Spark of Light
A destitute woman had recently taken shelter in Nityananda Patnaik’s home in Jajpur, along with her six-year-old daughter. The widow of a zamindar, she was from the same caste as Nityananda. Three years earlier, her husband had lost everything in a lawsuit and, overwhelmed by the pangs of poverty and bouts of depression, he had lost the will to live. Those three years had been a harrowing time for her. Finally, when she had absolutely nowhere else to go, Nityananda had offered to let her and her daughter, Parasamani, live in his home.

Nityananda had worked in the treasury office in Cuttack and was now on a pension. He had also inherited a small zamindari, and lived quite comfortably. His was a small family—a wife, Ushabati, and son, Shiva Prasad. An only child, Shiva Prasad had arrived after years of dedicated prayer to Lord Shiva, and so it was appropriate that he had been named in honour of the god. When the boy was thirteen, Nityananda had sent him off to stay with one of his friends in Cuttack so that he could get a proper education.

Nityananda’s wife, Ushabati, was as proud, foul-mouthed, and haughty as her husband was gentle, calm, and collected. After moving
in, Parasamani’s mother dutifully attended to every chore around the house, but no amount of slave labour seemed to satisfy Ushabati. On the contrary, the poor woman was frequently singed by the raging flames of the mistress’s anger. Even little Parasamani was not spared; she too had to put up with slaps, blows, and pinches. God Almighty be praised for bestowing on the lowly and ill-fated enormous reserves of patience! What would happen to such poor souls without their ability to put up with their misfortune? No doubt it was just as well that Parasamani’s mother accepted every bit of humiliation without protest. Nityananda was blissfully unaware of the entire situation—not that he would have had the power to change it had he known.

When Shiva Prasad came home for the Durga Puja holidays, he was delighted to have Parasamani around. As an only child, he had been lonely for as long as he could remember. He was a kind and quiet boy, which made it easy for Parasamani to take to him.

One day, seated beside Shiva Prasad while he was studying, she blurted out—whether out of childish enthusiasm or some deep-seated desire Lord only knows—“I wish I could study too.” Immediately, Shiva Prasad found a copy of *Barna Bodhak*, a reading primer, and began to teach her. Until he left for Cuttack at the end of the holidays, he guided her through her lessons every afternoon, encouraging her to read and to write the alphabet and simple words with a piece of chalk. In just twenty days or so, Parasamani mastered nearly half of *Barna Bodhak*. But it all stopped in mid-stream, when Shiva Prasad went back to Cuttack.

Six months passed. Shiva Prasad returned home for the summer vacation. Parasamani’s studies resumed, and, after finishing *Barna Bodhak*, she started on *Bodhadayak*. One day, Ushabati chanced upon her son teaching the girl and gave them both a tongue-lashing, as unnecessary as it was vitriolic. From then on, Parasamani did not seek Shiva Prasad out; she studied by herself.

Besides being a fair-skinned beauty—hardly anyone around could hold a candle to her—the girl was so graceful and well-mannered that everyone immediately fell for her. Perhaps because he did not have a daughter of his own, or because he was naturally generous of heart, or just because Parasamani’s sweet, innocent face was difficult to resist, Nityananda never missed a chance to express his affection for her. But
sadly, despite her charms, the girl failed to gain even the smallest place in Ushabati’s heart.

II

Through times good and bad, five years passed, drowned in the boundless depths of Time. Many were lifted out of the darkness of despair and propelled toward the blinding illumination of happiness, just as others were deprived of the nectar of joy and happiness and submerged in the bottomless ocean of grief and sorrow. Who could count the number of humans Time sent, despite their wishes, to their deaths, just as it showered the elixir of happiness on a grieving world by bringing forth a bountiful crop of babies as lovely as fresh flowers?

But whether times were good or bad, not much changed in Nityananda’s family. One of the good things that happened, though, was that Shiva Prasad passed his First Arts examination and returned home. Ushabati’s fondest wish was to get her son married, and she began to pester her husband day in and day out.

One day, Nityananda took her aside and said, “Place your hand on my head and swear you will not refuse my request.” She hesitated, but let herself be convinced. “When Parasamani was just two years old,” Nityananda told her, “I once met her father on some business. One look at the child and I thought to myself, God willing, someday I’ll get our son Shiva Prasad married to her. So intense was my wish that I let her father in on it, and we both swore we’d not let it be otherwise, even if one of us died in the meantime.”

It was as if Ushabati had been struck by lightning. “Is that why you asked me to place my hand on your head and swear?” she exclaimed. “What will people say if I accept Parasamani as my daughter-in-law? Aren’t there many beautiful girls around? How can I settle for a girl whose mother doesn’t have a single coin to offer as dowry? You want me to give my son in marriage to a girl whose mother works as a servant in this house?” These and many other arguments spewed forth in vehement protest.

Nityananda listened to it all in silence. “I cannot go back on my word,” he said quietly. “If you’re unwilling, you may do as you please. But you’ll be on your own when it comes to arranging your son’s marriage.”

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For eight or ten days afterwards, husband and wife did not speak to each other. Ushabati vented all her anger on Parasamani and her mother, who soon learned what was going on.

In the end, with no other solution in sight, Ushabati gave her consent. On an auspicious day and at an auspicious hour, the holy union between Shiva Prasad and Parasamani was solemnized. Nityananda was euphoric: he had kept his word. Parasamani’s mother was ecstatic at the thought that the best possible match had been made for her adored daughter. Ushabati, alone, was unhappy.

And then what about the newlyweds? Did they feel blessed and happy to have found each other?

III

After the wedding, despite the boy’s earnest wishes, Nityananda did not let Shiva Prasad return to Cuttack to continue his studies. Shiva Prasad tried, not once but two or three times, to find a job, but he had to abandon the idea because of his father’s opposition. No one knows exactly what arguments Nityananda marshalled in favour of his position.

Ushabati was an angry sort by nature, and what’s more, much against her wishes, Parasamani had become the daughter-in-law in the household. No wonder the rage she felt toward the poor girl intensified. Parasamani’s slightest lapse provoked such disproportionate anger that Ushabati could not get over her old habit of raising a hand to the girl. Once, Parasamani, dead tired, let her eyes close for a few seconds while preparing the evening meal, and, rather than subjecting her to the standard beating, her sweet-tempered mother-in-law simply poured a pitcher of cold water over her.

Parasamani’s mother learned to keep quiet, even as she witnessed her daughter’s misery. And Parasamani herself remained as silent as a deaf-mute, drowning her sorrows in her mother’s affection and her husband’s love. At fourteen, young girl though she was, she worked tirelessly, but with the utmost trepidation, from dawn to two hours past dusk, attending to chores of all kinds while putting up with her mother-in-law’s curses and beatings. The brief words of love and solace she received from
her husband at the end of the day, before she offered herself up to a restful slumber, made her feel like the luckiest woman on earth.

The ill-treatment his wife received from his mother did not escape Shiva Prasad’s notice, and although he could not say a word to his mother, one day he told his wife, “I know how miserable you are, how tormented you are, when my mother speaks to you so cruelly. But it is my loving request that you not take her unkind words to heart.”

“How can one who has your love be bothered by anything?” Parasamani replied. “Besides, sometimes I do make mistakes and deserve what comes to me.”

One day, Parasamani came down with a fever. She lay in bed in her mother’s room, and when, after five or six days, the fever showed no sign of abating, Nityananda called in a vaid—a country doctor—who took her pulse and wrote out a prescription. During all this time, not once did Ushabati step inside the room to see how her daughter-in-law was doing. Parasamani’s mother used the short breaks between her various household chores to take some food to her daughter—toasted rice flakes, ginger, salt, and pureed puffed rice. Without telling his mother, Shiva Prasad, too, went some three or four times to see his wife. After Parasamani recovered, Ushabati took her son to task for his shamelessness—visiting his wife in the middle of the day. Only God knows precisely what she said, but Shiva Prasad was deeply wounded.

Five or six days later, he begged his father to let him visit Cuttack, saying how much he missed the town and how badly he needed to see it again. Nityananda finally agreed, but only to a visit of a few days. It was decided that between the coming Tuesday night and Wednesday dawn would be an auspicious time for him to set out.

On the eve of his departure, Shiva Prasad begged his wife to take care of her health. She was with child. Husband and wife held each other a long time, crying silently. At daybreak, Shiva Prasad took leave of his parents and everyone else and started on his journey.

He was able to stay with a friend in Cuttack and wrote to his father to give him the news. Within a fortnight, he had landed a fifty-rupee-a-month job, which he accepted. He was in no hurry to return his family home. This chance at independence was exactly what a doctor would have prescribed an ailing man.
Four months after Shiva Prasad left, Parasamani gave birth to a baby boy. Nityananda conveyed the happy news to Shiva Prasad. But the child’s family was not destined to enjoy this happiness for long: the newborn deserted his mother’s lap while she was still confined to the women’s quarters and returned to the fairyland whence he had come, plunging the entire family into an ocean of grief and tears. Parasamani came down with a fever almost immediately, from which there was no relief for the next fifteen days.

When he received the sad news, Shiva Prasad yearned to be with his wife, but he was reluctant to apply for leave from the job he had so recently taken.

Nityananda called in vaid s and doctors to treat his daughter-in-law, but to no avail.

One day, quite secretly and with much difficulty, Parasamani wrote her husband a letter:

Dearest,

Your poor one longs to see you one last time before she leaves this world. Can I beg you to come home and help your servant fulfill her last wish—to rub the dust from your feet on her head before dying?

Forever yours,
Parasamani

She entrusted the letter to her mother, asking her to place it in an envelope with a postage stamp and find a trustworthy woman to take it to the post office.

Parasamani’s letter moved Shiva Prasad so deeply that he requested a week’s leave and rushed home.

It was as if the flickering flame of Parasamani’s life had been awaiting one last glimpse of her husband’s face. For once, Shiva Prasad, past caring what his mother would think, went straight to his wife the moment he reached home. The poor girl burst into convulsive sobs when she caught sight of him.

She beckoned to him to approach her deathbed, and, when he did, she took his right hand and clasped it to her chest. “How I had looked forward to placing your son in your lap when you came home! Not only did
my wish not come true—it will remain forever unfulfilled. This is our last meeting in this life, and I pray to God that I may have you as my husband in my next."

Parasamani spoke these few words with the greatest effort. Silent tears streamed from Shiva Prasad’s eyes and drenched his wife’s hands. Parasamani’s mother rushed to her daughter’s bedside, wailing bitterly. Hearing her, Nityananda and Ushabati, too, rushed in. Parasamani asked each of them to bless her with the dust from their feet. After she had covered her head with it, she looked longingly at her husband one last time and passed away.

Only two months later came yet another bereavement: Parasamani’s mother, grieving over the death of her only child, followed her into the other world. Was all this predestined, willed by God? Who could have changed any of it?

Shiva Prasad did not go back to Cuttack. He withdrew and kept to himself. His parents wanted to see him marry again, with no delay.

In a short time, a suitable match was found. The girl was the daughter of a wealthy man, and Ushabati was elated, viewing the match as the fulfillment of her true wishes—all the wishes that had eluded her grasp when Shiva Prasad had married Parasamani. Soon, preparations were afoot for a wedding only the following month.

Even though Parasamani was no longer alive, Shiva Prasad constantly felt her presence. She was always there, laughing gently, extending her hands toward him, begging for his love and affection. So when he learned of the plans for a second marriage, he did not hesitate for a moment to tell his mother right out: “I’m not going to marry again. Don’t you people even think of it.”

His mother was stunned, as if felled by a blow. “Son, even old dotards marry two or three times. You’re a young man, but you refuse to remarry? What will happen to us if you don’t? We’ll simply perish.” She used all sorts of arguments—some harsh, some sweet.

But Shiva Prasad was unmoved. “I won’t marry again.”

When the matter reached Nityananda’s ears, he, too, thought that these words had issued from his son’s lips but not from his heart and that he would be reconciled to the idea once the marriage had taken place.
The wedding day dawned. It was already eight in the morning, but there was no sign that Shiva Prasad had arisen. Wondering why, one of his relatives went to his room. Not finding him there, he searched the whole house. When the matter was brought to Nityananda’s attention, he also began looking everywhere for his son and sent out search teams as well. Ushabati’s tears of joy soon turned into tears of anguish.

The people sent out to search all returned dejected. The festive occasion became a dark day, full of agony and despair. Nityananda and Ushabati cursed themselves and cried until they were hoarse. The light had gone out of their home.

Although Shiva Prasad had expressed his unwillingness in no uncertain terms, he realized that his parents would overrule him and go ahead with the second wedding. So, on the night before the wedding, after everyone had gone to bed, he put together a few clothes and a little money and left home. Uncertain where to go, he set out on the road to Cuttack. But he felt uneasy about remaining there, aware that his father would soon get wind of where he was. So he left for Calcutta, and it was there that he experienced a sense of relief. Not immense, unalloyed relief, but relief nevertheless. His more immediate worry was how to face the future.

A month passed. His money ran out. He had not met anyone in the city who could help him out with a loan of ten or fifteen rupees to tide him over. One day, tormented by worries and anxiety, his hands clasped over his heavy heart, he was sitting in his room when he heard someone singing in the next room. He was so drawn to the music that he went next door and sat beside the singer, plying him with requests to go on.

The last song was one of renunciation and nonattachment. It touched Shiva Prasad to the core, changing his life in an instant. The song was like a beacon, showing him the direction he should take.

The next morning Shiva Prasad donned the robes of a mendicant. Chanting the names of the Almighty One—he who embodies eternal happiness—and seeking shelter at his lotus feet, he set out to roam the world to sing his praise.

It is difficult to explain the great peace and joy that came over Shiva Prasad, who did nothing but speak of God, under whose feet he had found refuge—the one whom he had installed in his heart and to whose mercy creation owed all its limitless splendour and riches.
**Epilogue**

Our wish is not to bring the story to a close with the sad plight of Nityananda and Ushabati. But, for those eager to learn the couple’s fate, here it is. Shortly after Shiva Prasad vanished, Ushabati died. Nityananda sold off his property and, keeping only what he needed to survive, donated the rest to the temple of Sri Jagannath, in Puri. He moved to Puri, but he was not destined to live there long: he soon left for the divine abode.