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Opening Extract from...

A Life Apart

Written by Neel Mukherjee

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A Life Apart

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History isn't only what we inherit, safe and sound and after the fact; it is also what we are ourselves obliged to endure.

'Public Intellectuals', Cynthia Ozick, *Quarrel & Quandary*.

And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
And now was dropped into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

'Lycidas', John Milton.

And then another problem reared its head. When Miss Gilby had first entered the inner courtyard there had been a great deal of trouble that had lasted quite some time. Eventually, the whole thing had got buried under the routine and rhythms of quotidian life. But soon everything was raked up again; I hadn't given much thought to Miss Gilby's nationality for a long time but now I began to do so. I said to my husband, 'I think you should ask her to leave.' He kept quiet. I said a lot of unpleasant things to him. He heard me out, silent and sad, and then left the room. I sulked and cried for a while. That night, he said to me, 'Bimala, I cannot see Miss Gilby as *just* an English woman and nothing more. Does the fact that you've known her for so long count as nothing? Is her Englishness everything? Don't you understand how fond she is of you?'

I felt ashamed but couldn't swallow my pride entirely and agree that he was right. So I said, somewhat petulantly, 'All right, then, let her stay. Who's asked her to leave?'

from 'Bimala's autobiography', Rabindranath Tagore,
The Home and the World.

ZERO

There was a queue for electric furnaces at Kalighat crematorium on the eleventh of October. Ritwik did not know how long he had to wait before one became available.

‘You have to wait, like everyone else. No corpse is privileged over the other. You can’t hurry death, do you understand?’ he was told by one of the furnace attendants, as if he had asked to jump the queue when all he had wanted to know was how long it would take. He reasoned he would much rather a longer wait for he did not want to go through that bristling panoply of rituals before the sliding rails carried his mother’s body into the heart of fire, in full, cleansing view of everyone. When the moment arrived, he knew he had been dreading it with a cold, randomly clutching-and-unclutching grip in his bowels. His mother’s body had been laid out on a criss-cross frame of cheap wood that formed a ramshackle stretcher, secured to it with rough coir ropes and covered with a white, coarse sheet; her head had been left exposed. It nodded and lolled like a floppy doll’s as the stretcher was placed in front of one of the three furnaces that would ultimately devour her.

The Brahmin priest was already there, more a harried figure doing brisk business than a sombre religious person. A distracted, infinitely bored look had seeped its way into his stubbly face through years of practice in the death trade: it was an irremovable mask now, his only skin. His eyes were the yellow of mangled fried eggs and he had foul breath.

‘Are you wearing any animal products? You’ll have to remove them,’ he said to Ritwik.

‘What animal products? Leather?’ Ritwik wasn’t sure what he had to remove.

‘Yes, leather, wool, anything made with horn. You will have to take off your shirt as well.’ From the complete absence of tone, he might as well have been reading out a lesson he had taught every day for decades to a bunch of vapid children.

Ritwik undid his borrowed watch – the strap was made of leather – and handed it to his brother, Aritra. He then took off his shirt and stood there, naked to the waist.

‘What about the belt? Is that made of leather?’ the priest asked. Those sick yellow eyes didn’t miss a thing.

‘Yes, I think it is,’ Ritwik said, ‘but I can’t take it off. My jeans are three sizes too big for me; if I remove it, they’ll just slip off.’

There was the noise, no, not even noise, but the atmospheric charge, of a dutifully suppressed titter of shock around him. As the priest grudgingly assented or ignored, he could not figure out which, he was handed a bundle of burning faggots and asked to circle his mother seven times and touch the barely burning straw-and-twigs to her grey face every time he reached her head during the circling. This then was *mukhagni*, the fire-to-the-face ritual that initiated the funeral process and without which it was unsanctioned and incomplete, this the very act that had made him shy away from all the ceremonies which were the first-born son’s duty at his father’s cremation eleven days ago. But now he did not have the heart, or the steeliness of will, to send along his mother without the reckoning, with all the imperfections on her head.

Ritwik suddenly had a suspicion of a supremely ironic design of Things, with a malignant sense of humour, which had brought him to perform what he had so wilfully avoided a few days ago. Someone was laughing somewhere, he thought, as he turned his head away every time he branded his mother’s dead face: it left a black, ashy singe wherever it touched. His stomach heaved, letting him know that it had been empty for a very long time, and a malicious spurt of acid moved up swiftly behind his chest bone, his throat, impatient to enter his mouth, but he swallowed the sour fire.

The wooden stretcher with his mother on it was positioned on the rails; it slid shudderingly along them towards the door of the furnace with insides of consuming fire. The body entered it, the door shut all from fire to fire, while he stood outside in his intolerable shirt of flame and a wail went up from a clot of numbed people in front of another furnace, the sound like a refraction in a distorting mirror. This then was the atomised end, the final breakdown into the fundamental particles. *It will take an hour and a half for it to be over, come away now, come.* Ninety minutes was too too long for a human body, wasn't it? Did it burn like paper to an infinitely curling hyaline thinness, his mother escaping out of a flue somewhere upwards and ascending still . . .

Two days after they took her to the hospital, Ritwik's mother died. The whisper everywhere was that his father had taken his mother away. 'Pulled her away to him,' everyone said. Otherwise, how could one explain the abnormally small gap of eleven days, *eleven days*, between the two deaths? To Ritwik, everyone seemed scared at this sign of the workings of a world beyond the here and now, as if their lives had been momentarily lit by a cruel, grand flash of the great unknown, a reminder of something ineffable, then plunged back into their dim, quotidian greyness again. He detected a faint whiff of an 'I told you so' attitude in his uncles, his aunts, the neighbours, or was that just imagined? But there was no mistaking the holy dread at what was being discussed as the bond that worked beyond human life.

On the day it happened – grey, close, the no-time between afternoon and dusk – Ritwik was sitting on the floor of his uncle Pradip's room, indifferently pushing around the cold rice and dal and vegetables on the stainless steel plate in front of him, with relatives and neighbours sitting around, waiting and watching for signs of grief at his father's death nine days ago. This parliament of vultures had been gathering for the last week to circle around that one death when it looked as if it could suddenly, thrillingly, jump up to two. Their piously suppressed excitement provided a tight

murmur in the background, like the muffled buzzing of bees: grief offered such a delicious peek into the minutiae of other people's lives.

His mother was in her room, in the customary mourning garb, coarse handspun white cotton sari, being watched by another set of people, waiting, watching, and commiserating. It was then that Mejo-mashi, one of his aunts, ran into Pradip-mama's room and wailed, 'Something's happened to Didi, come quickly, she's slurring her speech and rolling her eyes!'

In one swift swarm they reached his mother's room. Ritwik saw her, awkwardly reclined on the floor, trying to stretch out beside the low bed but failing, her jaw a fluid, mobile line involved in the painful formation of words which kept slipping away from the solid, sharp edges they unthinkingly assumed in healthy people. Her eyes were trying both to shut and to keep open at the same time, as if seeking a fugitive point of focus that kept eluding her. The elastic slippages of the words managed somehow to convey 'pain' and 'head'. Ritwik barked out to nobody in particular, 'Why are you shouting? Why are you all crowding around her? Move away, give her some air!'

It did not take long for the neighbourhood doctor, who had come quickly, to conduct a few basic tests – scratching a key on the soles of her feet, asking her, a bit too loudly and slowly, as if speaking to a retarded child, to focus on the tip of a pen which he held in his fingers and moved from one point to another in a straight horizontal line – and confirm what was already nudging darkly at the back of Ritwik's mind: she had had a massive cerebral stroke ('hemiplegia' was the word the doctor used) and was to be rushed to the intensive care unit of a hospital.

There were no ambulances in Calcutta. Assuming you had a telephone in the first place, there were no emergency numbers to dial either. Although Ritwik's childhood had been dotted here and there with the excitement of seeing fire engines rush past, a standing fireman in an overlarge helmet clanging a loud bell with a stick or pulling the string attached to it, he had no idea how it had

been summoned. A phone call or someone running to fetch it? In any case, they did not have a telephone and it would have meant going upstairs to Tabbu's flat to use their phone, so someone had to go to the bus stop, a ten-minute walk away, and fetch a taxi from the rank there.

His mother had meanwhile thrown up the chyme of boiled rice, boiled potatoes, boiled green bananas – a sure sign, the doctor had said, of cerebral haemorrhage. In popular belief it was a 'medical' indication that things were very serious indeed. There was a short, tense debate between Ritwik and his uncles whether carrying her horizontally to the taxi parked outside would exacerbate her condition or whether supporting her two arms around the necks of two strong men and walking her to the taxi would be more damaging. In the end, it was decided she would be walked out, supported by Pradip-mama on one side and Pratik-mama on the other, with Ritwik following closely to offer additional help should it be needed.

There was a crowd now: neighbours congregating in the balconies of nearby houses, trying, and failing, to be discreet as they looked on; the throng surrounding the passage of his mother from the house to the taxi outside (they had to shout 'Make way, make way' several times to ease the obstruction); and the assortment of relatives. There was Ria-mami, married to his oldest uncle, Pradip-mama; their daughter, the three-year old Munu, whimpering, not quite sure of what had happened but, with a child's unerring nose, had somehow sniffed out that her favourite person in the household was going away, perhaps with no hope of return; Nisha, the maidservant; his mother's sister, Mejo, who looked retreating and forlorn, whether from what had happened to her sister or from Ritwik's sharp words a few minutes ago, he could not tell; Tabbu's mother; half a dozen neighbours.

The taxi was one of those not unusual Calcutta ones which had two drivers sharing the business of driving in shifts. There was trouble fitting everyone in: Tabbu sat in front, squeezed between the two drivers, Pradip-mama, Ritwik, and Aritra in the back, with their mother half-carried, half-slumping. Ritwik's three other uncles

gathered around, wanting to clamber in, in a display of hectic participation. He came close to pointing out that the taxi couldn't fit any more; besides, there were quite enough people to take care of things, but he held his tongue: it gave them something to do, a kind of focus to an otherwise unvaried stretch of the same day, day after day.

Throughout the dust-blown journey to the hospital, the second driver had his arm out of the passenger window and flailed a filthy red cloth, in all probability the one used for cleaning the taxi. This was the Calcutta equivalent of the warning wail of the ambulance. The hope that traffic in this city would stop or make way for a taxi with an insignificant red rag flapping out of one of its windows was risible and infuriating at the same time. How many people knew that a red rag meant a car carrying the seriously ill to hospital? Ritwik certainly didn't until now.

The taxi went down Anwar Shah Road, turned right at Deshpriya Sashmal Road, with its straight, uninterrupted stretch of tramlines, and made its way to Kalighat, its wheels sending up a dense cottony billow of yellow-grey dust that, mingled with the exhaust fumes, kept blowing into the vehicle through the open windows. It snagged in Ritwik's mind as another worry: his mother really shouldn't be breathing in such visibly polluted air at this time. The roads on either side of the tram tracks were dug up in places and it was a bumpy, convoluted ride, all straight lines from one point to another becoming two oblique diagonals taking in a distant, third point. With each jerk, Ritwik feared the clot in his mother's head was oozing out more blood, or her frangible brain-lobes juddering with the impact and disintegrating like some delicate pudding that could barely hold its shape.

At Kalighat, the taxi took a left turn and went past the crematorium – the same crematorium where his mother had performed the last rites for his father nine days ago – on its way to the medical centre in Alipore. It was one of the busiest crossroads in the city. Pedestrians and traffic flowed into each other like indiscriminate waters; there were no demarcated spaces for either, no rules about their separation.

A cow stood, calm and transcendent, in the middle of this barely moving, lawless sea of people, bicycles, autorickshaws, lorries, cars, buses, stray dogs and trams. A woman with stainless steel kitchen utensils balanced on her head shouted out her wares and tried to cross over to the other side towards Gariahat. All these registered in Ritwik's head like separate photographs, without syntax. And above all this incessant noise of traffic and horns and human living, he could hear, as an abiding bass-line, the raucous cry of crows. He just had to shift the focus of his ears, from foreground to background, to hear the harsh, continuous cawing welling out over everything, like the slow, silent beginnings of a flood.

And now that it was all happening, how would he live? Throughout his teenage years, he had forced himself to think about his mother's death, as if that willed act could deprive fate of the power at least to seize him with the suddenness of tragedy. It comes to him easily, the line, *Readiness is all*. Lying on the floor, between his mother and Aritra, his father on the pallet, night after sweat-saturated night he had taken himself ruthlessly through the worst scenarios and when it had all played out in his febrile imagination up to a point beyond which nothing, no hope, no solace, no consolation, nothing remained, he went one step further. It became a slowly forged shield through which the vagaries and surprises of events could scarcely touch him for he had already imagined and lived inside the worst.

What *would* life be without her? In some amorphous way he had always thought that all his happiness would come to an end with her death. But what if it released him instead into a terrifying new life, unshadowed by the prospect of her ageing and dying in slow degrees? What if that freedom was given him so early? If he could only push the inevitable away to some unspecified point in the future when he was old enough, a proper adult, he would be able to deal with it efficiently and well, but no, it really was happening now. It wasn't the luxury of a safe mind toying with dark imaginings in terrified fascination any more. At thirteen, he thought twenty-five was the right age for dealing with Big Events

like the death of a parent; now, at twenty-one, the notion of a safe age turned out to be a mirage, receding further and further into the distance as one approached a moving boundary. Perhaps there really wasn't any safe age for loss.

And his father had just died, leaving him as the theoretical head of the family. Following the ineluctable laws of Bengali hierarchies, he was now in charge of their family of three, responsible for his mother and his younger brother. It was this that ate at him more than his father's death, this swift alighting of burdens and responsibilities when he was so unprepared, so green. How was he going to provide for them? On that deceptively small question, everything foundered. Families were based more on subtle ties of provider and receiver than on any intangible emotional bonding. If he had been ten or twelve at this moment, he wouldn't have had to think about all this; something would have been arranged by the other adults in the household until he came of age. But he couldn't hope for it now. If he could become invisible, or just cease to exist, be whisked away to a different country, a different continent . . . It wasn't the first time he had had such fantasies but now, looking distractedly out of the taxi window at a group of strutting pigeons pecking at some spilled grain on the roadside, at two slum children just sitting and staring blankly at traffic and passersby, their eyes opaque and unreadable, he felt guilty about letting thoughts of money enter his head. He should be thinking of his mother, her well-being, not costing it down or ledgering family relationships.

All those fears of his mother dying and leaving him alone were really his fears of a parent in hospital with no money to pay for medical bills, doctors, nurses, medicines, tests. But for now his pockets were heavy with borrowed and given money. He had been sharp enough to grab the bulging wallet which his mother had held so close to her in her week of mourning, a wallet filled with money from relatives, his own friends, Aritra's friends and their parents, people who instinctively knew that that would be the greatest necessity now that her husband, the family's sole earner, was dead. Soumik's mother, Uncle Adip, Mrinal, all had come forward with

generous wads of cash, which they had embarrassedly pushed into her hands, or had bypassed her altogether and had given Ritwik and Aritra instead. Taking possession of his mother's wallet had come naturally; as soon as the taxi had arrived outside the front door, he had picked it up from beside the bed. If he had been less alert, it would almost certainly have been stolen by one of his uncles and, when asked, they would have denied ever having set their eyes upon it. It was the story of their lives in Grange Road. It had been clever of him to get in there first and prevent the money from going missing. That opportune seizing brought temporary redemption from more begging, more debts (he knew the money would be spent in a matter of days) and more shame. At least for now, he wouldn't have to call on Mrinal for a handout for the first things – the doctor's home visit, the taxi fare to the hospital, the admission charges.

The hospital was new, swanky, and built and run with the dirty money of Marwaris. Everything seemed to happen swiftly and efficiently here, to Ritwik's amazement. He had grown up with news coverage of innumerable hospitals in Calcutta where cats roamed and pissed in the wards, dogs came in and walked away with newborns or wandered around licking the wounds and sores of people lying there with no hope of escape. But here there were silent lifts and the white noise of functioning state-of-the-art medical appliances. The insistent air-conditioning goosepimpled his thin arms, the floors shone with the zing and ardour of the new. Money changed hands as he signed the requisite forms – he noticed there was a clause absolving the hospital of all responsibility should the worst happen and wondered if it was true of hospitals everywhere – and his mother was wheeled away by uniformed nurses and attendants to an intensive care unit on a floor high up in the building.

Tabbu's obtrusive altruism now took the form of an iterative chanting of, 'Nothing's happened, everything's all right, everything will be OK', and Ritwik started counting on the digits of his fingers how many times he repeated the saving formula. Both he and Tabbu were chain-smoking in the car park just inside the entrance

of the hospital, as if what had happened had released them into a new permissiveness. For Ritwik, the act of smoking in front of his uncles still carried a minor charge of flouting accepted codes of behaviour: it was almost a dare on his part, a gauntlet thrown down to his uncles. He had already begun to show them that, just because his father was dead and his mother in a perhaps terminal coma in hospital, he wasn't going to be bossed around by them. It was best to make things clear from the very beginning. But the cleanly triumphant feeling he had been hoping to be rewarded with didn't quite arrive. Instead, it was clouded by tiny motes of betrayal: his mother had worked so hard to ensure that the boys didn't fall prey to the bad habits that so characterised her brothers and here he was, indulging in the very thing she had tried to protect him from, to score cheap points. The cigarettes left a woolly burn along his throat and lungs. He had a taste of the futility of her life and his heart turned over.

Ritwik carefully folded away the very short encounter with the doctor the next morning in the hope of deliberately expunging it some day in the future. Everyone assembled at the hospital awaited the doctor's arrival with varying degrees of apprehension. They had all been told who the doctor was and their irritatingly frequent questions – *when will he come down? when will he let us know? will he be long?* – had been answered with exemplary patience.

When the self-possessed doctor did arrive, everyone rushed to him like pigs to the feeding farmer. Ritwik composed his face into an expressionless nothing as the doctor said, 'We can't say anything with absolute certainty at the moment except that we have to keep her under observation for seventy-two hours. She's in a coma and we can't say when she will come around. Obviously, the cerebral stroke she has suffered is huge and extremely serious. Both sides of her body are completely paralysed and even if she does recover, she will remain paralysed, in all probability, for the rest of her life. Of course, that might well change . . . We need to conduct a few more tests – an MRI scan of the brain, a CAT scan . . .' Fluent, articulate, utterly detached.

Ritwik nodded impassively as the onslaught of information battered through his insides. He recalled Dida, his grandmother, another semi-paralysed stroke survivor who had hobbled her bitter way around the flat, skulking in corners and shadows, occasionally beaten up by her own sons, a twisted and hating figure, till her second cerebral stroke had sent her into a two-month coma from which she ultimately never recovered. The doctor's words burnt out a clearing in his head: like all clearings, it contained both ash and space.

The next day, during visiting hours, he took the lift high up to his mother's room. She seemed conscious, her eyes opening wide as if she had just woken up from a long sleep and was having considerable trouble easing herself into the unfamiliarity surrounding her; the world of her sleep still inflected the hospital room. She struggled to get up, looked at her son, and said, 'Home, I want to go home. Why am I here? What is this place?'

Ritwik answered, 'Yes, of course, you'll go home, but you're not very well at the moment, Ma. As soon as you're better, we're going to take you home.' He spoke very slowly, articulating each word separately and distinctly, as if he was simplifying something complex to an inquisitive child.

Buffeted by some barely articulable unease, she tried to raise her head against the pillows again. She looked like a strung-up marionette that hadn't quite come to fluid and easy life because the puppeteer had only just begun and was going through his hand and finger warming-up exercises. One of the monitors attached to her showed a jagged green graph, like a curious, moving snake, forming and reforming, arcanelly measuring out her life in electronic signals.

Ritwik, remembering what the doctor had said about extensive damage to the brain, asked her, 'Can you recognize me? Who am I?'

She answered him correctly, an emptiness in her face, perhaps trying to work out if it was a trick question, but the look of blank confusion could equally have been the effect of the stroke.

She tried to lift her hands, in an eerily lost movement, as if they had acquired an unmoored yet independent life, no longer governed by the directing brain. The words came out truncated and random, ‘Pain, headache. Here, here, no here’ – her hands, nowhere near her head, flailed about, unsuccessfully trying to locate the exact spot – ‘please massage my head, it’ll go away. Just a headache. And then you’ll take me home.’

Her eyes were wide and unfocused; they didn’t seem to be registering anything.

Ritwik had to find out if her ability to perceive and recognize objects had been impaired as well. From his sidebag, he took out the book he was currently reading – *The Complete Illustrated Nonsense of Edward Lear* – held it in front of him and asked, ‘Ma, can you tell me what I’m holding in my hands?’

She rolled her eyes towards him but didn’t manage to fix them either on him or on the book. ‘Book, a book’, the words tumbled out like an erratic spill of oranges from a paper bag. ‘Why are you asking me these questions? If you press your hands on my head, head, here, here’ – this time she didn’t even manage to raise her arms – ‘it’ll go, really, it will.’

He said, ‘The doctor will make it go away. You’re in good hands.’ The lie jangled so shrilly in his ears he looked up to see if she had heard it.

She had shut her eyes and was mumbling, ‘Like you used to massage my temples, forehead, with Amrutanjan when I had headaches, like that, it’ll go away. When you were young. It’s a very severe headache, you know?’

He felt as if something had gone through the centre of his torso, entering through his navel and boring its way out back through the spine. The duty nurse came in and saved him. ‘All right, that’s enough. You mustn’t tire her out.’

Ritwik stood up to leave with his back turned to the bed. He couldn’t bear to look at the bloodless face of his mother already asleep – or was it comatose? – on the regulation pillows but the need to twist the knife proved too strong. He turned around and

a careless calculation, done god knows when, hiding and waiting until this moment for the ruthless ambush, tripped up his entire being: she had been four years older than he was now when she had given birth to him. He gripped the metal rail at the end of her bed and swallowed. When had his own span of life, one he had thought so small that it could be counted, almost totally, on the digits of one outstretched hand, become so large that half his mother's could be circumscribed within it? Half a lifetime, a mid-point reached with his birth: how could time be calibrated with such erratic abandon?

That night he slept in the flat of Aritra's college friend, Sujoy. It was a convenient distance from the hospital and near-strangers offered both anonymity and a hiatus from the pinning focus of searchers looking for information, signs of grief, points of break-age. He was tired but did not want to be subjected to the ruthless time between switching off the light and the tricky oblivion of sleep, so he forced his attention on his Edward Lear.

He didn't know what woke him up in the middle of the night. His mouth was dry, his throat a sore, raspy burn. Did she wake up as well, in an alien, clinical bed, her mind alert and ranging over things with the dreamlike clarity that colours such hours? Was she afraid? Did she think she was going to die? What did it feel like? Did she call out for him, her strangled cry bounding and rebounding off the insulated dark walls, or faintly leaking and petering out in the lowly lit corridors? Did she think of his father's death or her own?

The next morning, the inevitability of going to the hospital gave him a sense of doom that seemed to drag and dredge inside him. There were people there already, his friends from college, and Aritra's, who had offered to do the early morning shift. It was like a vigil, he thought, as he went to shoulder his time. Something in the shadows of Arpit's face while he crossed the main hall already told him. Certain floating pieces of signs and sense, unconnected until now, suddenly came together in a confirmed design, a design he had always known would be, must be, as Arpit said in his

infinitely rehearsed ‘thus you break the bad news’ voice that his mother had ‘expired’ in the early hours of the morning.

‘Expired,’ Ritwik thought, ‘what an improbable word to use.’ He nodded almost imperceptibly, acknowledging the news. Inside him was a breathless hollow, at once spiky and porous, awl-and-threaded through with the fibres of his very soul it seemed; it could have accommodated entire other worlds, other times.

Giving Arpit and others the slip, he went up to his mother’s hospital eyrie, perched so safe and high above the torrent of the city, to see what she looked like in death. He wanted to be alone, at least for this first view of his dead mother. A pale face in all its waxy coldness, lips with the pallor of ash, eyes shut: it could have been a deeply sleeping face that rested against the pillows. How could they be so sure that all the beating, breathing, painful life had left that face? He thought he was going to reach out his hand and touch it but couldn’t bring himself to move even an inch.

And here the gratuitous tyranny of memory seized him by the balls and no place, no time was safe, and he was a mere nothing to that event he had never, never thought about, never remembered, till now it was everything. He is four years old, and he and his mother board a hand-pulled rickshaw in Park Circus, on a road adjacent to the west side of the big circus green. Even now he feels that momentary precariousness of his position in the slightly scary rickshaw, as if he is about to fall backwards as the puller lifts up the front of the vehicle and the world tilts around him. Suddenly in front of them, in the middle air, there is a whole colony of blue and water-green dragonflies, circling and hovering in their staccato way, sometimes still in the air with just a vibration of wings, a static thrumming, and then off again with a jerky move. *Ma, Ma, look, look, dragonflies! What a lot of them! What are they doing there? Why aren’t they landing on something?* That suspension of a large swarm a cause of wonder and his mother with an explanation for a small child: *They have just been born, up in the heavens, and have been sent down to earth right now*, as if heaven were up above behind the canopy of the blue sky, the dragonflies shimmering their papery

net-wings, a dazzling whirr in the clear light, having just pierced the blue screen above in their birth and descent. The little boy is delighted at the miracle and his eyes widen with wonder and happiness as his mother smiles and smiles at this benediction of air.

At Kalighat, he was struck by the place's newly found familiarity; it was becoming a dangerously regular haunt, almost known, almost comfortable. There were three or four tea shacks with corrugated tin sheds opposite the main entrance to the crematorium. They looked so fragile, with their rows of smudged glass jars which contained gaudily coloured biscuits, the open coal fire with the huge kettle for boiling tea, milk and sugar together, and the long, leaning columns of terracotta drinking cups. The bit of the road along the shanties was a little drain of these discarded and broken cups, of muddy washing-up water and the red stains of paan spittle.

Eleven days ago he had been here for his father's cremation. It appeared to be a type of puerile radicalism now, the way he thought he had scored points in refusing to perform the last rites for his father. In denying the honourable duties that bound the male first-born in a Hindu family – although his family was that only in a diluted, anodyne way – he thought he had taken a socially meaningful step. This was compounded, although Ritwik could take no credit for it, by his mother's decision to do the necessary rituals. Untraditionally so, because Hindu tradition gave no place to women to atone for the sins of the deceased and see off his soul. If anyone had thought it odd or deviatory, this business of the last rites being performed by the dead man's widow instead of his surviving sons, they had not said so. On top of that, both he and Aritra had refused to go through *ashauch*, the ritual eleven-day mourning, a period of defilement, culminating in the *sraddha* ceremony, where the soul of the dead was finally unmoored from all its earthly ties and sent on its way to purgatory or another birth or whatever.

Just recalling what his uncles had gone through when their mother had died made him furious with the punishing nature of it

all: sleeping on hay and straw with bricks for headrests, no shaving or cutting of hair, no meals after sundown, a mind-boggling assortment of dietary rules . . . And then there was the final ceremony that ended it all: all hair was shorn off and shaved, including chest and armpit hair (although not pubic hair), the endless abracadabra with the phoney priest, pour this on fire pour that on fire, make seven or nine or three portions of that sickly mess of rice and bananas and ghee and place it there and there and there while chanting the names of your male ancestors (no one could go beyond a generation, or two at the most), the obligatory mass-feeding of relatives, neighbours, friends, the poor . . . *Cock cock cock* he'd spat out *I'm damned if I'm doing any of this when my time comes*. But this death was different. This time Ritwik was going to do what was expected of him. If there really was a soul after all, which needed to be released, he didn't want to take any chances with his mother's.

There was no question of opting for the traditional open wooden pyre, so uninsulated, so barbaric to Ritwik's mind. In those blank hours between registering the corpse for cremation in an electric furnace and the little ritual before it actually happened, Ritwik noticed disparate patches of people strewn around the crematorium. Death sometimes made survivors gregarious. He was surprised that there were so few inconsolable people; he had expected far more than the occasional ones, from whom he glanced away. Every haggard face there looked dry, as if deprived of some essential sap which loss had wrung out of them drop by drop, leaving only dark shadows and a desiccation around the mouth, the unkemptness of dusty hair, the crushed, limp dullness of the stale clothes; Ritwik wondered if he looked like them as well.

The billow and swell of support and advice around Ritwik and Aritra grew. It seemed that virtually half of Aritra's college had come over to stand by him in this hour of need. Information rained down on him, thick and merciless, like a choking Old Testament plague – the time it would take for the corpse to be completely burnt once it entered the furnace; how the ramp

automatically rose to advance and lower the 'body' inside; how the gates of the furnace came down to cover the process from human view; the list of things he had to do before and after the cremation. Now that he had to perform all these himself, he was fascinated by the structures and codes of this little world of the business and commerce and rituals of death. It was an alternative world, so inescapably under his own yet so unknown until he had to educate himself in its rules. Who would have thought that such knowledge had to be bought with so much fire, fire that would send his mother somewhere upwards and ascending still, in dispersing, intermittent clouds of elementary particles, so that if he breathed in he could fill his chest with tiny fragments of her being and hold this transubstantiation locked inside his distending lungs.

In Hindu belief, the navel is indestructible, left behind in the furnace as the whole body is converted to a fistful of ash. The last act of the cremation was the retrieval of this undestroyed navel from the maws of the furnace. There was a short walk to the Ganga, which ran right behind the crematorium, to set the 'navel' afloat (or whatever lump of rock or charcoal the *panda*, the crematorium tout, had handed you) following the guidelines of yet another priest or hanger-on hoping for a few rupees.

Aritra's face was flushed, as if one of the walls of the furnace that held their mother's corpse had suddenly slid from its fixed position and the contained fire had licked and blazed too close to the boy's face. A purification, an extinguishing. The dark of his pupils seemed to have welled and inked out in circles under his eyes. He made Ritwik a generous offer, 'Look, if you don't feel up to it, I can do this last bit.'

'No, it's all right; I've done it so far, let me see it to the end.' He paused for a second, then added, 'Besides, I'm the elder son . . .' his voice trailed off to make space for the excuse.

The *pandas*, who ferreted through the ashes with long sticks after the body was fully incinerated, handed him what passed for his mother's navel in a flimsy earthen bowl. They had heaped it

with ash and cinder out of an odd sense of decorum. There was a small procession – he, Aritra, Tabbu, a couple of Aritra’s friends, Pratik-mama, and a few others – to the dark slurry of putrefying matter which was the Ganga, the holy river, not running but stagnant and stench-bound behind the crematorium. On the way, he was seized by an urge to root through the ashes and earth in the little bowl in his hands (surprisingly heavy) and see if it really contained his mother’s rubbery navel and the stump of her umbilical cord untouched by fire.

They reached the slopes of the bank and as he was asked to step closer, almost into that seething shit, he was once again overcome by nausea, afraid that any physical contact with the river would cause some repulsive illness. He stepped forward a few inches, gingerly, steeling himself to disobey any orders to stand ankle-deep in it. There were emaciated dogs moving around the place, materializing in and out of the thick darkness everywhere, sniffing for, he supposed, human limbs and charred flesh. He tried to take his mind off the marauding creatures and perform all that was asked of him. From the slums on the other side of the river, random feathers of Hindi film songs kept getting blown in with the intermittent breeze: *Slowly, slowly we must increase our love, O magician, who has cast a spell on my virgin heart.* The weak electric bulbs, dotted here and there among the huts, looked like static tapers.

The brothers flinched when the priest sprinkled everyone with holy water from the river: for a few moments they were acutely conscious of the exact spots on their bodies where the contaminated water had landed. They must remember to wash with Dettol when they returned home. Ritwik was asked to set the ‘navel’ afloat. But there wasn’t very much water in the river and instead of floating away, as it was picturesquely supposed to do, towards salvation on the other side, the bowl landed with the squelching splash of a hard object hitting clay.

Here, all ends and begins.