there?”

“Yes sir, at the Knatapukur morgue. They did the post-mortem even though the reason of death seems to be pretty clear. No one has claimed the body,” he finished.

Singh drained the last of his tea and got up from his swivel chair, put on his Khaki regulation cap and picked up his baton. “All right Balok da, you’re coming with me. Let’s go and have a chat with the people at the morgue. Have they sent us a report yet?”

“No sir, I don’t think so.”

“Okay, the DCP says investigate, and so we shall. Constable, ask the driver to get the jeep out.”

Samsher Singh and Constable Balok Ghosh marched out of the Burtolla police station to see a dead girl.

Chapter XII

Lalee was marinating a piece of fish in turmeric and salt. She was thinking of her mother, crouching beside the clay oven, covering her nose with part of her saree as she cooked. She would wake up before the sky was even light and start her day. It had been years since Lalee had last seen her. How old was she? Did her brothers and their wives even take care of her? She felt a homesickness she hadn't felt in years. Her mother had never raised her voice, never said an unkind word to her. If she had known what became of Lalee, would she still acknowledge Lalee as her daughter? Her own flesh and blood? A stinging ache spread through Lalee. She wanted to see her mother, stand before her, touch her. Feel like a daughter again, feel like someone in the world cared about her. She touched her belly. She was carrying the first flicker of life within her. Would she give birth? Become a good mother? If she didn't bring this new life into this fucked up world would it be the kindest thing she could do for her unborn child?

She heard her phone ring. It was Rambo Maity.

"Hello? Hello, you there?"

"Yes, why are you shouting?"

"Uff this stupid connection, I never get a good line when I call you," Rambo grumbled.

"What do you want?"

"What do I want? Hah, can't you be nice for one minute? You talk to me as if I've robbed you and here I am working day and night so that...."

"Oh for heaven's sake, what is it about?"

“Got you a customer. Not so fancy this time, but seems like a harmless sort.”

“I don’t want to do these two penny jobs anymore Rambo, you know that. Why would I get a pimp if I wanted jobs like that hah, I ask you? I could just now go stand in the street and pick up cheap jobs like that...”

“Oh and you don't anymore is that it? You think I was born yesterday? You think I’d believe that you work exclusively for me, eh? Where did that bruise on your jaw come from then, eh? It’s as if I don't know shit about you Shonagachhi whores....”

“Fine, fine. One hour job?”

“Yes, don’t think he can pay for more than that. He should be there by four.”

She went back to her cooking. The thatch roof leaked in the monsoon but in winters it was dry and she much preferred to do her cooking in the shed instead of her room. For one, the smoke from the coal in the clay oven made it impossible for her to breathe inside the room. Though she hadn’t constructed it herself, over time she had mended this and repaired that to such an extent that it was almost made by her. The meagre mustard oil that she had poured in the wok began smoking and she quickly dropped the fish, moving slightly to avoid the splatter.

It was time to pay her rent to Shefali mashi. Lalee preferred to be on time when she could just so that if the need ever arose, she could ask for an extension on the rent. Rambo’s clients were okay in general. The work was steady. If she didn’t terminate the pregnancy, how long would she be able to work? What money would she have for herself and the baby? She wondered idly if Sampurna or the Sex Workers’ Collective would help her, financially and medically. Where could she go, when she needed to?

Turning over her fish in the wok she thought about Maity. He was decent when measured by the abysmally low standards of Shonagachhi pimps. She knew she was in a

far better position than most girls with pimps. For one, the chukris who were inexorably bound to their pimps and their madams were much worse off. They were in the lowest rung of the pecking order and their handlers were often a brutal lot. Whereas she had been a free agent for years since she paid off her cost price and interest to Shefali mashi who had bought her from her traffickers. Lalee had had time to build up a little savings, but in recent times her savings had taken a hit, as did her interest in continuing to live in the tooth and claw struggle of Shonagachhi. Still, she reckoned, whatever they said about Rambo, he hadn't been bad to her. Admittedly, till recently he had been nothing more than a hanger-on, conning first time johns on Shonagachhi streets, been a bit of a joke before he stumbled upon his newfound wealth. Once again Lalee wondered what he was doing to keep himself afloat rather well these days, but it was none of her business, as long as Rambo delivered on his promise of richer, regular, clients. All in all, she reckoned it could be a lot worse.

She took the lid off a pot of rice she had made earlier and served herself on a steel plate. She took a pinch of salt and two green chillies and placed them on one side of the plate and began eating her lunch of fried fish and plain rice. She peeled the soft, fried skin on the fish. Lalee wondered if the same would happen to human skin if burnt. And in a second her thoughts turned towards Mohamaya. When Lalee saw her lying on that floor, half her face had melted away. There was no cheek, no lips and no eye. The acid had eaten into her neck, and blood spluttered out of the open wound where the bottle had pierced the skin. It wasn't burning by fire, but it was burning nonetheless. When Lalee saw her she was already dead. But in Lalee's dreams she saw her still alive, sometimes spluttering and trying to breathe while all the blood from her body drained out of the gaping hole in her neck, at other times smiling and chatting nonchalantly as half her face dripped on to the floor. Lalee tried to forget the girl she discovered dead next door but she found a way to come back in Lalee's dreams. Now, peeling the raised skin of the fish, Lalee couldn't bring

it to her mouth. She ate her food as best as she could feeling at once queasy and censoring herself for this sentimentality. She felt guilty, though she knew she hadn't done anything to feel guilty about, but that didn't make it any better. She gave up the battle with herself half way through the meal and washed her hands. Unable to dislodge the face of Mohamaya from her thoughts, she went out of her door and saw two vans from news channels parked in the distance on the opposite side of the main road.

It wasn't that Shonagachhi was never in the news. Every once in a while some newspaper would decide to write a feature on the life of Shonagachhi girls or their children and what a stellar job the dedicated NGOs were doing in the area. And the news channels would bring around their vans when some hot and immediate crime had taken place in South Asia's largest red light district. But one thing was for sure, it never boded well. Lalee walked out of her room, not bothering to lock and walked to The Blue Lotus next door. The first room was the one she had found Mohamaya in. She knocked roughly on the door. A voice answered:

"Who is it?"

"It's Lalee. Open the door."

"It's open, you just have to push it hard. The door jams."

Lalee pushed open the door and saw a young girl sitting on a double bed facing the window with a hand held plastic mirror doing her makeup.

"Who are you?" Lalee asked.

"I'm Chanda."

"Are you...one of Shefali mashi's girls?" Lalee asked a little tentatively, unsure how to frame the question.

Chanda looked at her as if Lalee was crazy. "Of course. Why else would I be in her house?"

Shefali mashi, now in her late forties, had once been Lalee's madam and was now Lalee's landlady. The tin hovel she called her home and shelled out a very hard earned five thousand rupees each month belonged to Shefali mashi in the convoluted web of Shonagachhi's property rights. As the owner of The Blue Lotus, Mohamaya was her property as well, a chukri, barely one year into the business, just like this girl Chanda would be. You had to pay off your price first, the price you had been bought for, the initial investment that your mashi or your madam had made in you. You paid that off and if then you had some life left in you, you paid her rent for the rest of your time there, hoping that one day you'd become a madam and own the place you lived in.

Shefali mashi was a force of nature, and a big woman in the pecking order of Shonagachhi. She was astute, hard and formidable. Even the goons of the area and the pimps didn't dare cross her, but she didn't go sticking her nose in other people's business either. She ruled over her fiefdom of girls with a firm hand and those goons and pimps were in all probabilities arm in arm with her in business in any case.

"I'm Lalee," she said to the girl, feeling that she needed to explain her presence. She had walked out of her own door and into this one without much thought. She wanted to get out of her room and do something, see the place the Mohamaya had died in one more time, but why she felt the need, she didn't know.

"I know who you are," said the girl and concentrated on tracing the line of her lower lash with a black pencil that didn't seem to want to move very smoothly. "You used to be one of Shefali mashi's girls, I know, you live next door." She tugged the pencil against the skin and blinked back a stray tear. "Mashi's upstairs, if that's who you want," she informed Lalee.

"No, that's okay, I just saw the vans on the street and thought I would..." Lalee trailed off.

The girl replied enthusiastically, “Oh they’re from Tara News, it’s because of the candle light march tonight. Are you going?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“All of Shonagachhi is going to be in it. Malini came here with five others, spoke to mashi, all of us are going,” her eyes grew large with excitement. “Well, maybe not all, but most of this neighbourhood is going to be in it. But everyone is going to be watching for sure.” She turned to her mirror once more, “It won’t look good if you don’t come. You’ll be the only one at home.”

“Mashi will let you all go?”

“Oh, you have to admire Malini,” Chanda said with a conspiratorial smile. “She spoke to mashi for a long time, and brought people from the Collective. Mohamaya was one of mashi’s, so she can’t say no, right?” She seemed to give this some thought, “I mean, she could, but it would look bad,” she said. “Besides, Malini was adamant. To not allow us to join the march would mean starting a feud with Malini. I don’t think Shefali mashi wants that.”

Lalee was thinking about this when Chanda spoke again, “You know it happened in this room?” she pointed a finger at the floor and for a second Lalee’s almost expected to see a dead girl lying there. “Oh, I shudder to think of it. I didn’t see her. I didn’t want to see her but I heard what happened to her face. Oh my God,” Chanda shivered. “I never come here you know, but today mashi told me to get ready here, I have a regular coming in fifteen minutes and there’s trouble upstairs,” she lowered her voice and raised her pencilled eyebrows at Lalee in a conspiratorial gesture to indicate that the nature of the trouble might be familiar to Lalee. “So mashi said go use the downstairs room.”

“Were you at the demonstration the other day? Did you hear what they were saying?”

“The usual speeches. Things that happen to us girls in Shonagachhi and what should be done about it. There’s been more talks and meeting after the demonstration though, as in among the girls and the Collective’s members.”

“Like what?”

“The Collective contacted some NGOs, but they already knew. Now they have teamed up it seems. They say that the police are not doing anything about this murder, no one cares if girls like us die. So they organised a candle light march to get media’s attention and demand justice for Mohamaya.” She stopped for a moment and began to powder her face once more even though it was already a shade of unnatural white. “Fancy you not knowing that. There was so much talk about it.”

“I was out last night.”

The girl nodded sagely. “I heard Mohamaya had two kids. I never knew. Apparently they stay with her parents. They didn’t know what Maya did. They thought she was a maid in the city. Her husband died, so they had no money, like nothing at all and her parents are very old. You know the NGO woman, the big plump one who always shouts? Wears Salwar Kameez?”

Lalee nodded.

“She showed us a picture of her kids. One boy one girl, the girl is very pretty. Big eyes. I felt very sad, you know. They are so young, and none of it is their fault.” She stopped to take a long breath and then continued, “Did you know Maya auditioned for a small role in television? That NGO, Sampurna or something it is called I don’t know, she was a peer-educator for them. Maya used to go to the girls and tell them about AIDS and give free condoms and all that. Shefali mashi didn’t like it very much, but she didn’t say anything. Must have been because of Malini. That NGO woman apparently helped Maya get that television role.” Her eyes flashed. “Wouldn’t it be great if one of us made it in the

movies or TV? It could be me, or you,” she added generously. “Maybe I could ask the NGO people?” She looked hopefully at Lalee as if she had all the answers, “Nah, mashi would hang my head on a spike if she knew. She says it’s because of these people from the outside that we have all these problems.”

“Yeah, because everything is otherwise so safe and amazing in here for us,” Lalee said before she could stop herself.

“Yeah, it is what it is.”

The girl couldn’t be more than fifteen or sixteen, might be even younger, Lalee thought, and she already has that hardened resignation so typical of this life. Lalee watched her as she looked at herself critically in the mirror. Behind Chanda, Lalee could see cut outs of various Bollywood heroines pasted on the stained walls. She grimaced inside. Madhuri Dixit in a pointy bra, Kareena Kapoor in a red dress, Priyanka Chopra in a wet yellow saree. Other than calendar gods and goddesses, the most popular home decoration were these glamour heroines. The twisted irony of the situation didn’t fail to register on her.

“You should use some fairness creams,” Chanda said following on her comment about TV. “There are quite a few good ones in the market these days, I bought this new Fair and Lovely cream and see I’m already getting a little fairer,” Chanda pinched her cheeks and leaned towards Lalee but since it was hidden under a layer of makeup four shades lighter than the girl’s natural colouring, the efficacy of Fair and Lovely could not be judged. “You would get a higher rate,” she nodded at Lalee, appraising her. “Do you know how much they are shelling out for fair girls now? But not everyone wants those Nepali girls, they look too Chinese,” she wrinkled her nose.

Before Lalee could reply, they both heard a soft whimper and an indistinct thump from above.

Chanda said, "I hope it's not too bad." She scowled, "You know something? I liked it much better when that fucker was in jail."

"What do you mean? What's happening over there?"

But Chanda refused to oblige with any more information. "You better go see for yourself, I'm not saying anything. And anyway, I never see you come around. So what's it to you." She stared intently at the mirror, drawing an exaggerated line around her lips, refusing even to meet Lalee's gaze.

After the recent bout of garrulous gossiping this abruptness surprised Lalee a little bit. But more than that, she was disturbed by the sounds coming from overhead. In the long years spent in Shonagachhi she had witnessed and received countless beatings, and though so much of her was hardened to that, it still managed to resonate with something inside of her. She had never quite reached that level of indifference that would come naturally to a veteran of such casual violence.

She took two steps at a time and stopped at the landing on the second floor, catching her breath, winded from all the smoking. From where she stood, she could hear a man's voice, rather thin, but what it lacked in robustness it made up with vindictive rage. The man was calling his invisible target all sorts of names, though most of them were variations on the theme of prostitute. It's amazing, thought Lalee, how many synonyms one language could have devised and seemed to need. We are an expletive; a whole population of women connected only by their livelihood reduced to a single word of offence. At least we do what we do, she thought, but the ones who don't aren't spared either. At one time or another, every woman is turned into an expletive. A soft whimpering permeated her train of thought and she ascended the last few steps quietly, with caution.

A short squarish man of sturdy build was standing in the middle of the room with what looked like a whip in his hand, and a slight girl, no more than twenty, was whimpering a little distance away from him, with her forehead resting on the corner of the wall. She was in her bra and her lower body was covered in a pair of leggings. Her hair was all over the place, and she was breathing huge gulps of air between whimpers of pain. Once Lalee's eyes adjusted to the dark room, she saw that the man was Chintu, arrested recently on the charge of dealing marijuana to some foreign backpacker in Sudder Street. What he was holding was not a whip as she had thought before, but his own belt. It was fitted with a large Harley Davidson buckle and the girl's back was covered in raised vertical welts. As she stood motionless taking in the scene, unobserved by the other two, Chintu rushed towards the whimpering girl, shouting and grabbing her by the hair, and moved as if to knock her forehead on the wall. Without pausing for thought, Lalee rushed at Chintu and fell with all her weight against him, knocking him to the floor. He pushed her and she slid backwards on the smooth cement floor. Then in an instantaneous, animal rage she charged at Chintu, scratching, hitting, kicking— all at once.

It was impossible to say how long that lasted. To Lalee it felt like the fraction of a second. A deep and familiar voice said suddenly, out of nowhere, "Not the face, Chintu, never the face. You should know better."

Both Lalee and Chintu froze in an instant, as if a bucket of ice cold water had been poured over them. The rage drained out of Lalee; her vision, which had narrowed in anger focussing on Chintu, widened. She saw a middle aged woman entering the room from a door on the left, pushing aside the shiny curtains. It was Shefali mashi.

She clicked her tongue and shook her head, "How many times do I have to tell you?" she said in a soft, low tone, as if she was reprimanding Chintu for leaving the lights on too

long. She walked over to the other side where Chintu was still fuming, barely taking his eyes off Lalee, and sat on a plastic chair heavily.

“That’ll be all,” she said dismissively.

When Chintu didn’t show any sign of leaving, she said, “I said, Chintu, that that will be all.” She enunciated each word with such care, as if she was explaining a difficult concept to a slow-witted child. Lalee was instantly reminded of the long years she had spent in the power of this woman and how she had never once heard her raise her voice, but neither seen her contradicted or disobeyed. She never raised a hand herself, but she was the cause of violence in others. But strangely, given all of that, some of the girls never left her side. She drew as much respect as dread, and an odd sort of feral loyalty. But the mettle of Lalee’s inherent obstinacy and pig-headedness lay ill at ease with Shefali mashi’s unyielding nature. And yet, there was a grudging respect between the two women, even if it was fraught with a tenuous, shifting power play.

Chintu rolled up his belt and without another word walked out of the room. Lalee heard his thudding footsteps down the stairs and a loud bang as the door shut behind him.

Shefali mashi was holding a small box in her left hand. It was a fine brass thing, studded with a number of semi-precious stones all around. She placed the box on her lap and opened it. Inside a number of betel leaves were neatly arrayed, each fatly wrapped into a conical shape with a number of ingredients inside. She picked one and with great ceremony popped it into her mouth. After a minute of thoughtful chewing she spoke to the girl still cowering by the wall.

“Come here my girl.”

The girl, Lalee noticed, had stopped crying entirely as soon as Shefali mashi had entered the room. She was now crouching in the corner, staring at the older woman seated on the chair with great apprehension. It was as if she had forgotten all about her beating of

moments ago. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and half crawled, half dragged herself forward.

Lalee vaguely recognised her as one of the girls Malini had brought with herself the last time she came to visit Lalee. But she couldn't be sure, new girls poured in everyday and she had long since abandoned keeping track of them. It had seemed to her a futile occupation, and unlike other women who lived and worked in Shonagachhi, she found no camaraderie in cultivating that sorority. It only filled her with abject hopelessness.

Shefali mashi ignored Lalee entirely. She spoke to the girl as if no one else was present in the room but themselves. "Look at me," she said, "who did you speak to?"

The girl was silent. Shefali mashi said again in the same low measured tones, "I'm not going to ask again my child."

The girl burst forth into another torrent of sobs, and between gasps she said, "Believe me mashi, I only told Deepa madam. She asked me about Mohamaya, but she already knew, every one of them knew. I only told them what everyone knows."

"What exactly did you tell them."

And the girl stopped again abruptly. Her manner became guarded as if she didn't know how to frame the answer and save her own skin at the same time. "Just... just about Mohamaya. They knew her from the NGO work. They had taken her for that TV audition, and then they never saw her again. I told them, that Chintu was in jail and that Mohamaya wasn't working for him anymore. That she got her new room and wasn't...I mean, was independent. That she paid you off. And that her clients were all her own now, because Chintu was in jail. And I told them about the other thing...but I thought they already knew...."

"What other thing?" Lalee interjected automatically.

Shefali mashi looked at Lalee square in the face for the first time and asked the girl to leave.

The girl rushed as fast as she could out of the room, not once looking back, and disappeared through another door. Lalee found herself wondering how Mohamaya had paid herself off so soon. It was almost impossible to do in that short a time. Did someone else pay for her or had she reached some other arrangement with Shefali mashi?

Mohamaya still lived here under her roof, so she couldn't have been that independent. If it was anyone else, Lalee would have doubted Mohamaya paid herself off. But this girl lived here with her, and mashi wasn't contradicting her. Suddenly, Lalee realised that she had seen this girl before not only with Malini but also when she was giving the speech at the demonstration.

"So, Lalee, come to honour us with your presence, have you?" Shefali mashi said sardonically, pushing another fat betel cone into her mouth. "To what do we owe this pleasure," she said indistinctly through a mouthful.

Lalee was completely stumped. She had no good reason for this visit other than an inexplicable curiosity about the dead girl she had never really known and hardly ever spoken to. She countered mashi with another question.

"What 'other thing' was she talking about just now?"

Shefali mashi seemed more amused than offended. A half smile played on her lips. This, predictably, irritated Lalee. "Well?" she retorted indignantly.

"I would say it's none of your business, but it actually is," Shefali mashi smiled, "even if you don't know it yet." She went on to say, "You see Lalee, it pays to keep in touch with your neighbours. They might know a thing or two, even if you think them all to be beneath you."

A number of replies sprang to Lalee's lips, but she went with, "Yeah, maybe I'll start keeping in touch once the neighbours stop getting killed," and felt ashamed as soon as she had said that sentence.

"Your tongue runs away with you, that's your trouble," Shefali mashi said sagely. "But at least you're not stupid like these ones." She wagged a finger in the direction the other girl had disappeared. "Sit down, have a *paan* with me," she said to Lalee in a friendly tone.

Lalee decided to not complicate matters and sat down without another word. Shefali mashi produced one of her many stuffed betel leaves and Lalee put it in her mouth. "Who's making these for you now?" Lalee asked. "In my time there was this girl called Radha who did it, I remember."

"Yes," Shefali mashi smiled. "Radha made them very well, I remember. You were never any good at it."

Lalee gave a one shoulder shrug. "You know me," she said. "What's going on mashi? What's happening? Why was Chintu hitting her?"

"Ah, why do you ask? It's no more no less than what happens here everyday. She was...indiscreet, and she needed the reprimand."

"A girl died." Lalee said it so softly that she might have been speaking to herself. "I found her."

"I know, I was there," Shefali mashi said simply. "You did well Lalee, never to get mixed up in that NGO business. I know your distaste for people is universal, and you're no more on our side than you are on theirs, still, it's a good thing, you keep your head."

"What are you talking about? You think the NGOs killed her?"

"Of course not," the older woman said, "don't be absurd. No, Lalee, whatever these pimps or the police say, let me tell you something, if there's any good that's been done for these girls, for us and our children here, it is by those people."

Lalee was shocked by this unexpected show of charity.

“Mind you,” said Shefali mashi with a faraway look on her face, “they’re not good for business. But there’s business and then there are other things. And those things have gotten a bit complicated now. You may think what you like about me, but no girl under my watch has died.”

“Yes, that’s not a very high bar to set for yourself,” Lalee couldn’t help saying. “And this girl did die.”

The older woman turned towards Lalee, her face serious, “In this place? In this life? You dare to say that to me? How many girls have you seen, killed? Not dead, no. Killed.”

“A few,” Lalee mumbled.

“And none of them were mine. I take care of what’s mine. And they are mine Lalee as you once were. I bought them. I fed them, I took care of them, I told them how to fold the cloth when they bled for the first time.”

“Yes, you’d have to, seeing as many of them were put to work when they were eleven or twelve,” Lalee said nastily.

“You seem to forget that while I did that to them and while I did some other things for them, it was their parents, their relatives and their husbands who sold them to me. Sometimes for as low as five hundred Rupees. When their own people abandoned them, I gave them shelter, food and a livelihood.”

“Sometimes five hundred Rupees is the difference between life, and death by starvation.”

“Yes, I know that, and I know you do too. Are you still paying them?”

“Who?” Lalee was instantly on her guard.

“Your brother, and your sisters too I suppose. Does your older brother still come around to collect every two months?”

“How do you know that?”

“I know because it’s my business to know what happens around here and because I’m not stupid. At least when you were with me, they didn’t dare.”

“Well, it’s my money, and I’m free to do what I want with it.”

“Speaking of which, I hope you plan to oblige me with my rent soon.”

“I meant to bring the rent with me, but I forgot. Don’t worry I’ll pay you tomorrow.”

“See that you do. I don’t like defaulters.”

“You haven’t yet told me why Chintu was hitting her just now.”

“Because she doesn’t know when to hold her tongue. They haven’t learned when to be guarded. They will, though. This one for example, won’t talk again.” She shook her head, “Someone shows the smallest amount of interest in them, these NGO workers for instance, or when the newspaper people come around to ask them their stories, they just spit it all out. No common sense, but they’ll learn, they’ll learn all right.”

“What did she say that was so bad that Chintu had to play crosses and noughts across her back?”

“She just went and spilled everything she knew about Mohamaya to the police. Or not to the police directly I should say, she told the NGO people and that Deepa woman, from the Sampurna place, she took down her statement, her signature and went to the police,” she paused. “Still, I suppose it doesn’t matter. The police won’t take the case, and she doesn’t actually know anything important. But she’d have done well to hold her tongue. That is the point.”

“Who killed her? Mohamaya, I mean.”

“I don’t know Lalee, I really don’t.” Shefali mashi looked at a distant point on the opposite wall, “She wasn’t mine anymore you know. She paid off her price and became her own boss. I let her rent the room downstairs, thought I could keep an eye on her, and she

thankfully retained Chintu, so I knew what was going on. But then the fool got himself arrested and she went off on her own. I didn't know who she picked up and where." She paused for breath, "She wasn't very bright."

"Yes, of course, if she was stupid enough to get killed she must have been really thick, of course, that's how it works," Lalee said bitterly.

"She was rather stupid, I'm not making that up. Well," she seemed to think for a minute, "well, stupid is probably not the right word, naive, trusting, you know what I mean? She was young."

"When I saw her... I mean, half her neck had just melted away, there was all this blood gushing out of her neck, it was all...exposed, and..."

"Yes, I know," mashi nodded slowly.

"You don't know who it was?" Lalee asked with a touch of desperation in her voice, "You really don't?"

Shefali mashi shook her head. "He took her cell phone and whatever money there was in the room. Under the mattress, I think. Not a very imaginative crime. Flung that acid on her face and ran for it. She must have been drugged before hand, or we would have heard her screaming."

"She had two kids?"

"Yes, the boy is six, and the girl is four."

"How did you find her?"

"Chintu brought her. Found her loitering in Sealdah station. Said she had come up from the village to look for a job. Husband died, the in-laws first beat the crap out of her then pushed her onto the streets with two little children. Her parents are so old they are practically dead. No money. Had a brother, but he died in a rail accident."

Lalee just nodded. It was a familiar story, one that she had heard in a number of contexts, a number of times.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” she shifted her weight from one side to another, adjusted the end of her sari and looked at Lalee. “I can do nothing. Except ensure that nothing worse happens. And it will. If the NGOs get the police involved it will get worse.” She shook her head, “It's never good Lalee, when outsiders get involved. It's about us, you realise? Just us. No one else cares. We're left to our own devices, the less people from the outside get involved in our affairs the best it is for us.” She stopped for a few moment, “I know what you are thinking Lalee,” she said, with some semblance of kindness, “but justice is not within my power, believe me, it has never been, but protection is. As much of it as I can do. I will try.”

Lalee simply nodded and got up. “Well, I find it very hard to believe Mohamaya was working independently after just one year. How did she manage to pay you off? It took me ten bloody years.”

Shefali mashi smiled inscrutably. When Lalee turned around to leave, she said, “You were quite good in the new video. It's always nice to see one of your own succeed.”

Lalee turned around and looked at her, perplexed.

“Oh you haven't seen it yet? Have you? I thought so. It's yours to borrow whenever you choose,” she smiled at Lalee.

Chapter XIII

Samsher Singh was feeling rather sick to his stomach but heroically forbore from retching, in the interest of maintaining his dignity in front of his subordinates. The truth was that Singh had never actually been part of a murder case before. He had seen dead people, road accidents, death by lynching, but he had never actually seen a mangled body with its mandatory post mortem stitches frozen solid in the cold trays of the morgue. To make matters worse, it was a naked body of a twenty-three year old woman. He was going to have a few nightmares, there was no doubt about it. He walked out of the cold-room into the relative fresh air of the porch outside the building and drew great gulps of air to forget the stench of death and formaldehyde. Even so, he suspected the phantom smell would haunt him for some time to come. Singh realised that a young man, a morgue personnel, was looking at him. He turned around and attempted to make his voice grave and important.

The young man's lab coat had a badge on it that said, 'Mondol.' He was wiping his hands in a small hand-towel with a cool disaffected calm. Singh decided to go for patronising familiarity.

"So you have had the body for a while?"

Mondol left the towel half hanging from his side pocket. "No, not really, compared to the number of unclaimed, unidentified bodies we get here. She's only been here a few days, tops."

"Did you perform the autopsy on her?"

“Hah,” the man laughed as though he expected nothing more than such ignorance from a policeman. “No, I just write up the reports. Doctor’s assistant. But I can give you her file if you want.”

“Hand over the file to my Constable will you? But I suppose you can tell me the gist of the matter. What did you find out?”

“Well, the cause of death seems to be a collapse of the respiratory system once the Jugular was ruptured because of the acid. Of course, then the bottle was thrust into her neck. I would suppose the acid was aimed at her face though a large amount of it also fell on the neck and burned the flesh. Although,” he stopped, “there was a bump on the head. I think she might have lost consciousness before the acid was splashed. There were also signs of asphyxiation. Though that was not the final cause of death.”

Singh tried to take it all in. He suspected Mondol of throwing in more medical jargon than necessary. After some thought he said, “That would explain why she didn’t cry out sooner. I mean that place is as full as a slum. People everywhere. There’s no way that someone wouldn’t hear her scream. Especially since there are at least ten other girls living on the first and second floor of that house. Anyway,” Singh paused, “if she indeed was strangled, and the same person did it, he would splash some of that acid on his own hand, wouldn’t he?”

“Not necessarily. He could have strangled her first and then thrown the acid,” said Mondol.

“Of course,” continued Singh in a thoughtful voice, “we do not know for a fact if there was only one person or the perpetrator had an accomplice.” And then he added, “Or if the attacker was even a man.”

Mondol let the policeman continue with his train of thought, waiting for the interview to end. At last Singh said, “Well, anyway, thank you for the help and please hand over that file to Balok da.”

On the ride back Singh was unusually quiet. Constable Ghosh knew better than to disturb his boss at such times. Eventually, Singh said, “It’s not pleasant is it Balok da.”

“It’s a dog’s job sir. We are the proverbial washermen’s dogs, we belong neither at home, nor at the washing ghats.”

Singh nodded. “Did she have a babu?”

“Oh yes,” Ghosh said, “they all have. I don’t know how they can be so stupid. Every girl there will hand over her money and all her savings to the first asshole that promises to marry them, if you excuse my language sir. Even those that have been cheated before. It’s such an obvious con and one that has happened to almost all of them, I don’t know how they keep falling for it over and over.”

“A woman’s heart, Balok da,” Singh said with a sigh, “it wants what it wants.”

Balok Ghosh gave his superior officer a sideways glance. Bugger me, he thought, he’s getting all philosophical about this murder. Aloud he said, “I have been hearing sir, that she had one.”

“You hear about everything,” said Singh. “Who was it?”

“Has a stall outside New Market on the footpath, sells Chinese wristwatches, sunglasses, belts— that sort of thing,” he paused. “A bad sort, by all accounts. Dealt drugs on Sudder Street and sometimes freelanced as this girl’s pimp after dark when he closed shop. Chintu knew him, broke his face a few times too. Poaching on his territory on both businesses.” Balok Ghosh found this slightly amusing, “Chintu was right pissed.”

“This girl was one of Chintu’s though wasn’t she?”

“Yes, that’s why. If her babu brought the customer, and sometimes these would be white sahibs, you know the Sudder Street foreigner types, all drug addicts with AIDS if you ask me— he’d bring them to this girl and he’d take the cut. Chintu wasn’t happy of course.”

“And you heard of any problem before? I mean between this babu and the girl?”

Balok Ghosh just shook his head, “Ah sir, they whack the girls about a little bit all the time, and still the bitches give them money and do their bidding. Now who’s going to say whether there was a problem or not? There’s always a problem with these people.”

“Yes Balok da, but this is murder,” Singh sounded a lot more grave than the Constable had expected.

“This isn’t the first nor will it be the last of its kind in that place, or anywhere sir.”

It looked for a moment that Singh was going to say something to that, instead he paused and after a moment, replied, “But the media’s all over it now, and I have my orders. We can’t sit and do nothing. Who’s the guy?”

“Salman Khan, sir.”

“What? The film star?” Singh exclaimed, open-mouthed.

“*Arrey*, no, no, sir, I think his real name is something like Mohammad Arif Aslam or something, I’m not sure. But the man’s a bit of a peacock and a big fan of the actor, dresses like him, talks like him— that sort of thing. So people call him Salman Khan, Sallu Khan, *Bhai*. It’s kind of a nick name, and I don’t think anyone uses his real name now.”

“Oh, I see,” Singh fell silent. After a while he said, “Do we know anything more about this girl Balok da?”

“Not much, I don’t think there’s much to know about her. Just the usual, like anyone else from there.”

“What’s her name?”

Balok Ghosh didn’t know the answer. He reached over to the back seat of the jeep and pulled out the brown paper folder that had been handed over to him in the police morgue. He untied the string knot and took out the first sheaf of papers, “Mohamaya sir, Mohamaya Mondol.”

Lalee felt completely lost. She did not have any idea what Shefali mashi was talking about. She said as much, narrowing her eyes, suspicious, “What do you mean? What video?”

Shefali mashi chuckled. She was amused, “Oh Lalee, see that’s the trouble with people who think they are smarter than everyone else. It never pays.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t have time to stand here all day listening to gibberish,” Lalee was irritated.

“Go through that door,” Shefali mashi pointed a finger to her right. “You remember where we keep the videos below the TV? You should, after all you spent years in this house. It should be right on top, the girls were watching it last night.”

With a backward glance, Lalee left for the room indicated. Across a king-size four-poster wooden bed was an old, big colour TV. Lalee indeed remembered the room. It was for those special customers who had a penchant for audio-visual materials. She sifted through the pile of low-budget pornos. It did not take her more than half a minute to find what she didn’t know she was looking for. The cover had a picture of a dark woman sprawled on a bed. It was grainy and did not have much light. Whoever was in charge of making that picture appetising had used various cutting edge tools such as full saturation

and full contrast of colour to make it seem so. The woman on the picture was wearing a loose white shirt, her legs sprawled in front of her. For the first few seconds, Lalee's mind didn't seem to work. But the woman in the picture was unmistakably, her. The picture was the same one she had given to Rambo Maity a few days ago.

Entirely perplexed and with growing apprehension she turned on the TV, the CD player and inserted the disk. The picture was hazy, and it was clear that there wasn't much light in the room, but it wasn't difficult to see what was happening. Some thirty minutes later Shefali mashi parted the curtains and came into the room to see Lalee sitting on the bed, remote in hand, looking completely lost.

"But, I didn't... I never..." she mumbled, staring at the other woman.

"No? Well, I'm not surprised."

"But, how? Where did you get this?"

"How? I'm afraid I don't know that. It's you in the film, isn't it, so if anyone is supposed to know how, it's you. I can't help you there. As for the CD, Chintu got it from the usual place. He got all the ones of you that he could find." She was smiling.

"There's more of them?"

"Oh not many, just one or two more I think. We have most of them. You're good."

"But I never filmed that," Lalee repeated.

"Who's the john?"

"Some new guy Rambo found." And then the suspicion circling around her head for the last few minutes became certain knowledge. "Rambo," she said.

Shefali mashi laughed out loud, "Took you long enough. But this guy is good looking. Decent hero-material if I ever saw one, not bad at all."

Lalee ignored this and said, "I still don't understand. Rambo wasn't even there. Do you think this guy he sent, he filmed it?" but she didn't feel convinced.

“No, I don’t think so. How would he film these then?” She pointed at a few more CDs strewn around. “This one,” Shefali mashi picked out a disc, “is with that john of yours, the one that used to come around here as well. Liked it rough, as far as I recall. How would the new guy get this footage? Unless he was hanging outside your window with the camera, and I don’t think he was doing that.”

Wordlessly Lalee took the disc from Shefali mashi’s hand and slid it into the CD player. The man on the screen was definitely Tilu Shau. Lalee felt herself sinking into a strange lethargy. She could feel her limbs slacken, her mind fill with a noiseless static. The shadowy people on the screen looked like someone she didn’t know. It was hard to believe it was herself and her longest regular. She began to look at Tilu. On the screen he looked like a different person— a person she hadn’t seen clearly ever since he had started to come to her. The way he was looking at her— as if the world held nothing in it but her. She felt sad for him; the film denuded Tilu’s heart, the rest of the world had no right to see his vulnerability.

Shefali mashi spoke again, “It’s not so hard to figure it out is it? The answer is staring you in the face. I would have a thought an intelligent girl like you would have figured it out much sooner.”

“Rambo Maity?” Lalee asked, already knowing the answer.

Shefali mashi continued smiling sardonically.

“But how? How could he do that? He wasn’t there, he couldn’t have been. Was he standing at the window? How? This Tilu Shau is not even his contact. He’s been a regular for at least five years, I had nothing to do with Rambo then.”

“Has he come around to your place?”

“Of course, he’s my regular customer,” Lalee said impatiently.

“Not your john, Rambo.”

“Well, yes. He comes to give me new clients, get his cut.”

“Have you left him alone in the room?”

Lalee fell silent. She was racking her brain, “Perhaps, once or twice, maybe. But never for long. There’s always some money in the room, however little it might be,” she said the last part softly.

“It doesn’t take that long to put a camera in a room where you won’t see it. And they make those things very well these days. You don’t even need wires and the Chinese ones are pretty cheap. About a thousand Rupees at Fancy Market or less at the black market in the Khidderpore dock, I believe.”

When Lalee did not reply but sat staring at the remote in her hand, the older woman continued, “Didn’t you wonder why Rambo Maity, who was the smallest of fries at one time, was suddenly so flush with money? What did you think it was?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t any of my business. I thought, well, he sold drugs sometimes, didn’t he?”

“It was your business,” Shefali mashi said levelly, “you might want to stay aloof Lalee, but you’re still a part of this world...this filth, whatever you may want to call it.” She looked around the room for a second, “You have a stake in it. And it has a stake in you. It’s not going to let go of you just because you wish to deny it.”

“Yeah well,” Lalee said sullenly, “I remember what you told the girls who tried to run away.”

“There’s nowhere to run to,” said Shefali mashi. “Anyway, that drug business takes a lot more courage than Rambo Maity has. If he tried to make that kind of money in the drug racket, he wouldn’t last a month. No, it’s been this, for a while. Take a look, you might recognise his handiwork.”

Lalee sifted through the stack again but did not find anything that looked familiar, except one short video of her, which seemed to be part of an anthology, and another one with Svetlana featured very prominently on the cover. She put those two aside.

Shefali mashi picked up the disc with Svetlana's picture on it. She was wearing a red babydoll negligee with bright red lips, vibrant against her white skin and blonde hair. Unlike Lalee, Svetlana had clearly posed for this photograph. The title in dripping blood font read *The Night Fairy*.

Shefali mashi cleared her throat, "Know her, do you?"

Lalee nodded.

Shefali mashi said, "Well, she clearly got paid for this." She paused before adding, "I assume you didn't."

Lalee shook her head again. Suddenly the inaction of first discovery gave way to anger. She got up, CDs in hand, "I'm taking these," she announced, "I need to have a talk with Rambo Maity," and she marched out of the room, flinging the curtain with unnecessary violence.

Shefali mashi was still smiling as though she found this extremely amusing. "Make him pay," she called after Lalee's retreating figure, "make him pay through his nose."

Chapter XIV

Diti woke up in the morning with a new sense of confidence. She had no idea where it came from, or how long the spell would last but she felt as if in one day she had grown up quite a bit. Normally the first thoughts in her head after waking up were A) existential dread— such as who am I? What am I doing? Are my teeth all still there? B) parental dread — oh my God is my mother going through my wardrobe again? Followed by C) basic life challenges— what time is it? Did I sleep through the alarm again? But today, she noticed a subtle albeit distinct ‘don’t care’-ness. She coasted the wave of this newfound self-confidence and stepped out of her home for the first time ever, without informing her mother when she would back home or intimating her with Diti’s exact schedule for the day.

She had a few morning classes to attend in college and planned to go see Lalee at Shonagachhi as soon as she was done. She really didn’t have much time if she wanted to submit the questionnaires and write a report on her interview with Lalee. On top of that she had GRE preparations, college search as well as her own courses to attend to. The final exams were only a couple of months away. During a break between classes, she overheard a bunch of her classmates— the pretty, fashionable kind— discuss their plan to hit the pub at The Park for some live music. Diti gathered that someone’s boyfriend was a bassist in the band and they’d therefore have the pleasure of ‘being with the band’. Though no invitation was extended to Diti, she spent a few minutes in the ladies’ toilet scrutinising herself in mirror, surveying with a critical eye what she could do to improve the general package. Then, as she was getting late for class, she abandoned that train of thought.

It wouldn't have occurred to Diti even a day ago that she could be in the same league with her class' hip and happening. Being the ideal daughter the way her parents simply expected her to be, had morphed into a deep seated and unquestioned inferiority complex in the whirlwind world of college life. She had resigned herself to it without even knowing it. But today, looking at those girls, those desirable boys with their long hair and guitars, she thought— well none of them have spent an afternoon in Shonagachhi, have they? Exposure to the insalubrious districts of Calcutta had given her a secret weapon. She felt she wasn't as worthless as people suspected her to be, or rather, as she had accepted herself to be. And so it was in a rather buoyant mood that Diti took the bus to Sovabazar and then walked a good fifteen minutes to see Lalee again.

There were two news channel vans parked on the main road and a little further on, groups of women were standing around with posters and placards in hands. Diti remembered that in a few hours when it was dark, the candle light march was going to start. She wished she had brought her camera, but the one on her phone would have to do. This was a good thing to write a report on, perhaps she could even interview some of the women in the march. She turned the corner of the main road and took the small by-lane at the middle of which was Lalee's room. Several young children were playing cricket on the lane with the time honoured wicket substitute— a stack of bricks. Since the 'ball' was made of scrunched up paper, the juvenile batsman could safely look forward to a long innings. Diti carefully sidestepped this part so as not be hit by flying paper balls or indeed, flying cricket bats. Such calamities averted with caution, she arrived outside Lalee's room to find the door ajar and Lalee rushing around the room. Diti waited for a minute or two and hesitated about knocking, then she pushed open the door and stepped inside. Lalee was

crouching in front of her bed, bent forward, trying to get a better look at something. She gave Diti a blank look and continued with her search.

“Hello,” Diti said hesitantly but Lalee didn’t look around.

After a minute when the search under the bed had been concluded, Lalee stood up and turned to face Diti.

“Oh, it’s you.”

Diti had never seen Lalee morose, and in the small amount of time she had spent with Lalee did not think such an emotion was even possible in Lalee. She was slightly taken aback, but she was far from feeling as lost as she had done the previous day when she had met Lalee for the first time. It was strange, Diti reflected, that in the space of one day Lalee had started to seem a lot more familiar than she could have known possible.

“I was supposed to come around, remember? You said you’d help with the questionnaires?”

Lalee in the meantime had climbed on the bed and was reaching out to the various boxes and trunks that were stowed away on a shelf-like space above the bed, carefully covered with an old saree. She was holding a torchlight in one hand and was trying to push the boxes with her other hand, focusing the light in odd corners. A small frightened mouse, unable to stand this close scrutiny jumped out at Lalee. Both the women shrieked, and then smiled awkwardly at each other. Then Lalee cursed a blue streak, which broadened Diti’s cultural horizon by a few square miles.

“I wish you’d call,” Lalee said sitting down on the bed, temporarily derailed from her search by the mouse.

“I did,” Diti protested, “you didn’t answer.”

Lalee picked up her phone and saw the two missed calls and put it back on the table.

“Oh I haven’t the time to breathe today,” she said. “What time is it?”

“It’s three,” Diti said, taking out her cell phone.

“I have a client at four, so we have to finish up before that and I have something very important to do before that as well.” She got up and resumed poking around the boxes above the bed.

“It has to be here, it has to,” she murmured to herself, “where else could you see the bed from? Fucking Rambo Maity, I’ll mince your dick and feed you to the dogs.”

Somewhat perplexed by this dire threat, Diti took out her folder.

Lalee looked around at the crackle of papers and said wearily, “Must we? What the fuck do you guys do with these questionnaires? Frame it up on your walls and give each other pats on the head?”

“I thought they were silly too at first, but after a few months when they collate all the data, there’s so much new information that comes out. Also,” she added, “they are anonymous. So no one has to worry about giving personal information.”

“Brilliant,” said Lalee in a black tone. Then taking a few heavy boxes down from the shelf she said, “I don’t have the time to sit down and have a heart to heart with you girl, questionnaires or not, but since you’ve come all this way— where have you come from again?”

“Jadavpur,” replied Diti.

“Oh, that’s way in the south. Anyway, since you’ve come all the way, you can ask me what you want to ask and I’ll answer if I can. That’s all I can do for you right now. Today isn’t a good day.”

“That’s fine, that’s hardly a problem.”

“Name?” asked Diti.

“I thought you said these things were anonymous,” said Lalee archly.

“Well, it’s confidential. You can choose not to tell me if you like.”

“What’s the point? You’ll know whose statement this is.” She blew the dust off a box absently, “Write down, Lolita Pramanik.”

“Your name is Lolita?” said Diti in mild surprise, “I thought Lalee was your name.”

“No, it’s just what they call me here. My real name is Lolita. My mother used to call me that.”

Diti wrote this down. “Age?” she queried in a very official manner.

“I’ll be thirty this year, in the monsoon.”

“Where was your home, originally?”

“I was born in Bihar, close to the border, in Samsthipur. There are a lot of Bengalis there.”

“How old were you when you entered the sex trade?”

“Thirteen.”

Diti’s pencil paused for a second. She remembered when she was thirteen. Her world consisted of school, dance and swimming classes, private tutors— a world of strictly controlled time-tables, chaperoned wherever she went by her mother or the family retainer.

“How did you come to this trade?”

“You know that’s the most common question I’m asked? I’ve probably answered that more times than I have answered what’s my name,” Lalee said. She had almost emptied the shelf of its trunks and boxes and was now thrashing a broom across it looking critically at every small object that fell out. Diti pulled out her handkerchief and pressed it against her nose to avoid breathing in the dust storm Lalee’s aggressive housekeeping had given rise to.

“I was married off, just after I turned twelve. The groom was an electrician; for my family, that was a posh job. So my family didn’t wait, they married me off as soon as they could,” Lalee continued in a matter of fact way, pausing from time to time to peer into

corners and poke them with her broom. “After the wedding I lived for a couple of months with my in-laws. It was a large family and I hardly saw my husband. He was much older. He must have been at least in his thirties by then. I realised he had a wife already and two children. I lived with them, in that house. She— that is my husband’s first wife treated me like a servant.” Lalee paused, “Well, I should add that she herself was also treated like a servant. It’s what wives are for, anyway.” She continued, “A year passed and I wasn’t pregnant. They began calling me barren and the insults only increased with time. I did everything they told me to, then one day my uncle came to visit me in my new home and see how I was getting on. At first they didn’t let me see him, but I waited for my opportunity and ran into the room where he was seated when none of my in-laws were looking. They didn’t say anything in front of him. I told him everything.” Lalee drew a long breath, Diti could hear a slight wheeze in her voice, a wheeze she assumed, that had nothing to do with housework. Lalee continued, “He said, such things happened and since I was married before God, and in the eyes of both man and religion I was his wife in faith, there was nothing that he could do. He said it would be fine once I had children of my own, and someday my son’s wives would be serving me. This is the way of the world, and after all my husband had a trade that people paid money for. So I should consider myself lucky.” Lalee paused as Diti frantically tried to keep up with the narrative. Lalee began putting up the boxes one by one on the shelf.

“Do you need any help?” asked Diti

“No, it’s fine. I’m as strong as an ox.” She continued with her story, “Once my uncle left, that evening, my husband and his father beat me black and blue. Beat me so much that I lost consciousness, lost a lot of blood. I woke up the next day, or it might have been a few days later, there are holes in my memory, I don’t remember everything about that time, I woke up in a Dharamshala. You know what a Dharamshala is?”

Diti nodded, “Those places you can stay for free, right?”

“Yes,” Lalee said, “one of those places. I don’t know whether we were at this point still in Bihar or if we had crossed into Bengal. There were a lot of Biharis speaking in Bhojpuri and Hindi, but that’s neither here nor there. It could as easily have been Calcutta. Anyway, so there I was, running a high temperature and in tremendous pain, my husband was there with me, that I know. Then one day, I was feeling a little better, he brought a woman— about forty, a big and capable looking woman, accompanied by two younger women and one man, into the room. They looked at me. The woman came closer and asked me to show her my teeth. At first I thought they were perhaps more of my husband’s relatives, a distant aunt or someone from my in-laws’ unending clan. Then they went out of the room, locked the door from the outside and stood there talking. That was the last I saw of my husband. That evening, those four people— the fat woman and her entourage brought me back here. You saw the purple house next door? That’s where I ended up.”

Lalee paused for breath, Diti raced through the page, spilling over the margins, trying to cram the whole of Lalee’s story into the inadequately available space.

Lalee climbed down from the bed and walked over to the table where Diti was seated. She was looking through the top of the table but since it had only Lalee’s cellphone, Diti’s handbag and other papers, Lalee proceeded to examine minutely the window frame and the iron netting that covered it.

“How much do you earn, per day?” asked Diti,

“Oh that depends. When you are just a girl, newly bought or delivered, you’re what they call a ‘chukri’. You line up in front of the customers with the other girls and they choose someone from the line. Depending on the customer they pay anything from two hundred to fifteen hundred per fuck, more if it’s for the whole night. None of that money comes to you, your madam or brothel owner gets the lion’s share and if a pimp brought the

customer, he gets a cut. When you've paid for yourself almost twice over to the brothel keeper— whatever she bought you for plus interest— all the feeding and upkeep that they did for you over the years, then you can rent one of these places,” she indicated her room, “usually from the same madam. Mind you, the girls who live in brothels also stand outside and pick up customers from the street. So there's a lot of competition.”

Diti asked, “Have you ever had a babu?”

Lalee paused for a minute, “I have regulars.”

Diti paused before saying, “So, no?”

“I did, okay?” Lalee said with rather more force than it warranted, “And then one day I didn't see him again.”

“Why?” Diti could not stop herself from asking.

“How should I know?” retorted Lalee. “Women like me don't get explanations. Perhaps he got married, perhaps he moved, perhaps he found another whore he liked better. I also refused to give him any money. That might have helped him leave.”

In an unexpected flash of boldness, Diti asked, “Were you in love with him?”

Instead of answering, Lalee gave her an angry stare. Diti quickly said, “Never mind that, never mind. It isn't important. So do you use condoms with your customers?”

“I try to,” Lalee said, her animosity of a moment ago forgotten. “But it doesn't always work. Sometimes business is slow, you have no money to eat, or no money to pay rent. If you refuse to have sex without condoms the customer will just go next door. Or worse, you might get acid thrown in your face,” Lalee finished darkly.

“Oh that,” Diti said, “they're all talking about it now. Do you know what happened?”

“I don't know,” Lalee said impatiently. “It's not exactly rare, and it happens more than you think,” she said with sudden bitterness, “but maybe the news doesn't reach as far as your respectable homes.”

But looking at Diti's wide eyed, slightly sheepish face, Lalee felt a twinge of guilt. It wasn't this girl's fault. Neither of them controlled the circumstances of their birth, or the events of their life. At this point in customary philosophy, Karma and the deeds of past lives are blamed. But Lalee had a violent opposition to such spiritual victim blaming. Whores had enough brickbats in this corporeal life to contend with, without adding on to it the burden of unknowable deeds in mythical lives.

"I saw some news channel vans parked on the main road," Diti said quietly.

"Only because of this march. They never show any interest in what happens to us. Newspapers only like sex workers when some famous actress or other is involved in a sex scandal, or caught running a sex racket in a flat in some posh neighbourhood. Work-a-day streetwalkers like us aren't glamorous enough."

Diti tried to think of news articles she had read about Shonagachhi. Somehow she couldn't recall any. Of course everyone knew what this place was, but people also didn't know what really happened here. Respectable people didn't cherish the knowledge of whore pits, nor were they meant to go seeking it.

"Must be because of the candle light march tonight," Diti said sheepishly, "they came and asked you to join when I was here last time," she added.

That blasted march, Lalee thought. It would be impossible to get out of it if she was in Shonagachhi this evening. "You got some more questions?" she asked Diti.

"Actually, I'm supposed to interview at least three women and write a report on it. I saw a lot of women gathered around the Collective's office as I came. All of them had placards in hand. I think I'll stay for the march, take some pictures, maybe I could talk to them." She stopped, "Is it okay if I write a report on this interview?"

"Do what you like," Lalee said. "Can't see it doing any harm anyway."

Despite the lack of enthusiasm, Diti understood it to be as close to assent as she was going to get from Lalee and quietly proceeded to fill in another chunk of paper. “Could you tell me a little bit about violence in this trade, in Shonagachhi?”

Lalee laughed. “A girl was acid burned to death across that wall,” she pointed a finger, “and you are asking me about violence in this trade?”

“Tell me,” Diti said simply.

“A girl had a bottle of carbolic acid dumped on her face and stabbed with the bottle.” Lalee said mechanically, running her finger through the top of the other window in her room.

“And? Is that common?”

“Yes and no; how do you judge these things? It doesn’t happen everyday but it is not rare either.” Lalee paused, “Well, it isn’t even rare for girls who aren’t whores. Other than that, there are beatings from madams and pimps, violent customers etc,” Lalee shrugged, “yes there is violence.”

Diti took notes as fast she could, and asked, “Do you support the decriminalisation of sex work?”

“The what of sex work?” Lalee blinked.

“Decriminalisation. Means to make something non-criminal, not punishable by law. There are movements organised by our NGO as well as many more internationally to make sex work legal. How do you feel about that?”

Lalee was quiet for a moment, “You mean, this work, this will become legal then, as in the eyes of law?”

“Yes,” said Diti, “that’s what they are fighting for.”

“Why?” said Lalee, perplexed.

“So that this is no longer considered criminal. So that you people,” Diti stopped, “I mean, I meant...women like you, who do this, are not considered criminals in the eyes of the law.”

“So that means pimps and brothel keepers won’t be criminals either?”

“Yes, I er..guess so.”

“Brilliant,” Lalee said, “more cash all around.” Then she continued, “You realise that making it not criminal won’t stop this thing right? That people who abduct girl children, traffic in them or sell them to these people won’t stop? It’ll probably increase?”

Diti had no idea what to say to this, but she made a guess, “Trafficking in people is a crime anywhere in the world. Decriminalising sex work won’t make trafficking legal.”

“It’s illegal now, right?” Lalee asked, “But it still happens every month. So the people who do it will only have to gain from your new law.”

“It’s not a law yet.” Diti was trying to write down everything Lalee said as diligently as she could, while at the same time keeping up the conversation with her. “It’s only a movement now.” After a minute she said, “But don’t you want this work to be considered as proper work? So that if something bad happens you can go to the police?”

Lalee had taken a large stool and was standing on top of it. Her low ceiling was supported by horizontal wooden beams. She had picked up her broom again and poked the beams with the broom handle. As a result, Diti was being showered in large balls of fluff and dirt all over, including the paper she was writing on. She dared not comment on it, though she wondered what Lalee was up to.

“Go to the police? What for? You think they will protect us even if our work is made legal? You think they promptly take down FIRs for sexual harassment, rape cases, dowry deaths and other things like that when it happens to girls who are not prostitutes? They’ll say that whatever happens to us we deserve, because of what we do. You can make this

work legal but you can't make us acceptable. It's never going to be considered just another job, if people think that then they are living in a fool's paradise."

Somewhere during Lalee's diatribe Diti had fallen horribly behind on taking down what she was saying and then in a flash of inspiration had taken out her phone and pressed the red dot to record Lalee's speech. With her eyes fixed on the ceiling, oblivious to Diti, Lalee continued in a softer tone, "I'm not saying that it's a bad thing, but if you think that it's going to change the ground reality for us, or that it'll give us more protection against violence, that's not really true. The police know about us a lot more than any respectable middle-class person does, and we get arrested only when it suits them. They get their cut, every time a new batch of girls are brought in, every time they think they can make some money off the pimps, the brothel keepers and the occasional john. You think that'll change when it becomes legal? I doubt it very much. And I don't see what's to stop them bringing more and more girls into the trade if it does become legal, have you thought of that?" Lalee looked at Diti and yelled "What the hell are you doing?"

"What? What?" Diti panicked. "I'm just recording you, just taking down what you say...."

Lalee was furious. "Why were you recording me? This was supposed to be anonymous. Are you going to show it to other people?"

"No, no, believe me, I was going to transcribe this later. I couldn't keep up with what you were saying, so I thought it'd be the best way, and you've been kind of going over the whole place..." Diti pointed lamely towards the desk, now covered with balls of fluff and dust.

But Lalee wasn't looking at the desk, her gaze had travelled past Diti to the little alcove where her miniature gods and goddesses congregated. She walked past Diti and went to the alcove. She stood still for a minute and then picked up the figurine of Shiva,

she looked closely at it for a minute and smashed it against the wall. Out of Shiva's third eye, a small black ball fell out. Lalee picked it up and placed it inside her handbag.

Lalee said, "Third eye indeed. I'll show him where to put his third eye. I should have known," she looked morose, "I really should have known."

"You should have known what?" Diti asked.

"I should have known better than to work with Rambo Maity." Then she said, "Are you done girl? It's almost four."

"Yes," Diti said hastily putting here papers inside the file, dirt and all.

At the door, Diti turned around and said, "I don't agree with you."

"About what?" said Lalee

"About this decriminalisation business. I know what you are saying, maybe you won't get justice, not easily at least, but I, for one, I don't want you to be a criminal, I..." Diti hesitated, "I don't think what you do is wrong, and I don't think that the law at least should say it is wrong."

Surprising both herself and Diti, Lalee stretched a hand towards her and touched her elbow. Embarrassed, Diti smiled awkwardly and left. Lalee called out after her, "Be safe." Diti looked back, nodded, and walked towards the Collective's office.

Chapter XV

Samsher Singh and Constable Balok Ghosh were on their way to Shonagachhi. The Constable had assumed that they were going back to the police station after the visit to the morgue, though in his unvoiced opinion there was no need to visit the morgue in the first place. The relevant details could as easily have been gotten over the telephone. But that's the thing with officers, every once in a while they will go and try things the complicated way. Very wisely, Balok Ghosh had remained quiet about it. Let him get it out of his system, he told himself. He hoped that the brief spell of investigative zeal would pass before the hour was out. So he was quite surprised when Samsher Singh, after a moody silence, declared to the driver that they were headed to Shonagachhi to take a look at the place where the murder had taken place. Balok Ghosh's placid temperament had been ruffled at this unnecessary detour. He had a pragmatist's heart and was looking forward to the hot glass of milky tea and gossip he'd normally have back at the station if it wasn't for Samsher Singh's sudden bout of productivity. He cleared his throat and said, "Is that of any use sir? After all it's been a few days, there's hardly going to be anything."

In fact this had occurred to Samsher Singh, but he was in the mood to do something. The sight of the dead girl, her face mangled by acid and her body stitched up in the regulation post mortem pattern had stirred something in his soul that he would be hard put to describe. He wasn't a man used to processing his feelings, and therefore ended up with a sense of unease that he found hard to shake off. In some vague way he felt that if he could do something, he'd feel better. Eventually he justified this by thinking that he had the boss' orders to investigate the murder and since the officer tag hadn't had time to wear off its

shine yet, who knows, it might even be a feather in his cap. Without any further ado, he decided to land up in the scene of crime and take it from there.

As they entered Shonagachhi, they found the streets barred by a number of cars and media vans parked on the narrow lanes. Samsheer Singh finally realised why his superiors was so anxious to have police presence. Police Constables from the nearby Sovabazar station were already attempting to herd protestors, activists and media representatives to no avail. “Vultures, vultures,” murmured Singh under his breath. The media and the police were natural enemies. The sight of one did not inspire confidence in the other.

Junior Constable Biswas from the kiosk outside Shonagachhi pulled off a textbook salute seeing his superior officer pull up in the jeep. Singh asked him about the news channel vans.

“Oh they’ve been here for a couple of hours sir, but they don’t seem to be doing much.”

“But the march is at seven?”

“Yes sir, I expect they’re warming up. After all they have twenty-four hours worth of programming to fill.” He added for effect, “And who knows, something unexpected might happen. Very volatile situation,” he nodded sagely.

Balok Ghosh, being more astute than both the other gentlemen very much doubted that anything would happen. But Samsheer Singh felt that he had taken the right decision in coming to Shonagachhi. If something was going to go down, he’d be in the thick of it.

“But then they don’t actually need anything much to happen sir,” continued Biswas pointing at some journalists with their camera-person’s in tow. “This is a week’s fodder to them. They can stretch out the story and say the same thing in a hundred different ways

without really knowing anything, or anything new happening. And the public will happily lap up the same old shit,” he paused, unsure if the vulgarity he uttered would be considered a misdemeanour in front of a superior officer.

Samsheer Singh hadn’t noticed. His brow was furrowed and he ordered the driver to enter the lane where the dead girl had lived, and died.

The presence of the police jeep did not cause any undue stir even if it did momentarily stop the cricket match that Diti had to sidestep. One or two windows opened and girls peeked out to see what was going on. Raids were infrequent, and in any case both the raider and the raided had hours of notice beforehand. Singh and Ghosh felt unnoticed as women began to gather outside for the march.

Samsheer Singh stepped out of the jeep in front of The Blue Lotus. Wondering if it was the customer she was expecting Lalee parted the curtains on her window and saw the two policemen knock on Shefali mashi’s door.

A window opened on the top floor and a girl’s head looked out. On seeing the police uniforms it quickly darted back again. Presently, the door was opened by an invisible hand and Samsheer Singh and Balok Ghosh disappeared within. Lalee opened her door to peek out even though she knew that she wouldn’t be able to see anything.

What she saw however surprised her more than the arrival of two policemen. At the start of the lane, walking slowly towards her was Tilu Shau. The last time she saw him was outside The Park Hotel, where he stood till everyone but him was gone from the streets. For a brief minute, involuntarily, her thoughts went to that night. She had enjoyed herself. Mr. Ghosh, though not a particularly good lover, had been a kind one. He hadn’t treated her badly, and she had liked spending the night in that place. It seemed like a dream now. So many things had happened so fast in the last few days that she didn’t know what she

could trust any longer. That brief interlude when she had thought she was on her way to escaping the Shonagachhi life for something better, had come and gone, without anything to show for itself. For a moment, Lalee felt a pang; she wished Mr. Ghosh would call again, or someone like him. She could be a mistress, she could have a babu like that. She'd make him happy too, fulfil her end of the deal. She could leave this place, leave these people, this strife, this danger and agony forever. It was a nice thought. But it didn't last long. She remembered the videos. The broker of that pleasant interlude was a man who had taken more than he had delivered. All those videos that Rambo Maity was selling even now, she hadn't consented to it. She had never said yes, and she hadn't been paid for it. She felt cheated, and angry and hopeless all at the same time.

Tilu came closer till both of them could see each other's face. To Lalee, Tilu looked apprehensive, standing a few steps away from her, hesitant. Lalee felt it was a long moment, longer than the few seconds it lasted. They were both looking at each other as if from a great distance. Tilu's hesitancy was familiar, as was the curve of his drooping shoulders, his thinning hair and the musty smell of his clothes. In the many things that happened to her in recent years, Tilu was the only constant. Like clockwork, he came to her. His devotion had only inspired a certain disdain in her, but today she felt relief as she stood looking at this very familiar stranger.

"I...I just wanted to see you," Tilu said very softly, as if he was whispering to himself.

Lalee couldn't bring herself to turn him away from her door once again, but she remembered that she had a client. "I have a client at four," Lalee said, equally softly.

Tilu blinked for a moment, "Oh, I'm the client," he said.

"I'm sure you are," Lalee said kindly, "but you see, my pimp is supposed to send someone. It's been arranged already."

“The man called Rambo?” Tilu asked. “I met him today, and I paid him for... four o’clock.”

Lalee moved into her room, Tilu followed. “Why did you pay him? You could have just come to me.”

“I didn’t know if you’d meet me if I just showed up. I thought if I paid Rambo, you couldn’t say no,” he said simply.

Lalee didn’t say anything.

“He called you Rosa.” Tilu said, “Is that your name now?”

“It’s a name I sometimes use with new clients. Rambo wasn’t supposed to know about that, but he does. He knows a lot about me now, and maybe a little about you too.”

Tilu looked perplexed. Lalee wondered how she would explain the videos to him. In a way, she felt responsible. She began by saying, “The last time you came here,” and hesitated. Should she even tell him about the CDs? He would probably never come across them. Would knowing about it help him in any way? Then she decided that he had a right to know. What he did with the knowledge was his business, but she couldn’t keep it from him. “The last time you were here,” she started again but Tilu interrupted her.

“That girl was killed. Was she your friend?” Lalee was quiet, trying to frame the sentence in her head. Tilu took this as a sign of grief, he moved towards her and put a hand on her shoulder, “Are you okay?”

Lalee felt calmer. There was something nice about that touch. She closed her eyes for a second and decided to go straight into it. “Yes, but I need to tell you something. The man you met today, he’s been my pimp for a while now. I didn’t know this, but he had been filming what happens here in my room and selling them as CDs. I just found the camera. It was hidden over there,” she pointed to the dishevelled alcove.

Tilu took a minute to understand. He sat on the bed, “You mean, he films you? He filmed us, the other day?”

“Yes,” she said simply and brought out the CD. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“You didn’t know?” Tilu asked and Lalee shook his head, “Come here,” he said softly.

Lalee went and sat beside him on the bed. Tilu put a hand on her lap tentatively, careful not to push her away. “It’s not your fault,” he said, “it wasn’t fair to you.”

“You’re not angry?” Lalee asked.

“What would be the point? I can’t go to the police. They won’t do anything or care. They may even arrest me for coming here in the first place,” he said. “All we can do is stop him from making any more.”

Lalee’s eyes flashed, “Oh, I’ll tan his hide. He’ll never dare to show his face again.”

They sat side by side in silence. Tilu looked at the walls, at her bed, the dirt on the floor and table that Lalee hadn’t had time to clean up. Lalee said, “So I suppose you have come to me for the hour?”

“I have time,” he said and lowered his side bag on the floor. Lalee turned to face him on the bed. Without a word, Tilu closed the gap between them and held her face between his palms. Then with a deep sigh he lowered his lips on to Lalee’s.

Lalee was startled. Tilu kissed her like a chaste virgin on his first visit to Shonagachhi. It wasn’t the tongue biting, blood drawing, desperate kiss of men wishing to exact their power over her, nor the fumble tongued advance of the inexperienced. It was a romantic kiss. Lalee allowed herself to give in to it; she kissed him deeply and sensuously. She wasn’t trying to please, but expressing herself— the madness of the last few days dissipated, and she began to let go of herself in Tilu’s embrace. He drew her in, and she realised it was another kind of fantasy. Not the same as the opulent five star hotel with the

rich man who she hoped would become her benefactor, but another kind; perhaps more gritty, and played out in the unreal squalor of her own life, of her own hovel, but bathed in a quiet glow of stability.

They disrobed each other slowly and with some ceremony, as if they were both seeing each other for the first time. Instead of the mechanical precision of doing a job well, Lalee let herself flow, to sink in the sensation and to remember nothing, to pretend together that they had all the time in the world.

When she got up, the light was gradually changing outside. It was getting chilly in her room. She put on her clothes somewhat haphazardly, Tilu Shau was lying on his side, one hand supporting his head, watching Lalee. She smiled at him and he lay back, staring at the ceiling, in a reverie of his own. She went into the shed behind the room to the bathroom. She pumped water from a tube well and filled the bucket. She took a short bath and once she had put on fresh clothes, came back into the room. Tilu was fast asleep, curled on his side. It was a little after before seven and she could hear voices outside her door

As the clock inched forwards, the evening changed to a darker blue and a few stars began to show. Lalee sat down on the edge of the bed, listening to the comfortable measured breaths of the sleeping man beside her. The sliver of light from the halogen street lamps fell on his face. An aquiline nose etched with two small depressions on each side from his glasses. Dark shadows under his eyes, as though he didn't sleep well. His scant hair fell on his forehead, his mouth was slightly open and he slept curled up as though he were guarding himself from the world. Lalee laid a hand gingerly on the Tilu's face. He lowered his face onto his shoulders so that Lalee's hand was in between them, getting warmer from his body. Lalee stared out of the window as darkness finally dropped over the Shonagachhi sky and over the crows on the telephone wires. The tap outside her house

gushed holy water from the Ganges through the streets of Shonagachhi and hindi movie songs pierced the evening fights, chats and laughters. She closed her eyes and tried to think of that room in The Park Hotel, but though she could remember the pattern on the bed cover and the upholstery, she could not see herself in the room. In her memory, it was as if an invisible and unknowable person had gone around the room with a camera, but could not inhabit the space. And for the first time in many years, Lalee, her hand growing warm against someone's cheek wondered how it would feel to pack up her meagre belongings and never return again.

Chapter XVI

Samsher Singh was sitting on a moulded plastic chair sipping a cup of tea. Shefali mashi was sitting in another of those chairs across from him surrounded by three women of varying shapes and sizes. This was the same room that Lalee had climbed up a few hours ago to see a young girl being beaten up by the pimp, Chintu. Samsher Singh was not feeling entirely at his ease. It was not, as one would suppose, the anxiety of sitting in the forbidden district. The police had a symbiotic relationship with the floating town of Shonagachhi and Singh had come around many times in the course of his job. Though sex work is technically illegal, no political party, no overzealous police chief had ever tried to dislodge these fifteen thousand women from their home and place of work. Calcutta was a city of romance, and every romance needs its night fairies. But it was the calm control of Shefali mashi's manner that was causing Samsher Singh this slight consternation. A man as large as Samsher Singh, in a powerful uniform like that of Calcutta Police ought to be in charge. Whereas a plump well built woman in her late forties with a couple of betel leaves stuffed into her face, seemed to be steering the conversation. The auto-masculinity of Singh's soul was at a loss to process this.

Shefali mashi was the soul of politeness. She had welcomed the police officer with no less grandeur than the madams of olden days who had welcomed the incumbent nawab and brought forth the finest blooms of courtesan-hood for his pleasure. She offered him both tea and *paan* and was sitting across from him with an expression of old world hospitality. But since she made no move to open the conversation, Samsher Singh cleared his throat, "We are here, madam, about the death of one of your girls."

Not a muscle moved in Shefali mashi's face. It was as if Samsher Singh had mentioned something about the weather. She simply kept quiet.

Somewhat irritated by this silence, Singh continued, "You know the news channels are sitting outside? This candle light march has been on the news? The media's going to lap this one up." He shook his head, "So you've got to talk to us," he lowered his cup on to the saucer with a clink.

Shefali mashi made an expansive gesture with her hands, "My dear officer sahib, we have no problem talking to you. We are on the same team. Ask me anything you want."

Samsher Singh was at a slight loss. He didn't exactly know what he was going to ask this woman. He had some vague idea, if any at all, that as soon as he started the interview, big nuggets of startling information would start dropping out of nowhere and all would be clear. Instead, he was coming up against the implacable facade of the matriarch of the brothel. He fell back on certainties, "What time was the crime committed?"

"We assumed it was midnight. One of my girls went downstairs around that time to... solicit. She had to cross Mohamaya's room to go out the door and it was then that she saw the poor girl lying on the floor."

"There were no screams, no one heard anything when it actually happened?"

"No. There is always some loud music playing up here. At night, we have to make ourselves heard and visible you understand. Competition is very stiff around here, as you know, and the girls are always chattering, always talking and shouting among themselves, talking with the customers. Plus we have children, pimps, babus and servants in the mix. So it is difficult to hear anything. But yes," she paused, "it is strange that we did not hear her at all." She smiled at him, "But I was hoping you could explain that to us. After all, you must know a lot more about this than we do."

Samsher Singh sidelined this hook and went ahead, “So no one heard anything till this girl discovered the body. Who is this girl, is she here? I would like to speak to her.”

Shefali mashi motioned silently to one of the women and she disappeared through a door. She emerged moments later with a younger girl, with swollen red eyes and dishevelled hair. She stood awkwardly before the two policemen glancing with fear at Shefali mashi.

Mashi said, “This is the girl who discovered the body.”

“You knew the girl who was killed?” asked Samsher Singh.

The girl looked at Shefali mashi again and quietly nodded.

“What’s your name?”

“Mala Bibi,” she said in a whisper, staring at her own feet.

“What time did you discover the body?”

She looked at Shefali mashi again, and this irritated Samsher Singh but he forbore from making any comment. “I don’t know,” she said at last, “it was around midnight. I just finished with one customer and went down for the next shift,” she said.

“Okay,” said Singh, “did you know the girl? The one who died that is. What’s her name again?”

“Mohamaya. Her name was Mohamaya.”

“Yes, yes, that,” said Singh, “so you knew her well?”

“We were friends,” said the girl, not looking up.

Shefali mashi clicked her tongue and the girl darted furtive looks at her. Singh feared that the presence of the madam was influencing his witness. He thought of asking for some privacy but was sure that Shefali mashi and her informants would be somewhere close by listening in. It wasn’t worth the trouble, he reckoned.

“So when you went there,” he continued, “what did you see?”

“I was just going out when I saw her lying on the floor. I just went in to check,” big blobs of tears were dropping on the floor like rain, “and she was lying there, dead. Half her face...just wasn’t there. And her throat...it was,” she stopped and shut her eyes.

“Yes, yes. You don’t have to go into that,” Singh mumbled awkwardly. She wasn’t more than nineteen to twenty-one, he couldn’t help noticing. A slight girl with large eyes, and something about her was still very much the village belle. His sentimental heart softened. He said kindly, “Where did the acid come from?”

“I don’t know,” she wiped her nose with the back of her hand, “it was just the stuff to clean toilets with, we all have a bottle in the bathroom or in the washing areas to clean moss and dirt, unblock the drains and keep snakes away.”

“Do you do it yourself? Did you buy a bottle recently?”

“No, here,” she indicated Shefali mashi, “we have a servant to do that kind of thing, but Mohamaya...well she recently started on her own.”

“But she was still under your roof,” Singh turned to Shefali mashi.

Again she made an expansive gesture with her hands, “I like to keep my girls close, officer sahib,” Shefali mashi said. “Especially the one’s who haven’t seen Shonagachhi without my protection. I’m their mother and father and friend. I’m all they have got, I have to look out for them.”

“Yes,” said Singh sourly, “and yet she died under your roof.”

“Just roof, officer, just my roof, not my protection,” the older woman said. “you’re forgetting that she was only renting the room from me. She wasn’t any longer one of my girls. She had paid herself off, bought herself from me. And she started on her own, well or at least so she thought,” she said enigmatically.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh these girls, sir, what can I tell you about these girls,” she said laconically, “every one of them is a romantic fool. Too many hindi movies, you see. They watch Kareena and Katrina and Priyanka and Deepika fall in love with a dashing hero on screen, marry him and live happily ever after and they think that’s exactly what’s going to happen with them.” She clicked her tongue, as though commenting on a minor character flaw, “They’ve all got their self-styled heroes over here. Especially the ones who make a bit of money— the girls who make the money that is, the gender roles over here,” she shrugged, “are a little bit skewed than what you might be used to.”

“So she had a lover?” asked Singh.

“A babu, officer sahib, a babu. The unofficial ‘husband’. Only as is usual with girls like Mohamaya, it was not a *denewala* babu, just a *lenewala* babu. The kind who takes, officer, not the kind who gives.”

“So who was this guy? You know him surely?” Singh asked, even though he already had that information.

“A young worthless streak of nothing called Salman Khan.” Shefali mashi burst out laughing raucously, “Salman Khan. Imagine. I tell you officer, every day in this life is a life straight out of a Hindi film,” she continued laughing.

Discomfited by the woman’s ease and lack of apprehension at the presence of two policemen investigating a murder case that happened under her roof, Singh said, “And what can you tell me about him?”

“Nothing good,” she said, “one of the many parasites that find their optimum temperatures here in Shonagachhi. Although,” she shifted her weight in the unyielding plastic chair and gave Singh an appraising stare, “he has enterprise. There’s a certain gentleman, and I think you’re acquainted with him, a Mr. Rambo Maity, this Salman Khan, Mohamaya’s babu, was known to have collaborated with our Mr. Maity.”

Samsher Singh remained silent, not one flicker crossed his face. Shefali mashi on the other hand simply looked satisfied with herself, neither urging, nor waiting for an answer. Both people were waiting for the other to react, for the bait to be taken, for the push and pull trade of information to begin.

Shefali mashi won in the end. Samsher Singh said, “What kind of collaboration, exactly?”

Shefali mashi smiled, “I’m just a woman officer sahib, but in this trade, information is everything. I hear, Rambo Maity has been doing very well out of the videography industry. I also heard that Mohamaya’s Salman Khan thought that it would be a good idea for him to be involved in Maity’s lucrative venture.”

Samsher Singh said, “What do you mean by involved?”

Shefali mashi shrugged, “Officer sahib,” she smiled, “you seem to think that I have supernatural powers. I’m not the Prime Minister of the country. I can only tell you so much. Adult video films are such a big industry. He could be sourcing the videos, distributing them, or shooting them. I won’t be able to help you there, I’m afraid.”

“Was the girl involved in this? I mean the girl who was killed? Was she making these videos?”

Shefali mashi would have sighed openly if she could; it had taken her a solid fifteen minutes to lead Singh to a conclusion that had been staring him in the face. Calcutta’s finest? You could keep them.

Samsher Singh was finding it hard to hide his excitement, he had found a solid lead at last. “Do you have any information on this girl being involved in the adult film venture that Rambo Maity has started, as you have said?”

Before Shefali mashi could have said anything, the girl who had been brought to bear witness in front of Samsheer Singh gave a frightened yelp, which she then cut short by covering her mouth with her hand.

Samsheer Singh turned on her and said in the most intimidating tone he could muster, “What do you know?”

She looked between the towering policeman and the seated madam like a deer caught in headlights. Shefali mashi’s expression was unreadable. If she was looking for encouragement or censure, none of those were available. Withering under Singh’s glare, she blurted out, “He told her it would be a good idea sir. It’d make her a lot more money than the customers sir, and it was all...pretend...you know, not like the real stuff...”

“And did she agree to that?”

“She didn’t want to sir. She didn’t, she told me. See, Mohamaya had two kids. The boy is older, they have just admitted him to a boarding school. They don’t know what she does... what she did...her parents didn’t know. She was afraid that someone would see her in a blue film and find out. She...and Sallu, that is her babu sir, were fighting about it sir. He hit her, I think. She didn’t say anything though.”

“Where is this babu of hers?”

“He is nowhere to be seen sir,” the girl finished, looking at Shefali mashi rather than the police officer.

“Since you have found out everything we know, and we know so little about this thing, it’s shameful...well since you have found out, perhaps you will let the girl go get ready for the evening. Police presence in the brothel isn’t exactly good for business, after all. We are working girls you understand, we neither have a salary, nor do we have a pension fund.”

She gave him a bright smile, “Plus she’ll need to recover from this interrogation, poor

thing.” She gestured towards the girl and she walked out of the room as fast as she could without actually running.

It was clear from the manner of Shefali mashi that the interview was over. And though Samsher Singh knew extremely well that he could not only drag the woman and her minions to the station right now, but arrest her and the whole lot too, he also realised that that wouldn't help him solve the problem. Besides, he had a target now. He felt that if he could lay his hands on the dead girl's babu, he would solve the murder. And since springing into action suited his temperament better than patiently manipulating more information out of this lot, he decided to leave.

Outside, he told Constable Balok Ghosh, “I don't like it Balok da. I think they are hiding something.”

Never one to say something without thinking about it first, Balok Ghosh said slowly, “Hmm...but it looked like they told us all they knew...well, more or less.”

“No, no...” muttered Samsher Singh, “they are closing up on something. And they will clam up against us, against any outsiders Balok da. They don't like us interfering in their affairs, even if it is murder.”

Since Balok Ghosh secretly nursed the opinion that this was a much better alternative than the state wasting its valuable time and resources chasing down a whore-killer, he refrained from commenting. After a while though, he felt inclined to part with some information that he had gathered on the down low, so to speak: “There's something else sir,” he said measuring his words.

“What?” asked Samsher Singh in the safe knowledge that Balok Ghosh had an ear very close to the ground. What pimps and servants and pick pockets would not say to an officer, they would say to the level-headed, quiet Constable.

“That girl who discovered the dead body, she was the one who told the NGO. They know about the blue film business.”

“How did you know that?” Samsheer Singh couldn’t help asking, though he knew it was a futile question.

“I hear things sir. Biswas on the kiosk heard from some other pimp who does some flying business for that madam.”

“I wonder what she said to them,” Singh wondered quietly.

Balok Ghosh had an answer even for that, “More than she told us, sir, I think some sex trafficking routes might be involved in that.”

“How?” asked Singh, “The videos are being made by Rambo and perhaps some others girls here. But they would already have to be here to make them right? How are the two related?”

Balok Ghosh remained impassive, “Who knows sir. But, do you think Rambo Maity would be alone in this? He’s a flounder, not a shark. I would think sir that it’s only the tip of the iceberg. He’s gotten himself into something big. Video films are just a screen.”

Samsheer Singh was wise enough to take the older man’s words seriously. He turned it over in his mind. Yes, it made more sense, he thought. “But, that woman there, they have no problem with sex trafficking. It’s like getting a fresh batch of fish in the market for them. Why should they have a problem if Rambo Maity is now facilitating the import?”

“Oh they’re okay with the trafficking sir, they have to be. But it might be something to do with the video business. If they don’t get their cut, they’ll be pissed. You can bet on that.”

Samsheer Singh was thinking aloud, “If they did have something on trafficking they wouldn’t come to us...no they wouldn’t. But the media is quiet about it. Maybe it hasn’t gone to them yet?”

Balok Ghosh said, “Most of the raids reveal nothing sir, because both parties know when and where it is going to happen, but if the media caught onto the racket and had evidence, if the NGOs could furnish that then it’d be a very high profile raid, sir. And who knows what one will find. It’d be the proverbial finding a snake when you thought you’re digging for a worm. And on the other hand,” Balok Ghosh seemed to think for a moment, “I don’t know...” he murmured, “it depends on how he is filming the stuff sir. If he is doing the filming in these rooms, under those roofs without for example, the knowledge of the brothel keepers, well that is dangerous.”

“Why? You mean because they are not getting their cut?” Samsher Singh was about to dismiss it but realised that murders had been committed for far less. There was one thing that lubricated the wheels of Shonagachhi, it was money.

Balok Ghosh shook his head, “No sir. People. People who traffic in girls, abduct or con them into this life, they come here sir. They meet here, they deliver goods here, they talk about these plans. Can you imagine what the NGOs working here would give to get that kind of information...evidence, on tape?”

“So you are trying to say,” said Samsher Singh in wide-eyed wonder, “that Rambo Maity is working to expose the sex trade? Maybe he is in league with the NGOs, eh? Trying to bring them to justice?”

Balok Ghosh felt what Shefali mashi had felt not so long ago. He sighed inwardly and said in a level tone, “No sir. I highly doubt that sir. I just think that Rambo Maity does not realise what hornet’s nest he has kicked. Especially sir,” he lowered his voice, “if that girl we saw today has already gone to the NGOs with this information, and maybe even, the tapes.”

Samsher Singh stood stock still. He felt he had been a massive fool. He turned around and began walking purposefully back to the purple house he had just left. Several girls

were crowding in the doorway, their faces arrayed in cheap make up, awaiting their evening's turn. "I need to get in here right now," Singh said with much more force than necessary. The girls nonchalantly stepped away. They had seen too many policemen and bribed too many policemen to be scared of them any longer. One girl, in dark plum lipstick, wearing a tight t-shirt with the Facebook logo on it ran a flight of stairs, presumably to inform the matriarch.

Samsheer Singh pushed past the women and looked around the first room he entered. His confidence was somewhat hampered when he realised that he didn't actually know which room the murder had taken place in. He leaned towards Balok Ghosh and whispered something, the Constable nodded and Singh straightened up.

He noticed the green painted walls, the cut and pasted pictures of the leading ladies of popular Bollywood movies lining the walls, the big bed in the middle of the room and a shelf full of odds and ends. There wasn't much to see. He looked at Balok Ghosh and asked, "Here?" pointing to the only available space on the floor.

The Constable nodded and Singh knelt down in front of the bed as if his eyes alone could perform the forensic search that this crime scene never got. He knew it was useless even as he did it. How many customers had passed through this room since the thing happened? How many girls have used this bed, used this room since then? Everything had been cleared away, every trace of the girl, alive and dead had been wiped away to make room for the next hour and its patrons. Singh felt hopeless. The surge of confidence he had felt just moments ago, dropped in an instant. It was so stupid to not have searched this space. If any camera, any evidence had been hidden here it was long since taken away or destroyed. But who would know that he'd in fact be asked to investigate the case. Whoever investigated the death of a whore?

Shefali mashi entered the room. There was no sign of displeasure on her face. She smiled with warm welcome at the two policemen and said, “Oh I must have seen someone’s lucky face when I woke up today. Officer sahib likes us so much that he simply won’t leave us. Shall I offer you some of my finest officer sahib? How do you like them?”

Samsher Singh made no response to this offer. In a brisk voice he said, “I need to make a thorough search of this room.”

Shefali mashi remained unperturbed. “If you must, you must sir. Our survival here is due to your charity. Consider me at your disposal,” but this handsome offer did nothing to soften Singh’s mood. He began a haphazard search of the room in which blustering played a far greater role than observation. Balok Ghosh made some motions to appease his senior officer but much preferred to stand passively in one corner knowing full well the futility of such a search. From time to time Singh would fling questions at the madam. Such as, “Where was she found?” At the foot of the bed. “Where was the bottle of acid lying?” Next to her, broken in half. “What did you do with it?” It had been thrown away.

In less than twenty minutes Shamsher Singh had proved to both himself and bystanders that searching a crime scene days after the murder had happened was merely a waste of time. He felt he could do something more but couldn’t for the life of him think what it was. With a grave face he said, “I need to see that girl once again. I don’t think we have heard everything.”

Shefali mashi said, “Sir, I assure you, she doesn’t know anything more. Besides, I have just given her some pain killers and some sleeping pills. Poor thing is traumatised after the murder and talking to you today has only made it harder for her. So if you don’t mind, I’ll send her over tomorrow if you please. And now, if you are quite done, could I have my room back please? There’s quite a queue forming at the door.”

Walking out of the door once more, Samsheer Singh felt he was missing something, over looking something that was obvious and staring him in the face. He didn't know what he could do, except chase down the girl's babu, who he felt quite sure was her murderer as well. If this was indeed about the sex trafficking business, it was much beyond the grasp of Samsheer Singh. Far bigger men than him with far more power and money were sitting at the helm of that business. He couldn't do anything, he knew even before he started. He hadn't joined the police force to clean up the city, or to right all wrongs. In movies they showed that kind of thing, but he hadn't met a single man in the police force who actually joined thinking that. Once in a while such men would appear. The whole station would be wary of such people, and they were inevitably handed the unwelcome transfers. Dogooders soon learned the hard way.

Chapter XVII

Tilu Shau opened his eyes and saw Lalee's face close to his. He thought he was dreaming, but the slogans from the street outside were loud and Tilu Shau remembered the march.

"Aren't you going?" he asked Lalee.

"Yes," Lalee said, "I was just waiting for you."

Tilu would have not believed this was actually happening, that Lalee was speaking to him so tenderly or waiting for him, had it not been for the piercing voices beyond the door.

"Do you have to leave?" She asked.

"No," Tilu said, still unable to believe his ears.

"Then stay," she said, "stay the night."

Lalee shut the door softly behind herself watching Tilu settle down with a pen and notebook on her bed. She merged with the passing multitude of women, each walking with a candle. Lalee had come empty handed but someone lit a candle and handed it to Lalee. Without speaking Lalee walked with them, not listening to the words but following the rhythm of footsteps, irregular and uncoordinated, but all falling in the same direction. She saw faces in the crowd she recognised, faces she didn't, faces that felt familiar as if in some way she knew them, faces she had forgotten. She saw the old midwife, jerking her bent body forward in a peculiar lurching motion. She smiled toothlessly at Lalee. It was one of those rare times she felt she belonged to this place.

At the end of the march when the congregation was distracted, milling about talking with each other, a faint sound caught Lalee's attention. A soft voice was calling her name from the darkened corner next to her house. Lalee spotted a girl standing in the shadows in the narrow gap between Shefali mashi's brothel and her own house. Several girls were out on the street, sitting or standing laconically, their faces painted two shades too white for their complexion. Waiting, or laughing, occasionally calling out at passing men. Lalee walked towards her.

It was Mala Bibi, the one Lalee had seen beaten by Chintu. Lalee felt a wave of guilt as she looked at the girl's face in the dark gloom between the two houses. She had clearly been crying. Her swollen eyes were alert with a hunted look Lalee was familiar with. She felt certain that there were other marks on her body from the beating that Lalee couldn't see. She could do nothing to help this girl, or stop her pain.

"I've been waiting for you," the girl whispered, looking around herself. "I thought you'd come out of your room, for tonight, but I didn't dare join the march."

"What happened?" Lalee asked.

"Will you take this?" The girl took out a plastic bag from the folds of her salwar kameez, hidden under her dupatta.

"What is this?" Lalee asked, looking at the opaque plastic bag.

"Put it in your bag or something. Hide it in your clothes," the girl said with some urgency. "Are you going out? Don't leave it in the house," she said.

"What is it Mala? Why are you giving it to me?"

"Mohamaya gave me those CDs two days before she died, and that..." she pointed to a black oblong, "is her cell phone."

"Why did she give you these?"

“She didn’t want to keep making the videos. I think she was scared that her family would see them. She was fighting with her babu, he was,” she paused, “forcing her to keep making them. She asked me to destroy them.”

“But the cellphone? I thought that was stolen by the babu, no?”

“No, I was the first to come into the room, before you or mashi or anyone. Mohamaya was lying on the floor but I didn’t take any money,” she protested with a wail. “I swear, I didn’t. I wouldn’t do that. But the phone was lying on the bed. I took it, and the CDs, she had given to me to hide.”

“What’s in them?”

“I don’t know. I thought it was just the sex videos she was doing. But then she could just throw them away. Why would she give them to me?” She asked as if Lalee had the answers. “But then when she died, I...” she stopped, “I began wondering if it wasn’t sex videos at all. People used to come you know, and I know they were not clients. It was more like a meeting. Shefali mashi used to go down there. None of us girls were allowed. Mohamaya and her babu were there; mashi prefers to have the meeting there because it’s on the ground floor and the rest of the girls hang out in the upper storeys. It is more... isolated, for the meetings.”

Lalee was quiet, trying to think it through. So Shefali mashi wasn’t as far removed from Mohamaya’s life as she’d have Lalee believe. They were involved in something for which this girl had to pay with her life. She asked, “Didn’t you check the CDs?”

Mala said, “No, they’re suspicious about me. They never leave me alone for one minute ever since Mohamaya died. Everywhere I go there’s at least one girl behind me.” She slid further into the shadows, resting her back against the wall, “After Mohamaya died, Shefali mashi and two other girls searched her room, till very late into the night. I knew

they were looking for something. And I heard mashi talking on the phone, in Maya's room. I think a new bunch of girls are coming."

"I have to go," she looked around, "she'll send Chintu after me."

"Why are you giving these to me? What am I supposed to do with it?"

"I don't know. But no one checks up on you. You are free, well a lot more free than I am. They'll kill me if they find this. I think mashi sends some of the other girls and the servants to go through my things. I have been finding new hiding places for them ever since I found them. I can't even go to the Collective to give these to them. You know some NGO people, right? I saw a girl coming to your room. They are afraid of you Lalee."

"Me?" Lalee asked, surprised.

"Yes, well, they don't have you under their thumb. You can do something," and then Mala Bibi began to cry softly in the darkness. "I don't know what's going to happen, I am scared Lalee, I'm so scared."

Lalee had nothing to say to her. Whatever she said, whatever words she chose, would fall short. She remained silent, but held Mala's hand. She wanted to say, Be safe, whisper warnings, advice caution, but none of that would work. Lalee couldn't do anything for Mala. She was living in fear.

"Okay. I'll keep them for you. I don't know what this is about...I don't even have a TV in the room, I can't know what is in it. But I'll keep it for you, till you feel safer."

Tilu came out of the room and looked around. When he saw Lalee standing in the corner with Mala he said, "Everything okay?"

Lalee nodded, "I'll be there in a minute."

Tilu said, "I heard your voice, so I came out to see if you were okay."

Lalee gestured for him to leave. Tilu hesitated for a moment and then he went inside Lalee's room.

Mala wiped her eyes, "I must go. If I'm not out on the streets, they'll suspect something. I just wanted to give you this." She smiled at Lalee, "He's a nice man, I've seen him come to your room," she said. "Is he your babu?"

"No," Lalee said absently, "I don't have a babu."

"Really? That almost never happens here," Mala said a lot more conversationally than before, "but then, you're not like the rest of us."

"We are none of us like any one else," Lalee said. Then abruptly she added, "I'm pregnant," apropos of nothing, except it was something she needed to say aloud, to say to someone else.

Mala was silent, it wasn't rare in Shonagachhi after all, she said, "You know, I always assumed that you had children. Like our Maya. She had two kids, I thought you did too. Something about how you was so strong, I thought you must be doing this for your children. Shefali mashi told me once that you send money to your family, I just thought they were your children."

"No, no children so far. I thought I was barren. It was a blessing, but I don't think so any more. I do still have a family, but they don't think I'm family any more."

"But why give them money then?"

Lalee shrugged, "Otherwise they will starve." She stopped, "How can I do that?"

"I don't know," said Mala, "the way they left us to die I suppose."

"I don't know if they had a choice, but I do."

The two of them began to walk towards the street lights. "It'll be okay," Lalee said abruptly and struggled to believe it herself, "it has to be."

Mala smiled wanly, "Be safe," she said to Lalee.

Lalee watched the skinny girl walk towards The Blue Lotus and hide among the rest of the soliciting crowd. Her face, drawn and swollen, reflected the yellow jaundice of the halogen lamps on the street.

Singh and Ghosh walked out of The Blue Lotus. Though the march was over, the makeshift dais outside the Collective's office still held one or two speakers and a sizeable, if distracted audience. Their voices carried forth on the narrow streets. A sudden chill filled the evening air. Singh, disconcerted after a fruitless meeting with Shefali mashi walked quietly towards the waiting jeep. Lalee watched them go just as she was closing the door after her.

She looked at her room and saw the dishevelled condition it was in, after her prolonged search for the camera during the interview with Diti. Tilu was reading a book. "How was the march?" He asked.

"It was okay," she said. "What else can you say about a march for a dead girl? But I'm glad it happened. In all my years here, I've never seen the women of Shonagachhi march for anything before."

"Are you sure you want me to stay?" Tilu asked, "Only, if I stay, you won't be able to work tonight."

Instead of replying, Lalee began to pick up her things from the floor, from the side of the bed and emptying the shelves. "I want you stay," she said without looking up from her work. She sat on her haunches and dragged the trunk from under the bed and put her meagre belongings into it. The paraphernalia of her existence in this space— so much of it

was inconsequential. She left much of them as they were and packed her clothes, a few pots and pans and put the money in her handbag. Tilu was watching her, eventually he said, “Where are you going?”

Lalee did not reply one way or the other and continued with her packing. After a while she said, “I don’t know. I wanted to get out of here,” she said, “but it looks like it’s not going to happen.”

“Where did you want to go?” Tilu asked.

“I wanted a better life,” Lalee gave a wry smile. “I suppose we all do. But now,” she stopped, “I think I want to go see my mother.”

Lalee didn’t know that this is what she wanted to do till the moment she said it aloud. Even a few days ago she’d have thought this notion absurd. She hadn’t seen her mother in more than a decade. Would she even recognise Lalee now? Was she even alive?

“Why? Has something happened?” asked Tilu.

“No, nothing has happened,” then she paused. After a long minute she said, “I found out I am pregnant.”

In the ensuing silence Lalee began to wonder what was going on with Tilu. After a long time he stuttered, “Why? I mean how? When?” he blurted out looking completely perplexed.

“The usual way, I suspect. Although,” she said, “I always use protection.”

“With me, yes!” Tilu said with force. Lalee gave him a cool look and he fell silent.

Lalee continued to pack, cursing herself from time to time for saying anything at all to Tilu while Tilu sat gloomily watching Lalee put her things in the trunk.

When Rambo got a call from Lalee asking him to meet her, he had assumed that she wanted the money from Mr. Ghosh. He was trying to decide how much he could withhold from Mr. Ghosh's generous payment without making Lalee suspicious. He wasn't in a good mood since he had found out that Svetlana had gone ahead and made her own negotiations with the fool Shamik, cutting Rambo Maity at the source. There was no coming back from that. Once the girl grabs a client, unless the pimp has her right under his thumb, he was out in the cold. But Lalee, thankfully being new to the world of rich clients, had allowed Rambo to do the financial dealings. Besides Mr. Ghosh had a peculiar aversion to handing out cash to the women he slept with. He preferred to pay Rambo than offend his fine sensibilities by paying Lalee directly. Lalee had no other choice but to accept the arrangement against her better judgement. This was a godsend for Rambo. Consequently he felt well disposed towards her. Although not as well disposed as to hand her the extra tip that Mr. Ghosh had settled on her via Maity. He was quietly going to keep that for himself and hope to hell that the next time Rosa met with Mr. Ghosh, the subject wouldn't come up. Mr. Ghosh also had an aversion to talking about money openly, and Rambo could reasonably expect that he won't bring it up in his hours of pleasure.

Rambo felt he had a good thing going, finally, things were looking up for him and his side business of secret camera pornos was gradually catching on. He toyed with the idea of proposing to Lalee that she perform in his porn films for some extra cash as so many of her compatriots had already done. Although, the nature of the clandestine home videos had its own niche customers and Rambo was undecided as to whether he wanted to give up that added angle to his business.

He arrived in Shonagachhi just in time to see the dying embers of the candle light march. Just as he rounded the corner to Lalee's room, he saw Chintu smoking a cigarette

on The Blue Lotus' balcony. For many reasons that had to do with preserving his body parts unbroken and unbleeding, Rambo didn't particularly care to be noticed by Chintu. He hid behind a convenient wall till the other man had finished his smoke and disappeared into the house. Only then he spotted the police jeep and the two policemen coming out of Shefali mashi's house. They could have simply come to get their share, but under the present climate— what with the girl getting murdered and the babu absconding— Rambo didn't feel like risking it. Besides, the machinery of financial give and take was so well oiled that officers rarely had to come down here to get their share. Low level Constables and pimps arranged that service without the officers having to trouble themselves. Rambo recognised the tall, broad shouldered frame of Samsher Singh. He began to suspect that this was somehow about that wretched murder. And here he was getting more and more comfortable each day thinking that the public was beginning to forget about that. After all even the twenty-four hour news channels had enough fluff to cover the national public twice over. Not in the least desirous of an impromptu questioning by Samsher Singh, he wisely maintained his cover till the jeep drove away.

When he knocked on Lalee's door, she was still packing. Opening the door an inch she saw Rambo Maity's panicked face. Without wasting a second, Lalee slapped him hard across the face.

"What?" spluttered a dumbstruck, angry Maity, "What the hell did you go and do that for?"

"I found the camera Maity. When did you put that in? I should have known...oh I so should have known," screamed Lalee. The anger she felt when she discovered the hidden camera came rushing back to her.

Rambo rallied magnificently. For a moment he was almost going to hit Lalee back but since he was the one at fault here, and he had been spooked enough by the recent state of

affairs in Shonagachhi, he didn't feel it would be wise to give Lalee any more cause to hold a grudge against him. Then he saw Tilu Shau come and join Lalee.

"What's he doing here?" Rambo asked

"That's none of your business," she said. "So how much have you made from my films then? How long have you been filming me? I swear I'll break your bones Maity, you worm...."

Rambo held up his hands in a conciliatory motion, "Oh come on, I'd never cheat you. I would have told you a long time ago, but that temper of yours, I didn't know how you would...."

Lalee pushed him with both hands, "How dare you," she began to say.

Rambo grabbed her hand and was about to twist it when Tilu Shau elbowed him into the door and the back of Rambo's head hit the door with a loud thud. "*Aou*," Rambo yelled, rubbing the back of his head. "Who knew you had it in you," he mumbled at Tilu. He breathed out in a tired way, "Okay, okay, let's talk like adults."

Lalee still looked at him like an angry wild animal.

He sighed and produced an envelope, "Here, see? Old Rambo would never cheat you. Here's your money," he tried to smile a little.

"And what about the video money? I could ruin you Rambo, I could make sure that you never enter Shonagachhi again. Chintu would gladly break your legs. They're none too pleased with you up there," she moved a finger in the direction of The Blue Lotus.

"Oh Lalee, Lalee, stop being such a hothead," Rambo smiled nastily. "The public loves you. Isn't that what you wanted? A better life? Well, you can't get a better life by doing anything else. I mean..." he laughed at the impossibility of the idea. "You didn't think that you'd get a job in an office, did you? But with your ass perched on this desk," he

indicated Lalee's wobbly table, "you make so many people happy. I would have told you much sooner, if I didn't know what a hot head you were."

Lalee spluttered with rage. Rambo's smile stung her and he had hit a nerve; a part of her felt that she was being punished for wanting more, for wanting to escape Shonagachhi. Tilu moved between them, protectively standing in front of Lalee.

Rambo weighed up his chances and decided to change his tune, "I don't have all the money right now," he said, the hint of pleading not escaping Lalee's notice, "but I promise, as soon as I can, you'll get your cut."

"You open your wallet Maity. You're leaving behind whatever you have right now or it won't go well for you," Lalee said, trying to force her way out of Tilu's shadow.

Rambo felt like saying, Oh yeah, and what would you do if I didn't comply with your majesty's wishes? But he held his tongue. This was bound to happen sooner or later. She would have found out one way or the other. After all, Mohamaya had been involved as was Shefali mashi, and though he was hoping to hell that this business about the porn films and his role in it did not become public knowledge, he also knew he couldn't realistically expect that. The girls all crammed together in this crazy town, talked to each other. And if one died in the way that the girl died, it was only a matter of time before Rambo's name would become tangled with it.

He opened his wallet and took out the money. "I have a thousand, see? That's all. You can keep it."

"How dare you?" Lalee hissed, pushing Tilu aside. "How the fuck dare you? How many movies have you made and sold off my back? And now you pretend to do me a charity? You owe me a lot more Maity."

"Yes, yes," Rambo tried to be reconciliatory again, "look," he said glancing over his shoulder, "look, it's not safe here anymore, you understand? I just saw a police officer I

know walk out of Shefali mashi's door. Normally, none of this would happen..." he trailed off. Then he said, "I'll pay, okay? But on the condition that you make more films with me, and with me only, you understand? More and more people are entering the market, but remember where your loyalties lie. That's all I ask."

Despite herself, Lalee laughed. "Loyalty, Rambo? To you of all people? You've got some nerve saying that to me here and now."

"Oh come on, I made you what you are."

Lalee tried to hit out again, but Tilu's back bore the brunt of it. He said, "Quit playing around Maity. Just pay and get out of here."

"I'll pay. Give me some time, and I can't come down here anymore. I don't like what's going around here. Call me, we'll arrange something. Meet me in Esplanade or somewhere. I have some good clients Lalee. You told me you wanted this. I didn't come to you, you came to me. If you really want this, I'm your guy. Trust me."

Lalee silently put the rest of the money inside her pockets and shut the door on Rambo Maity.

She moved slowly towards the bed, then without warning, uncharacteristically and with abandon, began to cry. Small tears became full sobs, leaving her no air to breathe. She doubled on herself, both hands clutching her stomach, then she gathered her knees around herself, guarding herself as far as her arms would reach around her own body. She cried like she hadn't done in years; in the early days, when she had just begun in the trade, she would cry like this in the long afternoons between shifts. By evening her face would swell and her eyes would redden. Those days Shefali mashi would either force a few stiff drinks down her throat or hit her. She soon learned how to cry silently. In time, she cried in the early hours when she could finally go to sleep each night. Even after so many years, at this

moment, she found herself turning into the young girl who knew nothing, understood nothing, and was afraid. Afraid of the men who touched her, afraid of that new life, afraid of the nightmare her life had become. No core of rage, no amount of anger was safeguard against this sudden and utter breakdown of walls she had built around herself. She whimpered and gradually began to stroke her own hair, like she imagined her mother would do to comfort her.

Tilu came towards her and hunched down on the floor. Without saying anything, he took her hands and held them tightly. For a long time Lalee didn't look up but buried her face between her knees. He kissed her hands. Starting with the wrists and her forearm, till he reached her damp forehead, her distorted face and drew her closer into himself. Lalee didn't protest, didn't resist, but let herself be embraced. He held her as she cried.

They sat side by side on the bed in the dark. The moon had climbed far above Lalee's small, grime encrusted window. The garish purple-pink of a neon light across the road fell on Lalee dark cement floors, a refrain from an old Hindi song played. Some drunk on the street was singing along, completely out of tune. Tilu said in a low gruff tone, "Are you going to keep the baby?"

Lalee was quiet. She had no idea what to say, she closed her eyes and breathed out a few times, then she said, "Yes, at least, I think so."

Tilu turned towards her and put his hands around her shoulders, making Lalee look directly into his face. Lalee saw Tilu was teary, eyes shining in the half light of the room, he said with a catch in his throat, "Marry me, Lalee. I don't have much but whatever I have, whatever I am, it is yours if you choose. There is nothing I won't do for you." Tilu's voice had broken in the end, a lump in his throat pushing down on his heart, blocking any words, any breath that might escape.

After a few long seconds, Lalee broke into bubbling laughter. It started with an odd gurgle and became in no time at all a full, unstoppable giggle. A guffaw that Lalee couldn't stop even as she started snorting with laughter.

Tilu was staring at her with his mouth slightly open, his jaw having dropped a few inches at Lalee's sudden unfettered mirth. Lalee had to wipe her eyes before she could reply, "Why," she breathed, "why do you men think marriage is the solution to accidental pregnancy? It won't make it go away you know," she said.

"I wasn't trying to make it go away," Tilu said in an offended tone, "I want to marry you," he said, as if in defence of himself.

"Then my answer is no, Tilu," Lalee said. "Oh don't look so sad. This is no tragedy," she took his limp hand in hers, "you've been good to me, I," she stopped, "I've not been good to you, I have not been nice to you, and I am touched by your offer, but you see," she looked into his eyes, "there's no need for us to get married. And I don't think it is wise."

Tilu failed to say anything but Lalee spoke again, "Now that we've got that out of the way, would you like to come with me? I want to get out of this place tonight, I don't want to be here. It's still early, let's go and eat something."

"Where would you like to go?" Tilu asked.

"You know, after all these years in this place I've never even seen the Victoria Memorial," Lalee said.

"You know they close at six in the evening?"

"That early? I suppose."

"After nightfall it's only drug dealers, pimps and..." Tilu stopped.

"And prostitutes," Lalee finished the sentence. "I know, I've heard about it."

"But we can still go. There are a lot of places to eat there."

“I have seen those places from the outside,” Lalee said, a hint of childish excitement in her voice that didn’t fail to touch Tilu. “It looks nice— all the people in Chowringhee and New Market. When the bus takes the flyover, you can see the Maidan, the white dome of the Victoria Memorial with the fairy on top...you can see it.”

“The fairy used to turn, revolve on the top at one point of time. It doesn’t anymore.”

“Why?”

Tilu shrugged, “Disrepair, or maybe it decided that it wasn’t worth the trouble,” he smiled.

“Did you see it turn?”

“Yes, when I was a boy. My father used to take me there on Sundays, to play. On Independence Day and Republic Day we rode the horse carriages, ate peanuts and roasted chickpeas, played football. This was when my mother was still alive,” he paused. “Shall we go?”

“Yes.”

“I have to tell you,” Tilu hesitated, “I don’t have much money,” he stopped, “I mean, I had some, but I gave most of it to your man there,” and then added anxiously, “you got it from him right? I mean, it is yours, not his.”

Lalee said, “I got as much as I’d get out of him now. It’s never a hundred percent; they take their cut and much more than is their due. But I took him on. If anything, it was my fault. For some years, I didn’t have a pimp, and things were okay, but he has good contacts, good clients. I just wanted to try...for something better than this,” she concluded.

“Most of us do,” Tilu said and changed the subject abruptly, “I mean, I have some money, but I can’t take you to a restaurant or anything...I just thought you should know.”

“Don’t worry,” Lalee smiled and waved the notes lying on the table, still warm from Rambo’s wallet, “Maity is treating us to dinner.”

Chapter XVIII

A golden light shone through the room in the morning. It was chilly and Lalee sought warmth in the sleeping body lying next to her. Tilu had stayed with her through the night. They had talked for a long time till both fell silent, lying in the darkness touching each other, and drifted off to sleep. Blinking in the sunlight, she took a few seconds to piece together the events that had led her to this companion for the night, stretched her body in a long yawn, giving in to a sense of pleasure, a quiet happiness. Everything looked perfect. The early morning chill and the golden light of dawn conspired to illuminate the small dingy room as if it was another world, another life and not the gritty dirt of Shonagachhi that Lalee had come to know so well over the years. And then she heard the sound of conversation, of people moving back and forth outside the room, and someone, crying.

She went to the window and lowered the half curtains. Chanda, whom she had met yesterday in Mohamaya's room was standing outside comforting a crying girl. Lalee opened the door and walked out. Some men Lalee hadn't seen before and Shefali mashi's old servant were readying a small van.

She walked up to the pair of girls and asked, "What happened?"

"Mala killed herself," Chanda said in a stage whisper.

"What? How?" Lalee asked, completely startled out of her morning stupor. She was about to mention that she had talked to Mala the night before, but stopped herself before she said anything.

"She took sleeping pills, mashi found her in the morning."

Lalee didn't believe this narrative for a second, "Where is she? Let me take a look."

“They’re just bringing her out. They’ll take her straight to the ghat to be cremated,” Chanda added with some surprise, “I didn’t know you were friends.”

“I,” Lalee faltered, they hadn’t been friends, not really, “we weren’t friends,” she said. She had in her possession the packet Mala gave her the night before and Lalee didn’t want to emphasise their contact.

Still, Lalee couldn’t affect complete indifference. As she made a move to enter the house, she saw the men bring out the body of the dead girl. Chintu however was nowhere to be seen. In lieu of a stretcher, the men used a large white bed sheet. The weight of the dead girl sagged in the middle of the sheet, as her body rocked slightly in the motion of being carried down the stairs.

Lalee stood stock still. The bloodless, apparently non-violent scene hollowed her out from the inside in a way that no amount of carnage or battery could. The casual ignominy, the mundane indifference with which this skinny, underfed girl had quietly died and the way she was being disposed off— as if the brothel was being spring cleaned— left Lalee with nothing, not even anger.

She was standing on the stairs with a couple of the younger girls when the men passed by her with the corpse. Her eyes were closed. Lalee thought that whoever came up with the description of dead people looking peaceful had either been very fortunate or had never seen any dead bodies. Then she noticed the marks on her wrists. Her left hand was lying limply to one side while her right lay across her chest. Lalee noticed that deep purple welts circled her wrist like bracelets. She followed the body outside and tried to see the girl’s other hand. As she bent to touch the body, Chanda croaked from behind, “*Arrey*, what are you doing? Don’t touch it. Or you have to go and take a dip in the Ganges. Don’t you know anything?”

Lalee looked at her and said, “Why are her wrists like this? What happened?”

“Don’t know. Maybe she hurt herself?” Chanda hazarded without interest.

“How can you tie your own hands that tightly, and why would you?” mumbled Lalee feeling like a fool for even having to point it out to this clearly uninterested girl.

“And you can’t take sleeping pills with your wrists tied together. Chanda,” Lalee said, deliberately touching the body. “Who slept next to her? I know you girls have to share rooms up there.”

“She had her own room. Mashi said, she was sleeping and no one was to disturb her.”

Nothing felt right about this to Lalee. She had spoken to the girl less than twelve hours ago, and though she didn’t seem to be doing well, she didn’t sound like she was going to kill herself either.

The men began to wrap Mala in the white sheet, a few stray sticks of tuberoses adorned the head of the bed frame. Lengths of twine tied her body to the skeletal ribs of the bed, going in and out of the wooden slats, securing her in place. The shroud covered her till the neck so all that was visible of Mala was her discontented, swollen face. “Get off the van, we have to go now,” one of the men spat out at Lalee without any ceremony.

“Where are you taking her?” Lalee asked, a frantic anxiety taking hold of her. “This is a police case. You can’t just burn her,” she yelled.

The men looked at her as if she had gone mad. Chanda and the weeping girl had heard her too. Chanda said, “The police? What’re they going to do? You want them to take her away and put her in the morgue and cut her open? What good will that do? And we won’t get the body till midnight at least. No one’s going to do all that,” she said. Then she came forward and took Lalee’s hand, “Come away, let them take her. It’s much better this way. Let her have some peace.”

Limply, Lalee let herself be pulled away. The metal doors of the van shut and the man at the wheel turned the engine on. Black smoke spat out of the exhaust pipe and covered

the trio of women. Then Lalee said, almost to herself, “She was Muslim wasn’t she? Why are they cremating her?”

“It’s easier,” Chanda said, looking at the van driving away, turning the corner to the main road. “She had a babu, a Hindu babu. He left her years ago, but she used to wear *sindoor*, and the bangles, she always said she was his wife. It’s what she would have wanted.” She paused, “Besides, I think you need a Mullah or someone to bury in the Muslim way. Who’s going to do that? We don’t have any here right now.” Chanda looked at Lalee’s blank, unseeing face, “Come on now, she’s better off wherever she is going. You and I have to get through the day.”

Lalee pulled away from Chanda and began walking towards The Blue Lotus. A few girls were gathered in the balcony, looking at the street and the van that drove away with Mala Bibi’s body. Lalee stopped when she saw the plump figure of Shefali mashi appear among them, dressed in a starched saree, her mouth full of *paan*. The two women stared at each other and then Shefali mashi looked away. She said something to the girls that Lalee couldn’t hear and one by one they disappeared inside. Shefali mashi glanced at Lalee for a moment and followed her flock.

Lalee walked back slowly to her own room. The incomplete packing was still evident in the room, the minutiae of her life strewn about the small, cramped space. Tilu looked up at her and said, “What happened? Why did you go out?”

Lalee didn’t reply but climbed on the bed to reach the shelves above, where some cardboard boxes and other junk was stored. She took out the plastic packet Mala had handed to her not twelve hours ago and put it in her bag.

The trunk would be too large to carry around, and she didn’t need half of this stuff. Looking around, she thought how hard it had been to amass these things. How each one of

these things had helped her feel more settled, more rooted, more arrived. But when the hour came what was a plastic bucket, or old clothes, pots, pans and speckled mirrors? She could leave them behind with much more ease than she could the wounds, nightmares, diseases and old scars that she had collected.

It didn't take her very long. Gathering the needful was depressingly fast. At last, she zipped the large bag and stood up straight.

Tilu was looking at her but hadn't said anything. Lalee was grateful for this silence. She said, "I have to go."

"Where?"

"Home."

Tilu remained silent. Lalee stood there waiting for him to voice the questions that were screaming themselves hoarse inside her head. Which home? The only place she could call home was this. What would she do? What would she eat? Was there any other work in the world for her? You have no education, no family, and very little money, she reminded herself, what will you do? How will you feed the baby? Are you even fit to have a baby?

But Tilu remained silent and Lalee stood there with clenched jaws, trying to silence the questions in her head. She didn't have any good answers, but she knew that neither she nor any child she might birth, deserved this life, or could stand this place.

"But I have something to do before I go," she announced, more to herself than Tilu. "I have some things to give to some people." She didn't know how to go about it. She had some vague idea of giving the CDs and the cell phone to Diti, who, Lalee realised, she oddly trusted. But she didn't know where Diti lived or even her phone number. The papers and pamphlets Diti brought were still on the table, Lalee hadn't had time to throw them away. She began to look through the debris of her room.

Behind the table, a yellow pamphlet peeked through a stack of old scraps of papers. Lalee looked at the yellow bill that Diti had come clutching the first time they met. On the corner was the address of Sampurna, she folded the pamphlet carefully and put it in her handbag. The police were never an option, but there wasn't much she could do, except put her tattered faith in the people who had worked for the women of Shonagachhi.

Constable Biswas at the police kiosk on Sovabazar Road, right before it curved into Shonagachhi, was sipping his hot, milky tea when he saw a white van pass by. Since no one was chanting the lord's name in loud yells, as was the custom when carrying a dead body to its last Hindu rites, it would have been impossible for Biswas to know that a dead girl lay in there. But the van had to stop for a full fifteen minutes at the traffic light, thanks to the early morning rush hour when all of the productive citizenry was trying to circumvent the laws of physics in a bid to reach their workplace under two hours.

Since the van stood motionless right outside his kiosk, Biswas could see a dead body wrapped in white quite plainly through the clear windows of the van. He hadn't thought much of it, till a few hours later when a freelance pimp of his acquaintance passed by the kiosk and stopped for a chat. He learned that a girl from The Blue Lotus has killed herself and they wondered idly if there was some kind of curse on the place.

Biswas said, "This Shefali mashi of yours will be left pretty lonely if this goes on, eh? You never know, these unnatural deaths..." he shook his head gravely. "They call to the others from the beyond."

"Oh come on," replied his informant, "it's nothing occult. These things happen once in a while." He waved at a young boy hovering at a short distance with a tea kettle and a stack of clay cups. "Another cup?" he asked Biswas. Handing him a steaming cup of tea,

he took a sip from his own, “If you ask me, my money’s on Shefali mashi and Chintu and the girl’s babu.”

“Hmm,” said Biswas, “we’re looking into it. Just yesterday Singh sir and Balok da came over.”

“Yes, I heard,” the pimp yawned. “Why are you bothering with it? It’s going to die down soon, right? Oh you should have seen it yesterday,” he said, “the whole place was full of people, journalists and news channels.” He said, “It’s bad for business, I’ll tell you that much. Had a new john with me, saw the cameras and spooked out. People don’t want to come when they see police jeeps and TV channels here.”

“It’s just pointless raking of filth,” Biswas contorted his face in disgust. The pimp lit a cigarette and offered one to the police Constable. Puffing out a cloud of smoke, Biswas said, “What are they going to do eh? Stop it all? But every once in a while they’ll rake up some shit or other. Fucking news channels.”

Once the pimp had departed, Biswas thought about this new information he had gathered and called a number, just to be on the safe side. When the call was answered, he said, “Balok da? It’s Biswas, from the kiosk...looks like another girl from the same brothel died today... Yes, Shefali madam’s house...I don’t know... they’re saying suicide... sleeping pills, apparently. I thought I’d let you know...they took her to the *ghat* about an hour ago sorry, sorry, I didn’t think it mattered that much...sorry, yes, yes, of course I saw you and sir come here yesterday...no, I didn’t stop then...I don’t think so...I spoke to Bablu, the pimp, you know that guy? Yes, he said there was no diary, no police FIR, they didn’t want to go through all that. Okay, okay. Thank you.”

And Biswas gazed out lazily at the still struggling traffic, in the safe knowledge that he had done more than his job for the day.

Balok Ghosh on the other hand replaced the receiver and sat for a moment in thought. Naskar, who was sitting on the same desk, pricking up his ears and eavesdropping on the fairly loud telephonic conversation said, “Another one, eh Balok da? It’s murder season up there, eh? What do you think?”

“I think that you talk too much and talk without thinking Naskar, that’s what I think.” Balok Ghosh said with a sour face, “If you want to amount to anything, especially in this job, you’ll do well to keep your mouth shut.”

Reprimanded, Naskar went on the defensive, “What did I say? You were saying the same thing on the phone. I heard you,” he said accusatorially.

“I never said, ‘murder’ did I? It’s ‘suicide.’ Learn the difference, it’ll serve you well in the future. Do you know what murder means?”

“Yes, a lot of fucking bother,” Naskar said sulkily.

“Exactly. Which is why it’s useful to choose your words wisely.”

After a while Naskar said, “Are you going to call Singh sir?”

Samsher Singh still hadn’t shown up at work. He was taking it slow, given the strain of the preceding day’s work.

Balok Ghosh shook his head thoughtfully, “No, I reckon there’s no need to trouble the gentleman. He can learn the facts in time. There’s no rush, everything is under control.”

“But they already took her to be cremated, no? I heard,” said Naskar.

“Yes, yes, accidental death, or suicide. Its plenty of work doing the last rites and a proper cremation without adding the police to the equation. Let them get on with it.”

“But,” Naskar said, suddenly excited as a new idea hit him, “if, say it is not suicide or accident, but murder, see, then they’ll have burnt the evidence! Don’t you see?”

Balok Ghosh gave his young colleague a chilly stare and said, “I’d suggest you get on with your work Naskar. Don’t try to make things complicated. Life is complicated enough right now. If things can be simple, let them be.”

And so saying, Balok Ghosh strolled off for another cup of tea and a well deserved rollup away from young excitable recruits.

Diti was sitting in a corner of the Sampurna office on a desk that didn’t belong to her, listening to the interview with Lalee she had taped the previous day on her phone and attempting to transcribe it. There was the usual amount of commotion and humdrum background noise of an office consisting mainly of young interns from colleges and universities. Diti was hunched up over her desk with her earphones on. She didn’t realise someone was calling her name till the person had shaken her by the shoulders. It was the office helper— who wasn’t quite a servant, but helped out the rest of them with small tasks, including making tea and cleaning the office. The lady said to Diti, “Oi, I have been calling your name for half an hour.”

Diti blinked at the woman’s unhappy face and realised the exaggeration, “Oh sorry. I didn’t hear you. What happened?”

“What happened? Nothing happened. There’s some girl outside, says she wants to see you. There’s a man with her as well,” and she withdrew muttering about the young generation’s despicable habit of pushing little objects into their earholes at all times.

Diti couldn’t think who might have come to visit her at the Sampurna office. Her first panicky thought was that it was her mother till she realised that A) her mother probably didn’t know or remember the name of the NGO she worked for B) there was no way for

her mother to find out the exact kind of social work she was doing, and C) no one would refer to her very respectable mother as a ‘girl’.

When she spotted Lalee outside the Sampurna glass doors, talking to a small bespectacled man, she was surprised. Even in January, the sun was shining ferociously. A large bag rested at Lalee’s feet. “Is everything okay?” she asked Lalee, pushing her glasses above the bridge of her nose, feeling vaguely concerned.

“Yes, well...,” Lalee paused, “perhaps they are not. But I’m okay. If that is what you are asking. This isn’t a crisis call.”

“Come, come inside,” Diti urged Lalee.

Lalee hesitated. The Sampurna office, with its light, airy rooms, large plate glass windows and cheerful young workforce was a different kind of world. People were laughing, joking, playing music and arguing with each other as if they were in a college canteen. No one took any notice of them as they passed. Lalee asked, “How do you get anything done here?”

“I have no idea,” Diti shook her head in mock lament. “Half the time they are going out for Chinese together, and after they are done working, they go out to a bar three times a week. I don’t know how they do it.” She pointed discreetly to some of the people, “A lot of them have done really good work though, won awards and medals, been written about in newspapers, and when you meet them, they’re just joking around,” Diti said with perplexed admiration.

“You should go out with them,” Lalee said

“You think? It’ll be nice.” Diti paused, “What will I tell my mom? She won’t like it.”

“Maybe you don’t need to tell her right away,” Lalee smiled.

Diti wanted to ask about the large travel bag in Lalee’s hand, “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Home.”

“But,” Diti spluttered, but there were too many questions she wanted to ask. Lalee gently steered her away from the middle of the office floor to a corner,

“I have something to give you,” Lalee said, “it’s important but I suggest you give it to someone in charge, I don’t want you to keep it, or anyone to know that you have it, because it might be dangerous for you, especially if you are planning to go back to Shonagachhi.”

Diti’s brow furrowed, “What is it?”

“It’s a couple of CDs from Mohamaya’s room and her cell phone.”

“You mean, the girl who died?”

“Yes, the girl who was acid burned,” Lalee said calmly. For some reason, she felt she needed to break the undisturbed euphemism of ‘died’.

“What’s in the CDs?”

“I don’t know, I don’t have a TV and there wasn’t much time. But it won’t be hard for you to find out. The girl who gave these to me thought there might be footage of what happened in Mohamaya’s room there. I don’t know if you know this but every brothel owner in Shonagachhi is involved in buying and selling of girls for what is nothing less than sexual slavery. Girls like me, and girls so young they don’t even understand what has happened to them.” Lalee stopped, Diti was looking at her, “People met there, in Mohamaya’s room, maybe the CDs have something on them, some information, some evidence...I don’t know,” she said. “I can only hope it’ll help somehow. And the cell phone might provide some clues too,” as Lalee spoke, she realised how little this was.

There was no concrete proof, no evidence and very little faith on her part that justice would be done. But however little it was, she had to make sure it wasn't wasted.

"I think we should go talk to Deepa ma'am," Diti said, surprising herself. Ever since she started her internship, she had avoided the Dragon Lady as much as possible. But at this time, she could think of no one more capable of handling whatever Lalee was bringing to their door.

And so Diti, for the first time since she had joined Sampurna, knocked on Deepa Marhatta's door of her own accord.

When the story had been explained, Deepa asked Lalee, "How did you get these?"

Lalee said, "Mala, another girl at Shefali mashi's house gave them to me. She died this morning." Lalee paused, the swollen dead face of Mala not far from her memory. "They say she killed herself, but I can't believe it," Lalee said. "She gave these to me last night, after the march. She was afraid but she wasn't suicidal. She was trying to live."

Deepa stood up, "Mala Bibi died?" she asked. "I knew her. Not well, but she was Mohamaya's friend, she came along for some of the seminars, but I haven't heard anything about this."

"They kept it quiet. No police, no FIR, nothing. By now, they would have burned the body."

Deepa sighed. "It's depressing at times you know, this job," she said and Diti was surprised to see the formidable head of the organisation speak so plainly. "No evidence, no police records and girls just...dying, just like that, and nothing happens, not a blessed thing," Deepa stopped. "Still, we have to keep on, haven't we," she smiled in an exhausted way at Lalee, "thank you, Lalee. I'll take a look, and if I find something even the slightest

bit useful, I won't let it go to waste. I promise you that. For now, I'll let the organisation and some of our friends in the media know about Mala and file a police FIR for her."

"There's one other thing," Lalee said, "there were deep red marks on Mala's wrists, like rope, but thinner." Lalee tried to recall what she saw, "I can't be sure, I was not prepared to see her like that, but I'm fairly certain both her wrists had the marks. I don't know a lot but I know sleeping pills don't do that. Also, Chintu..."

"We've heard of him," Deepa interrupted, "Shefali madam's henchman."

"Yes, he was beating her yesterday. It was for talking to you people, I think. And he was nowhere to be seen this morning when they took her out."

"She did come to one of our representatives. We know about the videography, Mohamaya mentioned it to one of us, but if the girls want to do it, and many of them do, to earn a little bit of cash, we can't do anything about it. They beat her for that?"

"Yes, perhaps they thought she knew more than she did. You have the CDs now, and the cell phone. Maybe it was because of those things."

Lalee turned to go, and Diti said, "But wait, where are you going?"

"I need to get out of Shonagachhi."

Before Diti could say anything, Deepa said, "We could help you. The question is always about money. We train girls who want to leave prostitution behind. It takes time and effort, but it can be done. If you try and when you're ready."

Lalee didn't reply.

Diti added, "You should Lalee, where will you go, all on your own? It isn't safe."

Lalee smiled, "Nothing ever is. But I have to go. I'll have to come back, sometime or the other, but now, I would like to be somewhere else."

Deepa had had more experience in helping people achieve change than Diti, and she didn't push Lalee any further. She went behind her desk again and took out a few business cards from a drawer.

"Take these with you Lalee, they are our representatives in other states. Our headquarters are in Delhi, but we have branches all over the country. Some of them don't have offices, but if you call these numbers, someone will come to help you. That I promise. And hopefully, I'll see you again someday."

Diti walked Lalee to the door. She was quiet and Lalee took her hand, "I've enjoyed talking to you," Lalee said, "be well, and I will see you again."

Tilu was waiting at the door, he smiled at Diti. She watched their retreating backs till she could see them no longer.

Lalee moved with the slow, long queue in front of the dark window of the ticket counter like a sleepwalker. Crowds of impatient people, moving and elbowing, small arguments, shoving and the background strain of railway announcements didn't seem to touch her. She closed her eyes and saw a field, a glaring sun in midheaven, the old banyan tree, the mud lane that turned into a small row of houses. She could almost feel the burning heat from the ground singing her bare feet, the small, brown, dusty, feet of a child. At the end of the lane would be a small house, three rooms in all, where she and her five brothers and sisters lived. She opened her eyes and wondered if it really would be the same after seventeen years. No, it would change. A new room here, another thatch there—just as she had changed. Would she recognise it when she saw it? Would it recognise her? Would her brothers, her sisters? Would her mother recognise her?

A tired man on the other side of the window said unhappily to Lalee,

“Where to?”

Lalee blinked a few times; she had been far away, thinking about a place she used to call home. Just at this moment, she couldn’t remember its name. Where? What was the name?

“Village Kalipur,” she said.

“Where?” The man said sourly, motioning for her to stand aside.

“Puncha,” Lalee said hurriedly, “in Puruliya.”

The man pushed back his glasses on the bridge of his nose and began typing into a machine.

“Fifty-three rupees and fifty paisa,” he said without looking at her.

Lalee handed him a hundred rupee note, he returned the change and the ticket. Lalee stood with the ticket in her hand as if she had never seen an ordinary unreserved train ticket before. People in the queue began to yell at her till a large woman elbowed her out of the way.

Lalee put the ticket away in her handbag and tried to remember how to go home. It was something her father had taught her when she was still a child, in case she was lost. The name of the village, the local post office and the name of the district. That must have seemed the end of the world to her father, Lalee thought. This was when he was still alive. Lalee tried to remember him— his face, what he looked like, but drew a blank. He seemed tall and lanky to her. He always wore a white kurta and a short white dhoti. It always smelled fresh. But she couldn’t remember his face.

A mile’s walk from the train station— that is the way home. Alight at Kalipur station and walk a mile eastward and you’ll reach home. She remembered the directions her mind

had been unable to forget. Then she realised, that was a long time ago. Surely, by now there must be a better way to get there. There wouldn't be any need to walk.

She looked around for Tilu and saw him standing under the big clock in an old archway of the train station. Built by the British, she thought. Did my father ever come here? Did he ever see this? She walked slowly towards Tilu and stood beside him. In the middle of a sea of people, only the two of them stood still.

"Got the tickets?" Tilu asked.

Lalee nodded.

"I can come with you," Tilu said, "if it makes things any easier. You can say I'm your husband, or...something," Tilu trailed off. "They don't need the truth."

"I do," Lalee said in a soft whisper.

"I'll wait then. When you come back," Tilu stole a glance at her. He did not know if she would come back, but he was hoping with all he had that she would. He tried to make it sound like a statement, but a question mark wafted in the air. "When you come back, you don't have to go back to Shonagachhi. You can stay with me."

Lalee looked at him and opened her mouth to protest but Tilu interrupted her, "No, no, I don't mean...I'm not going to..." he trailed off. "Just come and stay. There's enough room and no one will ask anything. And then, whenever you are ready, if you want to you can leave. I promise. I want to help, in whatever way I can, that's all." He looked down at his old, worn shoes, unable to meet Lalee's eye.

Lalee smiled, but Tilu didn't notice that. "We'll see," she said, "but it sounds like a good idea." She paused, "Thank you," she said.

Tilu looked up and flushed. He located a tea seller, walking around with a bucket full of tea kettles and plastic cups. He ordered two cups of tea and handed one to Lalee.

They sipped their tea in silence. In an incessant crowd, hundreds of people flowed past them, coming, going, running, pushing, selling, begging. They stood as though they were not a part of that moving world. Lalee looked around the station and thought how many girls, how many women in this station right now will end up in Shonagachhi in a week? She looked at every passing face, trying to remember, trying to etch them in her mind.

“This is a strange city,” she said.

“Isn’t it?” Tilu replied, and Lalee saw that his eyes were shining with a light that wasn’t there in the crowded, enormous train station. He was gazing out at the city as if it was his personal masterpiece. We love strange things, she thought. She thought of her hovel in Shonagachhi, and realised that for whatever it represented, she was grateful for that home, that shelter. And that she would miss the certainty of belonging, even if it was belonging to a place like Shonagachhi. Homes are always odd places.

In a few minutes, she would disappear in the teeming crowds, sit on a train and be on her way to another place and if she was lucky, another part of her life. For now, standing in the middle of the sweaty, five O’clock rush hour madness of Howrah station, in the yellow, pre-dusk light of a dusty, almost-chilly January evening, she looked up at the sky, at the disappearing orange blob of the sun and she hummed a song to herself.

Private Bodies, Public Desires:

Space and the Transgressive Body

Abstract

This exegesis aims to sit alongside *Other Town* rather than critique it directly. *Other Town* was born out of a curiosity to examine a commercial sex worker's personal space in a red-light district. This exegesis however, expands the contours of that curiosity. It examines the relationship between the female sexed body and national/cultural imagination; the important links between the female body as a sexual object and the woman as autonomous subject. "Rape culture" is an epithet that has been associated with Indian society in recent times. I attempt to discuss the various sociological, historical and cultural factors that inform perceptions of the female body within public and private space, with special regard to the sexually exposed body—both as victims of gendered violence and commercial sex workers. My contention is that the sexually "open" body embodies a "female grotesque" that becomes the site of romanticisation, horror, censorship, and fascination, denying it a subject-position. While *Other Town* is the story of a prostitute in present day Kolkata, this exegesis presents the cultural and historical framework that forms the background of the novel.

The first section begins with recent cases of rape and violence on women in Indian cities, and the modalities of media reportage and public consumption that they engender. The second section takes a step back to examine the position women occupy in the Indian national/cultural imagination, with particular regard to the deification of women in nationalist feminine iconography and its genesis in nineteenth-century Bengal. The third section looks at female sex workers and women in public in the colonial cityscape of Calcutta, in particular the laws and legislations that were employed to contain venereal diseases and the female body within a demarcated space. The fourth and fifth sections study two contemporary cinematic texts that depict female sexuality and transgression in a

technologically mediated age. It looks closely at representations of sexually transgressive women and prostitutes in popular culture and how they inform cultural perceptions of women as modern subjects. The sixth section discusses *Other Town* in light of the concerns examined in preceding sections. It explores the public/private divide and the notion of “freedom” from the post-transgressive space of a red-light district in a third world city. The seventh section concludes with a discussion of recent reports on sex-workers’ conditions and aspects of women-centred social activism in India. Focussing on the goddess/slut dichotomy, it looks at how cultural imagination affects social change. The exegesis is followed by an afterthought, in which I discuss my subject position as the author of this novel and the linguistic choices I made while writing *Other Town*.

We have the best culture in the world. In our culture there is no place for a woman.

—M. L. Sharma, Defence Lawyer for Jyoti Singh's rape case

I. Introduction: A Woman after Dark

On 16 December 2012, a twenty-three-year-old woman was gang-raped by six men in a moving private bus, beaten, bitten, had her intestines pulled out of her body, and later abandoned for dead by the road. The victim, a physiotherapy intern who worked at a US call centre to fund her education, was coming back home with a male friend after a movie at a South Delhi mall which ended at 8:30 p.m. Unable to find public transport, they boarded a private bus which seemingly carried a few other passengers and agreed to take them to their destination for a sum. Before long, one of the men in the bus asked the male companion what he was doing with a girl in public at night. An altercation ensued and in very little time the male companion was beaten senseless, six men had raped the girl, metal rods had been inserted into her vagina and her intestines had been torn out from inside her.¹ One of the perpetrators was a minor.

Since under the Indian legal system the name of a rape victim cannot be openly publicised without the express permission of the victim or her relatives, the much publicised incident was dubbed “Nirbhaya” and became her name by proxy as more and more media articles began substituting her real name for the code word “Nirbhaya.” Literally, “nirbhaya” means the fearless in feminine aspect. As her real name, Jyoti Singh Pandey began to surface with the express permission of her parents, the name and the moniker began to be used interchangeably in the media. Though incidents of rape, sexual assault and harassment are hardly rare in India and other parts of the world, this brutal attack on and death of a young woman elicited unprecedented response and protest nationwide as well as internationally. Leslee Udwin, a British filmmaker and producer,

¹The reason I have described this incident in its brutal details is because the term “rape” is so often used as an umbrella term to refer to all manner of incidents from date-rapes to brutal deaths. While each of those violations are traumatic and debilitating in their own right, rapes that are horrifically brutal need to be represented in the actual reality of their execution and should not be hidden behind the partial obscurity of the four letter word.

made a documentary on the incident for BBC entitled “India’s Daughter” which was later banned in India but aired on 4 March 2015 in the United Kingdom. The bulk of the documentary, which is no longer accessible to the public, is an interview with one of the accused and later convicted perpetrators, Mukesh Singh. He vouchsafes that he merely drove the bus while his five other companions, among whom was his brother Ram Singh, and a juvenile whose name has not been released publicly, committed gang rape, brutal physical assault, sodomy and tearing apart of the woman’s body as Mukesh Singh drove the bus back and forth on the same routes, passing many police checkpoints on his way. This narrative has been countered by the juvenile’s statement which records that Mukesh Singh partook of the same offences while his brother Ram Singh took to the wheel to keep the bus moving (Buncombe).

The narrative style of the documentary where Mukesh Singh’s interview is relayed, is not a two-way process of question and answer as one would expect from an interview. The questions Mukesh was asked are not revealed in the film. The result is an unflinching soliloquy from Mukesh Singh. Though victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault and rape are *de rigueur*, it is useful to take note of the statements that Mukesh Singh makes in a calm and reasonable manner to his silent interlocutor. Though his statements are in Hindi, a convenient stream of English subtitles record him saying, “While being raped, she shouldn’t have fought back. She should have just remained silent and allowed the rape” (qtd. in Kounteya Sinha).² In the absence of questions, the viewer has to assume from the available context that Singh means this as a justification of the brutality that was meted out to the girl and her male friend. It also shifts the blame squarely on to Jyoti’s shoulder; if she hadn’t struggled, she would still be raped, but perhaps not killed, or her

² The comments originally appear in Udwin’s documentary which cannot be accessed at present. For information on Udwin’s BBC’s Storyville documentary, see, BBC, “BBC Four’s Storyville to Broadcast Interview” in Works Cited. For more information on India’s banning of Udwin’s documentary see Withnall; for public reaction to the documentary see Varandani in Works Cited.

internal organs torn apart. Singh goes on to further shift the blame on Jyoti: “A decent girl won’t roam around at 9 o’clock at night. A girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy is. Boys and girls are not equal. Housework and housekeeping is for girls, not roaming in discos and bars at night or wearing wrong clothes. About 20% of girls are good” (qtd. in Kounteya Sinha).

Mukesh Singh’s views, unfortunately, are not anomalous. Countless men, even women believe what Mukesh iterates here. The mythic 20% good girls are nowhere to be found and yet the image of the good girl is ubiquitous in the cultural and social imagination. Real women often fall short of the standards levied on the “good girl” or the “good woman.” Patriarchal validation of ‘goodness’ of character deeply depends on the woman’s ability to imbibe the laws of patriarchy that inscribe women in their space. Needless to say, Mukesh Singh’s arbitrary percentage is not statistical, but an imaginary attribution and a fait accompli for Jyoti Singh’s brutalisation. It also resonates with the arbitrariness with which goodness as a value is bestowed and subtracted at will from society’s gendered subjects. “Goodness” can only be bestowed on a woman if she keeps to the home and hearth which is her delineated space in society and life. Any transgression is dangerous and can attract the “death penalty”, as it does in Jyoti’s case. In the above statement, Singh lashes out against the assumption that men and women are equal. A ‘good girl’ in Singh’s definition won’t transgress the bounds of the home and housework.

In the Indian collective consciousness, the mythic line that delineates home from the outside world is a well understood and oft-used concept, used in conversation as part of the common language. The Hindi/Urdu word *deheleez* (threshold) is often used to mark the space between the private and the public in common speech. The notion of woman and the notion of home are not only deeply tied to each other but are also constitutive of one another. The threshold of the home is not only the boundary of the woman’s world but the

responsibility of creating a happy and thriving home is also the woman's. Bengali proverbs, most notably—*shongshar shukher hoy romonir gune* (a home is made happier by a woman's virtue)—bear testimony to this idea. The cumulative effect of this cultural conditioning equates the woman with the home and vice versa, necessitating a complex cultural reckoning when women step outside that threshold.

In a pivotal scene in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, a line drawn in the sand becomes the catalyst of the great war that occurs between Rama and Ravana. While in exile with her husband Rama and brother-in-law Lakshmana, Sita becomes enamoured of a golden deer that she espies from her makeshift home in the forest. Unbeknownst to her, it is the demon Maricha in the form of a golden deer that has been sent to tempt her. She cajoles her husband Rama to go after the deer, hunt it down, and bring it back to her. Rama complies, but leaves behind Lakshmana to guard Sita. Having led Rama a long way from home, Maricha in his deer form, pauses for rest, tired from the run. Rama kills the deer-shaped demon. Before dying, Maricha screams Sita and Lakshmana's name in Rama's voice. Upon hearing the screams that Sita imagines to be her husband's, she orders Lakshmana to go in search of his brother. Against his better judgement, Lakshmana sets off in search of his brother, but not before he draws a circle in the sand beyond which he cautions Sita not to venture. With her two male protectors gone, the unguarded Sita is approached by Ravana disguised as a mendicant. Sita approaches the travelling mendicant to offer him alms as was the custom and duty of her times and is enjoined upon by him to cross the line Lakshmana has drawn for her. She listens to the false mendicant and crosses the line of safety. Ravana kidnaps her and the great war of the Ramayana begins.³

³ For a discussion on the *Lakshman rekha* as a concept in the context of Jyoti's rape, see Kanad Sinha; see Rahul Roy for a discussion of the *Lakshman rekha* from the perspective of masculinity discourse. For a discussion of the concept in Indian cultural consciousness, see Jain in Works Cited.

This circle has been popularly known as the *Lakshman rekha*, where “rekha” literally means line. It is transgressing this line of safety that supplies the woman’s fallacy and brings about her ruin and eventual desertion by her husband even though both Rama and Sita remain unimpeachably faithful to one another. To bring it back to Mukesh Singh’s statement, the *Lakshman rekha* that Jyoti Singh Pandey crossed in being a woman outdoors after sun-down, accompanied by a male friend in a metropolis, put her in the perilous position where the male perpetrators felt justified to “teach her a lesson.”

Whether the quote from the rapists’ defence lawyer M. L. Sharma was an actual representation of his views, or an unfortunate effect of his English usage, is a speculative question. Even if one gives him the benefit of the doubt, his opening comment in Udwin’s documentary provides a context to start this enquiry. In her essay, Swati Bandi talks about the media portrayal of Jyoti’s rape as well as a 2009 assault on a group of women in a Mangalore bar, focusing on the cinematic spectatorship that such portrayals in the media engendered. In January 2009, forty men of what can be called a Hindu traditionalist vigilante group physically assaulted and publicly disrobed a group of young women who had gathered at a bar. Quick to claim responsibility for this act, Prasad Attvar, a member of the vigilante group Bajrang Dal, said it was a “spontaneous reaction against women who flouted traditional norms of decency” (qtd. in Bandi 68). Far from decrying the assault, the Ram Sena (a Hindu majoritarian extremist group) founder publicly asserted “whoever has done this has done a good job. Girls going to pubs is not acceptable” (qtd. in Sengupta). The narrative of what would seem an inhumane act of grave injustice is changed to social heroism—the perpetrators in this altered narrative become the good citizens/good Hindus who are provoked to violence through their desire to restore India’s moral order. Swati Bandi talks about the endless relay of the assault footage on television channels and the consumption patterns of such potent combinations of sex and violence by the audience. In

the 2012 Delhi rape case as well, the media was saturated with images of the moving bus taken from CCTV cameras as it moved back and forth through the streets of Delhi (ostensibly while the brutal rape and mutilation was taking place inside) and photographs of the bus' interiors from the subsequent police investigation. Bandi contends that these technologically mediated images and the reconstruction of the incident after the fact, invites the audience (through visual images, news debates, open phone lines and live texting) via voyeuristic proximity, to participate in a national tragedy, constructing thereby a spectacular horror that involves the audience-consumer in an aesthetic affect. The aestheticization of violence then, according to Bandi, "weaken[s] the victims' experience of rape, turning rape into an exceptional form of violence perpetrated by exceptional perpetrators upon exceptional subjects." The aesthetics of the spectacular consolidate the discourse of exceptionality around rape and other gendered violence and acts as a tool to "absolve the institutional and historical ways the nation-state enables rape cultures . . . [and] allows the state to retain its authority through a hierarchical retributive politics that [is] sustained by disciplining both the female victims and lower class perpetrators." The role of the nation-state and its vested interest in such cases become all the more clear when we examine it in the light of Udwin's documentary title— "India's Daughter." Ironically, what made scores of people, and especially young women come out in protest against the 2012 rape case was the fact that it was not exceptional. In Jyoti Singh Pandey was an educated, young, lower-middle class working woman who had gone out to see a film with her male friend. The commonplace circumstance which quickly changed into a horrific brutality broke through the discourse of exceptionality. The "hierarchical retributive politics" Bandi highlights is premised on the dominant discourse pointing out the perpetrators' lower class, uneducated, rural backgrounds. This process of the nation's disassociation from and disavowal of its "monsters" is twofold: one the one hand it creates

a “spectacular frame [that] re-victimizes the victims by privileging the visual pleasure and humanitarian impulses of the consumer-spectator” (Bandi 74), and on the other, it imbues the media with a discourse of rationality/objectivity that stands synonymous with an imagined conscientious nation— the people.⁴

While the moral conscience of this imagined “people” is invoked ostensibly to combat rape culture, it ignores the subtle marginalisation of the victim herself. The discourse of silence around rape and gendered violence is substituted with a discourse of obscurity. After all the media frenzy the Delhi rape case received, photographs of Jyoti are still unseen. In its stead, pictures of the perpetrators and the moving bus as the site of the crime are in wide circulation. The law that safeguards rape victims’ names from being circulated, though practical in a social matrix that views rape as stigma and imbues gendered violence with an aura of silence, significantly increases the opacity and obscurity surrounding victim subjectivity in acts of gendered violence. Almost as a response to the massive public outcry following Jyoti’s rape, a District Court in Delhi meted out the death penalty to four of the five perpetrators (one of them had committed suicide in his jail cell and the juvenile received three years in a correctional facility). Mukesh Singh speaks out in Udwin’s documentary stating that the death penalty will only encourage rapists to kill off their victims and not leave them alive as he had.⁵ Coming from Mukesh, it sounds almost like a threat; however, here he overlaps with feminist thinkers who urge the judiciary to think of the effects that equating the death penalty with rape would have. On the subject of another

⁴ Bandi quotes Arnab Goswami, Editor-in-Chief of TimesNow and anchor of The Newshour Debate, as he discusses the Delhi rape case on his show—“The problem is that five men raping a girl, hitting her with an iron rod, permanently damaging her abdomen, hurting her intestines out there, the girl is battling for survival, she’s in a very critical state. I don’t know! If this is not the rarest of rare cases— also if the person gets away with five or seven year imprisonment, whether the faith of the people will be shaken.” She goes on to note that, “Goswami’s detailed narration of Singh’s rape . . . rehearses the masculine, nationalist anxieties around the threatening alien, illegal other. . . . invoking an imagined and unified ‘faith of the people’” (Bandi 75).

⁵ In the documentary Mukesh Singh says, “The death penalty will make things even more dangerous for girls. . . . Before, they would rape and say, ‘Leave her, she won’t tell anyone.’ Now when they rape, especially the criminal types, they will just kill the girl. Death” (qtd. in Freeman). It is interesting to note how he distances himself from “the criminal types”.

such incident dubbed the Shakti Mills Gang-rape, Flavia Agnes writes, “[The] feminist position has always been ‘rape is not murder’ and a woman who is raped is not a *zinda laash* (living corpse).” In effect, while the nation-state grants the death penalty to the perpetrators as “retributive” punishment, it also reaffirms the cultural bias of symbolic death for the victims. It bears affinity with the regressive notions of “honour killing” whereby only death can avenge and redeem the honour of the woman and her community.

By violating the principles of purity, these women are imbued with a freakishness—situated beyond the normal, and ever more exposed to the gaze of the world as their bodies become the site of violation, wonder, horror and spectacle. It is my contention that the sexually exposed female body—as victims of gendered violence, or as prostitutes, or pornographic bodies—are aspects of the female grotesque. When the sexed body is the repository of purity, privacy and honour, the invasion of the public sphere—often through sex and sexual violence—signifies a contamination, a break from the normal. The integrity of the body politic is seen as irrevocably lost, leading to a grotesque aestheticization of a violated purity. Once the private space of the body is transgressed, it is reposed to the realm of the public, thus legitimising public scrutiny, objectification and even more violation. Such transgressive female bodies have blurred the line between the private and the public, exposing that which lies underneath, whether it be sexually aestheticised flesh or mutilation of the physical body in view of the world. Agnes’ assertion that raped women are not the same as the living dead highlights the unnatural position they occupy in cultural imagination. Equating a raped body to a dead body is to deny its essential humanity, thereby providing justification for further violence and intrusion.

II. The Nation and the Feminine

The anxiety over the appearance and space of the gendered body in public is not a new phenomenon. In a study concerning the state of women's education in the mid-nineteenth century, Tanika Sarkar discusses the first Bengali autobiography written by an upper-caste Bengali housewife, Rashundari Debi, which was published in 1868 when Debi was eighty-eight years old. Women's education at the time was imbued with two ideas of superstitious inevitability—the educated woman would either be widowed through her “unnatural” act of learning, or commit adultery.⁶ Sarkar identifies two separate dyads in this male anxiety—the educated woman and the widow, and the educated woman and the immoral woman. She posits that the two dyads merge into one triangular structure:

The educated woman shares with the immoral one an extramarital desire. It makes no difference that in her case it is a desire for learning—she is not supposed to possess a desire for anything that does not come through or is related to her husband. By this act of desiring something else, she has then terminated the need for her husband. . . . education is a double repudiation of the husband. It is both immorality and non-conjugality. (Sarkar, “Strishiksha” 157-8)

Sarkar suggests that the educated woman forms the apex of that triangle, combining as she does aspects of both the widow and the immoral woman. All three are characterised by lack of a legitimised male presence. I suggest that the three figures Sarkar identifies form something of a spectrum, with the widow being at one end (the very ontology of such a creature defined by the lack of the husband) and the prostitute on the other (the term defined as an excess of male patrons, partners—“husbands”). The educated woman must

⁶ Sarkar quotes from the Second Report on the State of Education in Bengal, 1836—“A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families . . . that a girl taught to write and read will soon become a widow . . . and the belief is also generally entertained . . . that intrigue is facilitated by a knowledge of letters on the part of females” (Sarkar, “Strishiksha” 156).

then, stand in the middle of that spectrum. The term “educated woman” mentions nothing of the male presence or lack thereof in her existence and this uncertainty of “husbandry” is threatening to a patriarchally normative society. In some ways, this category of woman is the most challenging for society to apprehend because no social apparatus has been effectively formulated to deal with that challenge. Though the rate of women’s education in contemporary Indian society is far higher than the age of Sarkar’s study, the nebulous potentiality of the educated woman—her ability to choose, demand and select a male, and the suspicion of her agency, both sexual, mental and economic—signals a potential threat to patriarchal normativity. The oft-used justification of rape cultures, that she was “asking for it,” stems from this nebulous agency on the educated woman’s part to regulate her sexual desires, choices, movements and acts.

Widowhood has been a major problem in India until very recently when social injunctions against widows were somewhat relaxed, especially in urban areas. The anonymity of urban, globalised, economically developed Indian cities is largely responsible for that relaxation as are the changing contours of Indian society. Nevertheless, what might be termed the “problem of widowhood” has been adequately documented and theorised in cultural texts and hence needs no reiteration here.⁷ Detailed accounts of the space that widows occupied in Bengali society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be found in the works of almost all writers working in that period. A nuanced representation of the widowed female—young or old—would be found in the early-twentieth-century works of Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Bandopadhyay, and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. Life for the widowed female was firmly inscribed within the space of the home, and the space of the extended family. As at this time almost all families

⁷On Bengali Hindu widows sent to live in exile the holy city of Varanasi after the death of their husbands, see Ghosh; Majumdar. On widowhood and its implications in Bengal, widow immolations in Bengal, see, Lamb; Stein.

without exception were joint or somewhat elongated families—engulfing within their premises not only the immediate family but close relatives, distant blood-relations, servants, dependants and families of servants. The life of the widow played out within this complex and polyphonous family structure. Homes were divided between the *sadar mahal* (the outer palace/apartments) and the *andar mahal* (the inner palace/apartments), a physical and spatial divide that affected the outer and interior spaces that the two genders were symbolically supposed to affect, control and bear responsibility for. Women traditionally lived in and controlled the *andar mahal* where male entry was restricted. Symbolically as well as in practice these inner chambers stood for purity and the female remained the site of control of this purity—sexual (progenitive), spiritual and social. So, spatially, the widow is located in the *andar mahal* of the home structure, embedded in the nexus of familial relations. Similarly, the spatial location of the immoral woman is beyond the bounds of the “respectable” town. A special neighbourhood, a floating town is the designated space for the prostitute who can no longer be accommodated within the home. The concerns here again are that of “purity”; the presence of immoral women pollutes the purity of home and of society, hence they must be contained within the space created for them. It is only the educated woman, who is essentially a modern subject, who poses the difficult question of unchaperoned femininity and the problem of the space they are to occupy.⁸

In a fascinating analysis of women and public space, Swati Chattopadhyay says, “Appearance in public space causes their [women’s] real death or ritual death through widowhood and/or prostitution” (228). This deceptively simple statement however hides the complexity of the subject Chattopadhyay is seeking to unfold: she states that, ‘public

⁸ For an analysis of legislative and cultural signposts that laid the groundwork for the evolution of women as modern, autonomous, intellectual subjects, with certain nascent human rights see Sarkar, “Enfranchised Selves” and “A prehistory,” in Works Cited.

space' as a concept did not, in a sense, exist at this time in Calcutta, which in the nineteenth century is still the second city of the empire (221-2; 227-9). The space for women in that male-dominated 'public space' is undetermined and contested. The only times that the woman is in the public gaze is when she is dead or dying (such as when she is burned as a sati on the pyre) or when she is a "public woman"—a prostitute (235-7).

Building on Tanika Sarkar's triangulation of educated woman, widow, and prostitute, Swati Chattopadhyay draws a parallel triangular structure of woman, death, and public space, and goes on to say that, "Rather than being the agent of her husband's death . . . women bring death upon themselves by being out in public" (229). Even though Chattopadhyay's study is primarily based on nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengali texts and modes of Bengali colonial nationalism, the fine line of division between a "public woman" and a "woman in public" still remains a contested space.

The BBC documentary directed by Leslee Udwin that documented the 2012 rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey and interviewed Mukesh Singh in jail was titled "India's Daughter." While on the surface a deliberate sentimentalisation of the filial relationship of the nation with its (female) subject is obvious in the title, the conflation of Jyoti's rights as a citizen with her position as the nation's daughter reveals a deeper preoccupation with the female body and the national imagination. The title, in one stroke, elevates Jyoti from a person to a symbol—a secular apotheosis of sorts, wherein from a person, Jyoti Singh not only becomes a symbol but also the repository of sentimental subjectification. It invites an identification of all of India's "daughters" with "Nirbhaya," the emblem. The incident of brutal rape and death then becomes not only a violation of the basic human rights of Jyoti as an individual and as a political subject, but also a symbolic violation of national womanhood, as well as a failure of the nation to protect its own "daughters". It is perhaps useful to note here that this filiality is a sign of the national imagination's refusal to disown

a violated “daughter,” as would be the norm in patriarchal normative societies. The movement therefore premises itself on this refusal to condone or justify rape culture and its concomitant disappearance/symbolic death of the female victim.

The documentary concerns itself in large parts with the point-of-view of one of the perpetrators, Mukesh Singh and takes the audience on a journey to meet his mother and wife. Udwin has been criticised for what many viewers and critics have chosen to see as an attempt to humanise the perpetrator. Mukesh Singh’s wife, after denying that her husband could have ever done such a thing, refers to Jyoti Singh Pandey in later footage and says —“everyone is saying ‘India’s daughter, India’s daughter,’ what about me? Am I not India’s daughter as well?” Her discontent is directed towards the death sentence meted out to her husband, whom she claims is innocent. The subtext of the question lies in her perception of the state not allowing her to live as a married woman, and forcing her into widowhood (and single motherhood) by hanging her husband. But it is interesting that the terms she uses foregrounds herself as another daughter of the nation, and not her husband, as a “son of the nation”. On a related note, Mrs Mukesh Singh as well as her mother-in-law live in the ancestral village that Mukesh hails from. Mukesh lived in the city away from the women of his family.

This foregrounding of an imagined filial relationship with the nation is a contemporary secular variation of the deification of women, and owes its roots to historical and political attributes of male anxiety over the sexed female body. The construct of motherland—*deshmata*, *bharatmata*, Mother India—as a feminine secular deity, traces back to the beginnings of Hindu nationalism under colonial rule (Gupta 196-221; Bagchi WS65-71). In *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, Tanika Sarkar discusses the complex cultural and ideological movements that culminated in the feminisation of national iconography during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Bengal. She says:

The country was sacralised and feminised. The empire, symbolised by the lion, had often represented itself in strong, male terms. The standard British sneer against Bengali ‘baboo’ was that, unlike the ‘manly’ virile, British public schoolboy-cum-administrator, and unlike the Indian martial races, the Bengali babu was a weak, effeminate creature. Bengali nationalism, as an oppositional ideology, therefore defiantly worshipped and glorified in the female principle. (Sarkar, *Hindu Wife* 251)

In the same chapter Sarkar goes on to discuss how the transference of the “mother figure” happened from Queen Victoria to the indigenous Mother India. In popular songs, pleas were directed to the British Imperial Majesty and were possibly influenced by homilies to the Goddess Kali written in the eighteenth century by the popular Shakta poet, Ramprasad Sen.⁹ No reminder of such songs exist in contemporary cultural memory, so effectively was it wiped away by the rapid proliferation of the indigenous mother figure of Hindu nationalism. That Hindu mother—“Bharat Mata” (“Bharat” being the Sanskrit name of India and “mata” translates as mother) and Mother India, still dominate the cultural imagination and are regularly trotted out in the iconography of pan-Indian Hindu nationalism to the present day.¹⁰

What is worth noting here is that the colonial representation of the Bengali man as effeminate and unworthy of rivalling the “manly” Englishman had perpetuated itself to a wide extent. This cultural emasculation, with its far reaching effects, played a major role in the Hindu nationalists’ desire to subvert the hegemonic masculinisation of the ruling

⁹ “Where are you, Mother Victoria, I touch your feet/ Mother, what kind of a mother are you, why have you forgotten your child?” and “Where are you, our mother the Great Queen/ We have no other shelter but you” (Gita Chattopadhyay qtd. in Sarkar, *Hindu Wife* 252). For other such examples, see Gita Chattopadhyay (243).

¹⁰ Sarkar connects contemporary Indian Hindutva ideology and iconography with nineteenth-century artefacts of Hindu anti-colonial nationalism such as the song “Vande Mataram,” by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. See Sarkar (“Hindutva Theology”; *Hindu wife* 268-90). See also, Parama Roy (246-8) and Bhatt (175-95).

British class with a feminised national iconography (Mrinalini Sinha 1-32; Saayan Chattopadhyay 265-79). The consequent feminisation of the nation was an ideological necessity significantly aided by the existing pantheon of Hindu goddesses, Bengal being one of the foremost worshippers of the cult of the Mother Goddess. Changing the object of appeal from a foreign and distant British queen to a more accessible and readily available Mother Goddess therefore, held a powerful grip on the nationalist imagination. The conflation of this trio—mother, goddess, and nation—into one imaginary entity was, however, neither homogenous, nor undisrupted. Firstly, the “goddess” when identified as Mother India had to be somewhat secularised and the minutiae of Shakta (a sect of Hinduism that worships the dark feminine goddess Kali) and tantric ritual worship pushed to the background, in order to create larger access to this figure of national sentiment. Second, the question of food became inexorably associated with the figure of Bharat Mata/Mother India. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath*, which became the seminal cultural text for the rise of Hindu nationalism depicts the past, future, and present states of the Bharat Mata figure (55-6). The Bharat Mata before being subjugated to British rule is characterised by abundance and benevolence in her Jagadhhatri (nurturer of the world) avatar and in her Annapurna (the giver of food) avatar, which are then juxtaposed with the present state of poverty and starvation ‘she’ endures under her colonial masters. A hermetic figure of Mother India is famously depicted in Abanindranath Tagore’s eponymous painting, “Bharatmata,” shorn of her plenitude but replete with a quiet and ascetic dignity, signifying the underlying strength of the victimised indigenous peoples. Tagore’s Bharatmata, with her four hands and a halo around her head, is readily recognisable as a deity of the Hindu pantheon. The present bedraggled state of the Mother was also reflected in the songs of Jyotirindranath Tagore such as—“Look at our Mother, disease-ridden, skeletal, a withered body” (Gita Chattopadhyay qtd. in Sarkar, *Hindu Wife* 255). Though

Anandamath was published in 1882, it is set in 1771, when the Bengal famine of 1769-73 was in full swing. It is no wonder then that the spectre of starving bodies and depleting food grain informs the vision of Mother India that the text constructs. Though the Mother India of the past is the abundant figure of the Jagadhhatri/Annapurna, the Mother India of the present is characterised as the all-consuming, revenge-crazed, dark-feminine Kali; but the Mother India of the future is worshipped as Durga—the ultimate figure of triumphant virtue and rightness.¹¹ While locating the source of power and inspiration in the national feminine might seem empowering in the construction of a militant nationalism, the fissures of such “agency” are easily hollowed out when the actual power of action, and thereby change, lies invariably with the male “sons of the soil.” Sarkar defines the iconography and symbolism of the nationalist appropriation of the goddess pantheon in the following excerpt:

Durga is supposedly a warrior goddess who has killed a dreaded asura. Yet the icons depict a smiling, matronly beauty, a married woman visiting her natal home with her children at her side—the archetypal mother and daughter, fundamentally at odds with the dying demon at her feet and the weapons in her hand. In the juxtaposition of diverse images exists the hint of triumphant strength but it is overlaid, and the overwhelming final impression is that of domesticated and gentle femininity. Bengali nationalists finally appropriated this by transforming the traces of militancy and sexuality into something more ‘innocent’—into the ideal mother figure, the presiding deity of Bengali kitchens and the sickbed. . . . Once the mother, whether through her wrath, or through her calm strength, arouses her sons, the struggle for leadership passes out of her hands into those of her sons. . . . Kali

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s influence on the Hindu nationalist imaginary and the importance of the Bharatmata therein, see, Kaviraj; For a pictorial history and analysis of the image of the Bharatmata see Ramaswamy; For a Bengal-specific study of Mother India, see Sugata Bose in Works Cited.

reverts back to Durga, Durga becomes a household Drudge. Debi Choudhurani¹² lays down the glorious garb of the robber queen and turns to dish-washing (Sarkar, *Hindu Wife* 256-7).

The protagonist Mahendra is shown three figures of Mother India, each being worshipped in their separate rooms by the militant nationalist Hindu brotherhood that he stumbles upon (Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay 55-6). It is this “worship” that then becomes problematic; to quote Sarkar, “The process of deification is essentially a process of self-estrangement, of fetishisation” (*Hindu Wife*, 251). By defining women as the symbolic equivalent of the nation, the body of the nation is culturally transposed onto the body of the woman. The proliferation of such images would greatly facilitate the circumscribing of women to an ideologically, religiously and socially constructed “safe-zone” of purity. In this light, therefore, gendered demarcation of space becomes all the more relevant in naturalising the body-policing of women.

¹² *Debi Choudhurani* is an 1884 novel by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay following closely after *Anandamath* (1882). In *Debi Choudhurani* Bankim calls once again for a resurgent armed struggle against the British Empire, but this time led by an inspirational, formidable female character. The eponymous Debi (Bengali for goddess) becomes a bandit queen at the helm of a people’s revolution, but gives it up in the end of the novel in order to keep home and hearth. The title of Lipner’s English translation of the novel is suggestive— *Debi Chaudhurani, or The Wife Who Came Home*.

III. Public Women and the Colonial City

The anxiety over the sexed body is not a modern or contemporary concern symptomatic of a changing India, or a newly found urban dynamic in which women are assuming more visibility and access into public space. Though on the surface Jyoti Singh Pandey's rape seems to be a casualty of a uniquely contemporary urban phenomenon, the roots of this anxiety go at least as far back as the colonial period, with particular import for prostitutes or "public women".

During the nineteenth century, two acts were passed in order to regulate and classify prostitution in Calcutta. The 1864 Cantonment Act was primarily instituted to regulate a small population of Indian prostitutes who serviced the European soldiers and needed to be kept disease-free, but the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 (henceforth CDA; implemented in 1869) was intended to bring all manner of prostitution in the city under its regulation. This ambition however, proved very difficult in real and practical terms, not only because in a sprawling metropolis there were all manner of covert, irregular, blatant, and systemised modes of prostitution, but also because the vast population of prostitutes in the city was directly related to the interests and desires of the land-holding, wealthy native gentry, which the colonial government preferred to leave unruffled. An 1868 CDA report classifies prostitutes in Calcutta into seven categories that range across different classes, religions, castes, and economic and social contexts.¹³ Clubbing these different kinds of women together was expected to regulate the whole population of prostitutes at large in the city; as Swati Chattopadhyay remarks, the exercise of identification which clubbed together all prostitutes in the city regardless of religion, caste, class or personal means belied the assumption that "description and classification would somehow contain the

¹³ "Sanitary Administration of Military Cantonments under the Bengal Government," (qtd. in Swati Chattopadhyay 255).

corrupt bodies in space and map out a system of deciphering the immoral landscape, and at the same time brought home the impossibility of containing the population” (256).

Ratnabali Chatterjee’s report foregrounds the problem of such naming (and shaming) in slightly different terms:

By 1881 a process of categorisation was set in motion. The term ‘prostitute,’ however, did not give an objective description of an already determined group, but rather overlaid some of the earlier categories like Devdasis (temple dancers) or Baijis (court musicians). It also denied the Indian prostitutes a history as performers and artists. Colonial rule thus constructed a specific identity for the prostitutes obliterating their existing class gradations. Thus rich courtesans, muslim (sic) concubines, Brahman widows and Sudra maids were now all fitted into the parameters of an outcast group. (Chatterjee, “The Queen’s Daughters” 3)

The consequences of such narrow definition, however, meant that the contours of transgressive behaviour were further widened and homogenised. In real terms, there were wide social gaps between the courtesan and a lower class woman who substituted her earning with occasional sex work, quite often with her husband’s active support, to say nothing of their status as performers.¹⁴ Courtesans were typically high-class, expensive, catered to the aristocratic elite, and as such were loosely associated with regimes of pre-colonial power and patronage.¹⁵ However, in the current legislation, none of that mattered

¹⁴ “Working of the Contagious Diseases Act,” (qtd. in Swati Chattopadhyay 257). See also Chatterjee, “Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal”; and Gangoli for a survey of colonial and contemporary laws concerning prostitution in India, in *Works Cited*.

¹⁵ For an analysis of the Hindu reformists’ attitude towards Muslim courtesans and female performers, and the ideological connections made between filth and the prostitute’s body, see Gupta (109-122).

above their status as “public women.”¹⁶ In northern India, considered a hub of decadent courtesans, singers and *nautch* girls, there was even wider and more insidious moral policing within the domestic female population over ethnic songs—sung by women during weddings, fairs, festivals and household work—of which many were considered “obscene,” “lewd,” and regional, and sat ill at ease with the sanitising agenda of both colonial missionaries and indigenous nationalists.¹⁷ These songs had nothing to do with prostitution; they were mostly feminine social activities, within the polyphonous domain of the large private families, and other purely feminine social gatherings which sometimes spilled on to the public sphere during festivals and fairs (*mela*), neighbourhoods, and most noticeably, during the public spectacle of weddings. Gupta reminds the reader how these songs were constitutive of women’s identities through their articulation of desires and sorrows, the pivotal role that women (through these songs) played in “the rendition of imaginative narratives” (86) and in the preservation of ethnic, vernacular, and folkloric culture.

In real practice however, the CDA’s project proved almost impossible since not only would the colonial police force need to prove that sexual intercourse was taking place with some regularity, but also provide evidence of financial transaction. By its own definition of “prostitute,” the CDA had made it extremely difficult to differentiate between the public singers, *nautch* girls, courtesans, street-walking prostitutes and low-caste working women such as washerwomen and small-time produce traders who indulged in prostitution on the side. Till its retraction in 1886, the CDA ran up against native sentiment as it became more

¹⁶ The much documented “life of the courtesan” in novels and non-fictional writings, unless dismissed as the nadir of a decadent age, received either a romantic treatment or became a symbol of nostalgia and hankering for a lush time of pleasure and art that was forever destroyed by a new world order. The central figure of the artiste-prostitute thereby became both a symbol and a symptom, a useful motif in the hands of persuasive authors. See Works Cited for examples of such works by Ruswa; Shah Hasan; and Amir Hasan.

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of how “obscenity” in women’s traditional songs was targeted by the indigenous reformers, see Gupta (85-108).

and more clear that the prostitutes that the European soldiers went to could not be separated from the prostitutes that the landed Bengali gentry went to, with any efficacy. It drew criticism from the native population including the Bengali commissioners of the Calcutta Municipality who countered what they saw as a European infringement on native culture with suggestions of their own. These most notably included the suggestion that Anglo-Indian shop-girls and women who take drives in the evening be viewed as possible prostitutes as well.¹⁸ What becomes apparent here is that both native sentiment and European regulation deemed women in public to be dangerously close to being public women, and were not clear about how to tell one from the other. What is even more illuminating is that while the European CDA was busy regulating Indian prostitutes, the Bengali commissioners came up with ideas for regulating women who were slightly “other” than their own women folk; the Anglo-Indian community, being mixed-race children of Europeans and Indians were looked at askance by the traditional Bengali population. Similarly, women who took drives in the evening in Calcutta would either have been European ladies, Anglo-Indian women or Indian women who were rich and/or educated enough to have a European lifestyle and thereby deemed as “other” by the middle-class Bengali population. In their “otherness” and their presence in public, lay the crucial question mark to their profession and “respectability.”

Towards the end of its time, the CDA, perhaps realising that it was nearly impossible to control and regulate all the prostitutes in the city, turned its expertise towards regulating the space in which the prostitutes operated. A “sanitary cordon” was established around those areas that the then Commissioner of Police in Calcutta designated as areas that were inhabited by prostitutes who were visited by British soldiers. The women were not allowed

¹⁸ “Extracts from an Abstract of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the Council of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, for the purpose of making Laws and Regulations held on Saturday, the 23rd March, 1895” (qtd. in Swati Chattopadhyay 257 note 67).

to leave these areas to ply their profession.¹⁹ In addition, from the very inception of the CDA, prostitutes in the city were expected to register with the local police as an act of showing interest in continuing their profession. They would then be subjected to periodic inspections and treatment in Lock hospitals—these hospitals were institutions where venereal diseases were treated and patients would be literally locked in their rooms till they were deemed to be satisfactorily sanitised.²⁰

The admittance of prostitutes who had contracted venereal diseases and therefore needed to be cured by the CDA's own agreement, into government hospitals, also became problematic. Firstly, the sites upon which such Lock hospitals were to be constructed were debated topics, since many would advocate that such buildings—in themselves public symbols of private diseases—should not be built in city centres, southern suburbs or places where the middle class and gentry generally lived.²¹ The admission of such cases into the female ward of the General Hospital also caused problems since it was assumed that “respectable” women receiving treatment at the General Hospital would consider it an offence and affront to their dignity to have to share the same public medical space with prostitutes. In one “Memo” of the Sanitation Proceedings of 1869, the Surgeon-Major states that females with syphilis have been admitted to the General Hospital before but they had not been declared categorically as prostitutes who had contracted the disease presumably through their profession.²² What is of note here is that, “respectability” becomes a defining issue again to separate these women who happen to be in public—by

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of the geographical boundaries of the sanitary cordon implemented by the CDA, see, Sumanta Banerjee in Works Cited.

²⁰ Details of policies formed and discussed in the attempt to keep the British soldiers safe from venereal diseases acquired from Indian prostitutes can be found in Kaminsky; See also Levine; Wald; Whitehead in Works Cited.

²¹ “Memo from Arthur Holwell,” (qtd. in Swati Chattopadhyay 258 note 68).

²² “Memo of Norman Cheevers,” (qtd. in. Swati Chattopadhyay 258 note 69).

dint of sharing medical treatment at the General Hospital—into the two categories of prostitute and non-prostitute. Given that women who may not have been prostitutes, or declared as such, or clandestine or irregular practitioners could also have contracted the same diseases, made it almost impossible to legislatively define, control and regulate the female body in public. Still, questions of respectability and honour would not allow the prostitute and the non-prostitute to share the same space in public and yet the porous boundaries of city life and civic amenities would frequently blur the line.

IV. Gazing at the Private: Reading *Love, Sex aur Dhokha*

Though Laura Mulvey was talking about representations of women in Hollywood when she coined the term “male gaze,” its subsequent use has been so pervasive, even in the instance of Hindi cinema that the term can be safely applied to this discussion.²³

Mulvey’s hypothesis that the male gaze exists in the male character, male spectator and the camera, bears particular import for a discussion of Dibakar Banerjee’s 2010 film, *Love, Sex aur Dhokha*. Mulvey’s hypothesis owes its roots to Freud’s conception of “scopophilia” or the pleasure of seeing (Mulvey 344); in this film, the pervasive usage of the digital camera fulfils that very desire. Furthermore the film problematizes the act of seeing with notions of surveillance. Three interconnected short films present technologically mediated stories of invasion of private space, and in particular the space of the private gendered body as it reaches the public (often male) gaze, thereby redefining the contours of safe-zone, purity circles, and transgression in a digital age.

Love, Sex aur Dhokha (love, sex, and betrayal), abbreviated to LSD in all promotional material, consists of three short films—*Superhit Pyaar*, *Paap ki Dukan* and *Badnam Shaurat*—all of which use the found footage style of handheld cameras and CCTVs to tell stories of sex, surveillance, and violence. In the first movie, *Superhit Pyaar* (super-hit love) a young film student, Rahul, sets out to make a romantic film for his diploma. The film starts off with Rahul speaking into a digital camera, addressing “Mr Chopra” (who the viewer is meant to decipher as Aditya Chopra, one of Bollywood’s most successful

²³ For the usage of the term “male gaze” in the context of Hindi language cinema see, Dwyer and Patel; Nair; Brinda Bose; Woodman.

directors) and telling him how much he has learned about love from Mr Chopra's movies.²⁴ Rahul falls in love with a young girl, Shruti, who comes to audition for his movie. The shooting of Rahul's low budget romantic movie continues following the well-rehearsed Bollywood tropes of lovers from disparate classes fighting all odds to reach the holy grail of marital bliss. The mock movie-within-the-movie is farcically replete with slow running, bad acting, even worse fight sequences and the mandatory obstacle of the unsympathetic family order. Even the names of the fictional hero and heroine are lifted from the 1995 Bollywood classic movie, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (the lover will *take away* the bride [emphasis mine]).²⁵ The audience is meant to understand the well-placed Bollywood markers in the fictional movie as both a parody of and a tribute to the famous director to whom Rahul is paying this homage. A spanner is thrown into the works when Shruti's overbearing family forbids her to take part in the movie and so Rahul devises a clever plan to approach Shruti's father with a request that he allow the family home to be filmed as the location of the heroine's palatial home. On learning that Shruti's father has a penchant for acting, Rahul offers him the role of the heroine's father, thereby securing his permission to let Shruti continue acting. During the first meeting with Shruti's father, he asks Rahul for his name. Rahul replies with only his first name—Rahul. The father says, "Rahul, who?" and Rahul replies, "Rahul the director." In the guise of this seemingly innocuous question lies another enquiry, that about Rahul's caste. The surname would bear the marker of a person's caste, and by extension, their social class. Rahul evades the question. This is further emphasised in a later scene when Shruti asks Rahul if he is on a scholarship, and Rahul replies that he is a "Special Case". The audience is meant to understand that the

²⁴ It is imperative to note here that Ravi Vasudevan locates the rapid proliferation of the term "Bollywood" to denote Hindi cinema, which he argues is a special branding of a certain kind of Indian cinema, post the enormous success of Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995). See Vasudevan in Works Cited.

²⁵ Vasudevan translates the film's title as "Brave of Heart Wins the Bride," associating in the process, marriage and romantic love with notions of masculinity, possession and the female body as property.

Special Case in this regard would stand for SC, or Scheduled Caste—a historically marginalised people in the hierarchical order of the Hindu caste system who are eligible for governmental reservations in educational institutions and for jobs.

Predictably, Rahul and Shruti fall in love and elope together, mirroring the actions of Rahul's cinematic characters. The elopement is necessitated by the growing restrictions placed on Shruti and from the fact that she is to be married off in a week's time. After a temple wedding they spend their wedding night in a hotel room. The camera, which seems inseparable from Rahul and captures every single moment of this saga, is shut off voluntarily at this point as the two lovers fall back on their hotel bed. Later, Rahul naively insists that Shruti call her family. It is worth mentioning here that during this conversation Shruti's father asks once again for Rahul's name, again, Rahul replies only with his first name, not uttering the last name which would give away a lot more about the caste divide between the two lovers, to mention nothing of the vast differences in their economic statuses. However, after the wedding, Rahul, whose last name is revealed to be Kumar, repeatedly refers to Shruti as "Mrs Kumar," "Shruti Kumar" and even corrects her when she uses her maiden name "Shruti Dahiya" while recording a thank you message on his camera to the self-same mentor Mr Chopra. After the initial telephonic altercation with Shruti's family, her father invites both of them back home to be received in traditional ceremony. However, during the car ride the two newlyweds are ambushed by Shruti's thuggish brother and his goons, beaten, their bodies hacked to pieces and left by the road. The camera lies discarded by the road.

The narrative method of enmeshing reality with over-the-top, obviously parodic film footage, works to underline the porous borders of cultural artefact and lived experience. The resultant text is an unsettling documentary, where the fantastical-fictional elements of both cinematic and real-life love meet a nightmare ending. Even though the gruesome

“honour killing” is very much rooted in present-day Indian social reality, the night vision camera, the unexpectedness of the event after a formulaic Bollywood love-story and the cover of darkness, lends a quality of the gruesome fantastic to their deaths. At the very start, Rahul declares to his camera that whatever he has learned about love, he has learned from the films of Mr Chopra. While this claim evinces the obvious naïveté of Rahul, the eventual tragedy is only accentuated by the fact that many such couples who have dared to flout filial orders or complex caste/class structures have met violent ends. The question then becomes of the responsibility of cultural representation; and the vast difference in the way “love” is narrated in cultural artefact and the way love stories end in newspaper reports of death. In Rahul’s film, Shruti’s father delivers a badly acted last scene where he releases his real/reel life daughter and asks her to live her life freely and for love (a famous last scene from Aditya Chopra’s *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*). The mirroring of life and film highlight that in the end transgressing lovers don't get the happy endings. Shruti is not free to live her life as her screen counterpart is allowed to do.

What interests me for this analysis is the spatial dynamics of this movie-reality. Rahul and Shruti meet in a film institute where Shruti’s freedom of movement is dictated and controlled by the regulations imposed by her family. She has to be back home by a certain time or that fragile agreement of partial freedom of movement can be truncated at any moment. The couple’s short courtship happens in the relative freedom of the outer world. However, their access to those spaces are conditional and tenuous: they go to a park during the short hours that Shruti is allowed to be outside the bounds of her home, they meet in the locations of the movie while they are filming, they marry each other in a temple and they rent a hotel room for their wedding night. The public park is transformed for a few hours into a private meeting place for two lovers; the movie location where Shruti’s brothers and his goons bash up the hero of the film in the suspicion that one of them is

having an affair with Shruti is already a space of make-believe, which is then violently encroached upon by reality. The temple where they marry is another such public space where the lack of their respective families takes away the social legitimacy that a marriage otherwise grants. The couple think they are safe since they have married each other in a religious ceremony and have consummated the marriage. It is under this assumed sanctity that Rahul demands a reunion with Shruti's family. However, the public space of the temple is deeply related to the private space of the home. Without the representatives of the private sphere, the legitimacy of the public wedding is socially controversial, even if it holds up in court or religion. The other question is whether a marriage performed without the presence of any other persons than the couple in question, can be considered "public" at all. It is still a "private" ceremony that happens to take place in "public." The next space of the rented hotel room is another such example of private/public spatial porosity. It is a public space that can be converted into private for an agreed sum of money and for an agreed amount of time. Beyond that, the privacy of the marital suite reverts back to the publicness of a hotel. Earlier in the film, when Rahul comes to Shruti's home to broach the topic of filming at her father's palatial house, the lavish and gaudy house is paraded as a marker of difference between the two lovers' socio-economic classes. It is also a bastion in which Rahul's entry is conditional. Before battering and killing the two lovers, Shruti's brother says to Rahul that everyone has a place in the world, and just because we let you enter our home you forgot what your place in the world is. The death then is not only a reminder of that normative social order that Rahul and Shruti dared to transgress, but for the justice-delivering brother and his goons, Rahul's breach of the home is symbolic of breaching the (presumably) "virgin" daughter of the house—the family's repository of honour. The last space, where the story ends, is the open road; the various spatial shelters that the lovers explore throughout their short relationship is finally left behind as the

punishment for breaching the *Lakshman rekha* of home results in their open-road killing. It is interesting however to note that though the death is “public” in so much that it happens on the open road, the lack of witnesses and the darkness of the night still make it a private crime. Space, both public and private, become porous and constitutive of one another’s contexts through transgression.

The idea of the women of the house/family/community, being the repositories of that house/family/community’s honour, is intrinsically related to the reproductive ability of women.²⁶ Among the many reasons for circumscribing women to the home and even violently guarding that threshold from “other” men, is to curb unsuitable or unsanctioned reproduction through those women. Women, as the bearer of children are therefore at once markers of, as well as the contested territory of struggle between, “them” and “us,” demarcating ethnic purity and cohesion from external difference and the threat of the Other.²⁷ Consequently, it provides the *fait accompli* that subjects women, especially fertile women to such gatekeeping and surveillance by the males of her community, so that the Other (male) may not have access to the womb that might be used to birth Other children and add to their numbers. This Other is a malleable identity, and its boundaries are porous. Most commonly, in the Indian context, this anxiety over ethnic/religious purity has been repeatedly and violently witnessed in communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims,²⁸ but “other” Hindus—such as anyone not belonging to the same caste or class, regional

²⁶ See, Gupta (298-302); For a historical perspective on the issue of reproduction and communal tension, see, Datta (1305-1319).

²⁷ For an analysis of the rhetoric of women as keepers of ethnic purity see, Wilson and Frederiksen in Works Cited.

²⁸ For an account of the contested space of the female body/womb and gendered violence during the India-Pakistan partition, see, Butalia.

identity, or anyone belonging to the same *gotra*,²⁹ is also an example of “otherness” and therefore subject to retribution. The idea of “purity” and ethnic cohesion lapses into concentric circles of defining and redefining its sanitary-cordon, with the ultimate result that marriage, sex and reproduction can only be legitimised within ever narrower scopes of sanction.

The protagonist of the second short movie *Paap ki Dukan* (shop of sin), is Shruti’s best friend Rashmi, a tall, dark, skinny woman who works as a night-shift shop girl in a departmental store. The movie opens with the installation of CCTV within the store premises, as the movie’s three male characters gaze into it. At night, two of those men, who are related to the owner of the departmental store, sift through the footage in the back room while drinking beers and discussing the two shop girls—Rashmi and Sonal—who work the night and day shifts respectively. Before long one of the men challenges the other, Adarsh, to charm the more conventionally desirable, fair-skinned, flirtatious, day-shift worker—Sonal. While attempting to sweet-talk Sonal, Adarsh is threatened by two aggressive men to whom he owes money. Needless to say, Sonal, is not charmed. Meanwhile, a shootout takes place in the coffee shop within the store’s premises and a customer is shot on the leg while Rashmi is on duty. It is due to her bravery and presence of mind that the victim is saved. Adarsh, who witnesses the incident, is impressed by Rashmi and a friendship develops between the two. Adarsh later learns from his friend that the owner of the store sold the footage of the shooting to a news channel for a forty thousand rupees. The friend persuades Adarsh to seduce Rashmi and make a sex tape without her knowledge so they can sell it for a large sum of cash. Adarsh refuses, saying

²⁹ *Gotra* is an exogamous, patrilineal genealogy that follows an unbroken male line of descendants from a common male ancestor. Marriages between bearers of the same *gotra* is prohibited and considered by the Hindu orthodoxy as tantamount to incest even if the two people are not even distantly related by blood. See Klass for an analysis of the *gotra* system as it pertains to marital alliances in West Bengal.

Rashmi is “not that kind of girl”; besides, he objects to her dark skin and lack of obvious feminine charms. He calls her a *behenji* (“behen” means sister in Hindi and “ji” is a suffix used to address someone with respect). In common parlance, it is used as an antonym of “sexy.” The friend assures Adarsh that when the clothes are off, fair skinned and dark skinned would not make too much of a difference, and since Rashmi is so obviously “unsexy,” she would be much easier to seduce.

In the seduction game that follows, Adarsh unwittingly begins to like Rashmi as a person and dithers about carrying out his plan. His attachment to Rashmi however begins to take all forms of aggressive and intimidating behaviour; eventually, they kiss, before which, Adarsh switches off the CCTV video feed. Adarsh’s growing anxiety and fits of jealous rage are not in the least helped by another male customer who regularly chats up Rashmi. The customer encourages Rashmi to apply for modelling jobs, which Adarsh learns as he compulsively keeps tabs on Rashmi through the surveillance video footage. In a fit of rage Adarsh tells Rashmi to quit her job, saying he’ll marry her and fund her family’s expense (it is revealed that Rashmi’s father is dead and she is the sole breadwinner of her family). He makes fun of her dark skin, her tallness (traditional Indian standards of beauty privilege a smaller frame in women since height is seen as a marker of “manliness”) and threatens her with physical violence. After the altercation, it is implied that the two are not on speaking terms anymore. In the back room, Adarsh’s friend makes fun of him for trying to be “noble” as they play a video clip of the aforementioned male customer laying a hand on Rashmi’s arm, on loop. Soon after, Rashmi learns that Shruti and Rahul have been chopped into pieces and buried in plastic bags under a bridge, following their rebellious marriage. She breaks down and desperately tries to reconnect with Adarsh and has sex with him. She asks him to shut off the camera, which Adarsh pretends to do, but the camera still records the sex act. The movie then shifts from the CCTV video footage to a video

streaming on the internet of the two of them having sex and Rashmi saying, “I love you, Adarsh,” while Adarsh looks into the camera.

The film ends with CCTV footage of the back room where the store owner tells the victim of the shootout (who has come looking for Rashmi) that she has simply disappeared. That, when he called Rashmi’s home number, a woman, presumably her mother, said, “No one called Rashmi lives here;” when he reminded her that after all Rashmi is her daughter, she replied that she never had a daughter. The store owner then points to the floor and says that this is where they recorded the sex act and that Adarsh is getting married soon. When asked if he had seen the video, he says that he doesn’t watch “dirty” things like that, though he hears that everyone is downloading it over the internet and his store’s sales have gone through the roof.

While Shruti is brutally killed, Rashmi’s complete disappearance from the screen immediately after her sexual transgression functions as symbolic death. She is disowned by her family and her lover, and is obliterated both from sight and narrative. The bloody death of Shruti contrasts with Rashmi’s bloodless, but total annihilation. Unlike the first short, the second movie is shot entirely within the confines of the departmental store, the adjacent coffee shop and the back room, with no shots of the outside world disrupting the claustrophobia of the store’s CCTV footage. Even though the departmental store in itself is a public space, the separation of the back room and the actual shop area present an interesting public-private and public-public spatial dynamic. The illicit beer drinking, watching the footage of the two girls on loop, the altercations and kisses between Rashmi and Adarsh and finally the sex act, all take place in the back room amidst jars and containers, while the more “public” facets of the story are played out in the shop and in the adjoining coffee shop. Of the two big incidents that get recorded and viewed, the shooting takes place in the coffee shop and the sex act takes place in the back room, and though a

news channel picks up the footage of the shooting and shows it on TV news, it is implied that illicit downloading of the back-room sex video has reached a lot more audiences. The already dubious spatial divide between the back room and the shop area, and the fragile privacy of the latter is further problematized by the pervasiveness of the CCTV cameras.

The third and final short film of *LSD*, called *Badnam Shauharat* (maligned fame) opens with two attempted suicides. Prabhat, the victim helped by Rashmi after the shoot-out at the cafe, is a cameraman/journalist who works with a news channel that conducts hidden camera operations in a bid to uncover the “truth”. Unsuccessful in his professional life, separated from his wife, and failing to provide for his daughter, Prabhat tries to hang himself (and films it) but the rod he ties his rope to breaks and falls before any harm is done. Soon after, he comes across a young girl jumping from a bridge in a suicide attempt from which he saves her. As soon as the suicidal girl is saved from drowning, instead of gratitude, Prabhat’s camera records her admonishing him for saving her. In a state of rage, she offers to repay him with sex, stating that she has no money to offer him. Prabhat refuses the offer and the girl, Mrignaina Biswas (Naina) reveals her story. She’s a runaway dancer who has left her home in a bid to be “launched” in a music video by a singer called Loki Local. Unable to gratify Loki sexually in exchange for music video casting, she had decided to take her life. Prabhat and Naina hatch a plan to film Loki Local attempting the “casting couch” and conduct a sting operation on him. Their first attempt is foiled because Loki suggests a threesome with his Russian protégé and the importunate Naina walks out on the offer/operation. A second attempt is made; this time, Naina dressed provocatively in a shiny black dress visits Loki in his vanity van. Loki explains to Naina that she would be much better off being sexually involved with one person in the interest of her career instead of many. He says that if she remains “single hand,” she’d be much more secure and

that he'd treat her like a doll wrapped in cotton balls. Naina and Prabhat bring this footage (and that of the ensuing sex) to the news channel but the editor decides that a singer whose claim to fame depends on songs like "*tu nangi achhi lagti hai*" (you look good naked) would not have any shock-value as a perpetrator of casting couch offences. Prabhat hides from his editor that they have footage of Naina and Loki having sex. The editor decides that Loki's public image is too run-down to have any shocking effect on moralistic audiences. Moreover she suspects that as soon as the video surfaces, Loki will deny it and instead defame Naina's moral character. They plan a double sting operation whereby Naina will inform Loki of the sex footage and film him offering to buy the evidence, so that once Loki denies the existence of the footage they can air the second video in which Loki is trying to buy that same piece of evidence. She also comes up with a title "*Dekhiye Loki nanga achha lagta hai*" (look, Loki looks good naked). While the editor (who is a woman) delineates this plan Naina asks, "And then what?"; the editor replies that then there will be interviews, question-answer sessions with the media, documentaries and talk panels, and assures her that they can stretch the story for a whole season. Prabhat does not like this plan, but the flow of events has gotten out of his hands. On the day of the operation, Prabhat and Naina go to the cafe in the departmental store, the site of the previous film. Loki Local shows up expecting a sexual threesome but Naina turns the tables on him; going off-course on the plan the editor had decided, she demands exclusive appearance in three of Loki's music videos without which she would expose him to the media. Loki tries to snatch away her handbag where she has planted the sting camera, Prabhat rushes to help but Loki takes out a gun and fires it at Prabhat. Rashmi runs to save him while Naina screams. As Prabhat lies in the hospital his editor comes to visit and asks for the footage of the shooting as the CCTV footage from the shop/cafe is not enough to identify anyone. Prabhat denies having any of the footage thus enabling Naina to have her much desired

music video “launch”. The last scene in Prabhat’s hospital is a gathering of the dead and the obliterated—Shruti and Rahul, Rashmi and Adarsh, Prabhat’s wife are all gathered around when Loki’s new music video airs. In a kitschy set with Loki and Naina, a Prabhat look-alike tries to film them through cardboard keyholes as the titular “*Love Sex aur Dhokha*” refrain plays over and over. Reality has finally become fiction.

Of the three lead female characters in each of the stories, Naina is the only one to escape literal and symbolic death. Unlike Shruti and Rashmi, she achieves what she had desired, but it inevitably comes with a cost. In the last scene where all the characters from the three stories have gathered around Prabhat’s sickbed, Naina is seen on the screen, ensconced in the hyperreal world of show business with a larger-than-life Loki, in a song parodying reality. All three girls are taken from the “real” world of the film through death, obliteration or the stage. However there are significant differences between Naina and the other two girls. Both Shruti and Rashmi are “regular” girls, even “good” girls who, prior to the events in their respective stories have lived their lives within the confines of “respectability.” For one, they both have familial identities and responsibilities, something Naina lacks right from the onset. As a young woman who has left her home in the hopes of becoming a celebrity dancer, she has already transgressed her *Lakshman rekha*. What the three women have in common however is that their stories unfold beyond the pale of home and hearth. While Shruti and Rashmi negotiate the home and world dichotomy tentatively, even faint-heartedly, Naina locates herself in the world. In the three stories there is a gradual receding of the family structure as the three women explore their own versions of freedom. A famous line from *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* that Rahul replicates in his movie—“*ja Simran jee le apni Zindagi*” (go Simran, live your life)—resonates in the background of Naina, Rashmi and Shruti as each of them become a version of the reel-

heroine, Simran, trying to negotiate life on their terms. Family order as well as the camera, perform three different functions in each of the stories. In Shruti's story, the overbearing family is not only present but is the cause of her retributive punishment. The camera acts first as a means of constructing a Bollywood-esque fantasy, able to erase the threat of the family to an idyllic state where the caste and class differences between the couple do not exist, but then the camera becomes a witness to their very real deaths. In Rashmi's story, the family is not present directly, but her responsibilities to the family are highlighted, as is her "unsexy," introverted nature. She is portrayed as a "homely" girl; the plainness of her appearance locates her within the bounds of the *Lakshman rekha*, the filial order. But the reported disavowal of her mother, and her absence on screen post her sex scandal is a sign of her ritual death. Unlike Shruti, she is a working girl who spends her nights working in a store. The camera in her case is the primary cause of her symbolic death or obliteration. In Naina's story, not only is the family not present in any way, she has actively sacrificed all filial connections in favour of public recognition. For her, the camera is a facilitator of success. Her desire to be seen, to be adored by an audience differentiates her from the other two protagonists. She desires the possibilities of scopophilia as the road to public success. This also makes her the most "public" of the three women.

Though Prabhat is the cameraman and suggests the idea of conducting a sting operation, it is Naina who becomes the camerawoman as she infiltrates Loki's private spaces—his hotel room and vanity van—with her secret "weapons." This however does not suggest that thereby the gaze of the camera changes into a female rather than a male gaze. The target audience for the sting operation footage still remains the fetishizing gaze, and the viability of the project lies on the audience-spectator's desire to see female sexuality in a behind-the-scenes exposé. Reality packaged as fiction, with a lethal dose of power and sex that would initiate articulations of moral outrage from the audience is the

modality of a casting couch exposé. Hence it is not necessarily empowering or subversive of the male gaze. Naina is both submissive and subversive in her role as a “victim”; she allows her body to be “used” (or exercises the authority to use her own body) in exchange for professional success, as Loki expects her to do, but by leveraging the evidence of her victimhood, she changes the power equation. However, the film’s discomfiture in portraying her as a completely unsympathetic character is underscored by her tears in the end when she comes to return the camera and the hard disk to Prabhat. It is also established in the movie that Prabhat would not circulate her sex tape, and real tenderness has blossomed between the two. The film’s insistence on pervasive realism—in its aesthetics, spatiality, themes and characters—creates a disturbing artefact of liminality. The audience is aware that they are watching a constructed reality, a movie, but the unrelenting realism of the experience comes close to breaking the invisible wall between spectacle and spectator. Neither fiction, nor entirely reality, the digital, portable camera manages to come uncomfortably close to the viewer.

In an earlier section, concerning the Delhi rape case of 2012, I have mentioned the connection between media coverage of gender violence and the invocation of a national consciousness, the imagined *vox populi*. It is revealed in *Badnaam Shahurat* that Prabhat and his colleagues had once conducted a sting operation in which the secretary to a state chief minister had accepted a bribe, with the fallout that the regimes of power had succumbed to this public exposé. For Prabhat and his colleagues however the result was far from good. When Naina tells him to be proud that he had “served the country” by exposing corruption, he replies that the nation does not need service, but entertainment. Here again, the film touches upon the porous boundaries of reality, truth and entertainment in media. The national consciousness, itself constructed out of a simulacra of truth, articulates itself through an aestheticisation of real events and eventually produces artefacts of fiction.

The digital camera has one disadvantage, which can be seen as an advantage in some contexts, over the 35mm camera in which films are most commonly shot: it has the power to come enormously close to the human body without having to use zoom. It is portable, sometimes invisible and highly pervasive in a technologically mediated age. However, with cognisance of the novelty of shooting a movie—essentially a constructed cultural artefact—in the found footage style using only digital cameras, and the themes of voyeurism, surveillance and truth-seeking that the film explores, what is still worth analysing is how a moveable, often-undetectable camera problematises the public/private divide. The necessity of the pervasive digital camera (as opposed to the more static, staged and constructed space in which the 35mm film camera operates) in telling stories such as these relates back to the demarcation of gendered space in relation to the sexed body that I have discussed in a preceding section. The unspoken premise of such voyeurism is a negation of the public/private divide; a “transgression” of the *Lakshman rekha*—the cordon of the safe zone and the circle of purity—to seek the sexed body in various “private” corners within the “public” domain. It is at once news, truth, entertainment, and scandal. The visual opacity that characterises the domestic, the private and the sexed, often-female body, is sought out by the intrusive digital camera; when the “private” footage reaches the “public” domain, the results are often disastrous. That is perhaps another reminder that the historical, literal, and ritual deaths that a normative society reserves for social-spatial transgressions, are still operative and topical.

V. Domestic Wives and Literary Prostitutes: reading *Dev D*

In 1901, a seventeen year old Saratchandra Chattopadhyay wrote a novella called *Debdas* which he published in 1917.³⁰ The story centres around a heart-broken young Brahmin man who has lost the love of his life through his own cowardice and indecision, and his later relationship with a courtesan who nurses him till his untimely and tragic death. This story would come to have an abiding grip on the subcontinent's imagination. Chattopadhyay's tale has been made into sixteen films the first of which was a silent movie in 1927 and the latest is as recent as a Bangladeshi film released in 2013.³¹ Though Bengali and Hindi adaptations of *Debdas* abound, the novella has also been made into Telugu, Tamil, Urdu, Assamese, and Malayalam language films in India, and in Urdu and Bengali in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The continuous retelling of the tale in almost every stage of Indian filmmaking makes *Debdas* a curious witness to the changing concerns of Indian cinematic history. As critics have argued, each telling of *Debdas* has been a reflection on national anxieties and preoccupations, much in the tradition of the Jamesonian national allegory.³² While a comparative analysis of all cinematic adaptations of *Debdas* is beyond this essay's scope, the 2009 film *Dev D* by Anurag Kashyap, with its significant alterations to the modern day *Debdas* (Dev, in Kashyap's film) bears out some of the anxieties and preoccupations about the gendered body that I have discussed here. My interest lies much more in the depiction of Dev's two love interests—the village belle Paro and the courtesan/

³⁰ Though the title in the Bengali original would read as *Debdas*, Sreejata Guha's English translation in Works Cited is titled *Devdas*, in keeping with the novel's cinematic titles in Hindi. For the purposes of differentiation, I will refer to the Bengali novel as *Debdas*.

³¹ For a list of Indian cinematic versions of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Debdas* through the ages, see, Sharma in Works Cited.

³² See, Madhuja Mukherjee in Works Cited. Though she does not mention Frederic Jameson, Mukherjee engages with Hindi cinema's (re)interpretations and preoccupation with *Debdas* as symptomatic of the nation, at various historiographic stages of both Hindi language cinema as well as through changing discourses of nationalism.

prostitute Chanda than in Dev himself. Kashyap is much more forthcoming in portraying the two women's subjectivities and sexualities than his predecessors. The moral contours of the homely girl/unhomely prostitute archetypes are much more problematic when both women's desires and despairs—not only social but also sexual—are portrayed in the film, transforming them from archetypes to female subjects.

In the 1917 text of *Devdas*, the village that Paru and Debdas come from functions as a lost ideal, a space of innocence. The disconnect between the lost spiritual home and the “vile” city with its excess of pleasure is the dialectic on which the text propels itself. However Dipesh Chakrabarty problematizes the rural/urban divide in modernist Bengali literature; village life, especially in the works of Tagore and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay wasn't an unmitigated idyllic space. Both writers had highlighted social ills that plagued rural Bengal in the early 1900s, especially in prose. Tagore's poetry however was much more in the idyllic vein when it centred on rural Bengal (177-200). Still, the “vileness” of the city as opposed to the “innocence” of the country was a powerful trope in cultural imagination. Since the construction of nineteenth-century nationalism could be held as the beginning of modernity in India, the imaginative tropes that proliferate during this period are still topical. Swati Chattopadhyay remarks—“Predominantly portrayed as an imposition, a constraint, the city seems to be made bearable by imagining a blissful countryside that performs as the ideal home . . . What distinguishes Bengali modernity and the nationalist construction of identity is the emplacement of the self in the troubled relation between the city and the country” (5-6). Devdas, though primarily a tragic romantic hero, is symptomatic of the self caught in between the city and the country. In both Bhansali's *Devdas* and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Debdas*, Paru and Chandramukhi are respectively symbols of the country and the city; innocent and a beacon of the past, Paru holds sway over Devdas' heart while Chandramukhi, a courtesan comes to

represent the “fallen,” pleasure seeking city space. Unable to return to Paro, Devdas immerses himself in the destructive excesses of the city, too self-piteous to notice Chandramukhi’s love or selfless giving, until drunk and ailing he returns to die on Paru’s doorsteps. Anurag Kashyap’s *Dev D* (2009) spares Dev this melodramatic death for the first time in his countless cinematic rebirths. The Bengali, educated Brahmin Debdas becomes Devendra Singh Dhillon from Punjab, the poor Bengali Brahmin girl Parbati (Paru) becomes Parminder (Paro) and the city courtesan Chandramukhi becomes a mixed-race young girl called Leni who later takes on the moniker of Chanda. But *Dev D* differs most significantly from *Debdas* in its resolution of the story; the “lost innocence” of the village/young romance is finally acknowledged as lost forever, and as Chanda tells Dev, encourages the characters to “move on” from past traumas.

The first part of the movie after Dev’s return from London, is set in the ancestral Punjab home of both Paro and Dev. Against the backdrop of rolling sugarcane plantations and the Punjab countryside, during Dev’s brother’s traditional wedding ceremony, the misadventure of Paro and Dev’s affair takes place. Both try to hide it from their respective families, use subterfuges and white lies to come close to one another. When Dev overhears his father’s factory staff talking about Paro’s sexual prowess and “easy availability” his rage first turns physical and outwards as he hits the man who says it, and then it turns inwards to his hatred of Paro, and results in his pushing her away sexually and emotionally. Paro, who argues with her father in order to marry Dev, is instead told by Dev that she doesn’t have the *aukaat* (socio-economic class, worth) to marry into his rich, industrialist family. He informs Paro, whose father is the manager of Dev’s father’s estates, that a manager’s daughter will always remain a manager’s daughter. Though the difference in their class is apparent, Dev’s father later reveals that he had long cherished a dream of Dev and Paro marrying each other. Unlike the Bengali original, in *Dev D* the opposition does

not come from the insurmountable family structure, but from the internal (il)logic of Dev's character. He is importunate, often selfish, self-destructive and irresponsible. There is also a subtle undertone of possession and claiming of a woman's body in Dev, which the movie never confronts or underscores to a great degree. Dev's self-engineered destruction of his relationship (and possible marriage) with Paro is driven by his inability to accept Paro as a sexual being in relation to male partners other than himself. Hurt pride results in Paro's acceptance of a marriage proposal from an older widower, with two young children. Quickly after Paro's marriage the narrative shifts to Delhi, leaving the pristine countryside behind. But the traumas of home follows Dev into the city and he begins a fast-paced descent into emotional, physical and financial ruin.

The cityscape in *Dev D* is of particular interest to me in this discussion. The middle-phase of the movie documenting Dev's drug-fuelled, alcohol-addled, self-destructive Dionysian nihilism, is shot mostly at night. But cinematically, it is not a drab, dark night. Strobe lights, flashing neon signs, time-lapse shots of traffic wheezing through the black landscape provide the psychedelic backdrop to Dev's urban odyssey as he falls from one drug filled vortex to another. The pervading theatricality in the spatial aesthetics of the film is brought out in fluorescent strobe lighting, misspelled graffiti and kitschy pop iconography. He spends his days getting drunk, scoring drugs, and spying on the newly married Paro who lives in Delhi with her new husband and stepchildren. She comes to visit him in his hotel and does his laundry; when Dev says, "make love to me," Paro lies with him on his bed fully clothed, but refuses to kiss him. The meeting ends with Paro telling Dev that this time round she's showing him his *aukaat* as once he had done. Dev pushes Paro violently out of his room and the two never meet again. At this time Dev meets Chanda through her pimp Chunni who befriends him. Through complicated circumstances he comes to stay in her "suite" for a few days. The two talk, laugh, break into swimming

pools late at night and fall tentatively in love. When a customer turns up at Chanda's suite, reality intervenes and Dev leaves. He goes back to his hotel, drinking and cocaine habit until one night he crashes his car and wakes up in a hospital after running over seven homeless people sleeping on the road. Dev's father dies and Dev suddenly finds himself short of cash for the first time in his life. He travels back home on bail for his father's funeral; the audience comes a full circle back to the village home where the Paro-Dev story had started. However, this time it has changed; Dev has a quasi-rude awakening as his mother cries hysterically, and asks "What have you done? What have you done?" On his way back to the city, Dev bribes the driver of the car that is meant to take him back to Delhi for his court appearances and absconds with him into another alcohol fuelled journey. Once he is doped, the driver robs him and abandons him by the side of the road. Dev hitchhikes to the Himalayan foothills and realises he can't get Chanda out of his mind. Homeless and broke, he comes to Delhi again, this time looking for Chanda.

Chanda's "suite" in the brothel bears particular scrutiny; when the audience (and Chanda) are first introduced to this space, a camera spanning 360 degrees pans through a circular, almost dizzying shot of emerald green doors, Chunni snorting cocaine, and the unveiling of a number of mannequins reflected eerily in the many mirrors of the room. As the film progresses the suite becomes almost a stage. Under the glare of strong red-pink lighting, an array of wigs and aviator goggles now adorn the bald mannequins as Chanda is painted like a doll by a makeup artist, shoots porn dressed in elaborate costumes and wigs, and provides telephonic sex in a multiplicity of tongues. By day, the same space is flooded with natural sunlight as Chanda walks about in unassuming pyjamas, doing her homework and drinking her coffee. Her quick transitions between languages, costumes and varied sexual services destabilise the notion of a unified self. There is a hint of the carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense in the space that Chanda occupies. A polyphony of voices emerge

from the same tongue, as identity is constructed and played within a multiplicity of performative selves.

In Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Debdas*, the original Bengali text as well as in its Bollywood adaptations, Chandramukhi does not have a stated backstory, making her all the more archetypal of the "hooker with a heart of gold" trope. Kashyap corrects this imbalance by carefully delineating the story of Leni/Chanda as a privileged teenage girl whose life gets turned upside down when she is caught in a maelstrom following an MMS scandal. As a schoolgirl she acquires an older "boyfriend," who after a few bike-rides takes her to a hotel where he films Leni performing fellation on him and then circulates the video. Following the scandal, Leni's father shoots himself and her Canadian mother sends Leni to live with her father's side of the family in rural North India. Unable to live there under threats and abuse, Leni escapes to the city and meets a woman who offers her a job in a brothel, food, board and a chance to complete her education. Eventually, Leni chooses the name "Chanda," an abbreviation of the fictional courtesan Chandramukhi as she is watching Bhansali's 2002 adaptation of *Devdas* in her brothel-home. Never again in the film is the name "Leni" mentioned again. The symbolic death that Swati Chattopadhyay feels is characteristic of transgressive women, who "appear in public space", obliterates Leni as the fully transgressed, newly transitioned Chanda is born (228). The film confers a subjectivity to Leni/Chanda by constructing her backstory; in one sense, her origins are established in the film, but on the other hand the film also deconstructs her identity, as the post-transgression Chanda evolves in every costume she wears.

Referring to Bakhtin's influential work Mary Russo says of his "grotesque realism":

The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical

body which is monumental, static, closed and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world (62-3).

Russo's interpretation of Bakhtin's concept is applicable to Chanda and Paro respectively. Though Chanda is nothing like the "senile hags" Bakhtin describes in his commentary on "grotesque realism," her body politic is "open"; her transition from Leni to Chanda and then the subsequent variations of costumes and languages suggest the plasticity of the "grotesque" body, whereby it becomes forever a body in transition, a body of becoming. On the other hand, Paro ensconces herself into the "aspirations of bourgeois individualism" through her respectable marriage. Her refusal to let Dev enter/colonise her body post marriage suggests a static closeness as Russo describes in the above passage. Though arguably Kashyap's Paro is much more a sexual being than her earlier (re)incarnations, the liminal "wildness" in Paro's character (evinced in her carrying a mattress to the sugarcane plantation in order to consummate her relationship with Dev, mailing him naked photos of herself and her open rage at not being allowed to pursue Dev as a prospective husband) is a lot more controlled after she is wed. Though she trades her village belle garb of *salwar kameez* for sleeveless shirts and long skirts, she acquires an aura of "respectable" behaviour as a calmer, mature woman, who insists on addressing her husband with respect (Bhuvan *ji*) which Dev ridicules.

The days Dev spends in Chanda's suite, are some of the most stable, tender moments in the film. It stands in contrast with the first half of the film where Paro and Dev are sneaking around in a manor house overrun with friends and relations, trying to come close to one another. The "respectable" environs of the familial house is traded for the sleazy, over the top brothel; in the first instance, the private home is turned into a public arena during the wedding and in the second the public house of ill repute transforms into a

private refuge for the two characters. Dev asks Chanda for her “story.” She counters with a laughing, “The story of how I became a *randi* (Hindi slang for whore)?” Dev tries to provide synonyms like “escort” and “call girl”; Chanda replies saying she has a social worker customer who can’t use the word *randi* either. She finishes by saying, “Calling someone a *randi* has fallen out of fashion.” The nonchalance of Chanda’s reply underscores the plasticity of terms. While to her interlocutors terminology is important as it is a reflection of their progressive/moral ideals, for Chanda, they are interchangeable and have very little real bearing on her life or work. It is another name, just as Leni was before she became Chanda. Dev however unearths the MMS scandal as he goes through her diaries and watches the MMS video on her television, without Chanda’s approval or permission (it is interesting that the film does not focus on Dev’s transgression into Chanda’s private space, or allow Chanda any objection to his snooping), and quite ironically, this unauthorised “viewing” of the hidden Leni brings the two characters closer. The notion of “falling in love” is predicted upon “seeing” beyond the surface of the object of love: Mulvey’s “male gaze” is an useful tool here— Dev’s “viewing” of Chanda’s former innocence and victimhood lays the groundwork for love to blossom. But it raises this question: if Chanda’s “victimhood”— the MMS scandal, romantic betrayal, national censure, father’s suicide and abandonment by the family— had not been established or not revealed to Dev, would the narrative of romance still hold the same affective resonance?

The pervasiveness of the portable camera has its consequences in *Dev D* as it did for the characters of *Love, Sex aur Dhokha*. For Chanda, it is an irretrievable transition from the private to the public sphere through the politics of the gaze. The act of oral sex is performed in a rented hotel room, a porous space in the public/private divide, and what is first the gaze of one male spectator (her boyfriend) and his camera, becomes the gaze of the nation. After Dev learns of her “story,” the two are seen standing on the balcony of

Chanda's brothel (symbolically the balcony is a suspended space. Neither fully public, nor entirely private); Chanda is painting Dev's face in the likeness of a sad clown. She says that even though her "scandal" garnered widespread media interest, her picture was never circulated in either newspapers or on TV, and yet everyone knew who she was. "The whole country got off on that video, and then they turned around and called me 'slut'" she says. It is something a post-scandal Rashmi might have said had she not been obliterated from the narrative of *LSD*. It is also reminiscent of Bandi's contention that media coverage of gendered violence engenders a participatory aestheticization of violence (74). Public viewing of private pleasure or violence becomes a collective act in which a whole country participates, and yet its casualties are the women who are involved in it. The modality of watching a sex clip is also curiously liminal; the usually personal small screen stands in contrast with a big/medium screen theatre or TV. While the latter is a participatory, communal act of viewership, MMSes or otherwise circulated sex clips are for the pleasure of the individual viewer primarily. The ease of circulation gives it a vast reach that makes it even more pervasive than a full length film.

VI. Naming and Shaming: *Other Town*

Recently, a friend of mine in Calcutta decided to move to her own place. When she sat her father down to tell him she would be moving out and to her own place in the same city, her father said nothing, and walked out of the room. The next day, he bought an Air Conditioner and installed it in her room. He told her, once you put this on and the weather is not this hot, you'll see there's no need to move out of our home. My friend still moved out, despite the magic of the AC, and she informs me that when he sees her walking towards her parents' home on Sundays from the window, her father turns on the AC even on days when it's cool enough not to be needed. Incidentally, my friend is a year shy of thirty, runs her own social change organisation and works in several others. Having known this family for years, I laughed at the anecdote, but it made me wonder about individual space for women (and men) in the Indian context. Most of my friends have moved to different cities, countries and continents to take up jobs and in pursuit of higher educational degrees. By default, they don't live with their parents. But the ones who have not left their hometowns, continue to live with their parents. The aforementioned friend is the first female I know personally, who happens to be unmarried and has chosen voluntarily—without any altercation or violence—to live on her own. Her's is a reasonably well-educated, middle-class family, no different from the countless others in urban Calcutta. Still, something as basic as wanting to live on one's own—at a reasonable age and after financial independence, seems to be a sacrilegious act. Her father has been deeply hurt. She has been harassed countless times by relatives and acquaintances, who believing that a young unmarried woman could have no other reason to live alone without a major scandal at the root of it, have questioned her in order to unearth it. Her mother, who enabled the whole process, arranged for her to have the old family fridge and ended up

upsetting her husband who accused her of encouraging their daughter to move out. In the preceding sections I have discussed the home as a private space, and its historical construction naturalised through the rhetoric of nationalism and purity. My friend's story, made me question the space of the individual in it.

Shonagachhi has existed for a very long time in Calcutta, and has changed as much through the years as Calcutta itself has. It is never far away from the collective imagination. Given that Shonagachhi as a space has exerted considerable pull over the romantic/urban sensibilities, and yet remains within the bounds of "taboo", this collective fascination over the romantic grotesque of a red light district bears particular scrutiny. I have mentioned before my contention that the exposed, public body (as is that of a prostitute) is an example of the female grotesque. I want to add here that it is also a romantic grotesque, where the squalor of such bodies is the site of romanticisation. The sheer number of epithets and appellations any language has to describe its red light districts and its prostitutes are testaments to that.

In terms of space, Shonagachhi, and places like it are fascinating in the sense that they function within the existing moral/social order (where they are often illegal) with a different set of cultural norms than those of the normative space. In that sense, they are small units of subversion even if they are the most high-risk, vulnerable of places. Among many other things, *Other Town* was born out of a desire to explore a space such as Shonagachhi in real, specific terms. Shonagachhi is a post-transgressive space. The women who work and live there have already transcended the bounds of home and of respectability. But the *Lakshman rekha* of the domestic, normative "home," which once transgressed cannot be returned to, are supplanted with new ones in the post-transgressive world.

In *Other Town*, Lalee and Diti are situated in the post-transgressive world and the non-transgressive world, respectively. On one end of the spectrum is Lalee, a professional lower middle-class prostitute, while on the other stands Diti, a young, middle-class, educated woman. The bounds of acceptable behaviour for each of them are vastly different. In *Other Town* Diti's personal space is non-existent within the confines of her home. Her movements are regulated, and her personal belongings are regularly ransacked. It is not from a deliberate draconian regimentation that this surveillance is instituted. Rather, the concept of individual space is so marginalised within the ideal family system that any assertion of it would require special articulation and instrumentation. In my imagination, Diti's upbringing and internalised mores would not equip her with the tools to start that conversation. Within the private space, therefore, the individual is not foregrounded. The filial "private," within the confines of the home, is another kind of public. It is only outside the ostensibly private space of her home, in the wrong side of town and in the wrong streets, that Diti apprehends a kind of individualism.

In her own way, Diti too transgresses her bounds of safety. A sheltered, middle-class girl, her world is different from Lalee's. In *Other Town*, she is the conduit between two worlds. Even though they are both young women who live in Kolkata and speak the same language, Diti and Lalee are strangers to one another's realities. With Lalee, Diti ventures out to a Muslim neighbourhood; though on the face of it, the three localities—Shonagachhi, Diti's middle-class home and college, and the Muslim areas of Marquis Street—are all parts of Kolkata, they are also culturally differentiated and demarcated places. In discussing the spatial dynamics of the novel, Diti's entry into the Othered spaces of Shonagachhi and minority dominated areas belie her transgression and thereby, her coming-of-age.

In spatial terms, Shonagachhi and other red-light districts complicate the notions of private/public and the safe/transgressive space divide. Much like Chanda in *Dev D*, Lalee's home is at once public and private and though she maintains an extent of control over who enters her home (an extent largely predicated upon her economic situation), The Blue Lotus, a brothel presided over by Shefali mashi, is not controlled by the girls who live and work therein. The prostitutes of Shonagachhi have already crossed the social *Lakshman rekha* of propriety and purity, but for Lalee another sort of transgression occurs when she involves herself with the murders happening next door to her.

Lalee is asked on three occasions how she came to be a prostitute. Each time she gives a different account. This is at once a way of resisting access to personal history, as well as a strategic tool for identity construction. Conflicting accounts of her backstory problematizes the nature of truth. All stories are plausible, and might have been true. If it is not true of herself, personally, it is true of countless others in similar situations. Narrating her story or other people's stories as the case might be, allows her to maintain multiple "origins" and changes "confession" to "storytelling." She also uses two names—Lalee and Rosa—that she switches according to customers and situations. As she narrates her story to Diti, Lalee gives her another name— Lolita Pramanik, as her "real" name. Her story spills outside of the given space of the questionnaire which Diti is attempting to fill, refusing containment.

The figure of the prostitute in literature is in itself a vast subject, replete with stereotypes and brutal representation among other things. For Lalee/Rosa in *Other Town*, I have tried to work through the paradox of having a strong character with a sense of her innate characteristics with a fluid identity that she constructs and craves. Her primary motivation is that of improving her circumstances, not as an escape from her profession but as a facelift to the same. As "Rosa" to her richer clients, she constructs her own version of

social mobility. Contesting stories of her own origins pave the way for her to invent characters for herself, and invent the circumstances of altered histories. As Scheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights* reminds us, storytelling is an act of survival, or resistance, and of change.

The novel ends with Lalee deciding to leave her life in Shonagachhi. There is a possibility that she might return and seek help from the social workers at Sampurna, where Diti is an intern. The organisation has the necessary infrastructure to rehabilitate Lalee if she chose to leave prostitution behind. However, the decision to leave Shonagachhi is not a terribly practical one. Apart from deep social stigma, Lalee has no education, trade or means of subsistence beyond her work as a prostitute. And yet, Lalee's life in Shonagachhi is under considerable threat from people who have not shied away from murdering other prostitutes. Violence is so embedded in the daily fabric of Shonagachhi life that the denizens of that particular world have accepted and internalised it as norm to a large extent, but when Lalee's life is in danger and she realises she is pregnant, Lalee is left no other choice but to flee. It is also concurrent with her growing desire to transcend her current life conditions, to go to a "home" she has left far behind and see her mother. She seeks that transformation not through a disavowal of her profession given that the realities of her situation would hardly allow her a "complete" escape, but through the modification of the same profession; perhaps her acceptance of prostitution is less than ideal, but it is far more realistic. She sets out to change the terms of her prostitution—the client, the rate, the environment—an aspirational move but not a radical one in so much that she still wants to continue to be a prostitute. The fact to bear in mind is that Lalee and women like Lalee do not have a choice when it comes to prostitution; they did not choose the profession and practical ways of relinquishing it are not available to them. Hence Lalee's agency extends as far as changing the terms of negotiation but not the profession itself. Constrained as it

may be, it's still a quest for freedom. In the end, the "freedom" Lalee acquires is of a different nature than what she had expected. Leaving Shonagachhi becomes an amalgamation of choice and necessity. She comes unstuck from the fabric of Shonagachhi life; the threat of violence that normally looms over women in her position intensifies, and becomes a certainty in Lalee's case. Her choice is to stay and keep the silence surrounding the murders or leave and break that silence. She chooses the latter, but "choice" is a questionable word here, as it is for women like Lalee in all aspects of their life. The resolution of the story with Lalee waiting at the train station, at the verge of embarking on an unknown journey, and perhaps an inward journey to reach back to her roots, her mother, has a touch of the fantastical. In a largely realistic novel, readers might find themselves sceptical about this narrative outcome. And yet, at what point does a realist novel stop short of social documentary? It seems that there is a thin, often vaguely defined line separating journalism and fiction. There is the spectre of "responsibility;" the author, when dealing with subjects such as forced prostitution, economic vulnerability and sexual slavery cannot disengage from their real implications. But here I would like to reiterate Radha Chakravarty's conception of "freedom"—"The value of literature (especially fiction) for feminism lies in its accommodation of the factual as well as the imagined or visionary, for a visionary dimension is essential to a politics of change" ("Introduction" ii). In her chapter on Mahashweta Devi, one of Bengal's most prolific and politically conscious writers, Chakravarty points out that freedom "...can function in literature as an absent horizon" (11). As Kumkum Sangari—who points out the importance of absent horizons in *The Politics of the Possible*—writes, "This may be an absent freedom but it is not an abstract freedom: it is precisely that which is made present and possible by its absence—the lives that people have never lived because of the lives they are forced to live or have chosen to live. That which is desired and that which exists, the sense of abundance

and the sense of waste, are dialectically related” (18). In Lalee’s story, the “freedom” she reaches out to is precisely this “absent horizon” that exists as a propellant of her desire to escape, and to transform her life, it is also the freedom to go back home, to reach out to a filial order that she has “lost” by transcending the *Lakshman rekha* of purity. Within the modalities of a realistic text, it is hard to afford her that freedom unconditionally, or in a fully realised form, but as a concept it is the most valuable unreality that she can possess, seek or nurture.

At the end of *Dev D*, while Dev tries to locate Chanda frantically, the audience learns that Chanda has moved out of her brothel-home on the very day that he walked out of her life. This unquestionably melodramatic gesture is very much in the tradition of Bollywood’s women, as much as melodrama is an important trope in the narrative of *Debdas*, from which *Dev D* is adapted. When Dev finally locates Chanda, we see her giving Dev a bath, drinking tea together and riding behind him in her own motorcycle on the way to Dev’s court case hearing. Chanda’s “submission” to Dev is subtly conveyed by her act of bathing Dev—a nurturing, motherly act by the ex-prostitute, giving him shelter when Dev is homeless and broke, and yielding the driver’s seat in her motorcycle to Dev, riding demurely behind him. While all of these bear testimony to the film’s final complicity with traditional gender roles and feminine space, what is of interest to this discussion is Chanda’s apartment, where she has moved after her stint in the brothel. It is not mentioned what she does for a living, nor how she can afford a place of her own. Presumably, as a successful prostitute, she has enough money to rent an apartment, but what she does to sustain herself after she walks out of the brothel is not disclosed. It is unlikely that she still continues to ply her profession as a commercial sex worker since Dev’s rejection of her and Chanda’s subsequent move from the brothel were very clearly based on the fact that a “normal” and exclusive sexual relationship cannot take place

between the two while Chanda still continues to work as a prostitute. So her status as an *ex-prostitute* is of particular importance here—it is at once a site of irony and redemption. Dev’s earlier pronouncement of Paro as a “slut” and his subsequent rejection of her is echoed in the ending where he finally falls in love with the real “slut” Chanda. On a few occasions previously Chanda calls *him* a slut, implying that Dev cannot give himself to anyone fully—a statement Dev agrees with in the end. And still, it is by relinquishing her status as a “slut” and performing acts of notionally feminine kindness (such as bathing, comforting, nourishing and reminding Dev of his responsibilities) that Chanda achieves “redemption” in her story arc. Earlier in the film, Chanda takes off Dev’s shoes when he is brought to her bed for the first time, barely conscious after binge drinking with Chunni. She does so while still in her vastly exaggerated costume of a white afro-wigged nurse, complete with bee-stung red lips. As Dev sleeps she watches impassively under bright pink-red lights, with a lit cigarette in hand. Although the acts of caring are similar, the contrast between these two situations are evinced in the differing spatiality and aesthetics of the brothel vis-à-vis Chanda’s apartment. In the latter, Chanda wears no makeup, an unassuming jeans and t-shirt, and muted sunlight lights the scene. While in the former, the exaggeration in Chanda’s costume, arrays of wigs and mannequins and strong pink-red lighting lends an element of the fantastic to the scene. Aesthetically then, the difference between Chanda’s (motherly) giving of herself to a broken Dev on both occasions is that of sustainability and normalcy; in the first, the exaggerated setting underscores the lack of normalcy, implying an instability, while the latter scene restores the audience’s faith in the possibility of the relationship with its carefully constructed normalcy—a rare image in *Dev D*. Though I use the term “redemption” I do it with cognisance of the word’s spiritual dimension; the resolution of her character’s journey is deeply linked with her disavowal of prostitution, betraying the fact that Indian cinema is still not ready to grant happily-ever-

after to a practicing prostitute. Dev's "redemption" however, lies not in his ability to love but to forego self-destructive habits and temper his hedonistic lifestyle. His destitution towards the end of the movie also signals the foregoing of his ego, vanity and rashness, but Chanda's acts of service and devotion, ironically signify a reinstatement and mending of Dev's wounded male ego.

What I would like to point out here is the lack of economic information we have on Chanda's life after she moves out of the brothel. Since the narrative portrays her as a charming, versatile, professional prostitute, who is seemingly under neither coercion nor threat of violence, the audience might assume that she has the luxury of financial stability as well. Lalee however does not enjoy Chanda's (assumed) financial solvency nor her enabling, (her pimp Chunni and the Madam who recruited her from the streets encourage her to finish her school degree and later enrol her in a college) violence-free environment. Moreover, Chanda's "redemption" as it happens in the resolution of her story arc, whether we see it in terms of her quest for freedom or escape, comes through love. Though Dev is not her emancipator, it is because of him that she transcends her life as a prostitute. I tried to avoid using love as a trope of emancipation in Lalee's story. Without a romantic male hero, Lalee's emancipation depends entirely upon financial considerations. And in the absence of financial solvency, the freedom Lalee seeks can only function as an absent horizon, a propeller of the desire to transform.

VII. Conclusion: Sluts and Goddesses

I started this essay with a discussion of the *Laskhman rekha* and its context in The Ramayana. I'd like to close with another scene from The Mahabharata where having lost all his belongings in a gambling match, the head of the Pandavas, Yudhishtira gambles his wife, Draupadi. Draupadi is the joint wife of the five Pandava brothers, and a Kshatriyas princess. Following her husbands' loss in the gamble, Draupadi is ordered to appear in court, which she refuses and hence is dragged by her hair and publicly disrobed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes: "Draupadi is in a menstruating state and hence ritually impure." She refuses to appear in court, instead she asks—"Go and ascertain from the gambler whether he lost himself, or me, first'. . . did Yudhister have a right to stake her if he had already become a slave? . . . Karna on the Kaurava side, orders her to be stripped since, married to five men, against custom, she may be regarded as a 'whore'" (144).

I would like to draw attention to a few things in this scene—the "ritual impurity" of Draupadi and her status as a polyandrous woman. Menstruation has been long regarded in Indian culture as a sign of impurity, a state in which the woman is not allowed to take part in religious or sexual rites. The epic does not specify if it is because of her bleeding body that her disrobing is implicitly justified, but her five husbands are unambiguously cited as the *fait accompli* for her violation. Her legitimate question as to whether her husband, who has lost himself in gamble, has any rights over her anymore, goes unanswered.

In public view, Draupadi remembers her *Swayamvara* (a formal ceremony where she chose her husband Arjuna but was later made the wife of all five brothers, following an injudicious statement from her mother-in-law) the only other time she was seen in public. In both instances of her disrobing and her marriage, an act that should be private has been rendered public. Draupadi uses her public space, however derogatory, to reiterate the

question of rights, and if her husband had any rights to gamble her. This mythic and culturally ubiquitous episode resonates with the concept of human rights that seem so inalienable to subjects of modernity. But female bodies that are considered impure—whether that is a menstruating body, a raped body, or a body that has availed itself to multiple sexual partners—is implicitly outside the bounds of such assurances of safety. It becomes an open, accessible space of horror, sport and wonder.

The concept of the *Lakshman rekha* was purportedly to safeguard Sita, because she was a woman and therefore vulnerable. Rama did not think to safeguard Lakshmana but adjudged that Lakshmana should keep Sita safe in his absence. Once the boundaries of that safety-cordon is crossed, the patriarchal order denies the transgressive woman her inalienable rights to safety and her body. However, as Sushma Joshi reminds us, these *Lakshman rekhas* are not only topical within the non-transgressive world, but also exist in the post-transgressive world. Joshi mentions her conversation with Nepali women who were trafficked to India and bought as sex workers in Bombay, she notices how the trafficked women, sold mainly as sex slaves with no agency of their own were kept immobilised through fear:

They were afraid to leave their area because it was ‘unsafe out there, one did not know what would happen or what people would do to you.’ The brothel was safe because it was bounded and familiar . . . The tools used by rehabilitative homes and bourgeois family institutions to control the women’s sexuality and to keep them within their gender roles, ends up paralleling the brothel’s restriction of women’s mobility through fear, and the psychological paralysis created in women. (255)

In the nineteenth century, governmental legislations such as the CDA were primarily implemented to control the spread of venereal diseases; in other words, it was not the issue

of the sex workers as women, humans and political subjects that was at stake. Though a lot has changed in the journey from then to now, there are uncanny similarities in the *raison d'être* of governmental interventions. Carolyn Sleightholm writes of Shonagachhi and Kolkata's other red-light districts:

Today in Calcutta the practical needs of the sex-workers are gradually being brought into focus, *although the spotlight is still overwhelmingly on sexual health as HIV-related funds pour in to control the epidemic*. . . It is to be hoped that this new interest in the sex trade can be harnessed to tackle wider issues of power between sex-workers and the organisers of the sex trade, pimps and clients, babus or lovers, and between sex-workers and society in general. . . . Already *concerns over the spread of HIV/AIDS have given the sex-workers a new bargaining power*. Several leaders have sprung up from the red-light areas who are articulating their demands, taking independent initiatives and refusing to be silenced. ("Preface" xiii [my emphasis])

The female body still remains the bone of contention; in particular the female, sexually active and available body as a site of disease which may then threaten the integrity of the non-transgressive community as a whole, remains the point of reference, redressal and departure for corrective measures. A society where the threat of terminal disease gives sex-workers a "bargaining power" to negotiate terms of basic human rights, safety and autonomy, is a society not very far ahead from the age of legislative measures such as the CDA. In "A Prehistory," Sarkar notes, "the long nineteenth century was in a way a long debate over the claims of a woman's community/ family/ caste to the right to inflict death on her: in controversies about widow immolation and age of consent, her physical survival was the issue, and in the widow remarriage debate, her sexual death was

at stake” (602). As I have discussed in the context of *Love, Sex aur Dhokha* both of those threats for women—physical death and sexual death—are still not unalienable and sovereign.

In late 2013, an anti-trafficking organisation by the name of Save Our Sisters started an advertising campaign—“Abused Goddesses”—depicting Hindu Indian goddesses in classic calendar-art settings with bruised faces, to raise awareness about domestic violence. Each photograph was captioned with a helpline and this statement—“Pray that we never see this day . . . it seems like no woman will be spared, not even the ones we pray to.” The organisation’s name itself bears scrutiny, evoking as it does women-as-kin, and therefore as someone’s “responsibility,” and in need of saving, legitimising an infantilization of women which is only too familiar. The campaign very noticeably omits the dark, naked and vengeful goddess Kali who wears a garland of human heads around her neck, choosing only the more docile or domestic of goddesses from the pantheon such as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and Saraswati the goddess of learning. Durga, however, is a curious choice. She stands with six weapons in her eight hands, with her lion familiar and yet her face is bruised and bleeding. Her eyes are teary and sad. No vengeful anger is seen in her, even though primarily she is a warrior goddess, who has just slain a male demon after nine days and nights of warfare. It reinforces Tanika Sarkar’s assertion which I have quoted previously that ultimately empowering feminine iconography relinquish power and agency to patriarchy, its purpose is only that of inspiration. This campaign, mounted as recently as 2013, is no exception to that rule. It reinforces the goddess/whore dichotomy denying in the process essential humanity to gendered victims of violence. Brinda Bose’s assertive article in response to these images was titled— “No More Goddesses, Please. Bring in the Sluts”— where she asks the very important question: why do we not mount a campaign

with the bruised face of a commercial street sex worker who has been a victim of violence? Quite apart from the religious connotations of using only Hindu domestic Goddesses and thereby excluding other religious communities, the campaign plainly targets the abuser who is meant to be shocked by the image of the deity as a victim of gendered violence. While its appeal has been argued, Brinda Bose states that the message being sent ultimately reads as:

We should worship women as (docile, happy Hindu) goddesses, and/or that since we (should, or profess to) worship women as goddesses, we should not hit them or kick them, we are telling them to consign their women to safe oblivion. And we are also telling them that any time their women fall short of their assigned roles as domestic goddesses, they can be abused for that original sin (“No More Goddesses”).

To deify a woman is to take away her essential humanity, agency, enfranchisement, her politics and her voice. She is reduced to a symbol primarily in service of the same patriarchally normative order that needs to be challenged in order to effect change. Furthermore, deification turns women into ciphers, empty canvases on which cultural fantasies are projected. Brinda Bose says of this deification, “It strips her of passion and desire and transgressive possibilities. It deprives her of risk and so the remotest imaginings of pleasure” (“No More Goddesses”). While this is true of the “goddess imagination,” it is perhaps too romantic a vision for Bose’s ultimate hypothetical question, which relates to the title of her piece: what if men imagined women as “whores” rather than “goddesses”? The answer is only too plain— the society only too often does imagine women as one or the other, and in both cases there is an essential loss of humanity, but in the case of the real and imagined “whores”, there is often death, rape and brutality.

Figures like Draupadi, and Lalee are ambivalent figures of agency and victimhood. While on the one hand Draupadi's polyandry might seem empowering, it is a situation that arguably takes away her agency since it is not by her choice that she "serves" as wife to five brothers. Similarly, as Brinda Bose wonders, what apart from the dangers would the woman whose male relative imagines her as a whore, experience: "What pleasures—fleeting—of freedom, gifted to her body and soul she may have encountered too, and in those moments of irrational and transformative excess, she would have lived another life" ("No More Goddesses"). It is useful to remember the boundaries of that "freedom," and its costs. Lalee is not thrust into the "safe oblivion" of the domestic goddesses, nor the rules that govern their existence or the price they pay for societal safety and sanction, but her *Lakshman rekha* does not dissolve into a horizon of freedom. Neither goddess, nor slut is allowed true agency or freedom.

Cultural memory casts long narrative shadows on a people's imagination. The way we understand womanhood in India is often through this dialectic of goddess/whore, wife/prostitute, sister-mother/"public woman." In the very first chapter of *Other Town*, Tilu Shau imagines Lalee as the goddess Durga riding him. And yet, Lalee is a woman of little education or resources who sells her body because no other choice of employment is available to her. Women often fall through the cracks of these imagined dichotomies our cultural narratives continue to feed.

VIII. An Afterthought on the Telling: Linguistic Choices in *Other Town*

In his preface to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao addresses the uncomfortable position that the Indian English author occupies in linguistic terms:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. . . . yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual makeup—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language, and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. (“Author’s Foreword” vii)

What is this “dialect” then? In writing *Other Town*, I have found the “problem” that Rao speaks of above—“to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own” of particular import. Language then, in this context, represents the text's materiality, whereas what he calls the “spirit,” denotes the experience. And yet language is both material and experiential. Fiction and any writing, is an amalgamation of both the physical/material and intangible/spiritual aspects of language that come together to create the narrative simulation of lived experience. Lexical conventions stand in for life. This in itself seems to be a mystical process; and yet, the struggle I experience to render in an English narrative the patois and colloquialisms of everyday life that happen in a language that is

not English, is material. By extension, it is also an argument for truth and representation. The characters in *Other Town* are not people who are accustomed to speaking English in their everyday lives. Accidents of birth affect their access to education, class and economic conditions. The main protagonist is a prostitute who has plainly not chosen her profession and has economic hardships. I do not imagine her to be well educated. Her motley band of supporting cast—Tilu Shau, Rambo Maity, Samsher Singh, Balok Ghosh, Naskar, Shefali Mashi, Mala Bibi, Malini, the deceased Mohamaya—none of them, had they been real people, would have spoken English as a matter of course either. Only Diti, who is an English-educated woman would speak it. Even then, I imagine her English as formal, textbookish. She would have had no need or cause to speak it in her traditional, Bengali middle-class home, nor would she employ it to speak with classmates of the same linguistic background. And yet her subject and classes would be taught in English. Her relationship with English therefore is academic, formal and situational. Yet, in *Other Town*, my characters have had to speak in English. Sometimes their speech sounded unnatural to me. The rendering of Bengali formulaic expressions, interjections, colloquialisms, name-calling and “dirty” slang into English, has been difficult, and perhaps inadequate. The phonetic emphases of vernacular slang/name-calling is imbued with an aural aggression to my mind, that seems effaced in its English translation. The affective coarseness of *madarchod* sounds much more phonetically aggressive to me than its literal translation, “motherfucker.” The associative perception of English in India is that of civility, higher class status, access to expensive education or cosmopolitanism, and of a vague politeness so that even name-calling is imbued with its aura. Consequently, it’s harder for me to reproduce my characters’ speech—characters who would have used slang, vulgarities and “dirty” language as a matter of course—in the sanitised phonetics of standardised English. Much of those associations on my part is an attribute of my cultural colonial heritage, even

my catholic missionary convent education, as is inevitable when working with English as an Indian. Even if it is due more to my perception of it than actual practice, my perception here is also influenced by a life lived mostly in India and my experience of how Indians use English. Though “how Indians use English” is neither a homogeneous practice, nor a representative one; different kinds of people with their burden of varying cultural, social, geographical and educational backgrounds use English differently. It covers cultural elitism, misappropriation, malapropism, cosmopolitan “cool-ness,” even multilingual colloquialism where vernacular and English often overlap. This “patois” then, different in urban centres and rural settings, is impossible to render in a book written in English without flooding the manuscript with unsightly footnotes. To ignore it runs the risk of inauthenticity. A certain flattening of the linguistic topos and scope of a novel that could have been polyphonic, replete with the vagaries of a multilingual people, is perhaps inevitable.

In *The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English*, Meenakshi Mukherjee says that writing in English for writers of Indian English literature is not a choice. “Those who write in English do so because—no matter what language they speak at home—they have literary competence only in English” (2607). She states that if any writer does have the choice of a language, it is the occasional *bhasha* (vernacular language) writer, who is well-versed in English and/or possesses a cosmopolitan artistic sensibility. While this is a fair assumption or hypotheses to make about writers such as Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amitav Ghosh, whether they could in fact write in their Indian mother tongues will always be a hypothetical question, Mukherjee’s assumption becomes more problematic when applied to writers in Indian English who may or may not be diasporic but have a literary familiarity with Indian language literatures. Mukherjee’s claim is not true of me; while “literary competence” is a difficult claim to make in any language, I’ve been writing

in my mother tongue Bengali for many more years than I have written in English. It is the first language that I spoke, followed by Hindi, Urdu and at last, English, even though English is the first language I could read and write. Given this background, when I am asked if English is my first language, I never quite know how to answer that question. This book could as easily have been written in Bengali, and perhaps that would have been more “authentic,” certainly in terms of dialogue. But I “chose” to write it in English. Cultural sensibilities are so entwined with linguistic practice, that it often escapes one’s notice. When those culturally specific sensibilities, characters, speech, and settings have to be rendered in another language, only then are the close correlations between culture and language made visible. The process of telling this subaltern Bengali story in English often created dissonance and a sense of the “uncanny” as I went along. As a writer, it was an interesting experiment, even in terms of linguistic form, to re-pot a Bengali story in an English frame. That “uncanny” feeling of seeing familiar experiences, cadences of speech transform themselves into something alien and hybrid in an English text speaks to the struggle of portraying cultural specificity in a different language, and it was not to be had if I had written this book in Bengali. The process of writing fiction, especially a full-length novel, is perhaps never quite logically or categorically explained away. Besides the issues of wider readership, both among Indians who do not speak Bengali and other readers in the world that the book may find, writing in English is a worthwhile experiment in terms of seeing cultural issues that are close to home, find resonance and perhaps significance in other cultural frames.

Much of the debate that Mukherjee covers in her article seems to resonate with Rushdie’s observations about the plight of the Indian English writer. He says:

Writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by an urge to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do

look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (428).

Such “anxieties of Indianness” are part of the corpus of Indian English writing. I am by no means its first casualty. Instead of being haunted every moment of writing this book by the spectre of authenticity, I have imagined how these people might have spoken, had they been speaking in English. Though this book has been written originally in English, the process of articulating that “spirit that is one’s own” in an alien language, has uncanny similarities with translation. I could not “translate” the imagined speech of my primarily Bengali-speaking, socially marginalised characters without sounding “inauthentic” in prose, as a writer and without distancing my reader. What happened then, was a sort of transference in place of a translation. I imagined what seemed to me to be their natural speech, their rhythm and idiosyncrasies of speech and manner, and transferred them to English. In time, their speech and dialogues in English began to feel natural to me. Whether it feels natural to the reader, is a question I have to leave unanswered. As Rushdie would have said, “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (432). Though Rushdie’s observations in *Imaginary Homelands* is largely related to the diasporic writer’s vision of the “lost country” and a reclaiming of memory, and thus speaks far more directly to Jameson’s assertion that third world literatures are essentially national allegories, I want to take his point about translation to engage with the linguistic conflicts of Indian English writing.

Speaking to the Indian English writer's authenticity, Rushdie says—"It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. But there is a paradox here. The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed" (429). While Rushdie chooses to celebrate the many-faceted reflection and counter-reflections of the broken mirror, Mukherjee asserts that:

In the English texts of India, there may be a greater pull towards a homogenisation of reality, an essentialising of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community. This attenuation may be artistically valid when the narrative aspires to the condition of allegory but for the Indian writer in English there may be other unarticulated compulsions—the uncertainty about his target audience (2608).

It is interesting to note that Mukherjee discusses this tendency with respect to writers of an older generation such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, as well as Rushdie. The high modernism of the earlier stalwarts' narrative realism is quite different from Rushdie's postmodern magical-realism, but the "homogenisation of reality" as Mukherjee sees it, still holds. Following Jameson's influential essay and the conversations it generated, no "third-world" literature is exempt from the charge of national allegory. There is much evidence to support Jameson's hypothesis, as there are exceptions that prove otherwise. The critical conversation surrounding the essay is too great to bring under the purview of this essay. Still, Jameson's contention that all third-world literatures are national allegory, demands attention in my own case. The contention that it is national allegory is not only a thematic issue in a narrative, it is also a linguistic one. The "uncertainty about his target audience," refers to this linguistic anxiety. Meenakshi

Mukherjee goes on to talk about R. K. Narayan's Malgudi and the unspecificity of its geography vis-à-vis literature in Indian vernacular languages where there is no escape from cultural and geographical specificities since both the author and the much more clearly defined target audience share intimate cultural knowledge of where the story takes place. Even if the locale of action is a fictional place (such as Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Nischindipur or Neel Lohit's Achinpur) often bearing names that accentuate their metaphorical quality, the language in which the story is written and the names of its characters with their tell-tale surnames, would firmly ground not only the history of the characters themselves but also the cultural, social and political history of the place. This is harder to do in English; as Mukherjee contends, the English author is not secure in the knowledge that their audiences have the necessary tools to decode "associative word-play, ironic understatements or oblique references" (2608).

I do not share the belief that there is "a distillable Indian reality which could then be rendered through particularised situations," (2609)—an "unspoken faith" Mukherjee ascribes to Rao, Anand and Narayan. *Other Town* has specific geographical boundaries. It does not attempt to speak for India, or represent India as a nation. Though in this exegesis I have tried to trace a lineage of women's spatial inscription and the concept of transgressing that spatial boundary, the novel primarily is a story of a red-light district called Shonagachhi located in the heart of North Kolkata. It is neither allegorical, nor metaphorical, but a real world that has existed within a modern-day city where prostitution is illegal. The rules within this space are slightly different from the rest of the middle-class city; there is more lawlessness and the engines of state often turn a blind eye. The novel therefore is not a national allegory, but a tale of people inhabiting the fringes of society and trying desperately to claw an existence from there. I have made the denizens of that

specific world speak in English, but in reality, that is not the language they use to any great degree.

Mukherjee discusses the internationally known writers of Indian English novels, a very large number of whom live outside of India. In reference to a quote by Bharati Mukherjee, Meenakshi Mukherjee says that, “Indianness remains . . . only as a metaphor. India less as a place than a topos, a set of imaginative references” (2610).³³ While as a textual strategy that might be serviceable and indeed necessary in novels that primarily deal with expatriation, return and cross-cultural encounters, it does not suffice in a novel such as *Other Town* which is entirely set in a specific part of Kolkata, focussing on characters who have very little chance of crossing international borders to the “West”. What I had to deal with then wasn’t a fabulation of the nation discourse, nor an allegorical story of “India” as a whole, but the challenge that, “the reality of India has to be daily confronted at a non-metaphoric level” (2610)—a predicament Mukherjee accords the writer of vernacular Indian literature. Though she uses the term “India” in both cases—as a real place in the vernacular text and as the “imaginary homeland” as per Bharati Mukherjee’s metaphorical India, her argument is better served by substituting the umbrella term “India’ with a specific regional space within India. “India” is always a concept; a small town in the state of Kerala is very different from the communally torn city of Kashmir, a village in the desert regions of Rajasthan has very little similarity with Kolkata, and Manipur has its vast differences with Maharashtra. Even if all these regions are subsumed within the concept of “India,” primarily for the purposes of the nation’s political identity, the multiplicity of cultural realities of these regions and people living therein contend with the conceptual

³³ Bharati Mukherjee states, “I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous driven underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with a sentimental attachment to a distant homeland. But no real desire for permanent return. . . . Instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse, a ‘visible’ disfigurement to be hidden) I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated...Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of comprehending the world” (qtd. in Meenakshi Mukherjee 2610).

mutability of “India,” if not its homogeneity. It is only by naming specific spaces that “India” assumes any corporeality. Interestingly, Mukherjee allocates this privilege of specificity to the vernacular litterateur, and arrogates the burden of the imagined topos to the pan-Indian, often diasporic, Indian-English writer. Mukherjee adds, “India might be a ‘discursive space’ for the writer of Indian origin living elsewhere, but those living and writing here, particularly the bhasha novelist would seldom make figurative use of something as amorphous as the idea of India, because s/he has a multitude of specific and local experiences to turn into tropes and play with” (2610).

I would contend, that any writer writing about India, in some form or another, who has enough cultural familiarity with the space of their subject matter, would have access to the “local experiences” that Mukherjee sees as the domicile writer’s prerogative. The language in which to tell the tale then becomes a matter of choice, not a compulsion arising from lack of literary capital or cultural familiarity. This is where my subject position as the writer becomes relevant; though I have lived in Singapore for the last four years, I am still politically (and culturally) an Indian citizen. I don’t have another citizenship outside India or any guarantee of permanent residence outside of India. I also happen to write in English and Bengali. In *Other Town*, I have written a novel about Shonagachhi (not “India”) in English. Though there is plentiful evidence to support Mukherjee’s claim in her essay *The Anxiety of Indianness*, I have somewhat consciously moved away from her paradigm— as a writer of this Indian English novel, I have tried to be cultural specific about a certain group and class of people without desiring to bring it under the giant umbrella of a national allegory.

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