

**The Peggy Chapman-Andrews  
First Novel Award 2016**

**First Prize**

**The Unbelonging of Taksheel  
Chaturveydi**

by S. M. Misra

## Chapter 1, The Leave-Taking. India, September 1932

In his mind's eye, Taksheel saw himself performing his evening ablutions one last time: first outside beneath the stars in the tin bath with the imported Palmolive and then, for powdering and moustache trimming, in the bedroom he shared with Jalbala. The day would be, ultimately, as all February days were, relentlessly hot. Water-starved ground had cracked and effloresced months before and the red dust that was the remnant of solid earth clung to everything like damp turmeric. But, before the day broke into the symphony of heat that, after two months, had made everyone ill-tempered and lethargic, there would be a heavenly early morning, the meagre dew having tamped down the prickly dryness and the sun a gentle forerunner to its furious noontime self.

In the perfect leave-taking of his imagination, Taksheel would take breakfast for the final time with his immediate family. He would sit, as was their custom, flanked by his daughter, Dina, and Jalbala. The two older boys would sit facing him. He intended this seating arrangement to curb the rambunctiousness of the boys, aged six and four who, when not under his eye, were alternately pinching one another, tormenting the dogs, or taunting the servants. The youngest child, a baby boy, would rest on his wife's lap, suckling or contentedly gazing up at the faces surrounding him. Taksheel had already instructed the servants not to enter the room after laying out the food. He would let Dina and Jalbala serve him, which would be a novel and intimate way to enjoy his final breakfast.

After this scene of familial harmony, Taksheel imagined crossing his threshold wearing a pristine white shirt, western-style suit and polished leather shoes. He would stroll the short distance to the waiting Wolseley surrounded by family, acquaintances, servants, neighbours, local children and hawkers: in short, the whole Chaturvedi entourage. At the beginning of the line would be the lesser servants, the ones whose tasks were so menial Taksheel did not know their names. He would smile and raise his hand, his first and last acknowledgement of their existence. They would place palms together, index fingers on upper lips in mute reverence. Some would likely stoop to touch his feet. Next in the line would be the third or fourth generation of their family to serve the Chaturvedi's: Rambuti the cook, Hari the gardener. These retainers would be favoured with a few well-chosen words of thanks, in Hindi of course, and an exhortation to continue in their duties faithfully whilst he was away. Next would be the many children of his many brothers, sisters, cousins, neighbours and associates. They would receive a ruffle of the hair, a pinch of the cheek.

Next would be neighbours and friends. The men would slap him on the back and force themselves to wish him the very best of good fortune. He would accept their insincere blessings amicably, serene in his crisp white shirt. He would smile over the shoulders of these men to the women in the second row, the wives wearing their second or third best saris, who would smile back before lowering their eyes and resuming sham conversations to ease their bashfulness.

Next would be his brothers and their wives. As the eldest son, he would hold their hands in both of his and look them square in the face. He would ask Baldev to ensure the orderly running of the household and in particular to supervise the education of his three sons until he could send for them to join him in England. He would ask his sisters-in-law to console Jalbala through the sadness his absence would cause and to assist her in being watchful over Dina who was, he knew, a strong-willed child. There was no use wasting time importuning Kailesh although he would miss his dear, useless, younger brother.

He anticipated that by this juncture the proceedings would have lasted an hour. He would almost be at the Wolseley. The driver would emerge and stand by the open rear door. His luggage had already been sent to the port to be loaded onto the boat. Now he would speak with his children. First Dina. He would instruct her to be a help and support to her mother, to be obedient to her uncles and grandfather and to love her brothers. Then the two boys. Their attention span was short and they had thus far failed to comprehend that their father was travelling on a large boat to a far away country where they spoke a different language. The only solid fact that their skittering minds could

grasp from the repeated explanations was that of the boat and upon this, they had become jointly fixated. How big would it be? What colour would it be? Would it have enormous sails like the ship trapped in the bottle in grandfather's study? Would there be pirates? Their inability to apprehend the momentousness of what was happening was irksome to Taksheel, and Jalbala had kept the boys away from their father these past few weeks in an effort to save them from his chiding. But it was important, Taksheel felt, that he leave them with some words that they would remember - some rule to live by that even their immature brains could process and make something useful of. He felt it should be something to do with duty and with discipline for this latter they seemed to be completely without. But Taksheel had not framed the exact sentences in his mind. He decided to trust to the inspiration of the moment hoping that when faced with these two small replicas of himself, unable to comprehend anything that was not physical and immediate, he would know, as a father, what was the right thing to say.

Next his father. It was impossible for Taksheel to script this exchange because his father and not he would be the author of it. He hoped to receive a blessing: an indication that his father had full faith in him and believed that he would be successful in his ventures. However, it was always difficult to know what the old man would say.

That would leave Jalbala and the baby, Jawahar. Jalbala and Jawahar. Jawahar and Jalbala. They always formed a single unit in Taksheel's mind. From the moment he had been born Jawahar had rarely been off his mother's hip. Jalbala seemed to have become so accustomed to this new appendage that she moved and spoke as if they were one being. Taksheel had often had it in mind to tell Jalbala to leave the baby with his ayah once in a while, to let the boy learn some self-sufficiency. But for some unexamined reason, whenever it was on his lips to say something of the sort, he felt the wrongness of doing so: like trying to rend apart something holy. He was not used to feeling things viscerally and it unnerved him. Doubtless if he had not been about to leave for England he would be compelled to take a firmer hand because it was not right to molly-coddle a baby in this way. She would make the boy feeble; womanish. Taksheel's sisters-in-law, who had also noted the unusual strength of this mother-child bond, had suggested that Jalbala was clinging to her baby to comfort her in the difficult days leading up to Taksheel's departure. Although he wanted to believe this was the case, Taksheel knew that it was not. It was unfair on the other children of course. The boys barely noticed; carelessly happy as long as they could bait squirrels or dress the dog up in their sister's clothes or find new and ingenious methods to separate a lizard from its tail. But Dina, intelligent and thoughtful Dina, did notice. Others in the extended family noticed too and felt sorry for Dina but, because she was intelligent and canny rather than winning and pretty, no one tried to make things up to her in any way: to take her under their wing until Jalbala's obsession with the boy waned.

What would he say to his wife of ten years as they stood beside the Wolseley? The woman to whom he had been betrothed when she was younger than Dina was now. The beautiful, red sari clad girl of sixteen who, on their wedding day, had walked the Saptapadi with him around the sacred fire seven times, invoking the Gods together to grant them and the universe plenitude, love, unity and happiness. The same woman who had stood beside him as the pyre beneath the diminutive and lifeless body of his mother was lit and had wept as he had wept. The woman who had sacrificed the firmness of her body, the radiance of her skin and the slenderness of her ankles to give birth to his seven children and who had found it within herself to continue despite the loss of three of them.

Contemplating his imminent leave-taking these past months never failed to leave Taksheel feeling optimistic, almost heroic, until the daydream got to its final stages where he stood facing his wife and youngest child by the Wolseley. The mental image would break up like a reflection in a puddle when it starts to rain and he would be left with the sound of his own voice as a younger man reciting the mantra that he had chanted after each of the seven prayers he and Jalbala had said to one

another on their wedding day,

"Now let us make a vow together. We shall share love, share the same food, share our strengths, share the same tastes. We shall be of one mind, we shall observe the vows together. I shall be the Samaveda, you the Rigveda, I shall be the Upper World, you the Earth; I shall be the Sukhila, you the Holder - together we shall live and beget children, and other riches; come thou, O sweet-worded girl".

\*\*\*\*\*

"Who would ever have thought it could rain like this in February, bhaia?" Baldev asked Taksheel the morning of his departure. "Your suit will get ruined, yaar. Better to wear a salwaar kameez and change into your fine clothes when you are arriving into Liverpool." Baldev failed to keep the mirth from his voice.

Taksheel jerked back the grass matting, which the servants had hurriedly suspended in front of the windows in the middle of the night to prevent the unexpected flood dampening the Kashmiri rugs, and looked up at the sky.

"It is not a long way from the house to the car, Baldev, and the rain is stopping."

"Just as you say, brother." Baldev replied, "shall I go into the main house and tell everyone that you are ready to leave and that they should come and bid you a, how do you say, fond-farewell?" Taksheel suppressed his irritation at his brother's aping of English small talk. It demeaned them all somehow but whenever he tried to convey this to Baldev he was met with indifferent jocularly.

"Yes, Baldev, please do that. I will be leaving in five minutes. The boys were taken ill in the night and their mother says they must stay out of the rain. I have already said goodbye to them. Jalbala will be outside with Dina and Jawahar. You and Kailesh and your families will be outside, I assume? And father?"

"Yes of course brother. All the family will be there. The servants too wanted to come and give their regards to the sahib but this rain has caused so many problems on the estate." Baldev was helpless to prevent the tone of the cringing underling from creeping into his voice as he gave his elder brother news he knew would displease. "All the men are busy trying to unblock the wells and tend to the fields where the vegetables are apparently being washed away." Baldev chuckled, amused at the thought of dhoti-clad gardeners chasing after the muli, bhindi, and corilla that were taking advantage of the flood to make their escape from the vegetable plots.

"The women are mainly clearing up in the big house and Kailesh's house. Dirty water has flooded very many rooms there," Baldev said wobbling his head from side to side (a habitual gesture of his that Taksheel had told him made him look like a coolie).

"Are we expecting anyone else?" Taksheel asked.

"Well, bhai-ya, of course the Misras would have come and the Colonel and his children and for absolutely certain Dr Sarathwathi and his wife would not have missed it for all the tea in China, but the rain has washed away the road. It is verily im-passable so I do not think we should wait for them. They have all sent their servants to pass on their best wishes. Some even sent burfis and some lovely mangoes but I do not think many will brave this rain. Also, it is very early and you know how lazy these Indians are, yaar." Baldev laughed like a naughty child at his own remark and Taksheel was too agitated to point out the irony.

Baldev's wife, a smudgy-featured woman, whose years of child bearing had made no appreciable difference to her face or her figure, both having been mediocre even at the height of her bloom, entered the main room of Taksheel's house.

"Well, brother, I cannot find that naughty Dina girl," she announced in her busy voice. "No one has seen the little memsahib since the sun rose this morning and no one has time for these naughty-girl hide and seek games on such an auspicious day." She turned to smile at her brother-in-law in what was intended to be a coquettish way. Taksheel regarded both his sisters-in-law as unattractive, female versions of their foolish husbands, and did not bother to acknowledge her statement.

"Brother, we will go and gather Kailesh and father and we will be outside in approximately two minutes." Baldev steered his wife out of his brother's quarters as Taksheel wondered how it was that everything he said managed to be so exquisitely ridiculous.

Taksheel had his tickets in his briefcase along with his passport, bank books, and letters of introduction from his father. His tie had been tied, loosed, tied again, straightened and re-straightened. His shoes were so shiny he was afraid to let the servants at them any more in case they rubbed a hole in the leather. He stood for a moment alone in the middle of the main room of his house listening to the rain that was, in fact, showing no signs of ceasing. He should be elated to leave this country full of imbeciles and laggards. A people so stupidly lazy that they had ceded control of themselves and all their resources to a tiny island miles away. He did not expect to miss his two younger brothers or any of the indistinguishable and undistinguished members of their respective broods with the exception, perhaps, of Kailesh. He was bored of The Gymkhana Club and bridge nights and the horse races and the weddings and funerals that went on for weeks, bored of the fasting and the hypocrisy. He had been anaesthetised by this communal, ritualised living for too many years and before he went under completely, he had to break free. He could not stand the thought of turning into one of the whiskey swilling, know-it-all anglophiles that he called his friends or to become like his own father, an erudite and thoughtful man who had had the misfortune to live long enough to be disappointed by each of his children.

Jalbala emerged from their sleeping quarters. For once, the baby was not attached to her. She was bedecked in her wedding jewellery and chimed as she walked across the rug-covered stone floor to where her husband stood. He caught her eye but quickly looked away to straighten his tie again.

"I fear it is almost time for you to leave," she spoke softly in Hindi and moved toward him. He had always admired the quiet way she had not adopted English as the language of conversation. She spoke to him in the same language and with the same voice that she used with the children, with her sisters, with the servants. It was honest and he regretted he had never commended her for it. "You know that I will send for you and the children as soon as I have made my way in England?" he said. "I cannot know how long that will be but Baldev and Kailesh and my father will make sure that you are taken care of and I will send money of course as soon as that is..." he trailed off, the right word eluding him somehow, "feasible".

"I know that, Taksheel," and she reached up and placed a folded silk handkerchief into his breast pocket. It was a cornflower yellow and the finest silk. He realised she had cut it from the lengths of material that made up the sari she was wearing.

"Look at all this rain," he shrugged resignedly and started for the doorway adding under his breath, "What to do?" He could see his brothers heading out into the courtyard with their children. They were not forming an aisle as in his imagination but were clumped together near the main house in an effort to shield themselves from the rain which had reached monsoon proportions. He could hear the mothers hushing their complaining children. There were no neighbours or friends amongst the

group. He stepped to the threshold of his home and looked up, disbelieving, at the rain. He feared for his suit and, more than anything, for his shoes. They had not been made to withstand this weather or the pernicious red sludge that was the ground between the house and the Wolseley.

Whilst Taksheel was eyeing the rain, Jalbala had been back to their bedroom to retrieve the sleeping baby and without waking him had fastened him around her middle with a sling of cotton. She walked to her husband, ankle chains rattling and the voluminous sari sweeping the floor in her wake. She quietly bent down in front of him, loosened his shoelaces and pulled the tongues of each shoe gently forward being careful not to crease the soft leather. She then held each shoe in place one at a time so that he could step out of them which he did, wordlessly. Her hennaed hands removed the argyle wool socks one at a time. She stuffed each sock in its corresponding shoe and held them both in one hand. With the other she held the handle of an umbrella that, like an illusionist, she seemed to have produced from nowhere.

“I think it is time to walk to the car, husband,” she said quietly.

“Yes.” He took the first step outside and his toes recoiled as cold stone became warm muddy paste. He adjusted his stride to match the short steps that Jalbala’s sari forced her to take and they walked in time toward the car. She held the umbrella aloft and to one side of her like a tightrope walker, arm extended fully to accommodate the difference in their height. Her gold bangles slid down her arm and stuck fast round the soft flesh just above her elbow. The rain fell on her and on her baby.

He was not after all required to speak wise words to his children and a few minutes after leaving his house, without spectacle or fanfare, he found himself standing before his father. A tall man with skin the colour and texture of aged parchment, Taksheel’s father wore a white kurta spotted with rain and, refusing to make any concession to the weather, stood, sandaled on the mud, hair plastered to his patrician skull.

Taksheel unbuttoned his jacket and bent at the waist and knees simultaneously giving the impression he was toppling over under the weight of his suit. Jalbala moved the umbrella to shield her husband’s head. He reached down to touch his father’s feet. His feet and those of his father squared off, each daubed in the same mud, each with the same bone structure, elongated second toe and high arches.

“Goodbye, my eldest son,” Taksheel’s father said to him in Hindi. “Make your way as best you can. We will be praying for your success while you are away. Look straight in front of you as you move forward through the world, son, but never forget what you have left behind you.”

“Thank you, father. I will do my best to honour you.”

The two men looked one another in the eye each trying to recognise himself in the man who stood before him. Taksheel’s father swiftly turned on his heels like a General inspecting his troops and finding them wanting and set back toward the main house. The rest of the family, damp and uninterested, took this as their cue to leave, and filed away with a few carelessly shouted farewells.

Unexpectedly, there was just the three of them. The baby was awake, confused but not displeased by the drops of rain falling on his face and tickling his cheeks. Taksheel put his hand inside the makeshift cocoon in which his son lay and splayed his fingers wide over the baby’s face as if trying to measure it. His fingertips felt his son’s skull through downy black hair and his thumb tip nestled between the creases of the boy’s several chins. The three of them stood connected like this in the rain. Taksheel closed his eyes as if this were an act of consecration. At last, the baby reached his own tiny fist up and towards his father’s hand, breaking the spell. He gripped Taksheel’s little finger in the surprisingly firm way of very young babies yet to be fully convinced they will not be dropped.

“Look. He does not want me to go.”

“He is not alone,” Jalbala said looking directly up at Taksheel, as she continued to shield him from the driving rain leaving herself unprotected. This was a step in their lives, intertwined from such an early age, without precedent; there was no mandated ritual. She started to weep.

“Why do you cry, Jalbala?” Taksheel asked.

“Because I am nothing here without you.” He was surprised by the vehemence in her voice as she stood squarely in front of him, one arm raised to hold the umbrella and one hand still clasping his shoes, rain-diluted tears running down her cheeks. He did not know how to respond to the accusation in her voice.

“Wherever I am, you are my wife,” he said in what he hoped was a reassuring way and, with his little finger still held firm by their son, he spread his fingers wider still, reached his thumb up to Jalbala’s forehead and placed it on the bindi, painted there with care early that morning; now just a smear.

“I have not understood why it is that you must leave us,” Jalbala said.

He sighed remembering that evening a month ago when he had told her of his plans. He had tried to explain then. He would try again now. “I think I can make a life that is more my own away from this place. I am sick and tired of the squalor and the filth.” He cast his arm about as if to indicate the horror and poverty just beyond the walls of Sanik Farms. “There is something wrong with the mentality of Indian people – it is in my brothers just as it is in the lowliest chaprassi. I do not know what it is but I cannot change it and I can no longer tolerate it. But most of all, Jalbala, I am not like it and I do not want to become like it.”

“I do not understand, Taksheel. But I am not an educated woman.” Jalbala closed her eyes and lent forward so that Taksheel’s thumb, which he had not moved during their exchange, pressed hard into her forehead.

“There are other reasons, Jalbala. The life we are all enjoying here – it cannot be sustained. You see how my brothers live, how their wives spend and there are so many children between us all. My father is an old man. Not all of our investments have been...have been... as...as... successful as we might have hoped. I must secure all of our futures. Things are changing in India, Jalbala, and we cannot go on living like heedless children.” There was no time to explain further. He had to leave now.

“England is a tiny, small island country where it rains all the time. That is why the British come here.”

Taksheel smiled weakly, saddened rather than amused that she would fall upon child-like arguments. He knew that what he was saying to her now, in one of the few unobserved, unscripted conversations that had ever taken place between them, was ultimately confusing to her. He pitied her that she had no grasp of politics and that the only argument she could marshal was to criticise the geography and climate of his destination. Almost better to be a dhobi walla and a man than to be a woman in this topsy-turvy country, Taksheel thought. He looked at her from head to toe and, more than her tear and rain-streaked face and more than the beaten slope to her shoulders and the too-tight wedding bangles cuffing her forearms, it was the sight of her yellow sari sullied and heavy with mud that made him want to beat his fist to his breast like a Shia devotee to make himself feel something there. The sari clung like a wet shroud around her legs giving her the appearance of a deplumed bird.

The baby’s lower jaw was starting to shudder with the cold. He must get in the car and leave. If he stayed to talk to her much longer he would not be able to do it and if he did not do it today he likely

never would and if that happened he would be a joke to all who knew him for the rest of his life and that would break him.

He trawled his thoughts for something to say to his wife that would be a comfort to her in the long, solitary hours she would spend in his family's compound. Solitary because she did not fit in with the women of the house now that his mother was dead and the tone of female relations was set by his sisters-in-law who formed a cabal that Jalbala had neither the desire nor the ambition to be admitted to. Conscious of the preciousness of this, their first exchange, not as equals but at least without the pretence with which his other familial exchanges were doused, he did not want to hold out any false promises. He was disappointed that all he could manage was, "Well, if I am wrong about England then I can buy another ticket, get back on the boat and come back here can I not?" He forced a smile and with his free hand gently prised open his son's reluctant fingers.

There was nothing else to say and the baby was shivering. She handed him his shoes and socks. He leaned over and put his lips to his son's damp forehead and lingered there a while. For a moment, he could understand why Jalbala cleaved to him, the most placid and amenable of their four living children.

"Goodbye my son. When we meet again, you will not recognise me. But I will always know you." Taksheel was gratified by the contented gurgling sounds the baby made in response to his caresses.

He bent down and folded his long limbs into the back of the Wolseley. The springs beneath the leather bench seat caused him to bounce up and down involuntarily like a holiday maker excited to be going on a jaunt. He placed his clean shoes beside him on the shiny leather and wound the window down.

The baby had started to cry and Jalbala swung her body gently from side to side to comfort them both. She held the umbrella up over the empty space beside her.

The engine jolted to life with a rheumatic splutter and the car started to roll forward, struggling for purchase on the slippery earth. Taksheel poked his head out of the window as if he had forgotten something. Jalbala stepped forward expectantly.

"I shall be the Samaveda, you the Rigveda?" The Sanskrit prayer issuing from his mouth was a surprise to him for he had not formed the words first in his mind before uttering them as was his habit. Although he intended it as a statement, it had come out as a question. The words hung in the moisture-laden air like fragile raindrops. She stepped forward and put her palm against the half-open window of the Wolseley, her fingers curling over the top of the window as if to prise it open. His eyes took in the manic swirls of brown hieroglyphs on her palms: another small way she had honoured him that day. The baby's cries had grown loud and so she had to raise her voice to answer, "I shall be the Upper World, you the Earth."

He instinctively lent forward and clumsily kissed her fingertips succeeding only in part, the rest of his kiss bestowed on the glass. He felt his lower abdomen tighten and recognised this unaccustomed sensation as his body threatening to unleash sobs. Afraid he might start to weep in front of his wife and son, Taksheel reached forward and gave the back of the driver's car an imperative thump. He kept his eyes averted from her face and his lips against her fingertips as the wheels of the Wolseley spun in the mud. Grudgingly they caught hold and the car lurched forward.

“I shall be the Sukhilam, you the Holder - together we shall live and beget children.” His voice rose and broke as the driver, unaware of what was taking place behind him and reluctant to cede momentum, drove quickly away.

Taksheel looked out of the back windscreen through garish tassels and past a Ganesh idol until his wife and child were an indistinguishable yellow blob at the end of a molten red road. Taksheel took the yellow handkerchief out of his breast pocket, opened it fully and pulled it tight across his face. Silk covered his nose and mouth and caressed his eyelids. He inhaled deeply through the fabric square which smelt of coriander and jasmine oil like Jalbala’s fingers. The high, sweet smell seemed to catch the back of his throat. He pulled the handkerchief down from his face quickly. As he did so his eye caught the driver’s in the cracked glass of the rear view mirror. He set his jaw and bunched the yellow silk handkerchief in his fist. He saw that his shaking hands were covered with mud from his father’s feet. He rubbed his hands briskly with the handkerchief. The dried mud flaked off easily and turned to dust, which eddied around his head causing him to cough. He could feel sweat rising through his shirt.

The car’s wheels sank into potholes and ditches, bunny-hopped over rutted surfaces, swerved around skeletal cows languishing in the middle of the road and jostled with rickshaws and cyclists and cart-luggers of every description, its feeble suspension amplifying the shortcomings of what passed for roads in Jaipur. Taksheel clung to his image of himself: the opposite of this jittery, sweat-soiled man being flung left and right against his will. He forced thoughts of the fumbled, rain-soaked leave taking from his mind. In some way he had yet to fathom, it was the fault of this godforsaken country.

He took a deep breath and sat back in the seat, unclenched his jaw and dropped his shoulders. He stopped resisting the pummeling the car and road were conspiring to inflict upon him. He kept his eyes closed and pictured the landscape outside the Wolseley’s windows. The jolts and turns, the noises from outside and the muted imprecations of the driver, told him where along the route they were. After half an hour of bone-shuddering driving Taksheel calculated the next left turn would be the one that would take him out of Jaipur. As the driver slowed, made the turn and accelerated once more, Taksheel opened his eyes and looked about him.

He took in the ragged collection of farms that, over the course of his life, had made the transition from homely to run down to unapologetically decrepit. The battered sign in Hindi and English indicating they were leaving Jaipur sailed passed his window.

“Arey!” he barked in Hindi, “hurry up there, man, I have a train to catch. I do not have all day.” He reached forward and put on his argyle wool socks and his new leather shoes.

## **Chapter 2, Letters. India, 1933**

Dina could hardly believe that the first letter penned by her father from England was addressed to her. Her cousins peered over her shoulders and tried to grab at the pale blue oblong when the post-walla handed it to her. She held it aloft and ran with it to her family’s dwelling where she knew she would find her mother and brothers passing time inside during the hottest part of the day.

Dina had asked her father on the day he left to write to her and he had kept his promise. Better than that - he had entrusted to her his very first words from that other country. It contained news for the ears of everyone in the clan and that evening after their meal she would read it aloud to aunts and uncles, neighbours and cousins. But first, certain that it would be her father’s wish, she would read it

to her mother and brothers. She ran into their living room to find her mother seated on the floor playing a game of cards with Ashok and Ankush, Jawahar asleep in her lap amidst folds of silk.

She cleared her voice to attract their attention and held the letter in front of her at arm's length for dramatic effect. All except the sleeping baby, turned to face her. She read the letter slowly beginning with the date and place of writing, determined to extract the maximum delight.

1st September 1932,  
Bloomsbury, London

Dina-beti,

I am sending my first letter to you, my first child. I know you will read it to everyone in your loudest and clearest voice. So through you, I say to everyone in Sanik Farms, Namastey.

Let me tell you of the voyage to Liverpool. During the six long weeks many were sick. I was not one. When I felt my stomach turning, I would go up to the highest deck, look at the horizon and meditate. The body can in that way be controlled by thought processes.

Without the diversions of Sanik Farms I had to find other ways to pass the hours. I had some books for improvement with me but these were exhausted after the first week. I wrote down many ideas to discuss with Rabindra Sethi - my old friend from the University of Madras. He lives in Birmingham now and has a very successful business to do with the making of car parts. I also played some chess and rummy with a Panjabi – a musalmaan - but quite a sensible one.

The greatest difficulty I met with was securing food that was śākāhārī. The English must have meat in all their food, even breakfast, and it was almost impossible to find a clean dish. So, I ate like a poor man. I took a lot of vegetable soup – a thin dhal with no lentils – and potato and hard, white bread.

Ashok, Ankush – look in Dada-ji's Atlas to follow the route. From Bombay we sailed across the Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Aden. We docked at Port Sudan – I left the boat here for half of one day. It is a filthy place. India will have her independence long before these low class Africans. Then we traversed the Suez Canal from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea stopping at the northern terminus of the Canal, which is Port Said. I got off the boat again. In this place I saw Jews, Egyptian, Greeks and Italians, Swiss and British. You can hear French and Italian spoken as much as Arabic. It is an organised, clean place and the mix of the different races seems not to have caused too many problems. We made one final stop at Gibraltar before arriving in Liverpool.

The first you see of England is the Royal Liver Building rising three hundred feet from the shores into the sky. When I saw it I knew I was approaching a proper country where magnificent things can be achieved. One of the ship's stewards - a light skinned Parsee from Sindh who had made the voyage many times, told me of the mythical birds that perch on the two towers of the building. They are called Liver Birds. One bird looks out to sea at the boats coming into port and the other looks over the City to protect its people. If one of these stone birds flies away, it is said, the city will crumble. So it is not just Indians who like their myths.

I took the train from Liverpool to London. Here the train does not idle along as if its passengers are in no hurry to reach their destination. The train goes very fast – of course it does not have to put up with people clinging on to its carriages like monkeys or sitting on its roof.

I disembarked at Euston Station. This station has a magnificent Great Hall at the centre of which is a statue of George Stephenson – the Father of Railways. The station is vast and, but for the soot blackened ceilings, clean. The porters do not chase after you so that you must beat them away. They stand to one side waiting for passengers to engage their services. You do not need to step over

beggars and the old and sick. Is it that England has no old, no sick, no poor? Of course not. It is just that she has proper places for them. Government institutions, charitable societies, hospitals and almshouses. So the streets are not littered with the unwanted, the broken and the unclean.

From the station, I took a ride of five minutes in a taxi to the house of father's friend, The Right Honourable, Mr Humphrey Wyndham-Smith, from where I write this letter to you.

The house of father's friend is located in Bloomsbury. I am among fashionable people. Mrs Wyndham-Smith, who, at her insistence, is known to me by her first name of Edith, gives many parties and they are attended by diplomats, poets, politicians and explorers. To be polite and for the chance of meeting interesting people, I attend. When I am there, I hear conversations in Swahili, Hindi, French and sometimes even in English!

If there is prejudice against the foreigner here then I have yet to encounter it. I live amongst cultured people who have travelled the world but even in the street or at Rabindra's factory where most of the workers have not been schooled beyond the age of twelve, I have not seen any sign of it. It is different I am sure for the low-class Indian who cannot speak English and for the black man.

Edith and Sir Humphrey have three children. The eldest is Celia who lives at home. Then there is Mary. She lives in the countryside with her husband and her two children. There is only one son, Frederick, who is called Freddie. He studies at Oxford but seems to spend most of his time in London at parties or sporting matches. There are very often other houseguests coming and going; nephews, nieces, old aunts and school friends. I am never short of company. But company of strangers is not companionship of family. I see you seated at the Rosewood Table, sipping lime sherbets, and I wish I was with you.

I will write again, when I have more of interest to relate.

Taksheel.

Dina-Beti – give a kiss to Jawahar from his father. And your Amma too.

Dina raised her eyes to gauge her audience's reaction. The baby had remained asleep throughout; Ashok and Ankush, respectfully attentive as she read, quickly returned to the card game. Her mother looked uncertain.

"What do you think, Amma? Father has arrived and he has written his very first letter to me."  
"And you read it beautifully." Jalbala placed her hands underneath the sleeping infant and, from her cross legged position on the floor, slowly raised herself careful not to wake the baby. She drifted silently into her bedroom and laid the baby on her mattress smiling as, in his sleep, he closed his tiny fist around the muslin cloth and brought it to his face for comfort. She returned to the living room.

"What did you think of all that he had to tell us, Amma?" Dina wanted to talk about her letter, to discuss its details and analyse her father's impressions.

"What is 'Bloomsbury' and what is 'houseguest'?" Her mother's tongue curled around these English words with difficulty. Dina had not heard these words before but she could tell that her mother was not pronouncing them correctly.

"I think Bloomsbury is the name of a place that is in London – like Chandi Chowk is the name of a place that is in Delhi." Dina was not entirely sure that her explanation was correct but nonetheless

she delivered her answer with confidence and believed in it herself a little more for doing so. "Why has he written these words in English?" Jalbala asked her daughter.

Dina was irked that instead of experiencing the pure enjoyment she had from her father's letter, her mother's attention was snagged on the five or six English words that her father had cast adrift in the sea of Hindi.

"I think it is because there is no word in Hindi for 'wrought iron' or 'houseguest' or 'Bloomsbury' so he uses the English words and knows that Grandfather will be able to explain their meaning to us."

"I see." Jalbala spoke quietly and, touching the heads of her two seated boys as she passed them, engrossed in their card game, she returned to the bedroom to lie down next to her baby in the heat.

\*\*\*\*\*

Months passed without the post-walla coming again to Sanik Farms bearing the feather-light blue sheaf with a London postmark.

Dina imagined a laughing Goddess of the postal system. A fickle and forgetful deity with many stomachs and the head of a cow; an air of bovine indifference to her task. She could picture this corpulent being, reclining on sacks of golden hay, acolytes offering milk and honey in golden pitchers to appreciative lowing. This would explain these interminable months of silence only for two or three or four letters to arrive all at once as if that forgetful goddess had woken from her slumbers one day, beheld vast mountains of undelivered epistles and, with a wave of her hoof, bid her followers to fulfil their duties.

Dina knew that subsequent letters would not be addressed to her. The first was her father's way of paying her a compliment, but the others would surely be addressed to her grandfather. She had gone on several occasions during these past weeks to his bungalow ostensibly to offer to rub his feet or pull his rheumatic fingers until they clicked. But he was not to be fooled; "Come, come, Dina-jaan. What kindnesses have you come to bestow on your old grandfather today?" And she would timidly make her offer to rub his temples or to read from the Vedas or the Bhagavad Gita and he would say, "Well that is most solicitous. What a good granddaughter you are, Dina-beti". And she would half-heartedly begin her ministrations wondering how to make yet another enquiry as to whether a letter had been received. She was not a gentle masseuse and her distractedness made her carelessly forceful. When her grandfather's bones could tolerate no more he would say, "Aay, Dina. Thank you. That will do." He would wait a moment, watching the girl's features register her struggle to reconcile the desire to ask her question and her reluctance to engender his irritation. Always a little lenient towards this wilful, clever girl who resembled her Dadi, he would say casually, "and, in case you are at all interested, I can report that I have not received a letter from your father." She would make her excuses and retreat.

But on this day, four months after she had stood proudly before the whole Chaturvedi clan and read her father's first words from London, her grandfather, most unusually stood and watched her as she approached his quarters. She was unnerved. Usually she silently approached his seated figure and waited for him to open his eyes and address her before speaking. She wondered if she should walk faster; run even. That would surely be unseemly. Now the very act of walking felt strange as if it was a skill she had only recently acquired. She became acutely conscious of the way her arm was swinging by her side and the feel of the moist grass on her bare feet. Should she cast her eyes downward or hold his gaze as she approached? She decided on the former, not wanting to appear insolent. To avoid stumbling she occasionally had to look up and a snatched glance revealed that her grandfather was holding one hand aloft. His white salwaar formed a wing as it hung down from his

thin arm. Was he hailing her? This was unheard of. She grew closer and saw that he was holding up four fingers. She broke into a run and arrived at the veranda breathless. Her grandfather brought the other hand from behind his back. He was holding a bundle of pale blue letters. Her hands were clasped together under her chin in anticipation.

“Dina-beti. I received them this morning. I have not yet read them. Let us read them together and then, after the meal this evening, I will read them to all the family.” He took his seat in his cane chair and Dina dropped to a seated position on the floor at his feet looking up at him like a devotee. In her excitement she had placed her hand on her grandfather’s knee. He used a silver letter opener to carefully make a slit along one of the long edges. As her grandfather unfurled the pages she saw her father’s tidy hand, the same as she remembered only made smaller to fit the curtailed space of an airmail letter. Her grandfather read the first one.

15 December 1932,  
Bloomsbury, London

Pita-ji,

My blessings to you all from London.

When I left Sanik Farms the rakhi were still on the wrists of Ashok, Ankush and even Jawahar – put there by their devoted sister to celebrate Raksha Bandhan. Now the year is coming to an end which means I have been here for three months. It has passed in the blink of an eye.

I still write to you from the Wyndham-Smiths. They entreated me to stay with them as a permanent houseguest. Sir Humphrey is very busy and often away from the home. So the large house is empty much of the time except for Edith and Celia. I am travelling to Birmingham each week where I stay with Rabindra for two or sometimes three days. So I will stay here in Bloomsbury. It is better not to expend money on rent when it is not necessary to do so.

I am invited by Celia to go to the Winter Proms. “Proms” means “promenade concerts”. I do not understand this because walking has nothing to do with sitting in a grand hall and listening to music. I will ask Celia for an explanation. The BBC Symphony Orchestra will be performing. They are a new orchestra and the performance we will attend at the Queen’s Hall at the end of this month will be broadcast on the World Service. By the time this letter arrives, the concert will be over. I wonder, did you hear it?

I am up early tomorrow to travel with Freddie to the town of Twickenham where I am to witness a Rugged match. Wales and England will compete. Freddie tells me it will be one of the most exciting episodes of my life. Happily I need not fear the cold as Freddie took me to his tailors some weeks ago to be measured for an overcoat, none of my garments being a match for the English winter. The coat was delivered this morning. It is made of lambs’ wool and comes halfway down my shin. It has a high collar to protect the neck from the freezing air and the colour is a dark blue; navy blue as it is called. The lining is silk and the whole is a thing of quite some beauty. I had imagined that the superlatives Freddie used to describe the tailoring of Saville Row were exaggerations. But this is not so. The coat is put together with a skill the like of which I do not think you could find in the whole of India. I will be glad of it tomorrow as I sit exposed to the wind and cold watching a sport I cannot pretend to understand.

But I am not simply amusing myself at concerts and sports matches. I have been attending to the matters that brought me to this country with energy and my efforts are beginning to bear fruits. Rabindra is engaged in plans to expand his business in Birmingham and we are planning to acquire some premises – a factory – jointly.

Pita-ji, I touch your feet and to everyone I send my fondest regards.

Taksheel.

Dina had closed her eyes and, as her father's voice was not unlike her grandfather's, for some magical moments, it was as if her father sat before her recounting his experiences. Her grandfather folded the first letter neatly and laid it on the table. He picked up the second and reached for the letter opener with the same careful movements that he had once used to wield surgical implements.

"No, please, grandfather." Dina stood abruptly. "Please do not read the next letters to me now. I would rather wait until this evening and hear them with the rest of the family." She was backing away from her grandfather as if he was infectious.

"Dina-bhai, you have been waiting these last months for your father's words and now that I have them I my hand you do not wish to hear them?"

"Grandfather, with your permission, I would prefer to spend my day thinking of all that you have just read to me and in looking forward to hearing what else is to follow. We do not know how long it will be before more letters will come and I wish to make the pleasure last."

The old man nodded and Dina ran back to her family's home on the estate to tell her mother about the Winter Proms and Rugger and coats made from the wool of sheep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ashok and Ankush had been present in the house when Dina had rushed in full of talk of the Queen's Hall and English people with peculiar sounding names. They listened to her stories as they listened when she read to them from One Thousand and One Arabian Nights; with wonder and interest but without belief in the reality of the tale being told. In the afternoon, before the heat chased them back indoors, they ran out to find cousins and uncles with whom to play cricket. And so word had spread that news of Taksheel had been received.

After the meal, as the children slurped the milky juice of the ras malai from their wooden bowls and the men picked husks of the aniseed and cardamom they chewed to aid digestion out of their teeth, an air of expectation and excitement began to build in the big house.

"Are we expecting the Lord Krishna himself to come down from the heavens and join us this evening to hear what it is my brother has to tell the world?" Baldev said loud enough for his wife and Kailesh to hear but careful that his words did not reach his father's ears.

"Perhaps he is already among us," said Baldev's wife, Sita playfully. "He could have taken the form of the dog you can hear barking just beyond the perimeter or one of the monkeys Rajiv was chasing this afternoon."

Baldev laughed and in a voice of faux seriousness replied, "You are right, my wife. That monkey looked most regal. I hope Lord Krishna is not angry with Rajiv for his insolence in daring to chase a God." Kailesh joined in the laughter that followed but with one eye on his father.

Dina had secured herself a seat close to her grandfather so that her father's words would reach her ears first. When her grandfather stood she loudly shushed her younger cousins. The room fell silent and Janardan Kavi Chaturvedi's voice resounded round the stone walls, reaching up to the vaulted

ceiling, rolling down the walls over tapestries and silks and caressing the rugs that warmed the floor. He read the letter the contents of which had kept Dina, her mother and her brothers, entertained for the whole day and then, after a short break in which the servant cleared away the desolation of plates and cups and brought platters of burfi and an urn of chai with copper beakers, he read the second letter.

28 December 1932,  
Bloomsbury, London

My dear family,

I have much to report that I struggle to know where to begin this letter. First, of course, let me say that I hope it finds you all well.

I will begin with the item that takes up most of my thoughts. We have found our factory. It is in the area of Edgbaston (Ashok, Ankush, you will know of this name from your cricketing magazines). It is a dishevelled place at present. The owner, an old man, makes pieces for the inside of wireless radios. He is tired now and much of the factory is closed up and the machines lie quiet. He is an unfortunate because he lacks a son to hand his business too. There are not so many people interested in buying this worn out place. Therefore we will make a good price. We will refit the factory for its new purpose - the production of parts for motor cars. Rabindra's two other factories are also related to the automotive industry; one makes tyres and the other carburettors. His factories supply the Austin car plant also in Birmingham. I am sure Ashok can find for you amongst his collection of replica cars an Austin Seven: the most produced car of 1930! Europe is heading towards a time of mass car ownership and Birmingham is one of the biggest centres of production. I am very confident that this venture will be a successful one.

My present feeling is of great optimism and an excitement to face the challenges that lie ahead. It is difficult to express it in a letter. I will move on to other things now so as not to bore you with talk of production lines and machine cutters and transmission boxes.

The house is celebrating the holy festival of Christmas. There is a tree standing at a height of ten feet in the drawing room. Its branches are decorated with angels and kings and even a donkey. The figures are made of newspaper but you would never guess that. First, the newspaper is torn into strips and soaked in a mixture of glue and water. Then the wet paper is moulded by the hands into the desired shape. When they are dry these little figures are robust and can be painted to resemble the singers of Christmas songs or wise men or the child Jesus. You would be surprised to learn that I have engaged in this activity myself. Edith, her daughters and her grandchildren insisted I join them for an evening of singing and making decorations. It was strange to be in the company of women who are not my kin without their men present. It is, I suppose, what makes this country modern and not backward like our own country where there are so many segregations to be observed.

When we woke on the day of Christmas London looked like one of the illustrations in Dina's book, A Christmas Carol. The family had left gifts for one another wrapped in coloured paper underneath the tree. There was even a gift for me: some gloves. I think it was Celia who arranged this. Many neighbours came to the house to give and receive blessings. Some came with special sweets, as we would do at Diwali. At lunchtime, the table was laid for a sumptuous meal. The table is not made of unfinished wood like ours but of shiny mahogany and so smooth that it is hard to imagine its life as a tree. The custom in England is that around the dinner table man must be seated next to woman – but not husband and wife. They must be separated. Celia explained the intention is to make conversation lively – to prevent men from talking about politics and to encourage women to talk about something other than their husbands. So Celia and Mary sat either side of their father. I sat to

Celia's other side and next to me sat Edith's unmarried sister. Frederick sat the other side of her and other cousins, friends and neighbours were seated such that we numbered twenty five people.

There were very many dishes served. The family know well that I can only eat vegetables and they had made provision for me but it was interesting to see the other dishes served. At the end of the savoury courses a great ball of dried fruits soaked in brandy is carried in, in flames. This is the Christmas pudding. At Frederick's insistence, I bore the weight of the tray and I would guess that this pudding was the weight of a child of half a year. There were many other desserts; a pudding of plums, sliced fruit that has been preserved in sugar, nuts and figs and dates and so many different kinds of cheese eaten with dry biscuits. It was a feast worthy of a wedding.

When I write to you again it will be 1933. I am full of confidence that it will be a good year for all.

With all good wishes.

Taksheel

With the conclusion of the letter, excitement vibrated the room. People turned to their neighbour to repeat that part of the letter that had caught their attention. Then they turned towards Jalbala and gave her a nod or a smile. They had no way to congratulate Taksheel or to ingratiate themselves to him and she was the next best thing. She returned their smiles. She had missed the feel of the warmth from the reflected glow of her husband's success on her skin. She was reminded of who she was – Jalbala Sushila Chaturvedi; wife of Taksheel, eldest and most favoured son of Janardan Kavi Chaturvedi and mother to his three sons. She felt substantiated.

The children asked each other questions about puddings made of fire; the men were keen to reveal their fragments of knowledge relating to the car industry and the women speculated on the appearance of Celia, Mary and Edith. Did they wear trousers in the modern American style? They surely wore dresses that revealed their arms and a good portion of their legs at these dinner parties, but then how did they keep warm if there was snow?

Janardan Kavi Chaturvedi allowed the room to absorb this new information. He remained standing and after a few minutes, realising he was to address them again, the room fell silent.

"I have another two letters here from my eldest son. I was planning to read them all to you this night but my granddaughter sitting here so attentively taught me a lesson today about the virtue of patience and the beauty of expectation. Let us think about all that Taksheel has told us in these two letters. Let us offer up some prayers of thanks this night for his successes and when tomorrow night's meal is concluded I will read to you the other two letters."

When the clan left the large room in the big house to return to their own dwellings, a space seemed to form around Jalbala. Neighbours and sisters-in-law nodded to her, afforded her room, allowed her to step over the threshold first. She smiled, eyes lowered, at this small homage.

\*\*\*\*\*

Baldev was irked that the evening meal at which his brother's next two letters were to be read had taken on the atmosphere of a festival. He was bad tempered with his wife when he saw her deliberate over her choice of sari.

"It is an evening meal of dhal and paratha and raita, woman. You are not going to meet a Maharaja. Why are you wearing your ankle bracelets?"

Sita knew well the cause of her husband's irritation but she was not about to be outshone by Muni and, bored by his increasing bellicosity, she thought to obtain some pleasure from provoking him, "Why, husband, are you not excited to hear of the latest triumphs of our dear brother?"

"I am happy to hear from my brother, wife. I simply find it hard to understand why the whole of Sanik Farms must prostrate itself before his words as if he were the creator of the universe. It is demeaning."

"He writes most amusingly though would you not agree?"

"Yes indeed, Sita, I am sure the children and the weak of intellect are most amused at his descriptions. For those of us who have been to university and are well versed in the ways of the world, the tone of his letters is patronising. He writes as if we have never heard of Christmas before or snow; as if we are peasants he must enlighten us as to the customs of the English."

"I am sorry you are feeling disagreeable, husband. If you wish it, I will tell your father that you are feeling unwell so you do not have to suffer another of your brother's letters." She spoke in a simpering voice that she knew worked on her husband like hungry mosquitoes at dusk.

"Don't be ridiculous woman." Baldev's voice was loud and she started involuntarily. She sat on the bed and with one ankle resting on the knee of the other leg she squinted at the clasp of her ankle chains.

"Get out of my way." Baldev walked past her, knocking into her raised leg as he left their quarters. Her ankle chain, whose tiny clasp she had yet to secure fell to the floor. She retrieved it and smiled to herself.

The evening followed the same pattern as the one that preceded it. After the meal Janardan Kavi Chaturvedi rose and the room fell silent. He opened the third of the four letters and began to read.

1 March, 1933  
Bloomsbury, London

My dear family,

Happy Holi to you. I hope you are enjoying the festival of colours and welcoming the coming of the Spring. I long to celebrate the end of Winter but She seems reluctant to release her grip on this cold island. I am glad of my overcoat, my gloves and, a new addition to my wardrobe, a muffler knitted for me by Celia.

I have important news to share with you. I have today lodged the deeds to the factory – to our factory - with my bank. It belongs to us and soon it will be operational. Rabindra has begun soliciting orders with Austin and I have been to the Morris car plant in the town of Cowley. Morris have begun to manufacture small cars for purchase by the ordinary family. They are of the view that Britain is about to enter an era of mass car ownership. I believe it is true. I am hopeful they will engage us to produce for them engine components. They will give us small orders to begin with. If we can give satisfaction then these will increase. We have come across this opportunity at quite the right moment.

Do you know that on this small, wet island there are more than one hundred companies whose business it is to manufacture cars? Do you know how many such places there are in the entire sub-continent of India? There are none. It is a different mentality here. There is a quiet respect for order and discipline and procedures carefully carried out. It is a philosophy that I find congenial. It means that the streets are clean. It means that if you post a letter, it will be delivered. It means that if you

enter a shop and wish to purchase something, the price is clearly displayed and there is no need to haggle which demeans both customer and shop-walla. There are poor of course, but not multitudes of the starving. There are no lepers on the street, no limbless children begging. I will not go on. You all know well why our country languishes. I would just beseech Ashok and Ankush and, when he is old enough, Jawahar, to please look to Great Britain for an example in how a country should be run and how a people should have some pride in themselves to not adopt low, filthy habits. But, I am lecturing you and that was not my intention. This letter speaks of good news for the Chaturvedi family.

With all good wishes to everyone at Sanik Farms.

Taksheel.

As before, Janardan Kavi Chaturvedi left some time for the details of this letter to percolate. He sat down and waited for the remnants of dinner to be removed and the plates of jaleebi and cups for the chai to be arranged on the table. He nodded at Jalbala who was seated at the farthest end of the table from him. Usually she sat with her children and not with her sisters-in-law but this evening they had formed a cabal around her and seemed determined that she join in their gossip; be one of them. He noticed that, like the other women, she had taken extra care in the application of henna and choice of jewellery although he understood her well enough to know that this was not a matter of vanity for her but rather a way of honouring the husband on whose success her future, more than all of the other people in the room, depended.

When everyone had been served tea, attention began to turn expectantly towards the head of the table. He duly rose and read the last of the four letters.

21 June, 1933  
Bloomsbury, London

My dear family,

Greetings to you all. I am writing this letter on the evening of what has been the longest day. It is called the summer solstice and it is marked by a few with the lighting of fires and gathering around ancient stones. But these remembrances are nothing more than a nod to the superstitions of a pagan past. So different from India where even today idolatry and backward ideas dictate how people conduct their lives.

Baldev-bhai – I have been thinking of you today. This is because I have been to Lords cricket ground. I wish that you could have seen the pitch. Magnificent. All this rain is good for something because I have never seen grass so green and so perfectly prepared. It was like a Kashmiri rug but the colour of an unripe mango. I felt I could have lay down on that grass and made it my bed. I will be returning to Lords with Sir Humphrey and Freddie for the last day of the Ashes on the first of July. Sir Humphrey is a member of the Marylebone Cricket Club – so I will overlook the match from the members' pavilion. I am sure you will have the radio on to listen to this match so in a way we will all be there together.

Thank you Dina for all your letters. You are my most reliable and frequent correspondent. I am grateful for the details of daily life you provide. It gives me a tremendous sense of Sanik Farms and all who live there. It sounds as if all are doing well. Ashok, Ankush – I thank you for your fascinating postcards with your most unusual illustrations.

Our business is doing very well. We have orders from Austin, from the Ford plant in Manchester and from Riley and Humber in Coventry. We have had to acquire machinery and plant very quickly to keep pace with our order book. We are operating at capacity. The factory runs all day and all night seven days of the week. There is no difficulty in finding men to work overtime because the common man here wishes to work hard to improve life for himself and his family. It is not like India where the low classes simply sit around in filth of their own making bemoaning the fates.

It does not seem possible that I have been in this country for almost one year. It is a most peculiar sensation, this speeding up of time. In India, time always seemed to move so slowly; the long, hot summer seemed to last years. I remember as a child helping Rhambuti make kulfi. She would have me sit on the floor of the kitchen and stir the mixture of milk and pistachio and cardamoms with a big wooden spoon. It felt to me then that months and months were slipping by while I just sat on a cold, hard floor stirring and stirring, my two arms aching, waiting for the mixture to thicken. That is how time used to pass for me. In England time moves like a steam locomotive – not the kind that winds through India like a sleepy snake, so slow that children run alongside - but like the train that I take to Birmingham. It gobbles up the countryside so quickly that no sooner have we left London behind than we are surrounded by the green hills of Oxfordshire and when I next look up from my newspaper, there are the factories and row upon row of little brick houses that tell me I will soon arrive at Birmingham New Street.

From some foolish superstitious feeling, I have not yet mentioned what, all being well, will soon come to pass. We have more orders than we can accommodate so we must expand our enterprise. We have found suitable premises to acquire. The owner of an old textile factory that is no longer profitable is seeking to sell his factory and his machines. The looms are old and the weavers' unions make it difficult to modernise. We will buy the factory and its plant then sell the old wooden looms to India where they can be operated profitably and install brand new machinery for producing engine parts. My mind is full of the possibilities that seem to be everywhere laid out before me.

It is now finally dark outside. It is hard to believe that we are at midsummer and from tomorrow the days will get shorter and shorter. I hope that you are finding some respite from the summer's fiercest days. I imagine you all drinking lime sherbets and pressing cold flannels to your wrists. With fond regards to you all.

Taksheel.

As the great patriarch concluded his reading with his son's name a ripple of clapping sounded around the communal dining room. Not an Indian habit but the only way the assembled children, sisters, brothers, cousins, servants and neighbours (who had heard that a reading of Taksheel's letters was to take place this evening) could express their collective pride. If Taksheel's star was in the ascendant then so was theirs. He was their neighbour, brother, father; he was their blood. They congratulated themselves and, inwardly, felt some relief that, after all they had been told, Indians were just as good as the English after all.

Jalbala felt giddy, like a new bride, her face flushed as the women came to her and kissed her hand. She wanted to leave and return to her home as quickly as possible to perform a puja of thanks. She kept rice and maize in her drawer for just that purpose.

Baldev turned to his eldest son and muttered, "what is he talking of? Sleepy snake, I ask you?" but his tone was playful rather than belligerent as, with the mention of his name and the sport they both had a passion for, he felt his older brother's friendly hand on his shoulder. For a moment too, he felt a little taller at the thought that a Chaturvedi would take his seat within the panelled walls of the Members' Pavilion next to exactly the sort of men who gave orders to the Maharajas and Prime Ministers of all the States within British India.

### Chapter 3, Illness. London, April 1934

At Birmingham New Street, Taksheel fell into the first compartment he reached. It was second class and he had a first class ticket. It did not matter. He had to sit down. He could walk through to first class later. Perhaps after he had taken a glass of water to ease his thudding head. This was the first time Taksheel felt relieved to be taking his leave of Birmingham and Rabindra.

Since their reunion over a year before, Taksheel and Rabindra had readily rekindled the easy friendship of their university years and Taksheel was wont to stay on in Birmingham after their business was concluded for the sake of his friend's company. Sometimes they played chess or cards, other times they frequented a café that serviced the masses of Indians that had come to work in the old mills and the new car plants. The street food of Chandi Chowk was passed through a hatch in the side of a brick built, terraced back-to-back. A few men could fit inside but most ate their bhel puri and fried bhindi in the ginnel. In what was formerly the front room of the house, Rabindra and Taksheel would often sit, elbow to elbow with loom operators from Bengal, weavers from Kashmir and sheet metal workers from Maharashtra. Caste, religion, language; none of it mattered in a back street café in Hall Green. The freedom of it fired Taksheel's blood and he and Rabindra talked about everything with the passion of their student days. They talked of the deficiencies of Western philosophy compared to Eastern, the tide of fascism rising just a few hundred miles away, the New Deal being offered to the Americans, the Japanese land grabbers in Manchuria. Taksheel savoured every mouthful of the dhal and rice and roti and subzi that, in Sanik Farms, he would have waved away as peasant food. He bit into raw green chillies for the joy of feeling his tongue burn and the sweat prickle beneath his collar. When his gums and nostrils flamed with heat he took gulps of sweet lassi, the froth from the curdled, whipped milk laced his moustache. Not until Rabindra had first led him through the maze of identical streets to this nameless café, had Taksheel realised how the bland, spice less, over-boiled offerings that he had subconsciously reconciled himself to since the moment he boarded The Empire Britannica in Bombay, had rendered food nothing more than fuel for his body and mealtimes a necessary interruption to his busy days. But at the little wooden table in the front room or outside standing on the rain soaked cobbles, he ate and drank with an enthusiasm that was akin to worship.

But today, Taksheel wanted nothing more than to sit down, close his eyes and let the rhythm of the train rock him to sleep while it carried him back to Bloomsbury – back home – as he had heard himself say to Rabindra. It had been a successful trip - Taksheel, increasingly the public face of their joint venture, had secured new orders from the Morris plant and Rabindra had overseen the installation of new plant at the factory – but he was too exhausted to even reflect on the success with satisfaction.

He made for the seat next to the window, flung his overnight bag and briefcase into the overhead rack and, with the speed of the practiced traveller, bundled his scarf into a ball – a makeshift pillow – and lent against the window. The cool glass was a comfort against his hot forehead. He drifted off almost at once only dimly aware of the guard's whistle and the jolt as the engine fired to life and shunted them forwards.

Barely had the train emerged from beneath the vaulted glass roof of New Street Station, when Taksheel's drowsing mind thrust him into the midst of what he hazily recognised as Bombay's Victoria Terminus. Throngs of red dhoti-clad porters swarming around the station. He saw them, scurrying beneath precarious columns of trunks and hatboxes, valises and baskets, that grew out of oily coiled rags perched atop their heads. Relentless as insects they ran bow-legged, frantic, towards incoming trains or arriving rickshaws. These men were more vivid in his dream than they had ever been on the many occasions he had tossed them a few annas for their services. He saw for the first time how their eyes bulged as if the weight pressing downwards through their skulls and spinal columns might pop them out of their sockets. He noticed how, even when not bearing their burdens,

they still wore this expression; a look of terror, as if they were staring into an abyss but could not look away.

Taksheel saw, as the dream unfurled, that there was no camaraderie amongst these slight men - the baggage-wallas - with their spindly legs that buckled outwards. When a train pulled in they would dig their bony elbows into their neighbours and push the older, slower men out of the way in order to be amongst the first to reach the wealthiest passengers at the front of the train; jumping on before it had stopped moving. In return for their efforts they were usually swatted away by the rich Indians and the few English like flies.

As the train steamed through the dark towards London, Taksheel slept fitfully. He was exhausted but his vivid dreams allowed him no rest. He was relieved when he felt the train round the last bend and slow down as it approached Paddington. He stood to reclaim his luggage but the rocking of the carriage made it impossible for him to maintain his balance. He had to wait for the train to stop and the other passengers to leave the carriage before he could collect his belongings. He stepped gingerly from the train down to the platform like an old man and walked slowly the familiar path to the line of waiting cabs. It was late and there was little traffic. He forced his eyes to remain open during the short ride lest the driver think him intoxicated. He felt a nausea rising from the depths of his stomach and opened a window. He carried his brief case and portmanteau as if they were the weight of the trunk that had sailed with him from India.

He turned his key in the front door quietly. The hour was late. He hoped not to encounter any of the Wyndham-Smiths in the hall or on the stairs. His leaden limbs and the metallic taste in his mouth urged him to bed.

He paused on the first landing and rested his baggage on the floor as he steeled himself for the final flight that would take him, mercifully, to his bed. He was panting from the effort of the first flight as if he had conquered a mountain and was breathing thin air. The blood was pounding in his ears so he did not hear Celia's door open behind him.

"Taksheel?" She was attired for bed but the floor length kimono she wore over her nightdress would not have looked out of place at one of her mother's cocktail parties. Her hair was pinned in a complicated way under a silk scarf so that in the morning it would fall in smooth curls to her shoulders.

"I hope I did not disturb," Taksheel found it difficult to emit the words from his dry lips. He must lie down.

"Not at all. I was listening to the wireless." She walked towards him and he saw her pale brow furrow as she grew close.

"Taksheel, are you quite well?" She placed a hand lightly on his sleeve as she spoke.

"Nothing, really. Tired. The train ...you know." He could hear that he was barely making sense but could not think what to do. He was not yet ready to face the second flight. He felt a slight breeze as she swept past. Where was she going? Had he given offence? He sat down on the second step to muster his energy for the final ascent. Perhaps he would leave his bags here until the morning. He held onto the banister to steady himself. At least he was alone again.

He felt himself being manhandled. Were these dacoits jostling him to a dark corner of the station where they would rob him? "Array, array... stop. Leave me." He shouted in Hindi. Godforsaken country. Who did these people think they were? He called for a policeman. He would have them beaten with a lattee.

“Freddie, take him under that arm. I’ll take the other. We must get him to his room.”  
Who were these people with their strange names?

“Go and wake father. We need to call Dr Carmichael. I’ll stay with him.” A woman’s voice. Not his mother’s. Not his wife’s. Whose?

“There. Help me lay him down, Freddie. Taksheel, listen to me. You are unwell. The doctor is on his way. Be still. I’m going to remove your shoes. Close your eyes now. Everything will be quite all right. That’s it. Lie back. No need for you to talk. Close your eyes.”

The woman’s voice faded away.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr Carmichael - alum of Gordonstoun and Caius; physician to The Lord Irwin during his Vice Regency; Knight of the Garter - was at the home of the Wyndham-Smiths within two hours of Taksheel’s collapse on the first floor landing. He made his diagnosis - severe malarial relapse - within moments of conducting an examination; administered quinine and provided detailed instructions for the care of the patient before sweeping out of the house and into his waiting Daimler promising to return the following day.

Celia had refused to leave Taksheel’s side since he had collapsed at her feet five hours previously. “Freddie, have you sent down to the kitchen for some fresh ice and flannels?” She asked as she passed him on the staircase.

“Steady on, Cee. You’ve been up and down these stairs so many times tonight; you’ll wear the carpet out.”

“Freddie, really. Do you have the ice and flannels?” Her voice was high pitched in her anxiety but insistent. There were two growing patches of pink spreading from the centre of each cheek out towards her hair line from the exertion of running up and down the stairs from Taksheel’s room on the second floor to the scullery in the basement.

“Cee, you heard Carmichael. Taksheel will be fine. He needs rest, to be kept cool, to have his sheets changed twice nightly and to take his medicine.” Freddie handed her the flannels and ice that he had brought himself to speed up their delivery rather than bother one of the maids. She snatched it from him and turned to go up the stairs again.

“Ought, Freddie, ought. The Doctor said Taksheel ought to recover.”

Freddie turned to go to bed. The thud-thud-thud of his sister taking the stairs two at a time echoed above his head. Just as he was about to enter his bedroom, his mother emerged from hers, with a white face mask that leant her the look of a renaissance queen. She had stayed to hear Dr Carmichael’s advice and then returned to bed.

“How’s the patient?” she asked.

“He looks pretty miserable with the fever but Carmichael said this delirious phase is quite normal.”

“Absolutely.” She nodded and made to go back inside.

“Actually, ma, it’s Cee I’m rather more inclined to be concerned about.”

Edith stepped onto the landing and pulled her bedroom door shut quietly. She stood very close to her son.

“Whatever do you mean?” she whispered.

“She’s behaving in that way again. Can’t you see it? The way she fusses over Taksheel? That’s the way it started last time.”

Edith closed her eyes slowly and, inhaling audibly, tipped her head backwards so that, had her eyes been open, she would have been staring straight at the cornicing. The cold cream rendered her face expressionless. Her white visage and the high points of her plucked eyebrows pointing like arrows to her widow’s peak, gave her the look of pierrot; but beneath the theatrical crimson robe beat the heart of an eminently sensible woman. Edith had spent a privileged, nomadic girlhood in India before returning to London to be presented at Court. There had been a rumour during her debut season that her gaiety and wit had attracted royal attention. If she was aware of it, she gave no show of being perturbed and was in fact genuinely delighted when Humphrey asked her father for her hand. He was serious but drôle, clever but not arrogant and someone she correctly surmised would yield to her wishes regarding home and family. It was a very contented marriage. She had seen malaria before and her reaction to the doctor’s diagnosis was appropriate; concern without alarm.

“I’ll speak with her tomorrow. Please don’t trouble your father with this tonight, Freddie.” She opened her bedroom door just wide enough to slip soundlessly in.

Freddie went to bed and fell asleep to the sound of his sister’s footsteps going up and down the stairs.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the few occasions that the whole family was in residence, Humphrey insisted that they take breakfast together. So it was that on the morning following Taksheel’s collapse, Edith, Humphrey, Freddie and Mary (who was visiting with her two children) sat around the large mahogany table in the dining room. The children ate in the nursery as Edith found their vigour trying first thing in the morning. The breakfast was laid out on the sideboard and they helped themselves to sausages, scrambled egg, kippers and toast. Humphrey typically read the newspapers and took pleasure in half listening to the small talk of the women and Freddie’s occasional remark pertaining to, as the season dictated, batting averages or the outcome of Rugby matches. This morning, everyone was tired, no one was hungry and Celia was absent.

“Where’s Celia?” Humphrey asked no one in particular from behind *The Times*.

The silence that followed caused him to lower his newspaper to see his wife, son and youngest daughter casting uneasy glances at one another. Freddie rose and went to the sideboard to heap his plate with food he did not want. Mary shrugged. Humphrey looked at his wife.

Edith fixed Humphrey with her gaze and spoke as if no one else was in the room. “She has been up all night and refuses to leave Taksheel. I had breakfast sent up to her. She didn’t touch it.” She had hoped it would not come to this but after Celia’s last and most serious attack of nerves she knew that there was nothing to be gained from keeping the warning signs from her husband until complete collapse occurred. She had made that mistake before.

The spectre of Celia’s mental frailty, a condition they had all learned to accommodate in their own ways over the last twenty years, had been openly acknowledged. Freddie brought his empty plate

back to the table and sat down. Mary set aside the copy of *The Lady* that she had been fingering. The tension drained from the room. They all looked at Humphrey. He folded the broadsheet by tugging it in a way that made the paper snap. He pushed his plate to one side and placed his hands palms down on the polished wood. These were mannerisms he typically displayed in the committee rooms of Westminster. He was all business now.

“Edith, when is Carmichael coming back to see Taksheel?”

“Eleven o’clock.”

“When he comes invite him to stay for lunch. After we’ve eaten, you and Freddie and Mary will leave us alone here and I’ll speak to him about Celia.”

Edith nodded once and asked, “And in the meantime?”

“Leave her for now to do as she wishes. There’s nothing to be gained from trying to persuade her from a course of action she’s set her mind to when she’s like this. We all know that. If she refuses food we can’t make her eat. Carmichael is a good man. Let’s see what he has to say.”

“And if she refuses to see him?” asked Freddie.

“Let me speak to Carmichael.” Humphrey’s tone signalled the end of the conversation. Edith, Freddie and Mary took turns to make their excuses and left the dining room.

When he was alone, Humphrey rested his elbows on the table and rubbed his eyes with his soft fingertips.

Six hours following breakfast Humphrey Wyndham-Smith sat at the same table facing Edward Carmichael. The doctor cupped his brandy glass so the heat from his blood could warm the viscose liquid that he swilled around in a practised way. Humphrey uncharacteristically had taken his in one gulp as if it was an ordeal to be endured. Edward Carmichael looked at his friend and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Carmichael, it’s Celia.” Humphrey rose and went to the cabinet to refill his tumbler. He and Edith had both learnt to their cost that embarrassment as regards their eldest child’s condition only led to obfuscation, which did not serve Celia well and ultimately led to a great deal more embarrassment. He was braced to give a scrupulously full and complete account.

“She’s a very attentive nurse to our young friend up there. Seems to know what she’s doing.”

“Yes, indeed. She trained as a volunteer in the last year of the war. Never got the chance to put any of it to use though. Armistice came and then Hugo – her fiancé – died of his wounds in January nineteen. Do you recall? We’d had no word his wounds were serious. She was expecting to hear from him any day to say that he was being put on a boat home from France. She was being fitted for her wedding dress.” The second brandy was easing him into this conversation although his friend’s face was blurred as moisture filmed his eyes. He would stop at three.

“Dreadful days,” Carmichael said quietly.

“I’m sorry to bring it up, Carmichael. Robert was such a fine young man.” The two men sat in silence. Carmichael knew his old grief would have to yield to whatever it was his friend wanted to talk about.

“You’re concerned about Celia?” Carmichael spoke in a brisk tone to dissipate the fug of their combined losses.

“Carmichael, I think you know that there has always been somewhat of an issue with Celia’s nerves. You couldn’t know of the full extent of it because Edith and I, as you can imagine, have done our utmost to keep her difficulties private. But after the last time we agreed that, should the situation

arise again, we would put aside our own ... reticence ... and seek help for her.”

The evenings were drawing in and even though it was only a little after three o'clock, the room was dim. Carmichael stood and put the two standing lamps on. He sat down but did not recline in the wing back chair as before but rather sat leaning forward. He took a notebook and pen from his bag and placed them on his knees. He and Humphrey would need to put their friendship to one side, if Humphrey was to be able to tell of his troubles.

“Tell me about Celia’s first nervous episode.”

Humphrey rose and walked to the chiffonier to refill his glass. He filled it almost to the brim with water and then added just a splash of brandy for the taste. He went to stand by the picture window that gave out onto a decorative Juliet balcony. He spoke to the perambulating couples and the nannies wheeling their charges around the square in the dusk.

“She went to Chelmsford Ladies’ College when she was thirteen to board. She was excited to go. We would have kept her at home with us to be a day girl somewhere if she had expressed that wish. She seemed to settle in well. Her letters home were full of lively descriptions of the masters and mistresses and the other girls.” Humphrey adjusted the curtains and peered out as if he had recognised an acquaintance in the Square. His tone was determinedly casual.

“She was always a thoughtful child and I suppose that one did get an inkling from those letters that she was rather on the outside looking in. We went up occasionally for weekends to take her out to tea. We always asked if she would like to bring a pal but she never wanted to.” Humphrey took a few steps to the hearth and poked the fire back to life. It gave a reluctant crackle and a piece of charred newspaper from the splint used to light it flew out glowing orange. It arced to the floor and Humphrey stooped to pick it up, careful not to cause it to disintegrate. He stood up and rested a hand on the mantelpiece looking into the fire as the flames licked the lumps of coal.

“And then, after she’d been there more than a year we got a letter from the headmistress. Celia’s behaviour was giving them cause for concern. Could we please make arrangements to come to the school to discuss whether Chelmsford was really the best place for her?” Humphrey shook his head in old disbelief. “It was 1914. War was looming. I was in my first term of office as a member of parliament. I was working all the hours. Edith went to Chelmsford. When she returned that evening she had Celia with her.” His voice started to rise as the anger he felt towards others who should have done more asserted itself. “They just cast her out. Said she didn’t fit in. Tried to make it appear that they were acting in her interests – that she would be happier at an institution that was less academic, where there wasn’t such a strong emphasis on team spirit. Celia was devastated of course. Felt like she had let everyone down.”

“Did you find another school?” Carmichael made some unnecessary scrawling to obviate the need for his friend to look at him.

“She was vehemently against going away to board anywhere else. Never got to the bottom of why. I didn’t want to send her to some crackpot experimental place. I was never here and Edith had Mary and Freddie and her committees to attend to. So Edith arranged for tutors to come to the house. It seemed the best thing. The war was in full swing so we couldn’t send her to the continent to finish. She seemed happy in the house. She did her Latin and her French, played the piano and some years passed without her giving us much cause for concern. When she was seventeen Hugo was on leave and he came to the house with his mother one afternoon. Celia and Hugo had known each other from childhood and they hit it off tremendously. For the first time in her life she seemed ... I don’t know quite how to put it ... like a young person should be: lively and looking forward – like Freddie and Mary. Edith thought she was too young to begin a courtship but at the same time she was delighted to see her looking happy. All that nonsense about being presented at court and the season

and so on had rather fallen by the wayside what with the war. So we let them correspond. She wrote to him daily. He seemed equally taken with her. He wasn't a boisterous sort of chap. No interest in sport. He was quiet. Liked reading, classical music, that sort of thing. He wrote to me from France saying he wanted to marry her. Celia was delighted. I replied with my consent subject to them waiting until Celia was twenty one."

"And when he died?"

Humphrey turned away from the fireplace. He sat back down opposite his friend and leaned forwards, forearms resting on his knees. He looked directly at the other man for the first time in the conversation.

"She stopped eating. She stopped bathing. She refused to participate in any kind of activity. She refused company. She would go days without sleeping and then take to her bed for a week." Carmichael made notes. He was not unfamiliar with the condition and had encountered behaviour of this type during his time in India. Carmichael had spent a decade in the service of the Viceroy, at the pinnacle of British-Indian society. One of the many skills he had developed was the ability to place the women he met, in the very instant that their white gloved hands were extended in greeting, into one of two categories in which he found all women could be accommodated. There were the committee women. Physically strong they had enjoyed lacrosse, hiking and riding in their younger days. These women organised bridge clubs, polo matches and relief efforts for various types of afflicted Indians. They dealt firmly with natives and they gave birth to bouncing, contented babies. They enjoyed the excitement of their expatriate adventure. In the other camp were the fragile women; the neurasthenics who languished under parasols and wide brimmed hats. These women lived in fear of malaria and smallpox and mutiny. They could not tolerate the presence of any brown skinned personage and cleaved to their husbands who were invariably irritated at having been landed with a wife that, along with the heat and the bloody Indians, was just one more problem to be dealt with. These women had irritable, sickly children whom they sent back to England at the earliest opportunity. Their lives in India were a torment to them. Days felt like months and when they received a letter from home they wept with yearning.

"Well, Humphrey, that's not wholly unexceptional behaviour for a young woman with a nervous disposition who has lost her fiancé." Carmichael spoke with a determined lightness. He knew there was more to come and that Humphrey needed his help to speak of it.

"She ... she... inflicted wounds on herself, Carmichael." Humphrey heard his own voice crack and immediately leapt from his seat to pace the room as if the feeling of despair were somehow emanating from the armchair.

"What kind of wounds?"

"You see I was so terribly busy. And so was Edith. Freddie was just six and Mary was twelve. I think it had gone on for some time before anyone noticed. I saw old scars." Carmichael nodded. "I came home one night after a late vote. It must have been nearly midnight. I didn't want to trouble anyone so I thought I would help myself to a late supper from the kitchen. Celia came down. We surprised each other. I was struck by how tiny she was standing there in her nightdress. She was nineteen but looked the same age as Mary. Her collar bone jutted out and her feet looked blue. She looked so cold. Then I saw her arms. She tried to pull her nightdress down but it wasn't long enough. I could see fresh cuts and faint pink marks of old ones. She looked like a frightened animal trembling on the cold stone floor of the kitchen. She was picking at her fingers without realising – a habit she's had since she was a child – but I could see that there was barely any skin left around her fingernails. They were bleeding and raw."

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t know what to say. What could I say, Edward? I walked up to her and picked her up in my arms the way I had done when she was a child and had fallen asleep in the corner at one of Edith’s parties and had to be carried to the nursery. I carried her up the stairs. She weighed nothing. I could tell she was weeping. I lay her down in her bed and pulled her blanket over her and kissed the top of her head. I had to leave early the next morning for a week in my constituency. When I returned I spoke with Edith. She had no more idea what to do than I had. We put it down to a rather excessive grief and decided that it would pass with time. After our encounter in the kitchen, she did seem to perk up. She had missed coming out and said she had no interest in entering society but she did occasionally accompany Edith on social engagements. We thought it had passed.”

“Her behaviour returned to normal after that?” asked Carmichael?

“For a time, yes.”

“But there were other, subsequent episodes?”

“Yes. But whenever it got to the point where Edith and I felt intervention from the medical profession was warranted, she would seem to throw off the yoke of her melancholy and be happy; I mean abundantly happy. She would join in with Edith’s parties; attend the races with Freddie and Mary; have new dresses made; read fashion magazines; talk of taking a tour of the Continent.”

“And these periods of wellbeing, they would typically last how long?”

“Weeks, sometimes months. They would be preceded and followed by periods where her mood seemed to be normal – by which I mean not unduly elevated but not melancholic. But every few years something would occur to plunge her into a truly desperate state.”

“And when was the last of these desperate times?”

“When Mary got married three years ago.”

“And did her behaviour at that time follow the same pattern – not eating, harming herself?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me how she behaved at that time?”

“Do you know, Carmichael, I’m not sure I can.”

“I do understand that this is most difficult, Humphrey. I have seen this kind of acute sensitivity in young women before. In fact, I have a number of colleagues who specialise in the treatment of hysterics – or nervous conditions as we now say. It is not without hope. There have been significant advances in treatments and I have seen women who display the same kind of behaviours as Celia, overcome, to a large extent, their difficulties. Do let me help you.”

It was fully dark outside and the lamp and firelight cast an orange glow on the room and the faces of the two men within it. Humphrey had stopped pacing and returned to his seat exhausted with the effort of his confession and the fear that they were all about to embark on the same journey as before with Celia. Each time it happened he and Edith managed to convince themselves it would be the last; that their eldest child had overcome her nerves permanently and would resume the life that had been planned for her.

“When Mary’s engagement was announced, Celia seemed overjoyed. She was to be the bridesmaid and she, Mary and Edith threw themselves into the wedding preparations. It was their full time occupation for months. As the wedding approached, Celia’s gaiety seemed to subside a little but she attended her dress fittings and helped her sister to choose hymns and readings. When the wedding was over and Mary had left and she returned to this house with Edith and me, she began to behave oddly. At first we put it down to exhaustion from the wedding preparations. We thought she was missing her sister. Although there are six years between them they are terribly close. One night a few months after Mary’s wedding there was a knock at the door in the middle of the night. It was a policeman. He had found Celia wandering the streets near Euston. She was improperly dressed, freezing and shoeless. She was babbling and incoherent. The things she was saying... it was completely unlike her... she was saying things... I can’t tell you Edward ... lewd, disgusting things.”

“Humphrey, it is not unusual for patients who suffer in this way to display exactly the kind of behaviour you describe during these manic phases.”

Humphrey exhaled forcefully. “I am glad we have spoken of this, Carmichael. Edith and I are truly at our wits end. What do you suggest we do?”

“I can prescribe her some morphine sulphate today which will calm her emotional state. Looking after the young Indian chap seems to be providing her with an occupation and purpose and I would say let her continue. In my experience the quacks who insist on rest cures do more harm than good. A woman with this kind of temperament confined to her bed with no activity or stimulation of any kind rapidly deteriorates. No. As I say, let her make herself useful and keep busy. Once the morphia has put her on an even keel, you or Edith can suggest that she pay a visit to a friend of mine who has a practice on Wigmore Street dealing with just this kind of psychological disorder.”

“Thank you, Carmichael. I should have discussed this with you years ago. Silly to have kept it to ourselves.” Humphrey’s usual demeanour of genial efficacy settled over him once more. They had a plan of action. All would be well.

\*\*\*\*\*

Celia was determined that hers would be the first face Taksheel saw when the fever broke and he had knowledge once again of where he was. She was engaged in stripping the bed and remaking it with fresh linen when Doctor Carmichael came in.

“Ah, Celia. How is the patient and his devoted nurse today?”

“His temperature has remained below forty for the last two days and I need only change the sheets every other day now. The heart rate is normal and the colour has returned to his face. I think the fever has broken, doctor. He is still confused when he wakes and has a tendency to speak in his mother tongue but he is not distressed.” Celia was not convinced that her father’s friend was not simply humouring her when he asked her to report on the patient but she had decided to behave as if he were not.

“He looks a great deal better this morning, Celia. I was certain from the outset that he would make a full recovery as I told you when I first examined him but the swiftness with which he is returning to health is due in no small part to your efforts, my dear.”

“Thank you Doctor Carmichael.”

“Seems your training all those years ago didn’t go to waste after all.” He held Taksheel’s wrist in his hand and felt the pulse in his index finger as he spoke. She was so unused to praise that, despite

being thirty-three years old, she felt herself blush. She immediately felt awkward and silly and in her self-consciousness forgot the proper way to do corners.

"I am glad to do something useful. I was so sorry that the war ended before I had the chance to serve." She shook her head as she realised how she must sound. "I mean of course I was delighted that the war had ended and all the suffering and the waste was over. What I meant to say was that I was sorry I could not have been useful. I would dearly have liked to go to France and to take care of our wounded men out there. Nursing has been the only thing in my life that I have shown the slightest aptitude for." She gave a nervous little laugh with this admission.

"I'm sure you're good at all sorts of things, Celia. I know for a fact that your father and mother are terribly proud of you."

"You're very kind, Doctor. But I have given them precious little to be proud of. Quite the contrary in fact." The bed was remade and she busied herself refreshing Taksheel's water glass. "Luckily, between Freddie and Mary and Mary's children, my parents have been amply supplied with familial achievements of which to feel justly proud." She smiled warmly as she spoke. There was no rancour in her voice. She felt a genuine gratitude that she had such accomplished siblings and nothing but fondness for her parents.

"Your father did mention to me that he was concerned that you were tiring yourself rather with your efforts for our friend here. I can see for myself how dutifully you've nursed him and I know how draining that can be. I thought I might suggest you take these tablets." Celia took the jar being proffered to her. "Nothing terribly exciting I'm afraid but just take one every morning and night and you'll get a decent night's sleep and feel well rested." She looked at the jar but there was no label offering a clue as to its contents. "Do take them to put your father's mind at rest, would you Celia?"

"Thank you, doctor. Certainly. I am feeling rather tired at present and I don't want father to worry. He's so terribly busy at the Treasury."

"Good girl," said Doctor Carmichael as he gathered up the contents of his black bag. Celia took up her usual position on the chair at Taksheel's bedside. When she was sure the Doctor had left and was not going to return she took Taksheel's hand in her own and leaned in towards him sweeping away a lock of hair that had fallen across his brow. She resumed, in whispered tones, the story of her life that she had been recounting to him these past two weeks since he fell at her feet. He rarely stirred but she could feel that he heard and understood her confidences. She was so grateful that she had someone to share her hopes and fears with. Not since Hugo had she felt so close to another human being. Poor, sweet Hugo. He had died in a field hospital surrounded by strangers while she was waiting uselessly for him at home. How fortunate that she could be here for Taksheel. She had been given a second chance and she would not squander it.