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BOOK EXTRACT

'Come Home Adit'Extracts from Shashi Deshpande's book *Small Remedies*, shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award

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Small Remedies
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Hari's arm, set in plaster and supported by a sling, proclaims his handicap, which he tries to play down. 'I'm all right,' he says to me. 'Nothing to worry.'

Nevertheless, he is irritable, more I imagine because of the dependence, the inability to do things for himself than because of any residual pain. I admire Lata for the way she deals with him and the situation. I'd have thought she would get into a flap, but she refrains from fussing and leaves him, for the greater part, to manage himself, though clearly it calls for an effort on her part. She even goes back to work the day after he comes home from the hospital. I can see she's reluctant to go, but she conceals it from him, only her fervent 'Thank God you're here, Kaku' revealing it.

But there's little I can do for him. In fact, there's nothing that he will allow me to do. I tell him about Leela's panacea for any pain or illness -- a glass of Horlicks. 'I don't know where she got the idea, but you know how these things are sometimes, it got fixed in her mind: a glass of Horlicks will make you well. When she brought it to you, you knew she was really worried about you.'

Hari laughs. 'I'm okay. No Horlicks for me. If there's something I'd like, it's a cigarette. I'd give anything for a smoke at this moment.'

It's three years now since he gave up smoking, he tells me, but even now, at certain times, at certain moments, the longing for a smoke returns, the smell haunts him; like a phantom it accompanies him wherever it goes.

'Just one, I tell myself, but I know it won't stop at one. So I resist.'

He's more relaxed after this confession and so am I, now that I know his irritation is not connected to pain, but to this itch to smoke. We speak of the accident for the first time since it happened.

'At first it seemed to me that they were coming for you,' he says.

We wonder then whether they thought I was Hasina.

I admire Lata for the way she deals with him and the situation. I'd have thought she would get into a flap, but she refrains from fussing.

I go to Adit's room, the room I've avoided all these days. And it is there, at the sight of the room I haven't entered for so long, a room tidied by someone -- it's in this dead room that the madness ends for me.

I was wearing a salwar kameez that day, perhaps it was this that misguided them?

'But Hasina wears saris!'

'Oh well, you know the stereotypes we live with. She's a Muslim, therefore she would be wearing a salwar kameez.' And then he asks me, hesitantly, did he faint? He has a vague memory of a blackout . . .

'Yes, you did.'

'It must have scared you.'

I confess to him my shame that I could not help him, that I could not even look at the bone sticking out of his sleeve.

You kept telling me to push it back inside . . .'

'I know. The doctor tells me I said the same thing to him I had a strange feeling that the bone was not part of me, that once it disappeared from view, I would be fine.'

We're now interrupted by a visitor. There has been a constant stream of visitors for Hari since the news of the attack on him spread. The threat, that Hasina would not be allowed to sing in the temple, is now openly known. The police have tried to persuade Ravi to change the programme, but he is adamant. No, he will *not* cancel the programme, he will not get someone else instead of Hasina, he will *not* convert a public performance into a small closed-room one. It's going to be like it always was, he insists.

It's Hasina who has been unhappy at the thought of causing trouble, she's been dithering. She's here now to speak to Hari, to apologize to him, she says.

'What for?'

The parrot, which had set up a squawking when Hasina entered, suddenly falls silent.

'It's because of me that you were attacked. Those blows were meant for me. They must have thought Madhu was me.'

I find it hard to extract a single thread from the tangled skein of memories of that day. The only clear memory that comes to me is that of anger -- anger at being forced to crouch on the ground, at the ignominy of my position, down there among all those trampling feet.

Certain images still escape me, they whirl around in a dark, chaotic maelstrom. The final moments of madness between Som and me, when I, driven to desperation by the wildness of a man I could no longer recognize, cried out loudly.

But there's nothing that tells me I was the focus, the target of the attack. In fact, they pushed me aside -- or was it Hari who did that? He can't remember, either.

'But what does it matter now? It's over. And in no way are you responsible for what happened.'

'I've told Patil saheb I'm not going to sing.'

'And he's accepted your decision?'

'N-n-o. But once he understands that I'm not going to change my mind, I think he will . . .'

Hari tells her of Lata's theory that this is the work of outsiders, he tells her of Lata's faith in Bhavanipur. He agrees with her, he says. This is the work of politicians who're trying to extract some advantage for themselves out of this. The elections are in a few months . . .

'What does it matter who's behind these things? The results are the same. I'm scared, Haribhai. My parents live in Bombay, my mother was so shocked after the riots, she fell ill.'

It's always the innocent who suffer, I don't want anyone to die, I don't want people to suffer because of me . . .'

Abruptly I go to my room. I can hear Hasina's voice, Hari's, the parrot's deep guttural croaks that sound like

I try to be reasonable, to tell myself that it was merely the body reminding me of its existence, like it does when I draw back from touching the copper boiler.

snores. The murmurs cease, the door bangs. The parrot starts again, stops. There is complete silence in the house. Hari comes to my room.

'Madhu?'

I see from his face that he knows, he knows why I left the room.

'Do you want to speak of it?'

I look dumbly at him.

'I remember, very vaguely, reciting the Surya-namaskar that day. It's like a dream, but I can remember that you got up and walked away when I said *'Adityaya namaha'*. Is it so hard even to hear your son's name?'

After all these days, after so many months, suddenly it's time for me to confront the chaos, to make sense of it, to speak of it, to convert the fractured images, the vague shapes and sounds into a coherent word pattern.

I spoke to the silence, I pleaded with it. 'Come home, Adit, come home, Adit, please come home.' I cried out the same words over and over again. What else was there that I could say to him, what more did I want to say, anyway?

Certain images still escape me, they whirl around in a dark, chaotic maelstrom. The final moments of madness between Som and me, when I, driven to desperation by the wildness of a man I could no longer recognize, cried out loudly. The pain and darkness in my head, the thudding sound -- was it Som banging my head against the wall, or was I doing it to myself? And then Adit's face, his anguished face, his panicked cries. And who was it who cried out, 'Go away, Adit'? Was it Som, or was it I? Whose voice was it that drove him away, that sent him to his death? At times -- more often -- it is my own voice I hear shouting at Adit, telling him to go away, at other times, it's Som's voice that says those words. Did Adit come to us, did he come between us, did he try to stop the senseless violence? I don't know. I can only remember the sudden silence, the cessation of all sound, the emptiness in my head that only moments ago had been full of pain and darkness. And Som's blank face, the rage that had suffused him for so long, spent, leaving behind a hollow man.

These are the things I can't speak of, these are the things I don't speak of to Hari. I begin with the waiting, the two days and two nights of waiting for Adit to return, the two days and two nights of sitting by the phone, waiting for it to ring, waiting for Adit's voice to speak. But after that first night, when it rang four times, and I heard Adit's voice once, it was never Adit.

'He's a going out with the tide . . .'

We no longer believe that there are any links between our lives and the ebb and flow of the sea, the movements and conjunctions of the planets, the phases of the moon. Yet, at times, an ancient belief struggles through the layers of reason and reason itself wonders: placed as we are in the midst of all these phenomena, knowing how they are all connected, how can we alone not be linked to the rhythms of the universe? Why do we imagine that we humans are set apart from the rest of creation which is linked in so many mysterious ways we can never hope to decipher? Why is the unseen and the unknown the impossible to us?

December, January, February -- mobs running amok in the city.

Bai didn't believe in God, either -- she has never said this, she doesn't have to, her refusal to sing bhajans tells me this as clearly as if she has confessed it to me.

They say your identity is stamped on every cell of your body, your signature is all over it. Did they see -- Adit's name when they collected the limbs and gave them my son's name?

These things have never happened before, not this way. I have heard Leela speak of what happened after Independence -- in '47, '48. But this time there is a difference. There's a sense of an efficient malignant force at work, working out its plans through these mobs. Even we, who live in our safe middle-class apartments, way above the ground, can feel the subterranean amblings. Even I, caught up in my conflict with Som, can see the difference when I go out on the streets. For thirty years I've moved about in this city and never once known fear. But now, it lies like a pall above us. The streets are almost deserted at night, and those who have to be out look nervously over their shoulders and walk at a rapid pace. Hostility, suspicion and anger, which have become a part of my life at home with Som, are waiting for me when I go out of the house as well. There's a miasma, the smell of disaster in the air, but we are still free of it, still immune to it. Or so we think.

It is the third day of our waiting for Adit. We have lived through two days and nights of his absence, of not knowing where he is, nights choked with fear and grief. But there's hope, too; he will come back, surely he will return home, any moment he will be here with us. Som has gone out, I don't know where, and I am alone at home. It is so silent that I can hear the two clocks ticking, two separate sounds, the time in the two never merging. For me, it is like two different racks on which I am stretched, each moment, each ticking second, one more since Adit left, one more without his return.

I am sitting by the phone, as I have been since that first night. The first time I picked up the phone that night, I heard Adit's voice, I knew it was Adit, though I could not get a word of what he was saying. It rang again, three times after that, but each time there was only silence. Nevertheless, I knew that each time it was Adit on the line. I spoke to the silence, I pleaded with it. 'Come home, Adit, come home, Adit, please come home.' I cried out the same words over and over again. What else was there that I could say to him, what more did I want to say, anyway? The final, the fourth time it rang, Som took the phone from my hand, he pulled it out of my tightly grasping hand and held it to his ear.

'There's no one,' he said. 'It's dead.'

He didn't understand, it was Adit, I could identify even the silence as Adit's. It didn't matter to me that he did not speak; he could hear me, he could hear my voice, that was enough. And I had to speak, I knew I could convince him to come back home.

All day I sat by the phone.

The British bestowed dignity on whatever they built, they built things to last. I say this aloud to Lata, but Lata, a child of independent India, is not interested.

Each time it rang, I picked it up on the instant. And when it was neither Adit, nor his silence, I put it back, keeping my hand tightly pressed on it, shutting off all those voices clogging the phone, preventing Adit from reaching us. And then, remembering that, perhaps, even at that moment, Adit was trying to get through, I took my hand off the phone and waited for it to ring, for Adit's voice to come to me.

Now all that has ended. I have almost given up hope of hearing Adit's voice on the phone. It rings repeatedly, but it's always for Som, patients each time, asking me where Som is. And repeatedly, a voice that gives no name, saying, 'Tell doctor-saab not to go out today, tell doctor-saab to stay at home.'

For the first time I begin to notice something odd, the silence not only in our flat, but outside. An eerie lack of sound. The world has changed for us, we no longer have any routine left. These two days have distanced us from it so much that it lies at an immeasurable distance. And so, at first it does not sink in, the fact that the silence has given way to sounds, sounds of cars driving in, doors slamming, the lift moving up and down, children's feet running along the corridors, children's voices calling out -- children who should have been at school at this time. All these sounds, unusual for the time of the day, are like the untimely flight of birds frightened by something.

The door of our flat opens and the phone rings at almost the same time as Som enters.

He picks it up and listens. Something in his expression startles me, I get up in one wild flurried movement. Adit! He sees me, he makes a gesture that says 'no, it isn't Adit'. He listens, he nods, he says no more than *'Thik hai, thik hai'*. When he puts it down he tells me it was someone asking him not to go out. To stay at home. He tells me then what has happened in the city,

what is happening to it. He tells me of the bombs that have gone off across the city, a series of macabre bonfires lighting it up. The Stock Exchange Building, he says. Air India . . .

I listen to him, not really interested in what he is saying. What has this to do with Adit? It's Adit I'm waiting for, it's news of him I want. I say so to Som and he listens without a word. We sit across each other at the table, both of us silent, both of us waiting. A little later, he puts his head down on the table. Is he crying? Is there something he hasn't told me? I shake him, I rouse him out of it, but there are no tears on his face. Just blankness. Some time in the evening, the bell rings. Som opens the door and comes back to tell me he is going out, he will be back in a while. I wait, I don't know for how long. Time has ceased

ticking, I can no longer hear the sounds, as if both the clocks have stopped. I can hear only the pounding in my head, the blood singing in my ears -- these are the clocks counting the minutes for me now.

Later -- how much later?-- they come in. Chandru, Tony and Som. Yes, Som is with them, it is his face I look at. And in an instant I know what they have come to tell me, I know what they are going to say. I don't want to know, I don't want to hear the words. I can't remember what I say or do, I can only remember a voice calling out my name over and over again, someone sobbing. And then silence again.

They say your identity is stamped on every cell of your body, your signature is all over it. Did they see -- Adit's name when they collected the limbs and gave them my son's name? They say you can't be identified by your possessions. But they identified my son by his -- his watch, his clothes, his ring. . .

The flat is crowded. I'm surrounded by people, people crying, sitting silently, speaking to me, putting their arms about me. None of it reaches me. Somewhere, in the labyrinthine tunnels of my mind, I can hear the phone ringing, I can hear the silence that is Adit. I'm still sitting by the phone, I allow no one else to pick it up. But each time I take it, there are different voices, all of them saying the same things: *I heard the news. Is it true; I'm sorry . . . we are sorry . . . we're so sorry . . .*

What are they sorry about? What are all these people doing in our house? I want them to go away, to leave us alone. Adit won't come home until they've gone, I know that. And finally, thankfully, Som and I are left to ourselves.

'He's dead, Madhu. Our son is dead. Listen to me, just listen, he's dead. I cremated him myself. Adit is dead, Madhu, he's gone, stop waiting for him.'

I won't listen, I refuse to hear these words. They keep coming, Chandru, Tony, Rekha, Nisha, Rajani -- even Phillo comes, her face, wet with tears, as swollen as her feet in her too-tight shoes. Ketaki holds me close, she cries, but it's like meeting an acquaintance from a past life. At last, tired of meeting my intransigence, understanding it's no use, they stop coming. Tony is the only one who won't give up.

You must accept it, Madhu. Adit's gone. He won't come back. Cry for him, mourn him, but don't wait for him.'

I understand now what I have to do. It's not enough to believe he's alive, to say that the body they cremated was not Adit's. I have to do more, I have to go out and find him. I start going out every day, I begin looking for him. And one day I am rewarded, I see him. He's part of a crowd waiting at the traffic light to cross the road. Even as I move towards him, the lights change, the throng races across. I run after them, narrowly escaping collision with a taxi -- the lights have changed again, the traffic comes roaring down the road, the taxi driver mouths curses at me. I am uncaring of everything but Adit. I must get to him, I must catch him. But he's disappeared.

It doesn't matter. I've seen him, he's alive. I say this to Som. I'll find him and bring him home tomorrow, I promise him. His face changes, I can gauge his disbelief, I can see pity for me on his face. But I go out the next day buoyed by hope. This time I'll get to him, I'll speak to him, I'll bring him back home. Som will see I am right, he'll realize I was always right. And yes, the next day I see Adit again, but once more it's only a glimpse. I see him board a bus, a bus that moves away before I can get near. It doesn't matter, I've noted the number of the bus. I take the next one, I go all the way to the terminus, but it's no use.

I'm not unhappy. The glimpse I had was reward enough. Now each morning I wake up with the hope, with the thought -- I'll see Adit today. And I do. Flashing glimpses, but they keep me alive, they keep me going. I roam the streets till evening and then hurry back home, along with all those men and women returning at the end of a day's work. I sleep a sound dreamless sleep at night now -- it's like a death almost -- and in the morning, I join the army of workers once again. I am scarcely at home. I don't know who cooks, but there is food on the table when I return.

'Stop this,' Som pleads with me. 'Stop it, Madhu, it's madness.'

Tony begs me to go out for a holiday with him and Rekha. 'Just for a few days,' he says. 'It'll do you good,' he says. As if I'm ill, as if I'm convalescent. Som and Chandru want me to take some pills, they want me to stay home, they beg me not to go out any more.

These people are shadows, their words only meaningless sounds. The only reality is my son, the sight of my son.

Then one day, all of a sudden, the sightings cease. I go to all the places where I've seen him, but there's nothing, nobody. It's the third day of my fruitless wandering. It's evening and I'm on the beach. How did I get here? I don't know how long I've been here, either. But I've been sitting here for so long that my back has become anaesthetized against the sharp hurting rock I'm leaning on, my body has hollowed out a home in the sand under me. I sit and watch the feet go past me. In a while it gets dark. I can feel, rather than see, the darkness. The voices become whispery strands flung about by the breeze, the sea is louder, the foreground to all the noises now, not the background. Occasionally a pair of feet pause before me, then move on. One pair does not go, it stands before me. I can hear a voice saying things, soft murmurs loaded with filth, obscenities. I feel a hand on my shoulder. I took up and in an instant the hands drop, the feet move on. Once again there's someone who won't go, another pair of feet, a different voice. But there are no obscenities this time. Instead, the voice is gentle, persuasive, saying, 'Go home, Bai, don't sit here, it's not safe.' This voice, this pair of feet, too, move on in a while.

Much later, I hear a voice and I look up instantly. For a moment I think it is my father, the face is like his in those last days when he struggled for each breath. But it's Som, his face as spent and exhausted as my dying father's. He does not speak. He puts out his hand. I get up and go home with him.

'Have a bath,' he says. When I come out of the bathroom, he's waiting at the dining table. There's only one plate -- mine. Silently he watches me eat 'Now go to bed,' he says. For some reason, I go to Adit's room, the room I've avoided all these days. And it is there, at the sight of the room I haven't entered for so long, a room tidied by someone, everything in its place -- it's in this dead room that the madness ends for me. I know Adit is dead, I know he will never return.

If Som hears me sobbing, he doesn't come to me, he leaves me alone, like I left him to himself when I heard him sobbing the first night after Adit's death. I face the grief of our son's death alone as he did.

I can't go on, I have to stop. Hari has listened to me in silence. When I pause, he waits patiently. When the silence stretches, he makes a small movement. I restrain him with a gesture and continue with what I have to say. I tell him about how they haunt me, those last three days of his life. I can't come to terms with my ignorance of those days, I am obsessed by the need to reclaim them from the darkness. Sometimes I think I could have borne his death if I had been able to be with him, to see him die. We have a right to share it, the most profound human experience of death, with those we love, we have a right to be with them, to travel part of the way, even if we cannot go all the way. But I was denied that right, I was deprived of it. I don't know, I will never know how he faced the moment.

Once again I pause, and this time he remains still. He knows that there's something more I have to say.

They say, they all say that I've changed, that Som and I have changed. How can you not change after meeting death? Death changes you, how can it not? But nobody knows, except those who have gone through it, what that change is. You cross a threshold and enter a region of utter hopelessness. I've got into it, I'm trapped in it, I can't get out. I try, but it's impossible. How can I live like this? How long will I live this way? And what for, oh God, what for?

Words have scooped out a great hole inside me and grief pours out of this with the force of a tidal wave. I am sobbing, I can hear my own sobs, I can feel hands patting me on the back, I feel an arm going about me . . .

I draw back fiercely, thrusting the arm, the person, away, crying, 'No! No!'

And then I see it's Hari, his face twisted in pain, holding his injured arm, the arm I've pushed away with such violence . . .

He looks at me for a moment, on the verge of speech, then goes away without speaking, leaving me to myself.

The son being babied for the last time, being fed by his mother for the last time before he enters the world of men. The last time the mother can claim him as her child before letting him go.

'Are you all right, Kaku?' Lata asks me. Has she done something to hurt me? Has Hari? If they have done anything wrong --unintentionally, of course -- I should scold them, I have the right to do that, I can shout at them, I can be angry. But I must forgive them, they have the right to ask for that, haven't they?

Lata's anxiety and her concern about me push their way through these light, trying-to-be-casual words. I understand her distress, but there's no way I can respond, except with the meaningless patter of 'I'm okay, there's no problem, no, really, there isn't, don't worry, it has nothing to do with Hari and you . . .'

I can see from her face that she's hurt. She thinks my words are a distancing, a rejection of her. But what else can I say? And it is true that this has nothing to do with Hari or with her. The problem lies in me. It's my own self I hate, my own face I can't bear to see in the mirror. It's not only that I imagined something that wasn't there -- Hari's touch was the touch of compassion, no more than that -- it's my own response that has shaken me. My body's almost Pavlovian response to his touch. I try to be reasonable, to tell myself that it was merely the body reminding me of its existence, like it does when I draw back from touching the copper boiler. I ask myself, am I not making the same mistake Som did, am I not giving the body's actions more importance than I should? I know I should put this response away, where it belongs, among all those other spurts of desire for anonymous male bodies. Men do this better, they're better at dealing with the needs of their bodies, they accept it as natural, as part of our human identity.

But it's harder to convince myself and even harder to say these things to Lata. I retreat into myself instead, I spend more time out of the house. I prefer to be with Bai, her room has become a kind of refuge for me. She's the one person who won't ask me any questions, who won't be hurt by my words, or my silences, either. She sleeps most of the time, short naps into which she keeps dropping, conceding, it seems to me, these little bits to that final great sleep, keeping it at bay with these morsels. She moves almost imperceptibly from one state to another, drifting between sleep and waking so lightly, so easily, that they seem the same. Yet, there are times when she comes out of the blankness to an agitation, a wild burbling that makes no sense. I wonder then whether there's something she is trying to say, or whether it's just a frantic panicking, a wild flailing of wings at being trapped in a cage of non-understanding, of helplessness. Anything is possible in that mind where words finally have lost their place and only images, formless images, are left.

One day she makes a small gesture, a slight raising of a hand, an uplifted look, the eyes coming back then to rest on her own wasted body, her own dying self. Is she asking -- where is God? Where is that God who has done this to me?

'There must be Heaven or we must despair, for life seems bitter, brief, blank.'

Charlotte Bronte's words, which I came upon, not through Joe, but on my own. And when I did, I remembered all those graves and thought: what choice did she have but to cling on desperately to a belief in God? A God in Heaven looking after us, God: that last resort of humankind. But that comfort is not for me, I've never had it. I've believed in people -- how could I not, living as I did with Leela and Joe? But I lost this faith when I saw the cruelty of the mobs, all those faceless men who cold-bloodedly planned the death of innocents. Bai didn't believe in God, either -- she has never said this, she doesn't have to, her refusal to sing bhajans tells me this as clearly as if she has confessed it to me. But Bai believed in herself. And she has her music. Unresponsive as she seems now to almost everything, she responds, even if minimally, to the music that drifts into the room. Once, it is Abhay's voice that brings on an agitation in her. It seems to me that she is asking, 'Who is that?'

'It's Abhay, Bai. Abhay, Hasina's student.'

It means nothing to her. Another day, when we hear Hasina's voice, I see tears in Bai's eyes. She makes a small sideways movement of her head and the tears run down the sides of her face into her hair.

What are those tears for? Is she remembering something from her past? Are there some memories still intact inside that damaged brain? Or is it just the beauty of Hasina's voice, the music itself?

There is no regeneration in the brain and the heart -- these are the two seats of death. The cells once dead are dead forever.

Joe's words which Som and Chandru recalled with laughter, laughing at themselves for having chosen these two 'hopeless' specialities. No regeneration in the heart and the mind? But here's Bai moved to tears by music. How do we know in what hidden crevices they lurk, our dreams, our thoughts, our loves, our fears? How do we know that they don't continue to exist, concealing themselves, guarding themselves from the blows that come, from the blood vessels that burst? How do we know?

Naada Brahma Swara Ishwara.

Hasina's voice, Hasina teaching her students, the children repeating the words after her, their voices following the trajectory of hers.

Naada Brahma Swara Ishwara.

The sound is Brahma, the note is God. The sound and the note -- the beginning of the world. And the word? What about it?

'You must sing, Hasina, you must do it for Bai, I have been saying to Hasina like all the others. But Hasina is unrelenting. And Lata is certain the solution lies with me. 'Write the article, Kaku,' she says. 'Once people know what this programme means to us in Bhavanipur, once people read about how many Muslims have sung in this temple, it'll be different. Just you see!'

The word is important, the word matters. Lata's belief.

If we think we can influence people for the worse, why can't we believe they can be influenced for good?

Tony's belief, which Lata is echoing.

To both of them, the word is the flashing sword, the flaming torch, the disperser of darkness and ignorance, the bestower of knowledge.

Do I believe this? I don't know. But I want Hasina to have her chance. I want her to sing in the temple where Bai once sang in her Guruji's memory, where Bai's Guruji himself sang the glory of the goddess every evening and where his disciples gathered every year to remember him. Hasina, Bai's disciple -- keeping her name alive, continuing Bai's musical existence. Hasina must sing there. If there is the smallest chance that I can help, I must do it.

Lata and I leave home early in the morning. In a kind of unspoken agreement we haven't told anyone, except Hari, about our going. Nor do we speak on the way of my last aborted visit. Lata asks no questions about the accident, but obviously she knows where it happened, for once we're past the spot, she relaxes, she begins to point out the sights to me. There's the railway station where Bai got off and walked through the fields to Guruji's house. No fields now, of course. A cotton ginning factory, instead, which explains the bits of white fluff on the electric wires overhead and on the bushes, giving them a kind of bedraggled Christmas tree effect. We enter the railway station, deserted now since the little railway line was abandoned. The stone exterior still has some dignity, as also the softened beauty of aging stone. The British bestowed dignity on whatever they built, they built things to last. I say this aloud to Lata, but Lata, a child of independent India, is not interested. To her, the British and their rule are a part of history hooks, as distant as the Mughals and the Marathas. However intact it seems from the outside, inside the place is encrusted with bird droppings -- we can hear the frenzied flutter of wings the moment we enter -- and strewn with rags and plastic bags left behind by homeless people who've spent the night here.

The road curves along a lake and once past it the hills appear before us. 'There was gold in those hills once,' Lata says. 'It was only a small -- what do you call it? Vein? Anyway, there was not much and it was soon over. But the boys used to come here searching for gold, they used to boast they'd found it. As kids we were stupid enough to believe them. We thought . . . Look! There's the temple, Kaku.'

It's a small building, looking even smaller against the backdrop of the hills. Lata parks her scooter under the peepul tree, we wash our feet at the tap outside and walking through the narrow doorway, step down into the courtyard. The branches of the peepul tree cover the courtyard and loom over the temple, as the hills seemed to do when we saw it from a distance. The main shrine is right in the centre of the courtyard. It's significant, I've been told, not for its architectural beauty or its antiquity, but because it has been a place of uninterrupted worship for nearly a hundred years. Built by Ravi's great-grandfather, it has, since the beginning, been the family's responsibility and pride.

It's quiet inside, the cooing of the birds mingling in a muted harmony with the murmur of human voices. Lata is silent, confronting, I imagine, her memories. But it's impossible for her to contain them within herself for long; she begins to speak, to share her memories with me. As a child, she used to come here with her mother, who visited the place every Friday. 'My mother never missed a visit and until I got into a proper school, nor did I. I think of her running about the courtyard, circumambulating the shrine, like some children are now doing. But Lata's links to the temple go back to even before her birth. Her mother came here when she was pregnant for the third time, praying to Bhavani for a son after two daughters. Instead, there was Lata. Lata smiles cheekily as she tells me this.

The priest comes out of the shrine when he sees us. Lata greets him, she speaks to him with the intimacy of an old friend. 'We were in school together,' she tells me when I join them. 'We were in the same class. He was a brilliant scholar, he got a rank in his S.S.C., but instead of going to college like all of us, he went off to Benaras, to the Sanskrit University, and came back to become a priest. Now, he's a saint and he doesn't want to talk to sinners like me. isn't that so, Shrinivasacharya?' She pronounces the name with a deliberate, verging-on-the-impertinent formality.

The priest, a grave, unsmiling man gives her a reproving look and says something to her in Kannada, remonstrating with her, I think. She laughs. He turns to me and speaking in chaste Hindi, says, 'This girl still hasn't grown up. She's just like she was in school.'

She offers him our bag of offerings and he goes away. I can hear the crack of the coconut. He returns, lights the lamp and begins the aarti.

Like all dark stone goddesses, Bhavani is beautiful. Each time the lamp lights up her face and focuses on the kumkum on the forehead, on the gleaming jewels and the eyes, I think of the goddess riding triumphantly in her palki on the shoulders of men, I see the flickering lights and shadows on her face, I imagine Guruji's voice raised in adoring devotion. The aarti over, Lata goes off with the priest -- she has to meet his mother, she tells me -- and I go round the temple. There are very few people inside. Only one large group, actually, who are now on the pillared veranda that runs along the outer wall. They've just performed a puja and are getting ready for breakfast. Or is it lunch? I see that the banana leaves being laid down are the large-sized ones. But only a few leaves are being placed, certainly not enough for the whole group. And then I notice, with a heart-stopping pang, a mother and child sitting down before one of the leaves and I know it's an *upanayanam*. This is the *matru-bhojan*. I don't want to watch, I can't see this, but I seem rooted to the spot. The boy -- he's just about eight or nine -- looks self-conscious and awkward in his dhoti and bare chest, unhappy about something -- maybe, the head-shaving that is soon to follow. He's sitting next to his mother, a few other children clustered round them. I'm a little surprised by their seriousness, their solemnity. There's no joking, no teasing of the boy. They're trying to persuade the boy to sit on his mother's lap. He's reluctant, but he does so finally, perching himself on the very edge of her silky lap. Mother and son. The son being babied for the last time, being fed by his mother for the last time before he enters the world of men. The last time the mother can claim him as her child before letting him go.

But I didn't, I never let go, I held on, until he was taken away from me.

'Shall we go, Kaku?'

Lata takes me round the place. There was once a mango orchard behind the temple, she says. Now there is a row of houses, built for those who are working in the temple. The aura of sanctity and the murmur of mantras gives way to a cosy domesticity, to the mundane sounds of vessels being scrubbed and clothes being washed. Guruji's house was beyond the orchard, but like the orchard, it too no longer exists. We go up to the lake. Beyond it is the highway, and we can see the traffic rushing along. The sounds come to us from across the lake like the sounds in a dream, an illusion of activity we're shut out of.

'It's a pity we can't stay till evening. That's when it's most beautiful. The evening aarti is somehow magical. It's so peaceful and quiet and when they ring the bell, the echoes come back from the hills. They light lamps all along the wall and around the shrine; it looks really wonderful.'

When we get back to the temple after visiting the priest's home -- his mother asked Lata to take me there -- the *upanayanam* group is still there. They're getting ready for lunch, the real meal this time, not the ritual one. Lata goes to the priest to get our prasad and I see him introduce Lata to one of the women. They converse for a few moments, then come up to me.

'They want us to have lunch with them -- if it's all right with you, Kaku?'

The woman seconds the invitation with a smile; she's been told, obviously, that I can't speak Kannada. I nod and she goes back to arrange our plates. Lata gets into conversation with the woman next to her during lunch, and I marvel again at the ease with which she is able to reach even a stranger. I guess that they're discovering links between their families and I'm right. Lata, who turns to me every now and then, sharing the information she has, tells me they are distantly related. As I listen to Lata speaking to the other women, to me, I'm filled with wonder and pleasure at the ease with which she negotiates her way through the network of links. Once I hear Lata clucking her tongue sympathetically and she tells me, at the first opportunity she gets, that there has been a death in the family. Therefore the small, unostentatious ceremony, therefore the sombre mood.

The moment lunch is over, the child who's had his *upanayanam* races to the place where they've piled their bags and picking up one, pulls out some clothes. He's eager, I can see, to change out of his dhoti, to get back into the clothes which will allow him to run about, to be a child again. A woman goes to him and begins to remonstrate with him, she tries to take the bag from him. He holds on to it obstinately, his body and his face speaking the language of obstinacy and resistance. Suddenly it comes to me: *this is* the boy's mother, not the one on whose lap he'd sat during the *matru bhojan*. I realize now what was wrong with that earlier mother-and-child picture, how stiff and formal it was, with none of the curlicues that add life to a picture. This woman's face has the tinge of melancholy that hints at a recent sorrow, and this, as well as the simplicity of her sari and lack of jewels, tells me whose death it is they're mourning. She senses my look on her, she says something to the boy who listens, forgetting his tussle for the bag. He gives me a wary, under-his-lashes look, but obediently follows his mother when she comes to me.

'Give him your blessings,' she says to me. And to him, 'Do your namaskar and ask for her blessings.'

I can understand what she's saying, even if I don't know all the words. Obediently the boy lets himself down in a namaskar at my feet, the skinny body straight as an arrow, the scapular bones, like two wings on either side, slanted like those of a bird in flight, the newly-shaven head giving him the look of a fledgling bird. He gets up swiftly in almost the same movement. I touch him on the head.

What do I say? Ayushman bhava? Chirayu bhava?

May you live long. But what blessing can contend against our mortality? Mustard seeds to protect us from evil, blessings to confer long life -- nothing works. And yet we go on. Simple remedies? No, they're desperate remedies and we go on with them because, in truth, there is nothing else.

'*Sukhi bhava*,' I say finally to the child.

Som's father's usual words of blessing. 'Be happy'. That's possible, that's something we can hope to have some control over.

'What's your name?'

'Bhaskar.'

He gives his mother an appealing look; with a smile she relinquishes the bag to him. He flees with it and in a few moments is a child like the rest, racing about, climbing the tree, holding his cap firmly on his head to protect his bare skull.

'You know Kannada?' she asks me in Hindi.

'A little. I'm learning it from Lata,' I reply in Kannada.

'We were very happy you shared our lunch,' she says with a smile -- she has a beautiful smile -- a smile that takes the cold formality off the words, and goes away.

I watch her retreating back and think so many of us walking this earth with our pain, our sorrow concealed within ourselves, so many of us hiding our suffering, going about as if all is well, so many of us surviving our loss, our grief. It's a miracle, nothing less than a miracle.

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