

CHAITI SEN

Uma

During the monsoon the leader of the Naxalites died in police custody. On one of the nights following his death, Uma woke to the sound of thunder and shouts from the street. She got up and peered out the window to the alley but saw no one. What she did see was that the silver darts of falling rain caught the light from her husband's study. As she lay back in bed she tried not to worry that the police could use the glow of a desk light after curfew as an excuse to raid. Though it shamed her to admit it, she hoped that things would settle down and perhaps there would be some peace. At a great cost, yes, but she was weary of the violence.

She was just drifting off when she heard the familiar sound of Baba's calloused feet scraping across the tile. He blocked the light between the doors, where the edges refused to meet. This time, Uma thought, let him stand until he falls. She heard a raspy hiss escape from the bottom of his throat, and the shifts in his body, and even his heel peeling off the floor, the creak of his ankle, the disgusting sound of him scratching an itch.

She spoke then, with a bite in her voice. "Baba, ki chao?"

There was nothing legitimate he could want. He shuffled back to his room, the scuffing of his feet fading and disappearing. She did not hear Saurav come back to bed, but when the gray light of dawn woke her she discovered him lying stiffly at her side. The room was quiet. The rain had stopped. For a few minutes she rested her hand on his stomach, enjoying its gentle rise and fall, until Saurav covered her hand with his.

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

"I heard shouting last night," she said.

"It was nothing," he answered. "Just some rickshaw wallahs arguing."

She did not believe him. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, I saw," he said. "One owed money to the other."

Uma allowed a pause. "Do they not know the danger? Causing so much commotion in the middle of the night!"

If Saurav had thoughts about the two rickshaw wallahs and their shouting, he kept them to himself. Uma wanted to add, "Perhaps the worst is over," but she held back, not wanting to start a political discussion so early in the morning.. Gently he returned her hand and rolled over to his side, turning his back to her. Stubbornly she crept her fingers along his shoulder blade, but eventually the calls of the waking city summoned her out of bed. The day was beginning.

Ten minutes later she had given Baba his tea and medication and mixed the dough for the poori. She was too tired to roll them properly. They stuck to the rolling pin and stretched into ugly ovals with inexplicable appendages. Then they refused to puff and float in the hot oil. She pulled them out one by one, each more dense and leaden than the last. She considered tossing the whole lot when her sister-in-law Meeradi charged through the door of the narrow, muggy kitchen. Despite her slight build Meeradi always overfilled a room.

"Baba is screaming for his breakfast. He'll drive us all mad." She frowned at the pooris.

Uma gave her an anguished look. "I'll start again."

Meeradi picked up the plate. "No, these are just what he deserves," she said, "but for my breakfast, do remember that the quality of your luchis mirrors the depth of your affection for the recipient."

Uma smiled. For Dada, Meeradi, and the girls, she mixed and fried a second batch. They were round and lovely.

Upon her return Meeradi looked triumphant. "You should have seen Baba's face. He looked absolutely constipated."

"That's what he gets for spying in the middle of the night."

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

“Filthy old man!” cried Meeradi.

“Do you think he would molest me?”

Meeradi clutched her hands to her throat. “The exertion might finally kill him!”

The very last one she made was perfection, a bright full moon. She lifted it onto the plate, where it softly exhaled. This one was for Saurav.

She carried the breakfast tray up the steep stairs and cradled it in one arm while she opened the door. Her husband was tossing books into an old heavy lock chest, waiting with its jaws open.

“When did you drag that in here?” she asked.

He picked up another volume from amongst the various piles of yellowing books and newspapers on his desk. With difficulty she found a space to put down the tray and opened the balcony doors, letting in a burst of light and commotion.

“I can’t concentrate with that incessant honking,” he said.

“Hark, he speaks!” She lay her hand dramatically on her chest. “I believe he is speaking to me.”

“Good morning, my darling,” he said. Then, he smiled, revealing the deep dimples in his cheeks that made him look effortlessly happy. After eight years of marriage, one loving word from him still excited her.

He was holding a booklet - “Make the 1970’s the Decade of Liberation.” She took it from him but did not open it, knowing that the words would sound distant to her now. They were from another time and place that could not be revisited. She put the book aside and ran her fingers through his thick graying hair.

“Aren’t you going down to the clinic today? Dada needs you.”

“Yes,” he said, reaching for the book. “Yes, later.”

“Dada asked for you repeatedly this morning.”

Saurav flipped through the pages of the book.

“You mustn’t jeopardize our peace at home. He is beginning to grumble.”

She expected him to lash back at her for that remark, but he said nothing.

“I saved the most perfect luchi for you,” she said.

He sighed deeply and reached out to her, pulling her closer to lean his head against her stomach. “It’s exquisite,” he said. His head felt heavy, sinking into her flesh. Sometimes, less often lately, Saurav would sneak up from the clinic and join her for a private afternoon respite. Uma smiled. They lingered for several minutes, not letting go of each other.

She went back downstairs to encounter Baba demands for better luchis. Uma obliged him, and then ate her own breakfast hurriedly. She helped Meeradi get the girls ready for school, administered Baba’s medication, and went to the market. Returning at mid-morning she entered through the clinic, off the main entrance to the house, along the hallway crowded with waiting patients, then through a maze of cabinets and folding panels to find her beleaguered brother-in-law swabbing the throat of a screaming child.

“Has Saurav not come down?” she asked.

Grimacing as he pulled the swab out of the child’s mouth, he said, “Not as of yet.”

“What nonsense,” she said. “Really, Dada, you must not be so easy on him.”

Uma rushed up the stairs, two steps at a time. This time she would give him a real tongue-lashing. This time she would remind him once and for all that she had married a doctor, not a theoretician. She ran to the study and let the door swing open. “Saurav,” she shouted.

He was at the desk, his head resting on his arms, his breakfast scattered across the floor. “Saurav?” she called softly. He didn’t stir. She touched his back and felt no movement at all, no breath, no rhythm, no heat. A chill ran up her arm that pulsed through her body. She sank to the floor.

When she regained her senses she looked at him once and fled the room to call for help. Gripping the banister with trembling fingers she stumbled down the endless staircase. Her limbs were limp and useless. Before she reached the bottom she found she could go no further. She sat and stared

KARTIKA  **REVIEW**

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

at the shadows and contours of the wall in front of her. How long she remained there she did not know. With the heavy afternoon rains the house turned a dusky blue. It looked like evening but it couldn't have been later than tea time. Finally Uma heard Meeradi calling for her.

When her sister-in-law appeared they exchanged no words. Meeradi ran up the stairs past her. Upon her return she tried to raise Uma to her feet. "Come with me."

Uma shook her away and covered her face with her hands. They muffled a wailing cry that seemed to be coming from elsewhere, a ghostly being in another corner of the house.

"Come Uma. It will feel better to walk. I have you," Meeradi said. "I won't let you fall," but Uma's knees buckled and she felt monstrously heavy. She clung to the banister. Her feet always seemed to miss the landing. She wanted to get out of this blue tunnel but it went on and on until finally, with relief, she fell into a heap on the cold hard tiles. "Stay here, Uma. I'm just coming back, very soon."

Then she didn't want to be alone. Nor could she bear the thought of her husband alone, only a staircase between them. She had given up too soon. She pushed herself up to face the stairs again, but not even her gaze could reach the top.

Meeradi gave her tranquilizers and tucked her up in the tomb-like room where her nieces slept. She was groggy but could not sleep, prevented alternatively by the startling thunder and the gentle breathing, shifting, and swallowing of the sleeping girls next to her. The window was open to let in the air and sound of rain.

Later angry voices collected on the street below. Uma held her hand over her heart listening to their escalating cries. They demanded the ejection of a suspect from his home, their rabid throaty shouts cut with the high-pitched tenor of fear and grief from the man and woman of the house. The woman's voice sounded familiar to her; it could have been her friend Lata. As she waited for some kind of resolution, knowing well how these things ended, she was gripped by a

terrible clarity; her husband was dead. If the city were to erupt into more turmoil, she would have to face it alone.

She heard the mob moving on, but the damage to her nerves lingered. She wanted a stronger medicine. She rose and stumbled to the door, but even after adjusting her eyes to the light she remained on the threshold, neither in nor out of the room. Weakly she called to Meeradi, who came quickly holding a tray and a bottle of pills. "I have brought you some warm milk," she said.

"What has happened?" Uma asked.

"The young man at the Dhar residence."

Uma had seen that boy. Saurav knew him.

Meeradi shook her head. "Who is to tell now which side is right and which side wrong?"

Saurav would have known. Uma depended on him for such judgments.

"I want to speak to Rupam." It was a sudden hunger to hear her brother's voice.

Meeradi gave her another pill and told her to drink the milk. She drank quickly, burning her tongue and throat. Then Meeradi unburdened herself of the tray and pulled Uma forward, closing the door behind her. They linked arms and walked slowly down to the clinic, where they would sit under the fluttering lights and make the telephone call.

In the office Meeradi looked through a tattered address book filled with ant-like lettering. She lifted the enormous telephone, cradled it between her ear and shoulder, and dialed. A moment later she spoke loudly into the phone. "It's Calcutta here. May I speak to Rupam?"

Her brother's wife must have answered. Uma would not speak to her. She wanted her brother, but even after he waited on the line for her, she could not take the phone. Meeradi finally delivered the news herself, uttering the words "Massive Brain Aneurism," in her clearly enunciated English. Only then did Uma take the phone.

All she could remember about the conversation was that he promised to come.

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

The most upsetting thing about the cremation was that the pregnant humid air kept the fire from spreading as it should have. They had to douse the body in kerosene, so that the ritual was interrupted and made to look like a riot rather than a funeral. Then there was an excruciating length of time waiting for the body to be engulfed. And Saurav would not have wanted any of this. He would have wanted to be delivered to the crematorium without fanfare. She wished she'd had the faculties to insist on that, for the image of Saurav's body disappearing under the violent flame horrified her, even under heavy sedation, until finally she fainted.

After the funeral she continued to sleep in the small room with the girls. They were a comfort to her. Baba also shifted downstairs. He took to sleeping on a cot in a room off the kitchen, where a servant once slept. Uma would often wake from her naps to find Baba patting her head or rubbing her back. She prayed that Rupam would arrive soon. It would be a great expense for Rupam to come from America, and Uma feared he would not have the money. She waited fretfully.

When her brother finally did arrive he looked so confident and healthful, so radiant, that she fell into his arms and wept. To her, he looked exactly as a thirty-two year old man should look, his hair neatly combed on a side part, his skin smooth and clean-shaven, and his body slim and comfortable in loose-fitting cotton shirt and brown slacks. He came in like a cleansing breeze and took her back to her youth, before she was a wife and widow.

He took her out for tea and book browsing on College Street. He took her to the Planetarium and Botanical Gardens, even in the rain, keeping her busy from morning until night so that she would have no opportunity to collapse into self-pity, but as the day of his departure drew near, Uma felt the suffocating heat of grief again. She begged him to stay a little longer. On his last morning, after he'd packed his bags, he sat her down at the dining room table and said, "Did I tell that next month will be my fifth year in America?"

"It seems like ten," she said.

"It is serendipitous timing," he said. "I have applied for citizenship and can sponsor you. I always planned to ask Saurav if he'd like to bring you."

“Saurav hated America.”

“But would you like to come?”

“For a visit?”

“Or to stay, if you like it.”

She had not expected such an invitation, and had not yet given much thought to her future. “What would I do there?”

“It’s a lovely place,” said Rupam. “You can help with the children, perhaps until Joy starts school, but eventually you may continue your studies. A woman of your intelligence must not throw her future away.”

“Is that what you think I’ve been doing?”

“No, no, but now you must plan a life without Saurav. You need not lie down and wait for your death like our grandmothers did. Saurav would have wanted you to begin again, to carry on. Come to America, Uma ... it would be so nice.”

Uma noted a sadness in his voice. It was his wife who had wanted to go to America, not Rupam. Rupam had always been happy in India. “What of Supriya?” Uma asked.

He hesitated. “It was she who first mentioned it,” he said at last. “She said, ‘India is no place for a widow.’”

“She said that?”

“Don’t you remember that her own mother was widowed?”

The next morning, Uma woke up with that thought in her head. India is no place for a widow. She told him over breakfast that she would like to go to America, but she would absolutely not come unless Supriya invited her.

A few weeks later, Uma received a warm invitation from Supriya, stating that she was terribly busy and was so looking forward to having a sister in the house with her. Enclosed was also a list, written in Rupam’s careful print, of nearby graduate programs in English Literature that she could research during her visit. She gently refolded the letter and tucked it into a tin box, where she’d begun to keep her most important small possessions.

Not long after that she began to tell her friends and neighbors that she was going to America. For the next year,

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

all talk and mental preparation was directed towards her move. She began to separate from her surroundings. It was hardest in the evenings when she relaxed with Meeradi and Dada and her nieces who begged her not to go. It was easiest when her father-in-law demanded a foot massage and seized the opportunity to rub his toes against her breasts. They finally hired a young man, with a healthy streak of assertiveness, to be his full-time attendant.

She was cleared for immigration in August of 1973. As she waited with her tearful sister-in-law at Dom Dom Airport, a middle-aged émigré fell dead from a heart attack. The man lay on the floor for five hours before officials came to pick him up. Uma watched the lifeless man, dressed in a formal brown suit, and thought about her husband. She was glad to be leaving this dying country. She would soon be on a long island, surrounded by white sand beaches and ocean breezes. She imagined her nephews running barefooted, darkened by the sun, laughing on their way to the sea. How different it would be from her own cramped and sheltered childhood in Calcutta.

But as her fellow passengers gathered to board her flight, Meeradi hugged her tightly and would not let go. Uma cried, missing her as soon as they parted. The first leg of her journey was an agonizing stretch of sorrow and worry. In the air she had a heightened sense of loneliness and vulnerability. She only managed the remainder of the journey with glasses of whiskey and a set of ear phones. She listened to the American pop music channel to stimulate her imagination. By the time they landed her heart raced with anticipation.

When she entered the Kennedy Airport terminal lobby, she allowed herself a moment to be impressed by the grandeur of the room and its magnificent glass ceiling, the beauty of its clean lines. It was sterile but warm, like a green house or atrium. “So much nicer than Dom Dom,” she thought. “Geniuses of architecture.”

Then she looked for her brother among the crowd of Indian expatriates waiting for their loved ones. She was tired and overwhelmed by all the faces, and as her eyes swept over them they all looked familiar somehow, familiar yet non-descript, and so out of place in this modern facility. She worried that she might not recognize her brother, that he

might not be anymore familiar to her than the other young men looking out to the aisle.

She grew nervous as the crowd thinned and Rupam still had not appeared. She heard “Didi” called out several times, but never in his voice. Then she saw him, smiling broadly, rushing towards her. He greeted her with a touch on the arm and apologized for being late. Slouching and awkward, he quickly led her to the baggage claim, asking her formal questions about the flight and service, relaxing only slightly by the time they had all of her luggage in tow. Uma understood his self-consciousness. She, too, felt strangely shy.

Rupam stacked her two suitcases in the back of a long brown car that he called a station wagon. “It is like a wagon!” exclaimed Uma. The ride was smooth and fast. “How sleek. Nothing like an Ambassador, eh?” Rupam laughed.

“How clean and wide the streets are.”

She read the large green street signs out loud - Grand Central Parkway, Long Island Expressway, This Lane Only – until she realized how irritating that might be to the driver. She told Rupam how much she looked forward to exploring the island with the children. He laughed endlessly at that.

“Why do you laugh?”

“Didi, there’s nothing much to explore.”

“Is the seaside not closeby?” she asked.

“Not within walking. You will see the island is rather plain.”

The car slowed down as they approached his neighborhood. He pointed out the hospital, and a large building called Pathmark. “You will go there,” he promised. “Truly astounding, Didi! You have never seen so much food.”

When they turned onto Rupam’s street, she saw neat rows of rectangular houses. The trees were quite small, with delicate, thin trunks and sparse leaves. Although Uma loved the lush, gigantic banana and banyan trees behind her husband’s house, and the patches of shade that they gave to the scorching flat rooftop, she could appreciate the newness of this landscape, populated with young trees smooth and sprouting with possibility. And instead of regarding it as plain, she liked the uniformity of the street. Each house on Berkshire Road had windows and doors in the same place,

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

with a color palette ranging from gray to white, the distance between each house just as predictable and orderly. To her, it represented the absence of chaos.

Rupam's house looked small from the outside but she was surprised at how spacious it was. It seemed to be the opposite of the massive concrete extended family homes she knew, which were so much more cramped than the majesty of their exteriors would suggest. He gave her a quick tour of the house. The front door opened into a corridor, with three bedrooms on the right and a bathroom at the far end. To the left, a wide doorway led to a long living room lit by a large window, so large it nearly took up the expanse of the front wall. The kitchen was large and flowed from the living room. Everything was modern and clean.

"Come downstairs," said Rupam. "This is why I chose this house." He opened a door at the back of the kitchen and revealed a set of stairs descending into darkness.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

He switched on a light, took her arm, and guided her down. "We call this a cellar," he said. Then Uma could see why he was so excited. This "cellar" was a lovely expansive room, with a wet bar on one side, couches and a television in the far corner, and a ping pong table. "Table tennis! I challenge you to a match!" she said.

"After dinner, let the games begin!"

As they walked up the cellar stairs, he explained that Supriya would get off her shift at 5 and pick up the children from the babysitter on the way home. "Babysitter?" asked Uma.

"Ayah," he explained.

"You won't be needing an ayah anymore. I shall look after the children."

"Yes, Didi," he said happily. "It will help us tremendously."

Uma took her first shower, then changed into a new white sari. She didn't normally wear white, but she decided to dress conservatively, as this was the first time Supriya would see her as a widow. She gathered the gifts out of the suitcase and brought them into the living room, where Rupam was sitting on the couch, reading the newspaper.

He looked up at her. "Feeling refreshed?"

"Wonderful."

Rupam looked at his watch while she placed the gifts on the coffee table.

Moments later, three short honks of a car horn caused Rupam to jump to his feet. "There they are," he said. Uma dropped her bag of gifts and watched out the window as her sister-in-law slid a shiny red car into the driveway and parked it behind the station wagon.

Supriya emerged from the car, still dressed in her white physician's coat, her hair styled in neat modern layers, looking older and more angular than Uma remembered. Rupam rushed out the door, said something to his wife, and then opened the rear door of the car. Two boys tumbled out.

The first one had to be Shanti, the elder one. He was seven years old, long and skinny, followed by the short and plump tot named Joy, who was nearly three. The contrast between them amused Uma. With a bubbling euphoria she awaited the moment of introduction. They seemed so delightful.

Supriya and Rupam then moved to the boot of the car and pulled out a series of bulging brown paper bags. With her nerves bursting, Uma left the window and went out to offer her assistance, but they nudged her away with a great deal of protest, refusing to hand her a single bag. Slowly they all made their way inside, with the boys leading the way. Shanti stole curious glances at Uma, while Joy studied the movement of his feet as he walked up the path, oblivious to anything else.

Back in the living room, the boys stopped and stared at the pile of gifts on the coffee table. "Are those for us?" asked Shanti.

His parents scolded him. "Is that how you greet your Uma Pishi?"

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

The boy squirmed under his father's reproachful gaze until suddenly, as if he'd been pricked with a sharp stick, he shot over to Uma and hugged her. Uma laughed and patted his head. "Well, of course, these are for you."

Supriya threw off her coat, dumped the bags onto the kitchen table, and emptied them at incredible speed. Rupam could not keep up, and by the time he'd put a few cans of peas away, she had completely cleared the table.

"Let me help," said Uma.

"That will be no help at all. Too many cooks spoil the broth."

Uma looked back at the boys. The older one had taken a seat on the carpet, his eyes fixed on the gifts. She began to give them out, all the while distracted by the frenzy of activity in the kitchen – gathering, washing, chopping, stirring, in quick succession. Uma had never witnessed such productivity in all her life.

She gave Shanti a set of Indian comic books, a book of folktales (both written in English), and a book of Bengali nonsense rhymes. Rupam demonstrated what he must have thought to be an appropriate level of enthusiasm, carrying on about his childhood spent reading these books.

For the little one, Uma revealed a stuffed doll - a man wearing a turban and formal Indian suit. "Aaaah," said Rupam, "the Air India man." Shanti, looking rather longingly at the Air India man in his Maharaja's suit and turban, handed it to his little brother. "Look what you got," he said.

Joy was sitting with one arm slung over the edge of the couch, the other arm a mere extension of the thumb in his mouth. Slowly he reached for the doll and wrapped his stubby fingers around its leg. With his thumb still perched in his mouth, his lips tightened into a smile.

"I guess he wants it," said Shanti.

"Does he not speak yet?" Uma asked. Joy had dropped the Air India man onto his lap, already disinterested.

Uma realized her mistake only after an extended silence. The question came out as an expression of disbelief, but Uma hadn't meant anything by it. It was just that, in India, three-year-olds were such chatterboxes. They talked too much!

Uncomfortably she rummaged through her other gifts, finally pulling out a sari and placing it on the coffee table.

“I hope you like the design. All the ladies are wearing it in Calcutta.”

Supriya stepped into the living room. “How gorgeous,” she said, then hurried back to her cooking.

Soon they sat down to an elaborate dinner of fish curry, okra, lentils, potato cutlets, and rice pulao. Surpriya smiled when Uma praised her cooking. “A genuine smile,” Uma thought, “makes her look lovely.”

“I was planning to make biryani, but I couldn’t find the time to get the ingredients,” said Supriya.

“Oh, nonsense. Why go through all that trouble? This is wonderful.”

Just then, the phone rang. Supriya sprang up from her chair to rinse off her hands and answer it. Excusing herself, she pulled the spiral chord as far out to the living room as she could, where she spoke in a calm, hushed, professional tone. Rupam explained that she was on call.

That evening, Uma and Rupam stayed up much too late, reminiscing in the cellar, playing table tennis, and drinking whiskey, which he brought out when they started talking about their favorite uncle. “Chotomama,” they called him. Little Uncle. He lived half the year in India and half the year in London. Uma and Rupam used to accompany him to the Saturday Club, an old colonial club that had remained much as the British had left it, except that now it was brown men barking orders at servants. There Chotomama always gave her a taste of his whiskey. He thought women should be liberated.

Rupam and Supriya spent a few days showing Uma around and getting her acquainted with the tasks that would be set aside for her. These were laundry, dusting, cooking, washing dishes, “babysitting” Joy, cleaning the bathroom and cellar, vacuuming, and keeping toys in order. Uma appreciated the modern appliances, which made these chores painless, but still she did not do them as fastidiously as Supriya wanted.

KARTIKA REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

After a few weeks, Supriya complained about the underwear not being folded. Uma said, “I would prefer not to handle the underclothes for longer than necessary!”

Supriya did not find it funny. The next day, Uma presented her with towers of exquisitely folded underwear.

Of all her chores, Uma most enjoyed grocery day. On Saturdays, Rupam drove her to the Pathmark to fill her cart with whatever she needed to cook that week. It was her only regular outing. Her brother pointed out to her on one occasion that people were staring at her.

“They are probably wondering why you are dressed so formally. Why don’t you wear the pants suit I bought you?” Uma did not confess that she found pants to be the most uncomfortable item of clothing ever invented. She did not like the itchy polyester between her legs. She preferred to feel her smooth thighs rubbing against each other. Furthermore, the pants highlighted her ever so slight belly – most unflattering.

On an October afternoon, Uma and Joy sat on the couch in front of the window. Some of the leaves on the painfully thin trees had faded to yellow. She had been hearing much about the autumn colors and looked forward to the turning of the leaves, as if it would be a thunderous event. Not a sound came from inside the house, except for her nephew’s gentle breathing. If the world were to end that day, she would have no warning. The stillness would just continue forever.

Uma finished washing and drying the clothes. She folded them precisely. She vacuumed the carpet, washed the breakfast dishes, and dusted the furniture with an orange feather duster. She fed Joy and prepared a snack for Shanti to eat after school. She did her morning chores slowly and deliberately, doing and redoing to make sure every speck was lifted and every corner tucked, but this only ate up an extra hour. There was still the entire afternoon to fill. She could have gone downstairs to clean the basement, or gotten an early start on dinner, but this was her daily dilemma. She wanted to be busy, but not busy with that sort of work. Domesticity for the sake of it bored her.

By now, she had read every book in the house. It was a sparse collection, mostly medical books and children's picture books. She wrote Meeradi a letter last week and asked her if she could afford to send her one very long, very good Bengali novel. She lamented that this was not a very literary household and most of her time was spent with a mute.

There was nothing left to do except sleep, at only 1:00 in the afternoon. Joy lay on the couch next to her, staring up at the ceiling, sucking his thumb. Occasionally, he shifted his eyes slightly to catch her watching him. No reaction. She wondered what words, what thoughts, what pictures were behind those eyes. Those beautiful eyes. She floated in their obsidian pools, until he closed his lids and pushed her out. Rupam said they were indeed concerned about him, but the pediatrician assured them that he was neurologically fine, that he was simply experiencing a developmental delay. "You know, Uma, children here are allowed to develop in their own time," he said.

What else was there to do except sleep? She sank back into the large cushions of the couch and closed her eyes.

She felt a tiny grip on her knee as Joy struggled to climb onto her lap. She helped him up and resumed her position, trying to take her mind back to where it was before it was snatched back to this couch. He laid his head against Uma's chest. She opened her eyes, distracted by his little fingers weaving in and out of her gold bangles. She patted his back, and then placed her arm around him, her hand resting on his thigh. She closed her eyes again.

She was comfortable finally. Once she always felt like this, able to settle into rest easily, even in daylight, even with the din of the Calcutta streets filtering into her bedroom. In a house full of activity she could lay with her husband and enjoy his tongue on her breasts. Her body could accept so much then. There were no barren places, no corner that could not be touched. His hands belonged to her. She stirred slightly. Joy got tired of the bangles and moved to her necklace. She put her hand over his and held it there gently.

A moment later she sat up abruptly, nearly spilling the little boy onto the floor.

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

She removed Joy from her lap and wrapped her sweater tightly over her bosom. It was the sudden awareness of his fingers on her skin that alarmed her. Moments earlier she had been thinking of her husband so vividly. Joy seemed puzzled by her behavior but not disturbed. He stared at Uma for a while, then moved on to play listlessly with his toys.

She went on with her day without fully shaking her disorientation. At 3:00 she walked out to the sidewalk to make sure the school bus had arrived. She gave Shanti and Joy a snack of toast and jam, helped Shanti with his homework, and sat with the children in front of the TV for an hour until Supriya and Rupam came home. At 6:00 she served dinner and listened to them talk about the hospital.

“The dinner is quite good, tonight,” said Supriya.

The compliment bothered Uma. She had been cooking for years, after all. Were dinners on other evenings not “quite good?” To avoid making a cutting remark, Uma asked Supriya what she would like to eat for dinner tomorrow.

“Up to you,” Supriya answered.

After dinner, Uma asked Rupam to play a game of table tennis, but he said, “Not tonight, Didi, I’m beat.” Shanti wanted to play, so they played a few games consisting mainly of Uma hitting the ball and Shanti retrieving it from the floor. His mother called down at half past eight and told him it was time for bed. “Do I have to?” he begged.

It was Uma who tucked him in and read to him from *Abol Tabol*, the Bengali book of nonsense rhymes. At the end of each poem, he asked her to read another one. They enjoyed their time together. That unsettled feeling she’d had all day was finally leaving her.

At 9:30, Rupam poked his head in and said, “No more stalling. Time for bed.” Uma wondered why everything had to be so regimented. In Calcutta she would just be sitting down to dinner at this time. How she missed that evening chatter.

The house fell into silence, but she could not sleep.

At midnight she crept down to the basement and drank a swallow of whiskey, right from the bottle so that she wouldn’t have to wash a glass. When she put the bottle down, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror that lined the wall

behind the bar. The light was a muted orange, and it cast a flattering glow upon her face, highlighting her strong cheekbones and large, dark eyes. She had not looked at herself for a very long time. She ran her fingers along her eyebrows, then along the gentle curves beneath her eyes, over her full lips and along her jaw and down her neck, remembering caresses long gone.

The next day, after her chores, she sat on the couch again and thought about her life in India, trying to remember what she'd been busy doing all those years. She sometimes felt that Supriya looked down on her for not having children. What excuse did she have really? Beside Saurav's ambivalence, she had her own worries about raising children in India, causing Uma hesitate again and again. She didn't know that her opportunities would come to such an abrupt end.

Suddenly her chest tightened. She was overcome with a feeling that this house was suffocating her. She leapt up and rushed to her room, where she opened her suitcase and took out twenty of the two hundred dollars that she was allowed to bring into the country, none of which she had spent yet. She dressed Joy in his coat and hat and put her own wool coat over her yellow sari, and out the door they went. Her heart beat very quickly. She decided to walk to the Pathmark. By now she had memorized the route and felt she could handle crossing Stewart Avenue. She could pick Joy up and carry him across the four lanes. There was a grassy median in case they didn't make it in one go.

She allowed Joy to set the pace for a few minutes. He stopped to look at many things, and she would name them for him – black car, bird on a bush. He frowned at her as if she was disturbing his meditations. But when they turned a corner they both stopped to stare at something wondrous, a large tree plumed with fiery red leaves. As they stood there a generous offering fell to their feet. Joy crouched down, picked up the reddest leaf, and examined it on all sides. He then gifted it to Uma.

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

At that moment two boys rode by on their bicycles. By now Uma was used to the intent stares of the locals. She watched them ride away and heard the one say incredulously to the other, “Niggers.” She could not hear the response. The street was empty and quiet again. Worried that they might return, she picked up Joy and hesitated for a moment, but she would not turn back now. They were only boys, she told herself. She went on towards Stewart Avenue.

When they got there she felt daunted by the cars whizzing by. With the leaf still between her fingers, she held Joy in one arm and picked up the folds of her sari with the other. She waited breathlessly for the first break in traffic, and then lunged forward. Joy grasped her neck tightly as they ran across the street.

The running and traffic and air of adventure created a rush of euphoria. She saw a happy glimmer in Joy’s eyes, too, his pudgy cheeks inflated from smiling. Safely on the other side she put Joy down and they stumbled, hand in hand, towards the store, entering through the automatic door that still amazed her. She led Joy to the aisle that she’d been dreaming of - the book aisle holding four shelves of Harlequin romances and paperback bestsellers. There she lingered, reading the backs of all of the books while Joy sat on the floor and flipped through a collection of thin Disney fairytales with cardboard covers. She ultimately chose a fat mystery novel for herself and Pinocchio for Joy. As she spent her first American dollars, she noticed that she was not thinking of India so much today. She had enjoyed the walk, and now was looking forward to bedtime, when she could lie back and read.

It was 2:30. She had plenty of time to get home for Shanti’s bus if she carried Joy most of the way. She spotted a liquor store across the parking lot and decided to make a quick stop, in case she had trouble sleeping again tonight.

When they came out of the liquor store, she picked up Joy and traveled quickly. It was difficult to carry him, the leaf, the books, and the bottle of whiskey, especially with her cumbersome wool coat. She stopped to put the bag of whiskey into her deep left pocket and give the leaf back to Joy. The walk home seemed to take much longer. She picked up her pace when she saw Shanti’s empty school bus driving past her, but she told herself that she was only a few minutes late,

and that Shanti would wait for her on the stoop. He was not one to complain.

She stopped, dismayed, when she saw Supriya's car in the driveway. Not quite believing her eyes, she put Joy down and told him to run home. She continued slowly, wishing she could be hit by a car rather than face a tongue-lashing from her younger brother's wife. She had been enjoying the day so much.

Uma entered the living room and found Supriya on the couch crying, holding Shanti who was stiff and bleary-eyed. Supriya looked up, her mascara spilling into the lines beneath her eyes. "Where have you been?" she yelled. "I have been calling the house for two hours."

Joy walked over to his mother and stood by her legs. With a dramatic moan Supriya swept him up into her arms.

Uma took her coat off. "I took Joy for a walk."

"A two hour walk, in this cold? Where on earth did you go?"

"We went to the Pathmark."

"To the Pathmark? You took my son across Stewart Avenue to go to the Pathmark? That is more than a walk, Didi. How can you be so reckless?"

Uma knew she had no authority here. She didn't answer. Supriya was now holding Joy in her lap and kissing him. "Your cheeks are frigid," she said.

Shanti looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. Uma spoke to him. "I'm sorry you had to wait, Shanti. Were you very frightened?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Baba's late all the time." Turning to his smother he asked, "Can I go watch TV downstairs?"

"Take Joy with you," said Supriya. Joy jumped off the couch and started to follow his brother, but turned back suddenly. He ran to his coat, which was now sprawled across the middle cushion of the couch, and reached into his pocket to pull out the red leaf, a bit crumpled now. He held it up proudly. "I found it," he said in a clear but childlike voice, a voice that suited him perfectly. He dropped it into his mother's lap and ran away, through the kitchen, down the stairs. Supriya

KARTIKA REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR, WINTER 2008

stared at the leaf, speechless. Uma smiled. “Why do you worry so? All is well.”

Supriya shook her head and buried her face in her hands. “I am so tired. Didi, do you have any idea how tired I am?”

Uma longed to be tired, the kind of tired that would make her feel like she was put on earth for a purpose. She stood there shifting on her feet, wondering if she should sit down next to Supriya and try to comfort her. She decided not to.

Supriya uncovered her face and looked fiercely at Uma. “He was on the verge of talking. It could have happened at any time.”

“Of course,” said Uma.

“Do you think my job is easy? I don’t have time to play with him and take him for walks. I wish I did.”

Uma shook her head. “I know that. No one has judged you for it.”

Supriya started to cry again.

“I think you’re a wonderful mother,” continued Uma, “and a wonderful doctor.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, what do you know about either of those things?” She pulled a tissue out of her medical jacket and blew her nose. “Your presence weighs on me.”

Uma began to tremble with anger. She was not sure why Supriya wanted to provoke her so unkindly, but how she wanted to strangle this woman.

“That’s rather melodramatic,” said Uma, trying to seem unaffected.

“I am only telling you my feelings. Your brother made the decision, not me. We were perfectly happy before you came.”

There was nothing for Uma to say. She didn’t want to hear any more.

“Rupam convinced me that you would come to help. He convinced me that it would help me relax...I would feel less tired.” Supriya squeezed her eyes shut, letting two large teardrops fall down her cheek. “But you don’t make me less tired. You make me more tired.”

“But what of the letter? You wrote me a letter, inviting me.”

“How would it have looked if I hadn’t?”

“How can you be so unfeeling? Aren’t you the one who said India is no place for a widow?” Even as she said it, she realized that Rupam had lied to her.

“I never said that. My mother is a widow. She lives a fine life.”

Uma felt a hollow wind run through her veins. “Then,” she said quietly, “I was brought here under false circumstances. It is for you to discuss with Rupam, not with me.”

The silence told her that there was some truth to what she said. What sort of life would this be, being the subject of other people’s disagreements? She imagined herself storming into her room and packing her bags, but her husband’s home seemed very far away, and no longer a place to return to.

“I shouldn’t have left the house. It was careless of me,” she confessed, although it pained her to say it.

Surpriya was sitting back on the couch, her head resting on a cushion. Her expression did not change at first, but in the end, she seemed satisfied with the admission of guilt. Finally she sat up, her lids swollen and red, her eyes glazed. “What did you buy, anyway?” she asked.

Uma could not believe her luck. The whiskey was still in her coat pocket. She opened the bag at her feet and pulled out the two books.

“I suppose there isn’t much to read in this house,” Supriya said. “We don’t have much time for pleasure reading.”

Uma nodded.

Supriya lifted herself off the couch. “I’m exhausted. I’m going for a nap.”

Uma could not let her go without one last comment. “Your son saved his first words for you. Isn’t that wonderful?”

While stepping towards the hallway she answered, “Perhaps I shall enjoy it after some rest.”

Rupam came home long after dinner, but Uma could not face him. He and Supriya had a hushed conversation in their bedroom. She could not make out any words. Eventually they faded.

Her thoughts were loud in the quiet of her room. She stared at an oil painting of a Rocky Mountain scene across from her bed. The painting had none of the familiar colors of warm weather places – the blues, the yellows, the oranges, the reds. She wondered why an Indian family would put up a painting that was so hostile to the Indian aesthetic. It filled her with such bitterness that she got up and took the painting off its hooks and put it down. She returned to the bed to enjoy the bare wall, but this was just as menacing. She then picked up her mystery novel but could not concentrate.

Her doorknob suddenly turned, clumsily, from a slippery pair of hands losing their grip. Uma stayed in bed. She knew that Joy would turn it far enough eventually. That knob was stubborn and always gave him trouble.

Joy tumbled in and climbed into bed with her, grabbing the only available pillow and knocking his forehead against it in a steady rhythm. Uma watched him for a while. He always did this when he tried to get to sleep. It was such strange behavior that she feared it would cause him brain damage. She even tried it herself, to understand the range of movements involved and assess the risks. She found that it didn't hurt at all if the pillow was fluffy, though it did put a strain on the neck and cause discomfort to the forehead. At any rate, he liked it and there was no stopping him. Uma saw him this time with a new appreciation. He came into the room with such a purposeful regard for what he wanted. He wanted to go back to sleep. He wanted to go back to sleep next to his Uma Pishi. He only expended the energy that he wished to use, no more and no less. Finally, he rested his head on the pillow, and his breathing settled, a feathery snore escaping from his tiny nose. Uma smiled and pulled up the blanket to cover his legs. She rubbed his back. She sang him a love song.

Soja mere laal

Soja

Soja mere laal

Go to sleep

My love

Go to sleep

