

Alipura



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 juggernaut

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## The Dreamers

Village and block Alipura, district Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh. You know that morning has begun in a narrow lane of this village in Bundelkhand as soon as you notice the long rows of children shitting into the gulp and bubble of drains on either side of the lane. The sun has vaulted over the uneven and crooked roofline – cemented or tiled, sagging or humped – and is settling in for the day. Figures of an almost primal nakedness, in striped drawstring underpants, sit slumped on the plinths of houses, overcome with lethargy. Others are still fast asleep in the open, sprawled on scratchy charpoy, unaware of how their dhotis have ridden up, their long but loose drawers have slid agape, or that the views on offer are a topic of interest and wit among the defecating children. Flies dot the lane from one end to the other. It is mayhem at the public tap, where women noisily claim their turn and savage the claims of other women. On a raised plinth right there, but as if abstracted from the commotion, is a row of people sitting on their haunches, spitting out the results of their datoon, rinsing their mouths and gargling energetically over the drain. Also on the plinth is that band of elderly layabouts who answer to the name of dadda, babba or nanna, all now absorbed in extracting – with the aid of beedis – a

full night's worth of congealed phlegm from their chests, which they reverently dedicate to the same drain. Young men rake over the skin of their inner thighs and scrotums, pinching it between thumb and forefinger. Clutching their precious leaf-cups of jalebis to the chest, gastronomes race homewards to escape the harrying flies. An old woman appears with a basket of jamuns on her head. And spread over the entire scene is a peculiar odour, not exactly a stench, though certainly no fragrance either.

On such a summer's morning in the village of Alipura, a tonga entered the lane. Displaying uncanny skill, the driver steered his horse and cart safely past the squatting children on either side who were resolved not to budge an inch.

'Is the Manekpur Passenger in, bhaiyya?'

The old-timer who put this question to the tongawala had no need of the information, never having stirred out of Alipura in twenty years. But his guiding principle was that there's no harm in asking.

'Hau,' affirmed the tongawala and brought his vehicle to a halt.

The old man leapt off the plinth and landed near the tonga with such speed that even the horse was taken aback for an instant. The excitement of the tonga's halt roused other idlers to their feet and it was soon hemmed in by a sizeable crowd.

'You might ask them,' said the tongawala, to a passenger with the self-important bearing of a policeman. Besides this man and his flaring moustache, the tonga also held a loutish-looking boy and a couple of decrepit senior citizens.

'Say, bhaiyya, which way is it to Dube-ji's house?' was their query.

'Which Dube-ji? The one from Baruasagar?'

'No, from Mauranipur.'

'Come along, we'll show you there.'

With enthusiasm, the assembled spectators and volunteers began leading the way.



‘Stick close behind us,’ one of them turned to advise the tongawala.

‘I’m doing that,’ he returned, ‘but watch out for the horse, will you? You’re cramping his space.’

The procession made for Dube-ji’s house. An old man, constrained from movement by his swollen joints and a knee complaint, turned to another on the plinth and remarked, ‘They’re here to see Binnoo. Perhaps an engagement will come of it this time.’

‘Unlikely.’

‘Why’s that, bhaiyya?’

‘You can’t trust these Talbehat people. The bastards go around looking at girls all right but will never come back with a clear yes or no.’

‘True.’

The tonga had successfully managed a perilous turn of the narrow lane. It vanished from sight, but the conversation continued.

Binnoo was dressing up elaborately.

Why?

Because Lallan mamaji had found a likely match for her – a good-looking, capable, educated and cultured boy from a decent family of Gaudh Brahmin stock. Armed with these celestial virtues, the boy was coming over to take a look at Binnoo – which was why she was dressing up. Occasions for this elaborate toilette came her way five or six times a year. It had been so for the past few years. The boy in question was always a capable, well-born, cultured catch, and Binnoo did the honours for his reception every time. She would be ready as the good-looking, cultured, capable boy showed up with his parents, uncles, nephews, chums, hangers-on, or any company with the spare time to join him on a pleasure trip. They would examine Binnoo minutely, as if she were a pot they just might buy, before vanishing from view.

Yet, a renewed hope accompanied the preparations each time,

as the broken-down chairs of the sitting room made way for a sofa borrowed from the neighbours. A pink sari was unpacked. In the family's joint opinion, Binnoo looked pretty in this sari, paired with its matching blouse of puffed sleeves and a mirror-work neckline. On such a day she was permitted, even instructed, to 'do some cream-powder', considered a crime under more routine circumstances, and which could earn Amma's rebuke: 'Keep clear of fashion, Binnoo. Mind you, don't disgrace us with the caste fraternity.' It was commonly held that cosmetics ruin the skin, besides bringing dishonour to the family, just as a girl with an eye-catching hairdo was bound to be a shameless flirt. It was another matter that despite these adversities Binnoo always did manage a pretty-ish arrangement for her braid, and to get some touches of make-up on her face. Far from ruined by these attentions, her skin was glowing marvellously, and the sight of it strengthened Rammu's hope and resolve to make a grab for her at the first chance he got, by night or day. This Rammu, who grew ever more committed to carrying out his programme, was the son and heir of the Bania Gurcharan, their neighbour.

Binnoo rehearsed (hummed) a bhajan as she dressed. Mamaji invariably asked her to sing a bhajan for the boy's party. They would learn that the girl was much given to singing, especially devotional and religious songs, and that God had blessed her with a sweet throat. Binnoo was a competent enough singer. She could get within striking distance of the tune and never went entirely flat. Her own tastes ran to film songs, and these tastes were indulged in her moments of solitude, especially when she was alone on the terrace. From his terrace, Rammu would listen to her. The lyrics, packed tight with allusions to the dark night and faithless lover, parting, estrangement and reunion, the bed, the pillow, arms, bangles, sultry nights, inner courtyards and pulsating youth, left him all the more committed to his one-point agenda of making a grab for Binnoo some day. The drift of the bhajan-like song on her

lips at this moment went somewhat like this: Preserve my honour, O Lifter of the Mountain; this grieving woman leans into your keeping. The lines poignantly conveyed the wish that the Lifter of the Mountain, shortly to arrive lurching up in a tonga towards this grieving woman, would be overcome by the combined force of the borrowed sofa, the pink sari (and its matching blouse with the puffed sleeves), the siren call of her song, and that the cocktail of these attractions might prove sufficiently heady to make him choose Binnoo for his bride.

While we are on the subject, it may strike some naïve soul to wonder if Binnoo did not mind this routine of prinking herself for repeated viewing. The concerned onlooker may expect that even if she was not angry, she might have lost heart by now, succumbed to deep depression. But such was not the case. To Binnoo, these proceedings were inseparable from the fact and destiny of being born a girl. Since childhood, she had seen girls of her family, neighbourhood and acquaintance go through this rite of passage. Truth be told, the dreams that leavened her transition from girl to young woman were rich in such scenes, which Binnoo rewound and played in her head over and over. There was one where she, demurely holding a tray, served tea to the entire assembled khabbu team of the boy's people; then one in which a tonga stopped in the lane and from it alighted the prince of her dreams, on lotus feet, minding his lotuses as he stepped over the drain at the entrance to the house. In another, her prince, now seated in the refurbished drawing room, accepted a cup of tea from Binnoo, surreptitiously touching her fingers. In one scene, Amma, demented with joy, burst into the inner courtyard, the aangan, shouting out the news that our Binnoo had pleased the boy's people and they had accepted her. It may be worth adding that Binnoo's dreams had for the most part been realized. The boys who paid these state visits ensured that virtually every scenario of the fantasy came to life. Only the final link – involving Amma's demented sprint – remained to be secured.

Binnoo continued to dream without tiring of it. That another boy was coming to look at her today was a point of some reassurance. She knew no small number of Binnoos in other homes, whom the boys no longer came to see, or whose exhausted parents had called off the search for a groom and settled for cursing fate and their girl instead. Amma never taunted Binnoo. And if hope glowed yet in Binnoo's and Amma's hearts, its flame was stoked vigilantly by Lallan mama.

Binnoo felt a deep gratitude for Lallan mama. He was a retired employee of Indian Railways, and matchmaking for the boys and girls of the caste fraternity remained his sole mission in life. Within the family, every match was of his fixing, or so he liked to boast. Indian Railways had served him unstintingly in this project. With a clear sense of his standing as a former employee of the giant public sector outfit, he was eternally catching trains and disembarking without spending on tickets. The railway might have been his dad's property; nothing in his behaviour suggested otherwise. Up or down, all the trains were his to ride. He simply took the first 'up' leaving and returned on any 'down' available. If he wasn't back, you could be sure he had found a comfortable railway retiring room for the night. With him went a tin trunk that held a true almanac, a book of magical spells, certain weathered tomes of rites and rituals, the latest number of *Manohar Kahaniyan*, an issue of *Jasoosi Duniya* and, aside from the *Asli Kokshastra* and certain other salty titles, an absolute trove of horoscopes of eligible youngsters from the caste fraternity; also a fat and sectioned diary with detailed accounts of the marriageable, the addresses of such parties, their situation in life, demands and expectations, and so on. The trunk was opened at the slightest pretext and any ten-minute conversation on a railway platform or train could end with a fellow traveller's name and address noted in the diary, followed by the promise of a visit some day from Lallan mama. Thanks to Indian Railways, Mama kept his word too. Every ten days or so,

he touched down at Alipura, each time with news of a possible match for Binnoo. Once he'd got the niece hitched up, it would be the turn of his four unmarried nephews. He was determined to do well by them all. Lallan mamaji was alive to his responsibilities towards his widowed sister and committed to meeting them. The load on Amma would lighten once Binnoo was off her hands; to this end, Lallan – whom Amma called her Bhaiyyan, or little brother – did not spare himself or Indian Railways. He flogged its trains mercilessly across the terrain of Bundelkhand, matching horoscopes at one place, beating down dowry demands at another, waving the standard of his deceased brother-in-law's glorious issue wherever he went – but a 'setting' to plant the flag has eluded him so far.

There are two problems. One, that Binnoo's complexion is 'somewhat subdued'. Well, neutral voices flatly maintain the girl is dark. The other snag is a question: What sort of dowry can four fatherless boys arrange for their sister? This is where the talks with potential bridegrooms and their families start turning sticky.

For all that, Binnoo is dressing up once more. Humming her tune and billowed by dreams and hopes, she gets ready. Attentive to the latest command of fashion, she teases out a carefully careless fringe across her forehead – a tasselled arrangement, like keys on a ring – smears a generous quantity of cheap cream over her face, wears the gold earrings and chain given by Amma, and is stuffing the pleats of the pink sari into her waist when the chain on the door rattles.

'Do hurry up, Binnoo!' Mamaji calls from without.

'Coming,' squeaks Binnoo from within.

One of her brothers: 'Put some speed in it. Look how late it's getting!'

'Here I come,' responds Binnoo.

But how can she emerge just yet? A whole segment of the beauty regime remains ahead.

This is from a few hours before Binnoo retired to dress, that is, from quite early in the morning of the day the boy's party was expected. The sun had risen. After a night of being gnawed at by mosquitoes, a night of sweating and itching, of rising repeatedly in the sweltering heat to piss into the stinking runnel at the edge of the terrace, when Lallan mama descended to the aangan in the morning, the sun was already there. Unwashed dishes from the previous night, stacked in their trough in the corner, glowered rankly. Flies made desultory circuits of the trough, the dishes and other points of interest in the aangan. The tulsi plant in its raised plinth at the centre of the aangan had been watered with such a lavish hand that the surrounding earthen floor was now slush. Amid this stood a loose-strung cot with a rug spread over it, and on this rug lay the slumbering muscle-bound frame of a youth. With just his underpants by way of covering, but impervious to all the shaking and curses Amma could deliver, this was Mamaji's youngest nephew, Lalla. The floor of the aangan – cracking in places, along with its coats of cow-dung paste – also supported a sedately cross-legged Chandu, Mama's second nephew, who was sipping tea from a greasy glass while his other arm conveyed a breakfast of the previous night's roti, decorated with pickle, to his face. The eldest nephew, Guchchan, was strenuously hauling buckets of water from outdoors to fill a motley collection of containers within: a crumbling basin, gigantic brass vessels of ancestral provenance, and a humble assortment of pails, pots, pans, bowls and mugs.

A radio could be heard from one of the rooms. Its volume was turned high, and so was the voice of the person accompanying the song note for note. The voice belonged to Mamaji's third nephew, Chhuttan – the name a predictable tribute to his diminutive build. Any time he craved a smoke, Chhuttan withdrew to this room, 'to listen to the radio'. He was now priming himself for the toilet with the all-important beedi. From the sound of the radio Mamaji guessed where a lit beedi might be found. On descending

from the terrace into the aangan, he did not linger but made directly for the music room, where Chhuttan was practising his unique gift for singing and smoking simultaneously. With his one mouth and throat deployed on two fronts, when Chhuttan perceived Mamaji's approach, he turned the smouldering end of the beedi down into the cup of his palm. The concealment was about as effective as a fat man hiding behind a reed, but Chhuttan meant it as a pro-forma gesture. It proved he was second to none in being mindful of his elders.

'Listen to this one, Mamaji. It's a great song. From *Professor*.'

Mamaji showed no interest in the music and came straight to the point. In a stage whisper that went over the noise of the radio, he asked, 'Is there any left in the bundle, or no?'

Chhuttan reversed the beedi in his grip and presented it handsomely: 'All yours. But don't be too long in the latrine, will you? After a beedi I can't hold it in either.'

Mamaji set off with his prize, leaving instructions over his shoulder: 'They're coming to see Binnoo today. The sharbat will need ice. Remember to bring it. And store it in sacking.'

Chhuttan assured him the ice job was in hand and added that Chhadaami – the paanwala at the corner shop, didn't Mamaji know – happened to be a pal of his and supplying ice was part of his trade. Chhadaami had been told of their need and would have already laid aside ice for them. Mamaji paused. Caressing his belly in slow circular strokes, he announced that these fucking betel-sellers were loyal to nobody. And this Chhadaami, wasn't he the same bastard facing trial for the murder of his dad? Chhuttan was offended by the gratuitous jibe. He told Mamaji with some heat that he knew how to judge a man's character for himself. As for the dad, he was the kind that deserves to be murdered. Mamaji was not to worry about the ice. He should go take a shit and then be sure to meet Amma. She'd been bellyaching about the horoscopes, something that matched or didn't match – bad news either way – between Binnoo and the Talbehat boy.

Mamaji paused again to remark that there was no trusting these Talbehatiyas or their fucking horoscopes. With a proud smirk he added, 'I'm streets ahead of them. I checked out the boy's horoscope and had a matching one made for Binnoo. It's a tricky business, but Pandit Radhe Guruji, who normally charges ten rupees, did it for me for five.'

Chhuttan heaped praise on Mamaji's cunning. With an elder like him watching over them, the family could run rings around the Talbehatiyas, let them come in their thousands. Swelling somewhat, Mamaji took a deep drag on his nephew's beedi. Once he had recovered from the convulsive coughing this provoked, he spat a large gob of phlegm into a corner of the room and boasted that he had sold plenty of pups to the Talbehatiyas. Why, there was even the time he managed to palm off a one-eyed girl as whole. Did Chhuttan remember his Gopi chacha's daughter, who had developed a patch on her eyeball in childhood?

During this flow of the soul, Chhuttan had reached into a trunk standing in the corner and extracted a bundle of beedis from under its deceptive layers of old clothes. He lit one, drew on it and floated a perfectly formed smoke ring in the air, proving the younger generation's vanguard credentials here as in other fields. His considered view, which he proceeded to share, was that such achievements were all very well but it wouldn't do to grow complacent. The diabolical thing about these Talbehat chootiyas was that they went around looking like perfect imbeciles, and people were even taken in by their chootiyatik faces. Chhuttan reminded Mamaji of the cautionary tale, *Bai ki taint dekhiyo bhyaane*.

To recount it at length to Mamaji would have been pointless, and worse, an impertinence – Mamaji was, after all, the prime inspiration, creator, instigator and protagonist of countless such tales and could have recited them backwards – but now that the matter has come up, it is tempting to revisit the salient points, if only so readers may learn what kind of characters they are up against.



Legend has it that a certain hunchbacked boy, naturally keen on acquiring a beautiful bride with a large dowry, was baffled by the world's failure to present him with both. His parents were no less perplexed than he, but the conjunction of beautiful girl, large dowry and hunchbacked boy simply wouldn't arrive. Then, as was customary in Bundelkhand, or, shall we say in a recourse adopted by millions with unfailing results, they did not display the real goods to the girl's side but a substitute, whom the girl's family duly liked, accepted and agreed to fork out a large dowry to.

Now that's one part of the story.

The second part takes us to another village, where a gentleman blessed with a one-eyed daughter was unable to snare her a groom despite his willingness to part with a large dowry. So he too fell back on the region's ancient wisdom and caught his prey by using a decoy – his pretty niece.

So far the story has been quite straightforward, but what is a story without a twist? The twist here is that the boy's parents and the girl's father, the ones who had employed the popular stratagem, turned out to have used it on each other. On the wedding day, when the hunchbacked groom arrived at the mandap, his gait and posture immediately gave away the deception to the bride's father. The injured party glared at the groom's father, but that gentleman smiled serenely and remarked, '*Bhali bhayi, bhali bhayi, mandva tale kubad bhayi.*' (A lucky thing this hadn't happened to the groom before he stepped into the mandap, i.e., while you could still back out.) To this the bride's father shot back, '*Tum na jaano hami sayaane, bai ki taint dekhiyo bhyaane.*' (Sonny, don't go thinking you're the shrewd one here. Be sure to check out the bai's, or girl's, taint, or eyes, bhyaane, in the morning.) This riposte of proverbial status was what Chhuttan had quoted to Mamaji. The story is a didactic one, and its moral is that in Bundelkhand you would be well advised to test the ground at every step; it will never do to imagine the other party less crafty, depraved or dastardly than yourself.

This is the sobering point Chhuttan tried to convey to Mamaji, who, in the meantime, was racked by another bout of coughing. Between coughs he managed to splutter that, firstly, our Binnoo was not one-eyed but blessedly whole. What's more, he had seen off plenty of folk from Talbehat, Banda, Bilahri, Chhattarpur – which is to say, from every neighbouring area where the natives fancied themselves expert at the deceits of arranging marriages. Chhuttan conceded the point with grace. His summing-up had the flavour of an official communiqué: 'Mamaji, you're our only support. We lost our father as children and you are as a father to us now. Once Binnoo is settled, it won't matter if the rest of us have to stay unmarried. You won't hear us complain.' At Chhuttan's words, Mamaji rose as if a bolt had shot through him. The words were certainly moving, but the effect owed more to a pressure building up in his innards as the ancient link between beedi and digestion asserted itself. Whatever the reason, he rose electrified and, leaving for the aangan, declared, 'My boy, should any of you remain single whilst I live, shame on my life!' He vowed that the four brothers' weddings would be a thing to behold for the world at large – by which he meant the caste fraternity – and broke into a canter towards the door at the end of the aangan, which opened to the latrine.

Chhuttan, puffing on his beedi, lost himself to a vision of his lovely bride, a woman he flings on to the bed before proceeding to do everything he has for years dreamt of doing to any woman in her shoes. The song on the radio was from the film *Sangam*: 'Tell me, Radha, tell me if our union is to be!' Chhuttan raised the volume, joined his voice to Vyjayanthimala's, swayed on his feet and informed the world, 'It will be, oh yes, yes, it will!'

Guchchan tried rousing Lalla from bed with a kick. Lalla didn't rise. Guchchan kicked him again and said, 'Get up and help with the water.' Lalla just lay there and mumbled, 'Why don't you get Chandu to help?' This earned him a third kick from the scandalized

Guchchan: 'You want Chandu to carry buckets?' Getting Chandu to carry buckets or to help with any task about the house was virtually a thought-crime.

Chandu bhaisaab was the intellectual of the family, which is to say he had reached the matriculation without once failing an exam, in fact with quite good marks. The plume on the turban was that he was a student of science. The other three brothers, in which count Guchchan – the eldest – must sadly be included, had for years floated in a hazy zone somewhere around the matric and the school-leaving 'Inter'. It was feared they might linger there a few years yet. Guchchan, who was otherwise perfectly competent, sensible and up to meeting his responsibilities, couldn't seem to pass examinations, no one knew why. He had sat the matric, taken the supplementary, tried the re-supplementary and every other recourse available, not once but several times. At each attempt he failed in a different paper. He might assure Amma: 'I've got my Hindi in hand now. As to the rest, I had already cleared all of them the last time – nothing can go wrong.' Only to be tripped up by History. The next time, it was Geography. Then Commerce. If he changed his combination of subjects, a new round of upsets would begin. He understood how important it was that he should pass. The household had gone without a regular income for twenty-two years and Amma was hard put to support the expense of books and fees along with everything else. Guchchan wanted to pass too, he really did. If only he could do it without studying. The sight of books brought on thoughts of arson, a mounting pyromania that would have gladly seen the school building off in the same blaze. Pen and ink provoked desperate, hysterical impulses – to blacken the headmaster's face, to shove the pen and inkwell down his gullet. But Guchchan's academic ambitions in this direction were curbed by his desire to clear the school-leaving exam and please Amma. The Inter need not worry about him turning up with any further demands or expectations, he wouldn't dream of asking for more.

Amma wanted that her children be like their deceased father, literary-minded and learned; that like him they should delight in spending hours locked away in his tiny upstairs room stuffed with books, old handwritten collections of poetry and diaries of jottings. It was her hope to see a son of theirs counted one day among the major poets of Alipura, just as the father had been. Amma was herself illiterate, but had the feeling that something of their father's stamp would surely surface in the children.

Only Chandu bhaisaab had evinced that 'something' yet, what's more, with a 'First Class' attached to it. While a tide of academic failure engulfed the family, Chandu continued to pass his exams, no small feat by itself, and had lately been dashing off poems too. He was quite the deft rhymester, was Chandu, already drawing praise and envy in Alipura's midget literary circles. Not long back, at a poets' gathering convened by Diwakar-ji on his terrace – to mark his grandson's mundan ceremony – Chandu had edified the assembly with his 'Widow's Dream'. Diwakar-ji himself, passing by in the lane as Amma swept the veranda the next morning, informed her that hearing Chandu's poem had reminded him of Amritlal, this being her dear deceased husband. A proud Amma showered a thousand blessings on Chandu that day and urged her remaining offspring to learn by his example. But the remaining offspring, in whose souls a dumb terror of Chandu's intellect and erudition had long settled, were in no position to act on their mother's command.

Chandu bhaisaab became the ornament of the family, to be shown off to visitors. As his studies of science included a subject called Biology, and periodically involved him in taking apart frogs and worms, visitors would learn that this son was 'in the medical line'. It was hoped that Chandu would eventually turn his hand from ripping up frogs to human beings. The idea held a glamour all its own. Amma may not have understood much about these matters, but to hear such things said gave her immense satisfaction.

Amid the altercation over who should fill the water containers,

a disgusted Chandu left the aangan – leaving his tea and breakfast standing there in sullen rebuke. He made for the cramped study, where he opened the notebook reserved for his poetry and started on a new work, an indictment of this callous world where an aged mother must fetch water all by herself from the public tap.

Lalla had withstood the kicking he received without giving in. When he arose, the first thing he did was to stretch and test the various joints and muscles of his wrestler's physique. He cast a loving eye upon the ripples and bulges along his arms and thighs before reaching under the cot for a bowl left there the previous night. Straightening up again, he took out a fistful of soaked gram from the bowl and tossed it into his mouth, whereupon he took off like a robust horse in the direction of the tap. There was the water to fill, his regimen of sit-ups slated for directly after, and any number of household chores to follow because visitors were arriving again to see Binnoo.

The groundwork for Binnoo's big day was complete.

Lallan mamaji, in overall charge, now gave his full attention to directing Lalla in hanging a calendar on the wall. The calendar was a bid to impress the boy's people with the art-loving lifestyle of the girl's home. Issued by a beedi company of Jabalpur, it featured Dilip Kumar, with dishevelled locks, peering at something beyond the frame. What the thing was could not be asserted definitively, but the publishers were of the opinion – with which Lallan mamaji concurred – that a look of such yearning had to be reserved for a new bundle of Tiger Brand beedis.

Gurcharan Bania's battered and dispirited-looking sofa set had been arranged in the sitting room. Gurcharan owned no fewer than three shops in the village but did nothing to improve his standard of living – this was Mamaji's standing complaint against him. But that said, any sofa set, even this one, was better than having

none. Gurcharan's loafer of a son, Rammu, counted Chhuttan among his dearest friends; that's the same Rammu who was conducting a covert, one-sided romance with Binnoo. He overrode all objections this morning and insisted on helping Lalla convey the sofas to their provisional home. Once through the door, he pleaded thirst to penetrate further, right up to the aangan, where he lingered to pay his respects to Amma, but couldn't catch a glimpse of Binnoo.

As Lalla was nailing the calendar to the wall under Mamaji's guidance, Chhuttan strolled into the sitting room. With a quizzical smile, he paused before the calendar.

'What do you say to that?' demanded Lalla mamaji, with pride.

'It's the age of Dharmendra now,' returned Chhuttan. There was a derisive note in his voice.

'Whose?'

'Dharmendra's. Mamaji, haven't you watched *Phool aur Patthar*?' For his uncle's benefit, Chhuttan gave a crisp precis of the changing tastes of cinemagoers and concluded with a summary dismissal of the Dilip Kumar calendar. 'No one cares a hang for him any more. Didn't you notice how *Leader* flopped? I say a man should never lose sight of his advancing age. This is Dharmendra's time. Mamaji, you've got to watch *Phool aur Patthar*. Ten days back, I travelled to Jhansi to catch a show. You live right there and go "Who's this Dharmendra?" What a body the man has!'

'Our Lalla's body is a match for anyone but that makes him no Dilip Kumar, bhaiyya,' came Mamaji's rejoinder.

'Which moron was suggesting it's the body alone! You need the face to go with it. Ever noticed the mug on our Lalla?'

'Is that any way to speak of your younger brother?'

'I love him as a brother. If you want I'll kiss that face right now and prove it. But since we're speaking our minds here . . .'

Mamaji was riled. 'If I don't find an angelic bride for this very Lalla, you may speak all you like!'

'I've been to plenty of marriages arranged by you and never seen one angelic bride yet.'

'You shall, at Lalla's wedding, I can promise you.'

'And at mine?'

'With that attitude, sonny, what you'll get is a ghanta!' The accompanying gesture of Mamaji's forearm was an adequate illustration of the object Chhuttan could expect to receive.

'That's going below the belt.'

'Just listen to the way you talk!'

'All I said was Dilip Kumar is a has-been. But there's no harm in your calendar. Whatever the boy may think, his dad is sure to like it.' Chhuttan took a conciliatory line.

While the debate was raging, Lalla had fulfilled his office of fixing the calendar high on the wall. He was about to jump off the sofa when it made a sharp protest, as if something within had given way.

'Don't destroy it, yaar! It's borrowed property,' growled Chhuttan. Lalla turned irate: 'It wouldn't break just like that!'

'At least look at your size before you go heaving it on to the furniture.'

'I don't suppose your Dharmendra sits much on sofas?' Mamaji grabbed his chance to score a point.

'You couldn't get him to piss on a wreck like this!'

'Only dogs go around piddling on sofas.' Mamaji was enjoying himself now.

'Mamaji, name-calling won't help your Dilip Kumar! If he is past it, how's that Dharmendra's fault or mine? Take it from me, even your beedi company will have Dharmendra on next year's calendar.'

'I wouldn't even piss on that calendar.'

'A good thing you wouldn't. Aiming it that high on the wall won't be easy, for one.'

'My piss hasn't lost its force, sonny.'

'Exactly what Dilip Kumar also thought, and look what

happened. *Leader* bombed and his piss returned to soak him. Happens in old age.'

'Who're you calling old?'

'Excuse me, Mamaji, but you're not getting younger and that's the plain truth.'

'Says who?'

'All right, if it isn't, find an angel for yourself as well as for Lalla.'

'I might. Don't you write me off just yet.'

As the age-old give-and-take between uncle and nephew progressed, so did the finishing touches to the sitting room. The blotchy walls that hadn't known a coat of whitewash in years, the sofa set such as it was, the controversial Dilip Kumar calendar, a glass stuffed tight with a posy of marigolds, the old cot in the corner under its shiny covering of Solapuri cloth (reserved for such delicate occasions and otherwise locked away in Amma's trunk), and the printed curtain at the entrance to the room – all combined to present a vision of some grandeur, or so it seemed to Mamaji. He stood in the centre of the room and swivelled slowly on his heels, taking in the panorama, then turned to Chhuttan. 'How does it look?'

'So-so,' said Chhuttan.

'So-so? What's that supposed to mean?'

'That it's so-so, it'll do, what else? But I was thinking of something different.'

Mamaji went tetchy. 'Share your reflections with us, will you?'

'In fact, I wanted to put it to you.'

'I'm all ears.'

'Mamaji, let's say you manage to land an angel here, how would she go with this house of ours?' Chhuttan's question was hypothetical but acute.

'Why? What's wrong with the house?'

'Okay, nothing wrong maybe, but it's hardly right for an angel. And then we have to consider how she would go with our Lalla.'



'She'd go perfectly well. Nothing the matter with our Lalla.'

'Now, we like him well enough. But will she? That's the question.'

'She's welcome not to. Who's asking for her opinion?'

'Mamaji, angels don't go in much for suicide, do they?'

'Suicide? Why?'

'If they do, she certainly will when she gets here.'

'After meeting you, perhaps?'

'But you're not introducing her to me, remember? I'm getting a ghanta.'

'Quite right. It's what you deserve.'

'Okay Mamaji, tell me how would a doll look by *your* side?'

Before Chhuttan could stretch the teasing further, a livid Guchchan bhaisaab appeared out of nowhere and landed a stinger on his cheek: 'Behenchod, is this how you address your elders?'

The slap caught Chhuttan unawares. He reeled and fell on the sofa. A bundle of beedis flew out of his pocket and escaped to the floor. When he rose, he did so with a studied casualness, dusting himself lightly, as if this was all in a day's work, and even enhanced his cool dignity, far from denting it. He said, 'Have a care before you let fly, bhaiyya. What if you'd broken the sofa?'

By then Guchchan bhaiyya had pounced on the bundle of beedis. With every intention of putting Chhuttan in receipt of another slap, he advanced on him. 'You've been smoking again?'

'It's not mine.'

'Is it mine, behenchod?'

'Mamaji's. He sent for it. Go on, tell him, Mamaji. Waiting pointlessly for me to be pulped before you cl . . .'

'Yes, it is pointless my hitting you because you'll never mend your ways.'

By then Mamaji had come between them. He took the bundle from Guchchan, before drawing him into a corner for a whispered conference. With the summit of elders under way, Chhuttan strolled over to where an unperturbed Lalla was straightening the

curtain. A silent and reserved fellow, Lalla confined his emotional involvements to bodybuilding, massaging bitter oil into his limbs, raking the floor of the wrestling arena, handling all the heavy-duty chores (hauling provisions such as sacks of wheat off the bullock cart and conveying them to the interior of the house), munching on sprouted beans, going swimming when the river was high, keeping on the lookout for a good countrymade pistol for himself, swinging lathis and clubs, guarding his celibate purity whilst also diligently pursuing sexual information (sneaking the porn stashed in Chhuttan's trunk up to the roof for undisturbed perusal) and from time to time declaring his readiness to die for the family's honour.

Chhuttan came close to Lalla and said, 'Got an athanni on you?'

'No. What do you want it for?'

'To hire a cycle, yaar. Got to receive the Talbehat crowd at the station.'

'Why not walk? The station's right here.'

'Yes, so when I show up on foot like a chootiya, they know at once these beggars are penniless.'

'But you'd ride back with them in the tonga. You wouldn't be walking.'

'Yaar, there's a glory to being on a new cycle and leading a tonga, but you won't get it.'

'Anyway, I haven't got an athanni.'

'And if you did, you'd have gobbled it down in sprouted beans by now. Run along and get it off Amma.'

'Let me go to the station,' Lalla proposed. 'I'd do it on foot.'

Chhuttan took the offer badly and began to bluster: 'We're not digging a pit for wrestling over there, you know. You've got to conduct a conversation. You think it's a joke holding your end up with these Talbehatis? All the way, each side will try and make a chootiya of the other. They'll brag about their family, run floats and pageants past you. Their boy is a stationmaster who will shortly

be sitting the exam to join the collectorate, if you please. There's sure to be an uncle who is a sessions judge somewhere. We need somebody who can show our side to advantage. If you want to go walking, be my guest. Later, you could heat your saved athanni and stick it where you like.'

'No, it's you who's got to go. It's what Guchchan bhaiyya also said.' Lalla wanted out of the argument.

'Then jump to it and get a rupee off Amma.'

'But you said athanni a minute back.'

'It'll be another athanni for the ice, won't it? I have that to collect on my return.'

'Why not ask Amma yourself?'

'Yaar, she'd never give it to me.'

'When does Amma have the money to throw around?'

'She does. She's got plenty. Now go and get it.'

The routed Lalla went within. Looking daggers at Chhuttan, Guchchan took the same route.

Mamaji glanced at the old clock on the wall. 'It's eight already. The Manekpur Passenger will be in by nine. You'd better leave, Chhuttan. Won't do to be late for them.'

'I'm off, but how about returning my beedis, Mamaji? I mean the bundle that's vanished into your clothes.'

Mamaji returned the bundle after extracting three or four beedis for himself. 'Now leave.'

'Going. Just let Lalla return.' The sardonic smile was back on Chhuttan's face as he studied the Dilip Kumar calendar with renewed interest. After a spell of this he observed, 'The face of an ape, wouldn't you say, Mamaji?'

There was no reply.

Chhuttan turned around.

Mamaji too had left. Chhuttan was alone in the room.

But why say alone? He had Dilip Kumar for company.

As Chhuttan left for the station, Guchchan sat down to his puja.

Amma's eldest son was considered a sadhu by everyone, and rightly so, given his deep interest in religion. Prayers and rituals absorbed him utterly. Moreover, he had none of the usual vices, kept miles away from beedis and tobacco, touched the feet of his elders, treated women with a filial piety, applied himself to scripture reading, washed his eyes in triphala, wore a loincloth, kept up with new issues of *Kalyan*, arose at the predawn Hour of Brahma to a cold-water bath, massaged his mother's feet at night, parted his hair straight down the middle, practised yoga, despised men who styled their hair in a puff, accorded the highest place to celibacy, honoured mendicants, regarded anything new as a step towards moral breakdown, could reel off by heart the Durga Strot, Hanuman Chaleesa and Shiv Strot, and spent hours in puja every day.

This is why he was universally – or by neighbours and acquaintances at any rate – considered a sadhu. Among them, it wasn't done to cite Guchchan's example to make any sort of point: 'No, no, don't speak of him, that poor chap's a sadhu,' was said on every hand.

Once more, he was seated at his puja.

The rituals of prayer had exerted a mysterious pull on him since early childhood. Then, as he continued to fail at studies, his religiosity grew more pronounced. The day he learned he had failed at the Inter for the sixth time, he planted himself in the puja room and recited the Durga Strot without a break for seven hours, never once shifting from the lotus position. He was convinced that a malign spiritual entity had cast its shadow on his family, and till it was expelled he, and Chhuttan after him, could never make a go of their studies, putting down roots instead in the soil of every class.

The truth is that after their father's untimely death, when Guchchan was seven and Binnoo still a foetus in Amma's womb, the family had never got back on its feet again. The children could not discover what happy days are like, the shapes and colours

they come in, or the good things that happen on such days. Guchchan, who remembered stories of a happier time, developed a belief that its return would depend upon altering the psychic weather, changes he would orchestrate through prayers and rituals, privations, propitiations and austerities. Once he had neutralized the malign influence, he would clear his Inter, proceed to a job, and the family's happy days might resume. But the virtuous and sadhu-like Guchchan, who could spend hours in the puja room without altering his posture or noticing the time, went to pieces within minutes of opening his school books. It was assuredly that negative force field in play, and Guchchan redoubled his prayers.

Guchchan believed his devotion would please Durga Mata some day and she would appear to him: 'Rise, son, rise and ask, you get two boons.' He was terrified of being caught off guard at the big moment, of not knowing what to say. Or getting into a fluster, blabbing something like: 'Maiyya, a good Second Division in the Inter, please!' How the goddess would laugh at this simpleton. A welter of possible demands clogged his head and he could not choose between them.

It is as well that Durga Mata delays her arrival, or Guchchan might embarrass himself. For some days now, a single idea has lodged itself in his brain and rattles insistently there: 'Maiyya, send the achchhe din back to this house. Days when we wake up and there is no bickering. When we get to hear Amma's laughter. When we have water on tap in the aangan. When the exam results are announced and it turns out that everyone has passed.' Such tiny gains expressed his idea of better times. But where were even the smallest wishes coming true? Fortune's hide-and-seek with the family seemed never-ending. Guchchan has staked all his prayers and virtue on divine intervention before the close of play.

And so matters proceeded this day.

The people from Talbehata were arriving to see Binnoo. Binnoo was getting dressed to receive them. Chhuttan left for the station.

Lallan mama and Amma could be heard in murmured conversation from an inner room. After seeing to all his assigned jobs, Lalla was flat on his back in the cool of the covered entrance, preparing himself mentally for a bath. Chandu occupied the little study. And Guchchan was at his post in the puja room. Were Ma Durga to appear today, he wouldn't press his happy-days agenda. All he would ask is, let Binnoo be accepted, let this match be fixed.

Durga hadn't appeared so far. Guchchan's prayers could continue in peace.

There is a room on the roof. It is tiny and narrow. Closed on all sides. It had a window once, but it was sealed years ago with bricks and mortar. Access to this room is by a set of narrow spiralling stairs from the dark room below it. Amma holds the keys to both the dark room and the one above. The keys are strung into the fat bunch that stays tucked into the waist of her sari. The door to the lower room has a levered lock of old workmanship, to open which requires the insertion of three different keys, each turned to a precise degree – two to the left and one to the right. Only then does the lock grant admittance. When Amma enters this room, she closes the thick flaps of the door after her. Next, she drives the bolt shut and also fixes a wooden bar across the door, easing it into niches in the wall on either side. Now, no one else may enter: not Lalla, Chandu, Guchchan, Chhuttan, nor air or light – no one and nothing at all. For years, Amma alone has entered and left this room, penetrated its captive air, of which not a whiff escapes to anyone outside. She allowed the air to remain because it holds its tongue. Just like her. It sees all. Infers and understands. But gives nothing away.

While the air in the room cannot speak, Amma chooses not to.

Like the air, Amma contains a latent storm within her. She is aware of a current of feeling that accuses her of sitting on a hoard of valuables in this mystery room, stuff that she – Jijji to the extended family – has secreted away in her greed and parsimony.