

## SHARP SHOOTER

PARAMITA SATPATHY TRIPATHY

'What are you doing there?'

'Oh sir, *namaskar*...speaking, sir...' he whispered into the phone, pressing his mobile and right palm against his ear and covering his mouth with the other hand. As he spoke, he tiptoed out of Bhavan Theatre. Once he reached the foyer, he straightened up and smiled.

'Namaskar, I had just dropped in... The Corporation MD had called me here...'

'What's happening there?'

'Who knows? Death anniversary of some poet. His son was a high-ranking officer in the Ministry of External Affairs. This MD fellow with whom I have come is a friend of someone from the family. I am just accompanying him.'

'Whose anniversary is it? Some Oriya poet?'

'The name is written outside. There's a banner on the stage inside carrying his name, but I cannot remember off hand. Would you like to know, sir? Let me go inside and check.'

'Oh no, do not bother!'

The man hung up.

This MD fellow is really boring. But what could one do, mused the man, feeling quite delighted within. The officer had finally fallen neatly into his trap. Initially, he had behaved as if he was a paragon of honesty. But he knew every trick in the book to entice such hard-to-please officers. True, it took a little more time than he had expected,

but Are not patience and sweet words the biggest weapons in this trade? The man again smiled self-contentedly and looked at his watch. Oh, It is 7.30 pm already! God knows what this MD is doing inside!

It had proved so difficult to tame him! It took almost six months. And this guy wrote poetry too, with two collections to his credit, and meetings and speeches on his literary works! He had to attend all of them. What a waste of time! Initially he went to survey the audience to see if there were any high officers or dignitaries present. Then he would sit at a distance, checking his e-mail on his palm-sized mobile phone. In his trade it was essential to call up important persons every once in a while and enquire about their well being and to offer his services in case they required anything! He would stay in touch with them and send funny messages on the mobile. A handful of flattering ones too! This is how he kept himself occupied at such meetings.

The idiot MD was still inside the auditorium. It was seven forty-five. There were so many speakers on the stage who were yet to speak—they would all deliver long speeches on the poet! They were elaborating; he was like this and he was like that, and he was such a fine writer! Look brother, whatever he did, he did; now he is dead—why waste so much time and energy over him? Rubbish! He was getting restless.

He called for his driver and instructed him to wait for the gentleman who had come with him and drop him wherever he wanted. He also briefed him not to tell the MD how he himself had gone home. He got into an auto-rickshaw and asked to be dropped at the market. He sent a message to the MD that he had to rush home to attend to his son's illness; the car was at his disposal.

He called his wife on the way. 'I pushed a big deal through today. Get ready quickly and join me for dinner.'

'*Achha!*' his wife exclaimed with joy. 'But we have king-size crabs from Chilka lake. Tunu has already eaten the crab curry and says it tastes fabulous. Let us eat at home tonight.' She was silent for a second, and then continued, 'Look, I had gone to the Hanuman temple this morning and offered a silver laddoo and it bore fruit so quickly.'

You were so busy for the last few days. Where are you? The temple must be open now. Why do not you go and pay your respects?’

True! He directed the auto-rickshaw driver to take him to the Hanuman temple. His cell phone rang again.

‘Did I tell you I ordered a gold chain two months ago? It is a very thin one studded with only twelve diamonds. The shop owner said it would cost one-and-a-half lakh rupees. I could sense since morning that something good was coming our way. I have booked the piece,’ she said ingratiatingly.

‘Okay, do whatever you wish,’ the man sounded jubilant.

Today is an auspicious day, he thought on his way back from the temple. He had been pursuing this project for the past six months and had finally achieved his goal. He complimented himself. It had seemed so tough initially! He had wondered if he could tackle this hard nut. The officer seemed very stubborn and unyielding; he would never look him straight in the eye! He had been very apprehensive in the beginning. It took a lot of effort to bring him slowly into the web of his confidence. What did he not do for him? He had accompanied him to Bhitarkanika to count the crocodiles and then to watch the nesting of Olive Ridley turtles he had spent the entire night on the sandy beach at Rushikulya river mouth... such ridiculous stuff! The officer had a passion for greenery. He was a simple man but he had to be trapped anyhow. To please him, he had to order a dozen very expensive books on animals and environment from abroad. It is fruitless to ponder over those things now. His arrow had finally found its mark and proved he was a real sharpshooter! He reclined in the auto-rickshaw comfortably.

The trick is that one has to be an apt listener, paying attention to whatever the man says. Then, you have to figure out his character. Then, you have to find what his needs are and make a list of the same. After that, these needs must be magnified in such a way that the target feels everything would become meaningless if he could not meet them. It has to be continuously drilled into his psyche, and that too, subtly. He has to realise that acquiring these things would completely transform his life.

One has to find out what things the man was interested in and tell him that he, too, enjoyed them. Time, energy and money have to be invested. The most important thing was to have loads of patience and develop an extremely soft-spoken demeanour. In other words, one had to be a servile 'Yes Sir' man all along and nod to everything he would say! But look at the returns! Look at how far he had travelled in life! Fifteen years back, he was riding a second-hand scooter and now he has three big cars, one scooter for the driver and a moped for his cook. He had climbed up the ladder and shifted to a huge apartment in the city from their two-room first floor flat. He also had flats in all the major metros like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore and Hyderabad. He grew richer by the year. He also owned five or six farmhouses in Orissa with residential buildings in them.

There was a time when he could not afford to gift his wife even a gold chain. Now she purchased diamond necklaces every month and did not deign to look at silver or gold. They had half-a-dozen servants at home. He invited important and powerful people home for lunch and dinner. Every political leader, high official, industrialist and businessman was his personal friend. The fact was that he had discovered the dark secrets of these men by luring them into his confidence and he now exploited them to his own benefit.

But he himself did not possess any such vile qualities. He had reason to pride himself on the fact that he did not smoke or booze and was never in bad company, nor was he generally promiscuous. He never harmed anyone. But his enemies would swear about his cunningness. Let them say what they wanted to! All these were signs of their jealousy. Like everybody else he was only trying to earn a living and why should he bother about those who could not achieve anything in life?

A 275 crore deal had been struck today. Not exactly a trifle. The middleman's dues were ten per cent and ten per cent of that was his own share—two crores and 75 lakhs! Later, officers and politicians who had made gains from the deal would also approach him to invest their money. The interest earned would be split equally among them. He could not even imagine the sum he would finally pocket!

His heart swelled with happiness. He could not help complimenting himself on his efficiency. Rarely does one achieve so much. Many equally efficient and clever people had not done nearly as well. He was favoured both by Destiny and God. He joined his palms and prayed, 'Oh, Lord Hanuman!' He must remind his wife to arrange for a yagyan and a feast for Brahmins at his home next Tuesday.

The phone rang.

'Hope I did not trouble you much. The meeting was so absorbing that I sat through it,' the MD said.

'No, no, sir, what are you saying? I liked it too, but I could not stay on. I had to take my son to the doctor. He had flu but he is fine now. How was your meeting?'

'It was excellent. I never imagined that such a serious literary discourse could be so interesting! I would have missed a real good time had I not attended. Did you know what the first speaker said? He said, Mansingh was a romantic poet and went on to recite line after line from his poetry! How enchanting and deep his love poems really are... *Ei sahakara tale, sedina priyara karakankana bedhi thila mora gale...(Under this mango tree, that night, I was in your embrace...)*

I just cannot seem to get over the poems. Okay, boss, thanks a ton! Do come over tomorrow or day after,' the MD hung up.

His words kept echoing in the man's ears. Although he had heard poems earlier he had neither the patience nor the inclination to try and understand them. The poet's name was Mansingh but he could not even recall his first name.

The speaker was reciting the lines...

Love poems!

Does this MD write love poems as well? When his book was released two months ago, he himself had organized a party in a five-star hotel. The MD had gifted him two copies

of the book, making it seem as if he was giving him two bricks of gold! And he had told him, you must read the book and let me know your opinion positively. Later, he had flicked through the book. But as he was not in the habit of reading anything beyond the daily newspapers, he had no patience for poetry. He wondered why so many people went ga ga over this kind of stuff!

He had asked his wife to scribble a few comments on the back page of the book so that he could quote them to the MD when they met next. She had opined that the gentleman's poems were really good. Very endearing love poems, *Tuma doi nila akhira atala gahirare...(in the depth of your blue eyes)*.

This had irritated him that day. While his wife was thus praising the MD's poems, there was a call on his cell phone. While he was still on the line, his wife had left, and he, too, had completely forgotten about the book.

But love? What kind of love is this?

Though he kept saying he was fifty, he knew he was past fifty-one now. Half of his hair had turned grey and he had been dyeing it for the last decade or so. His eldest son was studying in the USA and his daughter was through with her post-graduation. His youngest son, too, would soon appear for his Higher Secondary finals. All these years, he had never pondered about love. He was neither handsome nor possessed a personality a girl would fall for. He had no memory of any girl speaking to him in school though he would occasionally steal glances at them. In college, he had watched girls fluttering like colourful butterflies, their duppattas flowing, their bosoms taut! But he never had the guts to interact with them. He noticed them dotting on brilliant and handsome boys in the class, but he had never been part of that privileged group.

By the time he graduated, he was under pressure to support his family. Since he was the eldest son, he was forced to marry at the early age of twenty-six. When he protested that he could not support a wife, his father decided that he would somehow manage. He was married off to an ordinary girl from an ordinary family. His marital relationship with

his wife was not great but he was not attracted to any other woman either. He was smitten by worldly riches.

‘Do you know—the man who has only one life partner has a short life?’ one of his classmates had told him years ago. He had been in need of money then and his friend had fulfilled his needs willingly. They had gone to Kolkata and stayed in a five-star hotel. For the first time he had asked for a call girl, but the experience had not been particularly exciting and so he had never gone for it again.

But what, really, was love?

On reaching home he marched straight into his bedroom and called his wife loudly. She rushed in hurriedly and then spread the jewellery box with the diamond necklace before him. But he was not paying attention. ‘Do you like me? I mean, are you in love with me?’ he turned his wife’s face towards him holding her by the shoulders and peered into her eyes for an answer.

She was initially too shocked to say anything and simply stared at him. In her right hand was the half-open diamond box.

‘Tell me the truth—do you love me?’ he sounded impatient.

By now she had regained her composure and shook herself from his grip and put the diamond box on the dressing table. Then she turned sideways and looked at her husband, ‘What do you mean? What a strange question! If I do not love you, who do you think I love? Why are you asking such silly questions? Come, dinner is served downstairs. It will get cold.’ She scurried back to the ground floor.

This was not the reply he had wanted to hear. Was she deliberately evading him? When he was getting ready for his office next morning, his eyes fell on the book written by the MD. He picked it up and put it inside his expensive leather briefcase before getting into the car. He could not concentrate. This was quite unusual for him. He was feeling very depressed as well. He took the book out and began to read. Then he stared through

the glass window panes unseeingly. He stood up to leave. It was four in the afternoon. He dismissed his driver for the day and started driving the car himself. He did not know where he was going. A white temple suddenly caught his attention. He had never noticed it before. He parked his car and entered the shrine. Everything was scrupulously clean inside and it was sparsely crowded. It was a Jagannath temple. He came to the main sanctum where a recital was on. He bowed before the deity and sat down leaning against a pillar.

The girl who was reciting devotional songs was completely immersed in the music. A lovely, honeyed voice she had. There were a few listeners sitting around her.

Although she was not very fair, she had glowing skin and she wore her sari well and tastefully. He observed her intently. She was singing about the immortal love of Radha and Krishna. She sang a few more songs and then stopped, packed her harmonium and closed her notebook. The crowd around her began to disperse. She breathed a sigh and stood before the deity praying mutely with folded hands for a minute or so. Wrapping her pallu around her she now knelt before the god and then headed straight for the door. He, too, got up and followed her down the staircase.

‘You sing so well! Your voice is very sweet and you have a good sense of music.’

She was walking with her head slightly bowed and was startled. She paused for a moment and then looked at the man.

‘These days, it is difficult to come across someone who sings with such devotion. People sing differently these days.’ As he praised her, he took out two five-hundred rupee notes and offered them to her.

This enraged the girl and she blurted out, ‘I do not receive charity from my listeners. I sing at the temple and I receive a salary for this. If you want to donate to the temple, there is a donation box there.’ She turned and rushed away. He stood rooted to the ground, staring at her as she left. Then he climbed back up the stairs and deposited the



notes in the donation box and returned. He was still distracted but a smile now flickered on his lips.

Next day he finished off his day's work quickly and drove to the temple. The singing session was on. Like the day before, he leaned against the pillar and watched the girl as she sang.

She was looking even more beautiful and fresh than yesterday. He stood completely absorbed in her singing. He could not follow her song; he just stared at her.

Again, the session came to an end and the crowd began to disperse. Again, the girl got up and bowed to the deity. When she turned back, she saw the man and a feeble smile played on her face. She was more relaxed today.

He got up and came up to her.

'You were wonderful today as well.' The girl now smiled a little more.

'Are you a student?'

'No. I completed my studies years ago.'

'Oh!' He was surprised.

'What do you do now?'

'Nothing much... I teach English in a primary school,' she replied.

'Where do you stay?'

She mentioned a suburban area.

'I am going that way. Are you planning to go home now? Come, I can drop you home.'

She stared at him for a moment, perhaps trying to scrutinise his intentions.

'Do not bother. I take the bus every day. I can go on my own.'

'What's the bother? I am going that way in any case,' saying so, he opened the car's door for her.

She hesitated for a while, wondering whether it would be proper to take the ride. Then she got into the front seat.

'Is it a government school?'

'Oh, no. This is a private school.'

'How much do they pay you?'

'Very little.' He could sense that the girl was reluctant to name the figure. He liked this hesitation.

'And from the temple?'

'Again, not much. But I like singing for the temple. I also give two tuitions at home.'

'Oh!' he sounded surprised—she had to struggle so much for survival!

'And at home? Your family?' Perhaps he wanted to know whether the girl was married or not. She was quiet for a moment. 'My parents and two younger brothers.'

'What does your father do?'

She did not respond; perhaps she did not want to.

'I will get down here,' she said suddenly.

He was taken aback. The car screeched to a halt. She jumped out of the car and walked away hurriedly after thanking him.

He kept sitting in the car. Such a good looking and talented girl going through such hardship! He had almost forgotten life could be like this.

He felt restless the entire evening. The next day was no different either. He postponed the next morning's work and reached the temple exactly at four. She was unpacking the harmonium. She saw him enter and smiled sweetly at him. He was waiting anxiously for her to finish her singing. He offered to drop her and she sat in his car without demurring. Instead of getting down where she had got off yesterday, she instructed him to drive another couple of kilometres. Her house could only be reached on foot, she said, as she got off. She also told him she did not have tuitions today. He told her they would meet the next day and instructed her to bring her bio-data.

After returning, he wondered if the girl had not scheduled her tuitions today deliberately—perhaps they could have driven a little further! He felt disappointed for losing such an opportunity.

Next day he met her at the temple again and drove towards her home.

'Cannot you skip your tuitions today?'

'Yes, I can,' she smiled.

'We will go for a long drive.' The man spoke of how he had to struggle to climb up the ladder. She listened with rapt attention. He told her about his experiences; he confided things to her he had not revealed to anyone all these years. These were things he did not often allow himself to think about. But he felt so much lighter after unburdening himself like this!

'There is not much difference between us. I was like you. I, too, had to struggle. It is because of my hard work and good luck that I have reached where I am today.' He held her hands now. She did not resist. He wrapped his arms around her and she put her head on his left shoulder.

'I do not like paying for a woman's body. I need real love,' he spoke softly, almost inaudibly.

Days passed by. He had never imagined life could be so smooth and pleasant and so free of obstacles. Never before had he experienced real pleasure. He bought an acre of land in her name on the outskirts of the city and built a three-room house for her there. There was such a lot of greenery all around! There were three people to look after the house. He also made some deposits in her name in a bank and bought her three ambassador cars, which a travel agency started hiring out. They paid her a share of the profits every month. He fulfilled all her material desires without hesitation. She was not very keen on jewellery or sarees or other household items. The man felt relieved that he did not have to spend too much. He had never imagined one could be so happy and so free. A blissful family life with wife and children, a happy relationship with this younger girl, and an ever-burgeoning bank balance—what more could one want from life?

He felt happy that he was not neglecting his marital responsibilities—his conscience did not trouble him. He fulfilled his family's every need. Once a year he would take his family abroad on a pleasure trip, and two or three times, he would take this girl along with him on business trips within India.

'It would have been nice if you had a child.' Sometime, he would express his despair and desire before her. 'I never imagined you would walk into my life like this. I cannot become a father now. After three children...' he said with genuine regret.

The work pressure and the busy schedule finally took its toll on him. His blood pressure soared and he began showing symptoms of a heart problem too. He was in hospital for several days. More than two months passed without him getting to meet her. He called her many times told her he was desperate to see her. She, too, responded with similar ardour but they did not get any chance to meet. His family was with him all the time.

'I have not seen you for two-and-a-half months. Look at our fate! I have to go to Dubai on urgent work. Although the doctor had advised me a fortnight's rest, I have no option.

My wife and a doctor will accompany me. It is a good offer; it may slip out of my hands if I do not go.'

One afternoon, he reached her house.

'When I return this time, I will stay two whole days with you. I do not care what people say.'

He paused for a while.

'I do not want to leave you at all,' he said and hugged her tight; she rested his head on her bosom. The bald patch on his head swam into view and the girl looked away into the distance.

'What is this nice aroma?'

'I have cooked small fish with mustard-seed paste and *kalam sag*. The Govind bhog rice we harvested this year is cooked and ready; please wait and have a bit.'

'No, I do not have such luck today,' he sighed heavily.

'You know I prefer food cooked by you to even the fare served at five-star hotels. Let me return; we will make up for the lost time.'

He kissed her cheeks and left.

The flight was delayed by four hours. He would thus miss the flight from Mumbai to Dubai even if he were to wait and catch this flight. Although it disappointed him, he felt happy too. At least he could spend the evening with her! After dropping his wife home he instructed the driver to drive fast. When he reached her gate he saw one of the cars hired by the travel agency standing there. The garden looked desolate. Had she gone out somewhere? But there was a car parked outside. Perhaps she was taking her nap.

The door was not bolted; he entered confidently. The moment he stepped into the room, he almost turned into stone. His eyes widened in disbelief.

She was in another man's arms! He was caressing her hair. The two of them got up on seeing him. It was the driver of the Ambassador car, the man he had employed eight months back.

'What is going on? Who is this man?' he struggled to find the words. He was trembling all over.

The girl held the man's hand and stepped forward. 'He is my husband. We married two months ago.'



Translated by : Mona Lisa Jena

## HUNGER

PARAMITA SATPATHY TRIPATHY

The job is simple enough. Dig a pit—a yard long, a yard wide and a yard deep. Lift the mud into a leaking bamboo basket and dump the load across the fence. That's all there is to it. There are rows and rows of pits to be dug every day. A horde of rickety men and women toil on in the scorching sun for the princely sum of two rupees per load.

Malati rubbed her eyes with her left hand and squinted. She still could not see properly. This had been happening over the past few months. These days she felt a dull haze hanging before her eyes. She had no problem in hearing, though. She heard a small crowd gather slowly. She could see a moving mass of dark bodies coming together. Shyam, Ghana, Naha and a few others—the boys from her village. She could hear their excited voices. 'The big project will start tomorrow. The excavation of the Gaira tank. The tank will be cleared of all mud and silt. It will then have fresh, clear water. At last, the sufferings of our village will come to an end. There will be enough water for us to drink all through the summer. And everyone will earn something as long as the excavation is on.'

'Digging is no back-breaking job,' she heard them say. 'You dig a pit, dump the mud into the bamboo basket, throw it across the fence—that's all—and you get two rupees for it.' Malati sensed the excitement in the air. The boys and men were clearly excited at the prospect of a steady flow of jobs. Digging of our village tank today, the tank of the neighbouring village next day. There would be no shortage of work. There would be enough food for all—enough water to quench one's thirst.

Malati knew the Gaira tank from her childhood. She had so many childhood memories associated with the tank—splashing about in the water, spending hours catching fish and so on. She joined the long queue of men and women, dragging her injured left foot and leaning on her walking stick. She could hear the sound of digging in the distance.

She could see loads of baskets changing heads. Was that Kusum's husband? Perhaps that was Kusum standing next to him with her sari tied above her knees. Kusum was helping her husband by loading mud into the baskets. He was helping her by raising it to her head. Kusum was slowly moving towards the fence to unload the basket. Dreams were floating in the air like the aroma of hot food. Two rupees added to two more—a fortune! The aroma of hot, steaming rice blending with the fragrance of spicy curry filled the air with an irresistible smell. Cool drinking water to wash a heavy meal down. What more could one ask for?

Why did Narain, her young son, leave the village at a time like this? He could have waited another fortnight. How much he could have earned! Her daughter-in-law could have cooked steaming rice and curry for all of them. Her grandson would have made repeated trips to the kitchen to see if the meal was ready. 'Just a moment, my son, it is nearly done,' she would have said. Dreams kept floating before her eyes. She let out a sigh.

Her daughter-in-law was again pregnant and had left, taking her two sons with her. She did not want to stay a day longer. The family was going without food. The boys were starving. She could not take it any longer. She pressed her husband to leave the village in search of a job in the town. Malati begged her not to leave. She begged her son—'Wait for a few more days; there will be rains, there will be plenty of jobs, there will be enough food for all of us.' But all her entreaties had fallen on deaf ears.

Narain was her fifth child, born after she had lost her first four children. He was the apple of her eyes. Even he had ditched her. He became a henpecked husband and always sided with his wife. Malati felt lonely and miserable. She could not blame her daughter-in-law as her two grandsons were starving and getting restless. She could not get anything for them to eat. There was no work. One had to walk five miles to get some work, and even that brought in only a paltry wage. Narain could not have managed even that. He was getting thinner and his health was failing him. She could see him wilting slowly.



One day, Malati woke up quite late in the morning. A host of noisy crows had gathered in the courtyard. Perhaps they were squabbling over a dead rat. She would have to clean the mess. She saw a new five-rupee note lying on the mat in the veranda, held down by a small piece of stone. Her eyes sparkled. She had not set her eyes on such an amount for quite some time. Narain had once shown her a five-rupee note a long time ago. She now picked it up excitedly in her trembling hands and looked at it hard against the light. 'It is real!' she concluded. She saw that the front door stood ajar. It was quiet all around her. At first she thought her daughter-in-law and her two sons were asleep and her son had gone out in search of work. Or perhaps he had just gone out and would be back soon. Then the familiar drama of their daily life would unfold: pungent remarks from her ever-grumbling daughter-in-law, endless demands from her two hungry grandsons, the sad and defeated face of her son, already looking old beyond his years. Her heart began to sink when she thought of him.

She now gave up all hope. Narain would not come back. She went inside the kitchen. There was only a handful of rice in the basket. She felt no urge to boil it to cook a meal for herself. She was too tired and broken. She sat down with her back against the wall. The news had spread that Narain had left the village. There were many others like him who had left earlier—Naba Nahak's son, Dhoba's son. Now it was Narain, Malati's son.

She remembered the happy times when her husband was alive. Both were young. They were never in want, though they never had plenty. He worked in the fields and earned a small wage. That was enough to support the two of them. They had four children—two sons and two daughters. But none of the babies survived more than a year. Malati's husband could not bear the shock. His health started failing. Narain was born around this time. Malati had a hunch that this one would survive. She prayed fervently to God. He alone could save him, she knew. She lavished all her love and care on him. He was a plump kid, very attractive. She used to put black dots on his forehead and make him wear a charm to ward off the evil eye. He was very demanding. He would never relinquish his mother's lap without a fight. He would often pull her sari in public demanding to be breast-fed. Malati always obliged him, moving to a corner. She never gave him a chance to sulk.

Narain was five years old then—the rains deserted the village that year. The soil turned hard. The ponds dried up. Work became scarce. Narain's father insisted on going to a town in search of a job. He left one day, leaving them to fend for themselves. But he came back soon, looking like a ghost, eyes sunken and hair disheveled. Narain refused to go near him. He was scared of this apparition. Malati's husband survived only a week. He vomited blood. He suffered a lot. Malati consulted a village homoeopath. Nothing worked and he died on the eighth day, leaving behind Malati and her five-year-old son, Narain. There was nothing to fall back on. But Malati survived and struggled to bring her child up. Even he, the apple of her eye, had now deserted her. He would never come back to her.

The sore on her left foot was burning in the afternoon heat. It had started as a small wound and spread to other parts of her body. She put some herbs on the wound, but that did not help. Her whole leg had become infected now. No medicine or ointment could control the spread of the blisters. She was scared it might infect her whole body. Her body burned.

A nurse from the nearby primary health center came to the village recently, accompanied by a few well-dressed assistants carrying medical instruments. They came to deliver some tips to the village women on nutrition and health care. She thought all this was useless.

Malati tried to stand up. She was terribly thirsty. She longed for a few drops of water. The Gaira tank had no water, only dry mud. Men were busy trying to make it deeper so that it would not dry up next summer. There would be enough water even during the summer months. She started walking towards the village. It was getting hotter. He stopped in front of Nahak's house.

'Daughter, will you give me some rice water to drink? I am dying of thirst,' she begged. She peeped into the house. Nahak's daughter-in-law was having her meal—a large bowl of watery rice. Her three children sat around her and shared it. On a small plate

there lay a few pieces of onion and tamarind. Malati felt cramps in her stomach. She begged again.

Nahak's daughter-in-law gave her a nasty look and shouted: 'Go somewhere else; there is not a grain of rice in the house. Where will I give you rice water from?' She saw that Malati was staring at her rice bowl. She turned her back towards her and hid the bowl from her sight.

'Give me some water at least; I am dying of thirst.'

'Where shall I get water from? All the tanks are dry. There is no water in the well, either. I have walked two miles to fetch a bucket of water. I do not have enough water for my own children. Please go away.'

'Shut the front door, Kuna.' She ordered her son in a harsh tone.

Malati climbed down the steps. She heaved a sigh of deep sorrow. Her tears had dried up. She felt as if someone was rubbing burning coal against her thighs. She looked at her wounds. They had turned septic. The burning sensation was now unbearable. She wanted to apply something cold to it. Even cow dung would do, she thought. She dragged herself towards her house, supporting herself with her stick. She saw a few cakes of cow dung lying near her house. She picked up a handful, sat down on the verandah and smeared it all over the wound. She sat leaning against the wall and tried to close her eyes.

Was that her daughter-in-law entering the house? She also heard the tinkle of bangles from inside the house. Malati listened carefully. Her sense of hearing was still sharp. She concluded that the noise came from the kitchen. Perhaps her daughter-in-law was draining the hot water out of the bowl of boiled rice. Perhaps she was now adding cold water to the rice. Was she taking out baked potatoes from the fireplace? She would now mash them and add salt and garlic. Malati could clearly smell the aroma of beaten garlic. Ah! The meal was nearly ready! The daughter-in-law would soon ask her mother-in-law

and her two hungry children to come and have their meals. She would sit with the two kids. Then she would drink cool water to her heart's content.

A faint smile appeared on Malati's parched lips. She could still hear clearly. She could hear even the sound of her cracking lips. She started getting restless. When would the torment come to an end? When would her daughter-in-law ask her to go in and have her meal? She could hear a buzz invading her ears. She tried to wave it away. But her hands did not move. She tried to focus her attention so that she would be able to hear when her daughter-in-law called. She would call any moment now.

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Translated by: Prashant Das

## ONCE UPON A NIGHT

PARAMITA SATPATHY

One

Lipi was beginning to stress. Her work was not finished yet.

She never ever took as long as she was doing today. She normally wound up by half past eight in the night. The clock was showing nine today and she still had not finished her work. Maybe she should shut down the computer. She thought for a split second about completing the half-finished report the first thing next morning before picking up fresh assignments. But there was no knowing if the Managing Director won't show up at nine and want to see the report. If the report was not ready by then, she will have to face hell in the morning. Lipi took a long breath. The computer was out of control today. It had got stuck twice already. She sat quietly for a while and looked around. Everyone was gone. She had clean forgotten that she was all by herself for the past half hour.

It was kind of strange that no one bothered to tell her. She knew she won't be able to work on any one else's computer. She didn't know the password. Lipi, for her part, always insisted on never leaving her work unfinished. Her professionalism had earned her a name among her peers. But what would she do now? She had let another fifteen minutes pass in the mean time. Well forget it; she would have to call it a day today, leaving her work half done.

"Didi, won't you go home today? It is very late in the night." The old watchman came towards her, tapping the floor with his stick.

"Yes, my work got over now and I am just leaving." Lipi took another long breath. She was feeling very unfulfilled. She knew she won't sleep so well tonight. She knew she would feel comforted only after completing her work next morning.

Lipi came out after shutting down her computer absentmindedly and turned on the ignition on her scooty, her mind focused on her work. She felt a little frightened as she came out on to the road. The night had really advanced. It was close to ten. She had never in the past left office so late in the night. If at all she had been late on occasions, she had either been shown a favour by a colleague or had alternately asked a favour of a colleague. Today there just was no scope for any conversation with anybody. And look at these people? One of them could have asked at least! No, everyone was selfish. She was so absorbed in her work today that she didn't remember anything else. Suddenly the beam from the head light of a car that was behind tore through her thoughts and fell on the patch of road before her. Lipi didn't get overly worried. But the car seemed to be tailgating her rather perilously. It could be a Maruti car or a van. Wasn't the fool of a driver able to see? Feeling a trifle irritated, Lipi edged towards the left of the road. Strange! The car too followed suit and came within a touching distance of her scooty. This driver was either drunk or didn't know how to drive, Lipi thought. Lipi

had no option but to step down from the tarred road onto the bare earth. She wanted to stop her scooty in order to give a mouthful to the driver. But she thought the better of it. The green Maruti car brushed past her scooty as it overtook her and stopped right in front of her. As Lipi came level, the black-tinted glasses of the two front windows were rolled down and voices and loud laughter were heard from the inside of the car. Lipi peered in that direction and could make out the vague shapes of three or four persons.

“Stop her scooty and catch the slut. Drag her in.”

Lipi panicked. She instantly knew that a couple of rogues were after her, finding her alone on an empty road. She further realized that the two doors of the car were about to be flung open. Within the blink of an eye Lipi started her scooty and, reversing direction, started to speed off on the half paved and half unpaved road. She knew that the Maruti too did the same in order to chase her.

Lipi tried to drive her scooty at a blinding speed. If she would so much as stumble upon a small stone then her eventless life would come to an abrupt end then and there. But Lipi had no time to think even. She only looked ahead and accelerated. Her face felt hot and chill wind swept past her two ears. She was unable to see or make out the houses and buildings standing on either side of the road. There was no chance to look in any other direction. Her eyes were fixated on the limited area of the road lighted by the beam from the headlight of her scooty. The fact barely registered in her consciousness that the area that she was crossing at that point was Jayadev Vihar. The area that looked so resplendent in broad daylight with the wide road and the houses of various shapes and sizes lining the road on either side now seemed to sink deeper into the gloom as a frightened and mute witness to her adversity.

She had no idea how far she had gone. She found herself on a relatively wider road, with the Maruti car, its headlights blazing, still shadowing her. Should she seek shelter in somebody's house? The thought slowed her down a little and the car veered dangerously close to her.

“Drag her in” – She heard a muffled cry and felt a pressure on her right shoulder. She increased the speed of her scooty with all her might. She could feel the load drop off her shoulder blade, but at that moment she experienced a severe pain in the front of her neck. The hand that shot out from the car had tried to drag Lipi by her *odni* and it pressed her neck hard in the process of getting detached from her. Just then Lipi reached a crossroads and, turning blindly to her left, drove very fast. The driver of the car who was now parallel to her had probably not reckoned with her sudden change of direction. The car turned around a little ahead and then followed Lipi. She had gained some distance in the mean time. She looked back and thought that the car was now about a hundred meters behind her. The lane she was now entering was narrow, but not nearly as narrow as to stop a Maruti car from passing through it if driven with some care. But Lipi felt the car slowing down. She looked to both sides. This was the time for decision. How long could this hide-and-seek go on in this blind alley? By postponing it she knew she was running the risk of a failed brake or of a skid on the road or of colliding against something. After all how far could she go like this? She had no idea

where she had reached. How far was the main road? No knowing what mishap could lie in wait for her there. She could already feel her limbs starting to shake.

She saw the Iron Gate in front of the solitary house. She opened the gate with her left hand without alighting from her scooty and went in. She got off the scooty quickly and ran towards the grill gate of the house. She knocked on the grill twice. Spotting the calling bell on the wall to her right she started pressing the button. She thought she saw the car come to a halt a little distance away and its doors open to let out the persons sitting inside.

Now they will swoop down on her, she thought. She was so tired and was in such a panic that her finger remained pressed on the calling bell.

The door to the house opened in the nick of time and someone came out. "Who is it? What do you need?"

"Please let me in quickly. They are after me. Look, they are moving towards me. Let me in, please." Lipi's voice was on its edge and she was constantly looking back to see.

The door opened wide and Lipi pushed past the man standing in front of her and got in.

"Please shut the door fast and bolt it. They are chasing me and will be here in an instant." Lipi was shaking like a leaf.

The man at once shut the grill door and the wooden door inside at her request.

"Now they will bang on the door. What will happen, what am I to do?" Lipi said this to herself. Her senses were fully alert to every word, every movement from without. She had no time to check the inside of the house or the man who opened the door to let her in.

"They are still outside. I can hear them. Maybe they are laying an ambush for me. I left my scooty lying outside. They will make off with it for sure." Lipi started speaking to herself once again.

"The scooty is outside. Shall I bring it to the veranda inside?" The man asked.

"No, please don't open the door now. They will most certainly be around." Lipi was frightened beyond her wits and her eyes and ears were trained on the outside, as before.

"Please sit down for a while." The man had brought Lipi a glass of water in the mean time.

Lipi drank up the water in one breath like an automaton and broke into a cold sweat immediately after. "I'd like to make a phone call. Do you have a telephone?" Lipi now

had the occasion to take a look at the man.

“Sorry, I don’t have a telephone. I came to this place only a few days ago. I have applied for a phone connection, but haven’t got one.” The man sounded sorry as he said this.

Was the man speaking the truth? Lipi studied him closely.

The man seemed to be in his mid or late thirties, was brown in complexion and was dressed in a white *panjabi* and trousers. Lipi looked this way and that. The house was smallish. Maybe it was a one-bedroom house. He seemed to be alone in the house. The roar of a Maruti car engine was heard from the outside at this point. The car started to move, cutting through the silence of the road and the surrounding air. When the sound receded, Lipi felt a little restless.

“I should be going home now. I have my scooty.” Lipi stood up to go.

“Don’t trouble yourself. Wait for another ten minutes. You need some rest.”

Lipi sat down quietly again and surveyed the room from the corner of her eye. The man was also sitting quietly. The clock on the wall kept ticking and everything else seemed to have stood stock still. Lipi heaved a sigh.

- Oh, how did indeed the day unfold? It was eleven in the night already. This meant that her ordeal of wandering in the streets and lanes had lasted only half an hour. Yet it didn’t feel like that at all. She felt as if she had carried this huge burden of time for hours on end.

“Time to check out the scooty.” Lipi stood up from her seat.

The man got up too and unbolted the door. He came out followed by Lipi. The man tried to unlock the grill door.

‘No, please, not yet.’ Lipi almost screamed as she pounced upon the hand of the man fiddling with the lock. “They are still around, still waiting. They may take advantage of the open door to rush in.” Lipi was out of her breath as she said this, and, pointing her right index finger towards the massed darkness outside, stood there hypnotised.

The man tried to peer into the darkness in an effort to fish something out. A car really was parked outside the gate, although it was not possible to make sure if it was the same green Maruti or not. Lipi walked back into the house followed by the man.

“Please shut the door.” Lipi appealed to the man in an exhausted tone of voice. She seemed withered like a defeated sportsman. Sitting herself down on a cane chair that was nearby, she held her head back and closed her eyes.



Closing of eyes summoned before her mind's eye a familiar scene of violence enacted in cinema. She was getting out through the open gate. The passengers of the green car were swooping down on her from somewhere in the dark. Lipi felt breathless. She sat up straight, her eyes wide open.

"Would you like something to eat? You must be hungry." The man asked Lipi.

"No, I'm not hungry." Lipi's own voice sounded very faint to her ears.

The man left the place. He brought from a nearby room or perhaps the kitchen a jar of biscuits, a bottle of water and a glass and kept them on the tea table. Lipi had no desire to glance at them.

"Do you want me to go outside and make a phone call to your home? Give me your phone number." The man offered to help.

No need of that. I shall leave after a while." Lipi knew that there was no one in her house except her mother. It was all the same to her whether she was notified or not. Mother would only worry a lot and send out a number of SOS phone calls in the middle of the night. Besides, Lipi didn't want this man to go out, leaving her alone in the house.

- But what if she and this man were to spend the entire night in a closed room? Lipi couldn't think ahead.

"I shall take you home on my motorbike if you want to go." The man said after five minutes of silence.

An obscene cry tore through the darkness and silence and dissolved along with its faint echo. Lipi felt a chill crawl up her spine.

"They are still outside." Lipi could manage to say only this in her traumatized state. It seemed to her as if some hairy beasts were lying in wait for her outside with daggers, claws and teeth.

Does she then have to stay here all night? Lipi knew without even looking that the man's eyes were surveying her.

"Alright. Come then and take some rest."

Lipi didn't try to look him in the eye. She was filled with vexation. How could the man expect her to rest under these circumstances? She could feel the eyes of the man glowing. Could she also be planning to take advantage of her helplessness? She badly wanted to rush out of the house and ride home on her trusty scooty. At the next moment she knew that it was beyond the bounds of possibility. They were still there, laying an ambush.

“Get up, please come this way.” The man left his seat and came and stood near Lipi. Without facing him she remained adamantly seated, her eyes focused on the floor.

“Come on, pull yourself together.” The man applied a gentle pressure on her left shoulder and made her stand up. Lipi felt sick. What an ill-mannered person? She could almost predict his next move. There was no way out for her anyway. She imagined with horror the other scenario: her mutilated and mauled body lying outside all through the night and pictures of it splashed across all newspapers in the morning and the huge crowd gathered in front of her house. She would either be dead or, what is worse, experience a kind of death every moment of her waking life. At least here the incident would remain confined to the four walls.

The man led Lipi towards the bedroom, touching her shoulder lightly.

“I don’t feel like sleeping.” Lipi insisted. She was wondering about the implication of this forcible removal to the bedroom.

“Sit down here. Take a little rest.” The man was standing near her. Lipi too found herself seated on the bed. She thought she should scream. But who would listen? In Bhubaneswar, neighbours did not know each other, let alone come to each other’s help, even when they lived in houses that almost touched each other. She would only earn a bad name. That would be all. The man, for his part, might allege that Lipi had come to him willingly.

Lipi sat with her head slightly bowed. She knew the man stood near her and looked at her unblinkingly as a predator amusedly watched over an easily available prey.

The night had deepened. The man would probably start off by coaxing her and then by forcing himself on her. Lipi was psyching herself up for this. Her father had been hell bent on getting her and her brother married within six months. He had started entertaining proposals from several quarters for this purpose. Father had in fact gone to her brother three days ago. Lipi was working as a computer programmer in a private company. She had started to dream about her future husband and their life together. Now the dream was to be dashed to the ground. Till today she had kept herself immune from the touch of a male hand. Well preserved, she was a virgin in body and mind. She had never allowed herself to waver in the face of a mesmerizing glance. She had made up her mind about accepting the man, arranged by her parents, as her spouse.

She had landed herself in quite a mess here. She would not be able to tell anyone. Nor would she be able to come to terms with herself if something happened tonight.

The man was standing there like that. Lipi summoned up her courage to cast a fiery look at him this time. The civilized demeanour of the man was a mere veneer; rank bestiality lay concealed underneath that civilized mask. Was woman only an object of pleasure? Was it her fate to be a victim of circumstances and time? The man smiled delicately in return for Lipi’s angry look. “Make yourself comfortable in the bedroom. I shall stretch myself in the drawing room.” Leaving her seated like that, the man walked

out of the room.

He must be showing off. He also probably realised that the lone rider through the night was not lacking in guts. Or maybe he was waiting for the right moment. The night would deepen still more and slumber would seal the eyes of everyone. Keeping pace with this darkening gloom, Lipi's nervousness would also increase. She cast furtive and cautious glances all around. If only she chanced upon a knife or a sharp-edged weapon, it would come in handy! She tried to study the man's movements. He did not seem to be present in the drawing room. She could hear the water running from a tap. She walked with stealthy steps towards the door and parted the curtain. She could not find him. She slammed the bedroom door shut and bolted it from inside.

Now she found herself alone inside a closed room. She heaved a sigh of relief. Thank God, she was saved from an imminent danger. There were only 3 to 4 hours of night left. She could sit through those. She felt deeply relieved.

The sounds of passing vehicles woke Lipi up. The day had broken. Lipi woke up with a start. She had changed from a sitting to a supine position at some point during her vigil last night. Her eyes fell immediately on the closed door. The door remained bolted from the inside as before. She got up from bed and opened the door. The drawing room was all aglow from the incoming rays of the morning sun. The stranger was seated in a chair with a newspaper in his hands. He was at angle to her. He turned his face on hearing the sound of the door opening, and, keeping the newspaper on the tea table, stood up.

"Hope you caught some sleep. I had my fears about you last night. I thought you needed a doctor. Lipi looked the man straight in the face before making any reply. How serene and radiant he looked! There was no other furniture in the room. So he must have gone to sleep, leaning against this cane chair. Lipi felt somewhat guilty. The man had probably finished his bath. Lipi felt embarrassed about appearing before him in an unwashed face.

"I fell asleep." Lipi spoke softly. On recalling that her *odni* had been snatched away by her pursuers last night she literally died of shame.

"I have troubled you enough. Now I must leave." Lipi said, making eye contact with the man. She had no words to express her sense of gratitude.

The morning felt very warm and cozy. It was redolent of brightness, hope and comfort. What a stark contrast with the night that had just passed!

"Please wash your face. I haven't had my morning tea. I was waiting for you. You can leave as soon as you have had your tea.'

Lipi had no power in her to turn down the offer. She went to the bath room and washed her face. She saw two doors to the bath room, both of which were open. One door opened to the bedroom and another one to the veranda adjacent to the drawing room.

So both these doors were open last night. And she thought she was perfectly safe by closing the bedroom door and bolting it from the inside. Lipi laughed to herself and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She entered the bedroom unflinchingly this time and surveyed the interior with admiring eyes. The décor was spotless, tasteful and understated. All this had escaped her notice last night.

The stranger had an attractive build. He also looked younger in the morning light. Lipi was watching him out of the corner of her eye while sipping tea.

“My name is Sambit Pattanaik. There is a name plate out in the front, but you may not have seen it at night.” Sambit also informed her that he worked as a Sales Representative of a Tea Company and had relocated to Bhubanewar only two months back.

Lipi smiled delicately, lifted her admiring eyes off Sambit’s face to take in the other aspects of the room. How intimate did the cane chairs of this empty drawing room feel! They were the mute spectators of her disaster of last night and of her magical escape there from. There was a book-sized photo on the small table in the left hand corner of the room. It seemed to her as if Sambit was following her glance!

“She’s my wife Priti and this is my five year-old daughter Nitu. I haven’t been able to bring them here from Kolkata. I shall go at the end of the month.”

Lipi felt a little commotion inside her. It never crossed her mind that this man called Sambit could also be a married person. She had begun to develop a sense of belonging to this little house. Her eyes wandered in the direction of the photo again despite herself. It seemed to her as if Sambit’s radiant personality emerged with redoubled vigour from the picture while his wife’s appeared to dissolve.

“I’m going.” Lipi stood up from her chair. She noticed the scooter that was carefully parked on the veranda. “I gave you a deal of trouble really. For my sake ...” Lipi broke off. Her eyes filled up with tears and her voice was choked.

“No, it’s nothing. Forget about last night. Such adversities do come in life at times. But do take care in future.” Sambit smiled gently.

## Two

Hearing the sound of the door bell at ten in the night Sambit opened the door and was surprised to see Lipi at the door. She was not the Lipi of that dreadful night. Had he not taken a good look at her in the morning after, he would not have been able to recognise her on this occasion.

Lipi was dressed in a faint pink saree. There were sweat beads on her face and a red bindi adorned the space between her two eye brows. Her lips were a light pink and trembled a little. Her big eyes were smeared with *kohl*. She lifted her face to make eye contact with Sambit.

“You? In this shape? At this time?” Sambit didn’t know what to ask. It challenged his powers of comprehension to think that the glamorous young woman of tonight was none other than the timid and frightened girl of that other night.

“Yes, it’s me.” Lipi’s large *kohl*-smeared eyes were in soft focus. “I couldn’t forget ... “  
- Seven days had passed since that nightmarish night -

“I have come. Can I stay just for one night?” Lipi’s voice was about to trail off. It was as if the ground was beginning to shake beneath her feet. Her face was reddening and her whole body was atremble with emotion.

The dazed eyes of Sambit softened. His eyes and face began to take on that charming and hypnotized look. He became wordless. He was only able to sniff through his eyes the unspoilt beauty of Lipi.

“Only for one night? That’s all?” Sambit managed to speak after quite a while.

Lipi lifted her downcast face and fixed her bedazzled look on Sambit’s face. Her face looked radiant from some cherished anticipation. A strand of curly hair played about on her face defying her command.

“Come inside.” Spellbound, Sambit extended his trembling hand towards Lipi.

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Translated by : Himanshu S Mohapatra