



translated by  
Madhukar Hegde

**M**adhav had never liked the evening rain. Rain in the evening was unfair! He did not mind if it poured during the night and he woke up to a sky wringing itself out. In a way it was better that the rain had spent its force. A light shower was good for the crops. Madhav remembered the time when he had worked in the field in the drizzle. His feet would sink into the mud, soft after the night rain. When he returned home, he would wash his feet with water from the copper pot outside, gently scrubbing them to get the mud off. How he enjoyed that! Those little pleasures had gone forever. Finished.

Rain! Madhav had loved it. As he entered the house, the water would be cascading from the reverberating tin roof. Buckets and pans placed below the sloping kitchen roof would fill up and overflow. Now, all that seemed to be a part of a previous birth.

He lit a bidi and took a long,

*pouring / low  
resound / echo /  
ring*

# THE CHEST

by Shirish Panchal



deep puff. But he got no satisfaction from it. He threw it away. The tobacco had become too damp.

He glanced into the house. Deewali had gone to work at the housing society nearby with their younger daughter, Roopa. The two older children, Mahesh and Sharada, were at school. Madhav was alone in the empty, quiet house. Actually, even when everyone was there, he had enough space to himself. The other people had very small houses. Like him, they too had left their villages and come to this town ten, fifteen years ago. But how many had been able to afford a two-and-a-half room accommodation like his? Maybe it wasn't a good area – but Madhav had never lived in a “good” area. They considered him extremely fortunate, but he had not liked it when they moved here and he did not like it now. What was there in it to like? *look by rotating*

Madhav's eyes once again panned his house. A few plants in broken pots. Wheat sprouting in small tins. Deewali had cultivated this hobby after she started working at the society. Madhav could see the wheat shoots in front of him. But he did not feel like touching them. In the fields, as soon as the shoots appeared, he would gently run his fingers over them, feel the tender leaves, play with them for hours. But here everything was dull, uninteresting. There was no magic left, no charm. Even the saali bidi tasted of kerosene. You could light one, two, three ... It made no difference.

The surroundings got on Madhav's nerves. He was upset by the plants being grown in a handful of mud. Mahesh had not liked them either and so he got up early one morning and flung them out. Deewali had thrashed him soundly. “Mara roya! Did you have to throw them away? Isn't it enough that we have been thrown out of our home?”

**H**ow much had changed in ten years, Madhav thought. Then, you could see nothing but fields. The tall neem, the spreading mango trees with their boughs almost kissing the earth, bawal trees along the edge of the fields, wells with leather water pouches,



and sheltering everything, the open sky. He had lost touch with all that.

What else could he have done? Their resources had diminished over the years and the effort to make both ends meet had broken his back. Take up other jobs, people had said to him. But where were the jobs? He had no choice but to sit idle like everyone else – smoking bidis, staring at each other's vacant eyes. Occasionally, one of them would ask a question, then silence would reign again. Doing nothing for six months in the year had been frustrating. Finally, he had made up his mind without taking anyone's advice. Leaving his fields in another's care, he sold all that he could and came to the town. It was hard for them to leave behind the vast expanse of earth and sky. Their hearts were scarred and cracked, like the earth was, in times of drought. Deewali had sobbed her eyes out.

Madhav tried, but he just could not forget the past. Every now and then, those memories returned to haunt him, and the pain came back. Nothing pleased him. Except Deewali. He would lose himself and his memories in the labyrinth of her body. But even then he would mutter, "You have become like a burnt-out bidi. There's no pleasure to be had from you anymore." Deewali would push him away in mock anger and say, "A man who has only one eye may not be satisfied with what he sees, but he has to manage with it!" And Madhav would tell himself, as he peered into the cracked mirror, If she is like a spent bidi, you are no better. How he had let himself go! His beard was like the rough stalks in the fields after the harvest. His hair was stiff and prickly like porcupine needles and his lips had darkened from too much smoking. *animal with sharp parts on body*

Again Madhav looked up at the rain. He did not feel like going to his tea stall in the market-place. There would hardly be any customers anyway. To walk through this river of mud – the episode in the Puranas, of crossing a river of mud must have been something like this, he thought, his lips drawn into a sneer and his eyes hard.

*smile for  
dislike.*



There was mud in the village too, everywhere – on the path to the fields, the streets, the courtyard. But walking through that clean mud had never put him in a foul mood or brought an abuse to his lips. He did not mind holding it in his hands, or rubbing his body with it when he bathed, the early morning sun shining on him. But this mud? Chee! People, cows, buffaloes urinated and defecated all over the place, women washed vessels and threw garbage anywhere they pleased. To have to trudge through that ... *walk cautiously*

He would have sat there, grumbling, if Deewali had not come back then. The little one had stayed behind at the society. Deewali was drenched in the rain. She quickly went in, changed, and came and stood in front of Madhav. When he said nothing, she shrugged her *more* shoulders and flounced off, to stand in front of the mirror. Making a chandlo on her forehead, she said, "My god, this rainy season doesn't end. I am fed up."

"Hn," Madhav started to reply but stopped, remembering what he had been thinking about earlier. He had not enjoyed the bidi either. Deewali looked at Madhav but there was no expression on his face. "God only knows what those hags saw in him when *old* they named him Madhav. There is nothing pleasant about this face," she muttered.

"Get me some hot ukadu. I'll drink it and then go."

Deewali was moving towards Madhav. She was miserable and cold and this Madhav had asked for hot ukadu! She went back and took a matchbox from the shelf to light the stove. The matchbox was damp. She could not find another one. "Give me a matchbox. This one is damp. Everything is damp here," she shouted, as she began to pump the stove.

Through the open door, Madhav looked at her with a resigned expression. In the beginning, he used to get very angry at the slightest provocation and sputter like mustard seeds put into smoking oil. He even beat her up sometimes. But gradually he had got used to her sharp tongue. He could bear her barbs now. *critical remarks*

Madhav pushed aside the sack that covered the old chest in



the corner. He was about to open it, when he stopped. Instead of taking a matchbox from inside it, he stood there staring at it, his beloved majoos. His fatigue and irritation disappeared. His eyes lit up. A kind of energy rushed through his blood as he began to run his hands over the majoos. It was a long time since he had caressed even Deewali with such affection.

On their wedding night, after untying the strings of Deewali's pearl-studded kamkhani, he had touched her all over. In the smoky light of the lantern, and the all-pervading smell of kerosene, he had glimpsed her grayish dark back and had felt a fluttering sensation all over his body. He felt the same thrill once again. He forgot the rain, the town, the tea stall, Deewali ... It had been quite a job bringing this four-and-a-half foot wide, three-foot high, intricately carved, real sisam majoos, from the village to the town. *spread everywhere*

"Look at my rival later. First take out the matchbox!" Deewali shouted from the kitchen.

Madhav lost his temper. He glared at her, nostrils flaring, lips quivering. She was sitting in front of the stove, her sari pulled up to her knees. Hardly noticing her bare legs, he opened the majoos and threw a matchbox at her. Deewali struck a match and put it to the stove. There was too much kerosene and immediately, it blazed. "Mind your hair. It'll catch fire!" he said angrily.

Deewali quickly moved back.

Madhav's eyes returned to the open majoos. His uncle had said to him, "You don't know where you are going to stay. Where will you keep this big majoos?" But Madhav had already fixed up a place and had gone back to the village for Deewali. Everyone tried hard to dissuade him from lugging the majoos along. For a brief moment he did consider leaving it behind, but then he said, "No, Kaka. I must take it with me."

Deewali too had created a fuss. "Yes, yes. Take it with you. Hang it round your neck. Why don't you live in it?"

"Be quiet, woman. I'm taking you, aren't I?"

"You have to. You married me. But you want to take that whore of yours also."



Madhav had been so angry, he would have hit her with whatever he could lay his hands on, but for his uncle's presence.

Madhav had seen the majoos from his childhood. At first, in the dim glow of oil lamps, then in the light of lanterns and now in the glare of electric bulbs. He remembered all the stories his mother had told him about it. "Your mama used to say that the carving on our majoos is like the carving at Mount Abu. It was brought by your dad from her father's house and it has been in our family for four generations. Look after it."

Madhav had always remembered those words. He and Deewali had moved from village to village, from town to town. Even in this town, they had changed several houses. Finally they had come to this two-and-a half room home. And the majoos had found a place for itself.

One by one, Madhav took out the contents of the majoos and spread them around. Matchboxes, small and big tea packets, pieces of old benarasi saris and heavily embroidered cloth. Suddenly, his thoughts galloped ... If Deewali was sitting in front of him wearing these beautiful things ...

Deewali brought him the ukadu. "What's this nonsense? How many times will you take things out and put them back? There is nothing in there!" she said sharply.

"How can I make you understand?" Madhav said, looking at her. "Come, share my ukadu."

"I have kept some for myself."

"Then bring it. We'll drink it together."

At once, Deewali's anger subsided. But she still pretended to be offended. She went in, poured the ukadu into a cup and came out. Madhav pulled her close. He looked first at Deewali, then at the majoos. "Often, I tell myself, Who do we have in this city? Let us sell everything and go back. We will manage somehow. How can I explain it to you? I miss the village. Sitting in the tea stall, watching the tea boil, I seem to have become like a broken cup-and-saucer myself."

lower down



Deewali looked long and deep into his eyes. Rarely did they get an opportunity to sit like this in the daytime. She thought, He may have become like a teacup, selling tea, but there is still a spark in him. Didn't his eyes brighten when I walked in just now?

She remembered their wedding. Sometime between Vasant Panchami and Holi she had applied haldi on her hands and put kesuda flowers in her hair. Hadn't his eyes lit up then too, when he saw her fragrant body?

She thought, What if he opened me up, the way he opened the majoos? Her eyes grew soft and seductive, like mahua flowers. But Madhav was in no mood to be intoxicated. Deewali stroked his head and said, "You are missing so much, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't satisfy you," she added, moving closer and peering into the majoos with him.

"Are you mad? You take care of most of my desires. Some needs are mental. Those that are unfulfilled, disappear when I look at this majoos. When you sow seeds, is it only the seed that sprouts? Whatever is buried in the field and whatever is stored in the earth also blooms. You think that this is only a patara. To me it is much more than that. Sometimes I think of it as a massive house with seven or eight rooms, opening up one by one. Or it is a seven-storeyed palace with each storey representing one generation."

"Will you ever be able to live without it?"

"We have given up so many things – the open sky, our precious lands, the tamarind trees at the edge of the fields, our homes – but as long as I have this majoos, I feel I have everything."

Deewali understood only some of what Madhav had said. He was highly educated by village standards, and had even gone to college for one year, while she had barely read seven books. Also Madhav had travelled a lot with his grandfather. At the age of nine or ten he had been to Hardwar, Kashi, Rameshwar and Ujjain.

"You can keep sitting here with your thoughts. I am going in



to cook," said Deewali. She felt that Madhav would pull her sari and ask her to stay. But he just sat there quietly, staring at the majoos.

He felt better in this house. The first one had given him a lot of heartburn. It was as if the terrace, the courtyard, the compound, the whole village house, had been cramped into a room as small as a water tank. Whichever way you turned, you banged into a wall. They had moved from one rented room to another. Time passed, amidst Deewali's grumbling, the dust of Vaishakh, the leaking roof of Ashadh, the little oil-lamps in the mud pots at Navratri.

Winter came, and even Deewali's thinned-down body seemed as warm as the ashes of a burnt out fire. Like the village dogs who huddled in the ashes, he would cuddle up to Deewali. Her body was for him the warm days of Holi, the only silver lining to the clouds. It was the only thing that had kept him going.

Three times they had moved, before they found this two-and-half room house. He had to sell one field to buy it, illegally. He wasn't the only one who had done so. There were sixty to seventy such houses on that piece of land. The light and water connections had swallowed Deewali's two-tola gold chain. Regular manual labour, part-time jobs and hawking goods had led him to his present tea stall business. It seemed to get him more money than farming. But his stall was in an area that hardly attracted any customers after six o' clock in the evening. He would close the stall as soon as it started to get dark, and go home, to put all the day's earnings - clinking coins, dirty notes - into Deewali's hands. In the beginning he had enjoyed counting the money but soon he lost interest in it. He would open the majoos and sit in front of it. Just looking at it gave him great satisfaction. It made him forget all the difficulties he had to go through.

The majoos was balanced on bricks placed at each corner. Along three sides of its base, were delicately carved creepers and leaves. In the middle there was a row of peacocks and parrots in fine filigree



work, and a little above that, small squares of brass were embedded in the carving. There were seven compartments of various sizes inside it. Whenever he opened the majoos, Madhav would see all that was inside it, and even what was not. And his eyes would light up.

It did not stop raining that day, so Madhav did not go to his tea stall. His routine changed completely after that. He spent less and less time at the tea stall and he started coming home early, to sit alone, and stare at the majoos.

Gradually, he began to hear sounds – from the cracks in the walls, from the doors, from the roof. All kinds of sounds – heavy, soft, shrill, sweet... Toys, soap, shoes and slippers, biscuits, sherbet, clothes, toothpaste, chocolate, television. All the goods in the world were advertised loudly, assaulting his ears. He would have liked the silence of the grave better.

Madhav finally understood the real reason for the clamour for electricity, for which all of them had spent three, four thousand rupees. Everyone wanted a TV at home. His son was seven years old and the daughters were five and three. Their eyes, noses, tongues, ears were alert to these sounds. If they were asleep, they would wake up. If they were studying they would put aside their books, if they were talking they would stop halfway and run to the neighbour's house, and it was difficult to make them come home. They didn't want datun so toothpaste arrived. Earlier milk with a little tea in it was fine, but now they wanted cocoa or chocolate. Following this was the demand for ice cream. Deewali also was influenced by the children. Madhav was forced to keep his tea stall open longer to take care of the extra expenses. Dust started gathering on the majoos.

But Madhav felt that something was wrong. His children didn't talk to him. Even Deewali was sulking most of the time. Very often no one was at home when he returned. Deewali would have gone to the neighbour's house and would come back only after



half-past nine. He was forced to sit alone. He smoked bidis, one after the other. Sometimes he would wander around outside, his head heavy from breathing the fumes of the boiled tea. He wanted Deewali. That Deewali, dry and withered, with the crumpled pallav, uncombed hair, a strong smell of hing about her, holding the pot of water – he needed her near him. But she wasn't there. The loneliness hit him, almost broke him. The house reminded him of the fields in the evening – empty, deserted. He would stare at the majoos for hours till his eyes blurred and he saw not one majoos but two.

One night, when Deewali was lying in his arms, she brought up the subject. "I don't like to go to someone else's house everyday. You are left alone here."

Madhav squeezed her and murmured, "After a long time you are thinking of me."

"What to do? These children don't listen. The eldest keeps chanting TV-TV the whole day. Why don't we get a TV too?"

Madhav's hand stopped caressing Deewali's face. "What? Get a TV? From where? Shall I sell my stall? Sell another field, or sell you?" He was furious. But slowly he realized that what Deewali had said was true. The family could watch TV together. The children could do their lessons watching it. They could eat their food in front of it. He had heard that they show everything quite openly sometimes. It would be nice to see it, holding Deewali ... Let's buy a TV. Never mind if it's small. And so what if its not colour, Madhav thought.

Seeing Madhav's face, Deewali's eyes began to dance. Multi-coloured dreams flashed before her eyes.

"What happened?" she asked him, as she bit his ear. Madhav let out a squeal.

"I also think that we should buy a TV. But how? Even for an old one we will need a couple of thousands."

"Only two thousand?" Deewali was surprised.

"We will buy a black-and-white. A colour one will be more expensive."



Deewali slipped away. "Who buys black-and-white these days? Everyone has a colour set."

Madhav pulled the sulking Deewali into his arms again. "When we don't have much money, we have to manage somehow."

"Not possible." Deewali was adamant. After a short silence, she whispered softly, "If you listen to me we can get one without spending anything."

"What? Without money? Absolutely free?"

"Where I am working, the people want to give away their set. It is hardly two years old."

"Then? You will have to spend your whole life working for them to pay the money back."

"No, no. It's not like that. Listen to me at least. Once I had brought the lady from the house here."

"To our house?"

"I showed her our majoos. She was very happy when she saw it."

"So?" Madhav felt his stomach tighten.

"The majoos at their place, the TV at ours."

Madhav couldn't breathe. He felt as if somebody had set fire to the majoos. Or it had been stolen. Or that someone was bidding for it in the auction.

"You really are a thick-headed fool," Deewali said impatiently. "A TV like that would cost at least ten to twelve thousand. The lady is a collector of old things and that is why she has agreed. Which fool would give you ten thousand for your patara? I had to praise that rival of mine so much before she thought of buying it."

Madhav stood up. He went to the majoos. He peered at it and ran his fingers lovingly over the carving. How could Deewali even think of it? Madhav started abusing her.

"You bitch! Mention this again and I will cut you up and fill salt in your wounds. Did your father give it to you?"

Deewali cried and cried. For four days she went around with a glum face.



Every time he thought of what Deewali had suggested, Madhav's eyes blazed with fury. He felt as if a part of his body had been torn off. He sat in front of the majoos. Sometimes he saw fleeting images of his ancestors in it. Sometimes it turned into an advertisement for soap, tea, shoes, chappals, biscuits, a cycle, a motor-cycle ... and he felt he was on it, going round and round in the "Well of Death" in a circus, with Deewali sitting behind him, her heart thudding against his back.

In his childhood he had heard stories of the djinn who gave you whatever you asked for. Now, he only had to say Open and the majoos would open. All sorts of wonderful things would spill out of it – things to eat, to wear, to sleep on. Even things you didn't need. How much the majoos could hold! Every evening it would spill out its goodies. You only had to press a switch and they would all go away. Till the next day when again it would say, "Your wishes are my command."

Madhav's head started spinning. The two-and-a-half room house had turned into a big shop. There was light everywhere from hundred, two hundred, five hundred watt bulbs, like the big shops in the cities. You could buy everything there ... For a moment he forgot what such shops were called. The people in these shops were from another world. They employed so many people to sell their goods. Pretty young girls with bright eyes.

Many days went by. Madhav could not sleep.

It was true. After all, what would he do with a patara? How long was he going to live in the past? What was wrong in exchanging it for a TV? The TV was like the magic tree, the one the gods had, which granted wishes.

One morning Madhav told Deewali. And she, before he could change his mind, took the majoos to the lady's house. And brought the TV home. Everyone was thrilled. Deewali distributed pedas. No cooking was done. Food was brought from outside. That night, Deewali's body revealed unimagined delights to Madhav.

Madhav kept muttering, "Ask, Ask. And it's yours."





translated by  
Preinila Condillac

**E**ven as he sat there, Amit knew that Parul was combing her hair, more like tugging at it, in the inner room. That done, she would wind it ruthlessly around her hand and slap a tight bun on to her head. And then, jab eight or ten pins into it, here and there ... almost as if it was someone else's hair. Amit was aware that the irritation and anger constantly simmering within Parul were because of him and directed at him. But he sat secure in his rhino-like armour. Barbs directed at him bounced back and hurt her, while he basked in the warm glow of victory.

After she had put on her saree, Parul would carefully apply a "foundation" of good-naturedness on her face ... layer upon thick layer of measured sweetness and pasted smiles. No one who looked at her could ever imagine the many conflicts that were raging within her at various levels of her being. It was not that she was such a fine actress. Rather, it was the

*Parul heard*

*inner turmoil*

*critical acclaim!*

# NAYAK

KHALNAYAK • VIDUSHAK

by Mannu Bhandari



result of a large dose of gentility and decorum that had been forced down her throat at birth, and which did not permit her to do anything as crude as show her grief.

Well, Parul could fool the world, but not Amit. Only he knew the abuses and curses that lay behind the loving words and honeyed tones with which she addressed him in the presence of others. Civility, gentility ... nothing but the cheap props of a life of duplicity and hypocrisy! His lips twisted in bitter mockery. Just as well he had dealt with their boring and oppressive "sophistication" right in the beginning - chomped, digested and deposited it where it belonged! His chest swelled with pride once more at the thought.

Picking up a sheet of chart paper, Amit sat down to finish the sketch of a stage-set with such total absorption that it was as if the world had ceased to exist for him outside of his work ... Parul, at any rate, had.

Even with his eyes glued to the paper, his eyes "saw" that Parul had drawn the curtain aside and was standing in the doorway, wondering how to leave politely without saying a word. Even if she was in no mood to talk, her sense of wifely duty would compel her to say something, at least an "OK, I'm going." The word "office" would, of course, never be uttered in the presence of her unemployed husband. That would be in such poor taste! Her genteel upbringing acknowledged the importance of handling a husband's self respect with care.

"Will you be home at around four today?"

The question took him by surprise. He looked up, despite himself. Wah! His guess had been perfect. She stood there all dressed up, looking so young and fresh. Who would imagine that this woman had spent the previous night turning and tossing in bed? He might have had his back towards her, but he knew that she had been shedding tears all night. Hats off to her!

Surely, there must be some special "training" which equipped people with the ability to hide their emotions. Or else, why was it that,



hardly had a thought entered his mind, and his face, in fact every damn hair on his body, seemed eager to announce it to the whole world? This in spite of his being an accomplished actor. But what could he do? After all, his parents had sent him to a municipal school to learn to read and write ... from where was he to acquire this "super-sophistication" of the "convent" types?

"Amma will be coming here ... if you are at home, she'd like to meet you."

He had half a mind to say, Thanks for the honour you have bestowed on me by using if. You could've simply ordered, Be at home at four and sit and talk to Amma. A good-for-nothing like you would have nowhere to go, anyway. But no. I apologise. Such crass words were not to be found in her vocabulary, however ugly the thoughts that were churning in her mind.

"Don't upset your plans on her account. Amma has to come this side for some work in any case."

"What does she want to speak to me about?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask and she didn't offer to tell me. All she said on the phone was, Will Amit be at home at four o'clock? Tell him I'll see him if he is." Then, ever so casually, she added,

"What could it be? She probably wants to drop by for a chat since she is coming this way."

Oh that flippant air! She shouldn't try it on him. Why didn't she come right out and say that her mother was planning to set him right, to let him know that, having married her darling daughter, he would have to mend his irresponsible ways?

"Breakfast is ready. Ask for it while you are working or whenever you like - Regular eating habits are beyond you of course - All right then, I'm off." The faintest trace of a mild perfume wafted past him. Really, nothing would ever make these people give up their airs!

**E**xit heroine. Now he was free till the entry of Ammajl, the villain. Freedom! Liberation! He tossed his pencil in the air, stretched languorously and took a couple of deep breaths. "Murari," he called



humble - a street with tree/landscape.

Nayak, Khalnayak, Vidushak

stretched widely  
out loudly, "One coffee. Make it piping hot." With that he sprawled out on the bed, completely at ease.

So much  
poverty  
in love  
What a relief! How trapped and suffocated he had been feeling all this while! In spite of his resistance, these two were taking charge of his life, destroying his identity. They seemed to have become his destiny. A sharp wave of pain washed over him as he recalled his old room - untidy, chaotic, yet a place where he had felt like a king even in times of abject penury. And the narrow gali, visible from the one solitary window, had been nothing less than a boulevard to his eyes.

So use all energy  
in every  
Now that the daughter had exhausted her arsenal in a futile bid to domesticate him, Ammaji was going to try her hand at it. All right, let her come - he would deal with her too. They both needed to be put in their places, and his rightful position had to be hammered into their heads. The matter must be settled once and for all.

She must be planning to strike him down with deceptive, sugar-coated cunning. So that he, already weighed down by her favours, would be rendered helpless by her kindness. Ammaji must have assumed that a few sentences would be enough to set this spoilt brat right. She could then return home victorious, banners flying high.

Am-124  
Ammaji's daughter had begun to consider herself an artiste after just a few roles - which he had given her - and by playing around with the arrangement of cushions and curtains in the house. No longer, though. Now she clearly understood the pride and the ego of the true artist. That love of freedom which he would not barter for the greatest luxuries (trivial as they were, in his opinion, in any case). Ammaji would also get a glimpse of this truth now.

As for matters of dialogue and style, who could compare with him, a born actor? These required not good-breeding but talent - an attribute that he, not Ammaji, possessed in abundance. This encounter was sure to be a knock-out for him!

Just the thought filled Amitosh with a new self-confidence. He felt as if a strange power was being born within him, shaking him out of the lethargy that had overcome him of late and adding a new weight to his personality. The surge of self-confidence brought with it a clarity of mind which allowed him to anticipate the many



*blame*  
allegations which his mother-in-law was sure to make, and to effortlessly formulate hard-hitting rejoinders. Not content with having his lines ready, he even went so far as to rehearse them a few times with full theatrical effects.

Now he was ready for battle. This mother-and-daughter team had overestimated its power. He would show them where they stood with him. The ongoing cold war against his lifestyle, his habits and, most importantly, his freedom (the freedom of an unbridled bull if their unspoken thoughts were to be put in words) must come to an end. Let the final curtain fall!

*not controlled*

*relying on*  
**H**e waited impatiently for the curtain to rise, in eager anticipation of the moment when he would finally bring it down. Time suddenly began to hang heavy on his hands and he picked up a book. Normally by now, having eaten a good meal, he would be stretched out on the bed and would fall asleep with Parul's unexpressed dictum ringing in his ears, "Only the slothful have the good fortune to sleep during the day." He'd left the door open. In response to the faint knocking, "Come in," he said.

And the villain came onstage. The same dignified appearance, the same gentle smile – truly her daughter's mother in every respect. Almost as if they were not flesh and blood at all, but dolls created from the same mould. No wonder they could not understand what "personality" means, or the power of a strong individual.

"Oh good! I'm glad I found you at home. I thought you might have gone out to some rehearsal. I had spoken to Parul but there was no way of knowing ... So, I had to take a chance."

Amitosh was silent.

"It's been so long since you all came over. (A sugar-coated reproach). I know you're very busy but do spare some time for this lonely soul. You know how I fret when I don't see you two for a while."

Amit was silent, but words took shape in his mind ... If I may be so bold as to put in my own language, the essence of what you are really saying, which lies not in these honeyed words of yours but in



what remains unsaid, it is this – An unemployed person cannot be short of time. It is just that you don't want to visit me. You avoid me. And thanks to you, poor Parul can't come over either. All day she slogs in her office ... if she were to come and sit with me in the evenings it would give you open licence to fool around.

As his mother-in-law passed her gaze over the room, her face came alive and her eyes lit up with appreciation. "So Parul has put up the new curtains – they certainly make the room more cheerful. She has always been so fond of doing up the house." And then continued in doting tones, "Some may accuse me of constantly praising my own daughter but this much I must say, very artistically inclined she is, this daughter of mine. Such an eye for choosing things. A real artist."

Good god! What an insult to art! For those unfamiliar with even the "a" of art, perhaps "real art" meant the ability to hang curtains, fold napkins and arrange cutlery on the table. Just as the bitter words were threatening to boil over, Ammaji produced her trump card.

"And the ultimate evidence of her good taste is the fact that she chose you, one of the top artists of the theatre world. In fact the best, I would say."

Though his hands did not move, Amit mentally clenched his fists. They were not going to work on him, these clever tactics she was using to try and douse his anger. He would not allow himself to cool down.

They both fell silent. It was as if each one was sizing the other up before getting to the heart of the matter.

"Amit, I have come to talk to you about something," she said in a voice stripped of all its earlier affection, its indulgence.

Hmm ... so now we're getting on to the right track. He was immediately on his guard. But then, another pause. Perhaps she was sharpening the cutting edge of the words she was going to use – precisely measured words they would be, and deadly sharp, so as to pierce him through and through.

"I don't quite know how to start."

Come on. At least have the good sense not to stage your theatrics



before an actor. Why don't you just reel off the long list of my misdeeds which your daughter must have given you? You must have committed it to memory over these past few days. Where is the problem in starting? Oh, I see ... your delicate vocabulary has no words to describe my base deeds ... tch, tch ... truly a serious problem. Poor Amma!

"Parul had specifically told me not to talk to you about this, even inadvertently, but ..."

Thank god, at least the daughter had realised that he was not one of those spineless creatures who are reduced to tail-wagging nobodys in the presence of these "superior" people.

"I couldn't let it rest ..."

Ah yes, a mother's love ... Couldn't bear to see her poor daughter suffer.

"After all, what can happen? At worst you'll fight with me. But that's okay. One does not take offence when one's children get angry."

That remains to be seen.

"What's the matter Amit? Why are you so quiet? You haven't spoken a word since I came in."

What should I say? Once you've delivered your intricate, finely crafted pieces, I will answer you with one rough but telling blow. It takes just one stroke of the blacksmith's hammer to equal the hundred delicate taps of the goldsmith's.

"I've heard that your new play has been held up."

Don't you worry about my play ... just get on with yours. This prologue has been stretched beyond boredom.

"I know you are proud and, to tell you the truth, I admire you for it."

Excuse me, but please be bold enough to use the right word. Don't say admire, say it's extremely painful. For all your wealth, it is pathetic to see how poor you are in terms of courage. Really, I pity you.

"Son even pride must have a limit."

Which you have come to set, perhaps.



"The biggest problem is that Parul is no less proud."

Oh, so you're here to defend Parul's pride. Do carry on. As her mother you're fully entitled to ... Why the silence? You can't summon the courage or is it your good breeding coming in the way once more? Allow me to put it into words for you. Hear me out and feel free to correct me if I get it wrong. I won't mind at all. The thoughts will be yours, the words mine ...

It was after working with Parul for two years and getting to know her well that you married her, and that too of your own free will.

So tell me, how's that for a start? What sort of an actor would I be if I couldn't mimic your style? Let me continue ...

With such enthusiasm she set up house! So readily she took upon herself the financial and familial responsibilities of your home, just so that you would be free to devote yourself wholly to the stage.

Hey listen, even if you can't applaud, at least nod your head appreciatively. Perhaps your daughter's sorrows are upsetting you. All right, I'll cut it short ...

Having received these favours, one would expect you to realise how much you owe my daughter. But you are such a thankless fellow - I'll change that to "wretch" if you like - that you are replacing her with a new heroine in your play! Not just that. You have also insulted my daughter by flirting openly with your heroine and the other tramps of the stage. How dare you behave in this manner?

So tell me, this is what you came to say, isn't it? Perhaps also to issue an ultimatum - Such behaviour will not be tolerated any further! Either you will have to mend your ways or I will take my daughter back - and gladly too. It is not as if she were a waif with nowhere to go ...

Well, listen carefully!

The heroine of my new play shall be Nanda, since I feel she has tremendous potential which I intend to fully exploit. As a director, it is my duty to bring new talent to the fore, to foster it. And if Parul, in spite of her close connection with the stage, does not understand this aspect of the director's responsibilities and looks upon it as merely an excuse, then I'm afraid nothing can be done about it. You



should see how devoted Nanda is at the rehearsals. She obeys my every instruction as though it were a vedic injunction. Respect for me oozes out of her every pore. She would do anything for me. Why then should I not take her?

Why do you look so upset, Ammaji? Oh, I see. You're wondering how I can compare the plain and simple Nanda with Parul and her winning combination of beauty, brains and character. They are as unequal a pair as Raja Bhoj and Gangu Teli. Nanda is a lightweight in every respect ...

I agree. But I also want you to understand how much substance this admittedly "lightweight" Nanda lends to my personality. Her very presence makes me brim over with self-confidence. While with Parul ... let's leave it. You won't be able to take it.

Amit waited in vain for her to launch her bitter tirade, so that he could retaliate with his well-rehearsed rejoinders. But when Amma finally broke the silence and spoke, the tone was not what he had expected.

"Look, you married Parul ..."

Just married her. Didn't commit myself to lifelong slavery.

"To me, you are both my children ..."

Your darling daughter's life has been ruined.

"You, and even Parul, consider me an outsider. Just think, since Parul's father passed away, the four flats, two offices and whatever else there is belongs to the two of you. But apart from the pay she gets from the office, Parul will not accept a single paisa from me. She is putting aside two hundred rupees every month in order to build you a terrace theatre."

A terrace theatre! But I will only be doing street plays now.

"Your play is stalled for want of a little money but you two don't even mention it to me! And when I do find out, Parul makes me swear not to speak to you about it. All right, I know that you have your self-respect. But this money belongs to you. So where's the question of self-respect? Why this reluctance? Now, I shall not say nor hear another word. Just get on with your play."

Without pausing for a comma, she said her piece and threw down



a bundle of notes tied in a kerchief. In one swift motion she rose and went clattering down the stairs, leaving Amit in a state of shock.

Amit felt his whole body tremble as his blood came to the boil. Oh, so he was to be defeated by this most base and low-down trick, presented in the garb of generosity. Having pushed him all the way into the mire of humiliation, she had walked away as spotless as a lotus leaf. He felt like shredding the bundle of notes to bits and throwing them at the retreating woman. But his blood, so recently boiling, had suddenly turned to water. His identity, his manhood, his very humanness seemed to melt and drain away, leaving him limp and lifeless. Wracked by an indescribably hellish pain, he knew he had to free himself from it soon. Or it would finish him off even as he sat there. Finish him for ever.

Freedom! In a flash Nanda's image was before him. In the past few months she had ceased to be a mere individual for him. She was his symbol of salvation. Whenever Parul's unspoken words flayed him and stripped him of his confidence, it was to Nanda that he would turn. Nanda, ever eager to please, whose every mannerism acted as a salve for his invisible wounds. He would come alive, a complete man once more. Nanda, only Nanda, could rid him of this agony. The very thought of her sent a shiver of excitement coursing through his lifeless body. How had he not realised that to these two women he was only a jester, funny and pathetic. No more. He would show them.

He would play the hero now.

Driven by a vindictive resolve, he snatched up the bundle of notes and thrust it into his pocket. Today he would do away with all restraints and inhibitions. He would use "his" money (that's what it would be in Nanda's eyes at least) to book a room in a posh hotel, and "order" the fanciest and most expensive food for dinner. And then, at his "masterful" best, he would enjoy Nanda. Thus would he confirm the reality of his existence and threatened manhood. How critical this had become for him today ...

And he rushed down the steps, eager to step into the hero's role.