he is a fallen woman. But, to one who knew, a look at her face would banish all revulsion. So sad, so full of pain are her eyes, shining like stars in the dark! Even before the birds stir in the morning, one can see her walking away from Kashi’s Manikarnika Ghat after her bath in the holy river Ganges, moving slowly, with small, dainty steps. Only the morning silently witnesses her motions. After her brief bath, she enters the Bisweswar temple, offers flowers to the image of Lord Bisweswar, and quietly communicates the agonies of her heart. The old priest of the temple often watches this devout woman with admiration. When, after offering her prayer, she sheds tears at the feet of the Lord, the old man’s eyes, too, do not stay dry for long.

One day, even the image of the god, made of stone, seemed to shake a little on watching her pained face. The priest placed his hand on her head and asked, “Who are you, my daughter? You come every day and offer worship. So intense is your devotion that today the stone image of the god seemed to tremble! I have often wept at those feet but have never seen such expression on that face.”
Cringing at his touch, Malati asked, “Does he listen to my prayers? Then why do I suffer so much?”

“He listens to you, my daughter! He listens to everyone’s prayers.”

“With that belief, I come every day and weep before him—that he might forgive all my misdeeds, remove all my sorrows and pull me unto his lap.”

“What’s your trouble? What misdeeds have you committed?”

What is her trouble—what sins has she committed? How will she express her agonies, and to whom? At the priest’s repeated questions, Malati raised her eyes to his face and replied, “Oh, Brahmin, you will not understand. I have many sorrows. There’s no end to my misdeeds. I am not even worthy to come to this holy temple.”

Surprised, the old man asked, “Why, who are you?”

Slowly, she replied, “I am a fallen woman.” On hearing these words, the Brahmin would not have been more startled had there been a sudden bolt of lightning.

“Sinful woman! With what audacity have you come here? To make this temple impure? Go away at once.”

Heeding this command, Malati, the culprit, withdrew but kept looking back beseechingly at the Brahmin. Her anguished expression stirred a memory in the old man. With a choked voice he asked, “Why did you come here?”

With that touch of compassion, Malati’s tears overflowed. In a broken voice and with tears in her eyes, she said, “Why? I have always asked myself the same question—why was I born? I have never had any affection since childhood. After four daughters, when I was born, my mother cried in despair; Father turned his face away. This is how I was received when I was born. As I grew older, I would die of shame on seeing my elder sisters. I was so dark! I understood why my father worried for me.

“Yet, when I came of age, several proposals for marriage came for me—because my father had promised a dowry of four thousand rupees. Was it easy to get so much money? Many worthy young men of our place were willing to marry me. One night, one such man arrived in the company of a procession and married me. Wedded to that stranger, I started out for his house. On the day of my departure, my mother pulled me to her when no one was nearby and cried uncontrollably. A mother’s heart—perhaps she guessed something of my future.”
“The first few days in my new home passed happily. But as the memory of the four thousand rupees faded, my husband’s fondness for me declined. He became a drunkard. ‘The daughter-in-law is inauspicious. The moment she came, she made my son wayward.’ My mother-in-law could never reconcile herself to this misfortune. My husband’s atrocities increased with every passing day. To this, my mother-in-law would keep adding fuel.

“Many nights, I lay unconscious because of the beatings I got. No one even came to say a word of comfort. I used to forget all my sorrows on just seeing one face—my son’s. My one and only precious jewel. But he also cheated me and went away! How could it be otherwise? One has to experience all the sorrows that one is destined for. After suffering from fever for three days, without any treatment, my son died. Before taking his last breath, he stretched his tiny feverish hands toward me and called, ‘Mother, Mother!’

“I couldn’t endure it anymore. A river flowed by our house. I thought I would renounce all my sufferings in its cold bosom and drown myself. I went and stood near the river and was about to take the plunge, but a gentleman brought me back. He assured me that he would give me a job at his house. I forgot everything. No harm in serving in someone’s home. At least I would be free from my husband’s daily tortures! I had no wish to go back to that house from where the cry ‘Mother!’ had disappeared forever.

“With one last tearful glance at that home of several years, I set out with him. And then the bubble burst—I woke up to realize that I had lost everything. Every door in the wide world was forever shut to me. Society, without any reflection on my sin, closed all roads and left me with only one option. On seeing that path, my entire being trembled with repulsion. Carrying the burden of all sins, I came away from there—society conferred on me, with great kindness, the title—a fallen woman! But the man, who took advantage of my pitiable condition and built this reputation for me, is an esteemed gentleman in the eyes of society.

“Do you know, O Brahmin, with what profound futility a deep anger grew in my heart against God? What rebellion stirred in my heart against the Lord? I decided to ruin myself and open the eyes of society to the truth! I took a vow that I would go to the gates of hell and say, ‘Look, O world. See what great ruin you have brought to the innocent by not doing her
justice?’ But I couldn’t do it. The holy memory of my eighteen-month-old son, his last cry at the time of his death, pulled me back from the path of hell. I can still feel the touch of that pure innocent flower when my heart turns toward evil.

“The blocked passages of my sorrows opened up, and they came pouring out in torrents of tears. In the darkness of my sorrows, I saw one faint ray of light. Following that faint glimmer, I arrived at this place. But even here, the world has no mercy to offer me a little space. To hide myself from the curious stares of scores of people, I creep here at night and set my eyes on the Lord—I acknowledge the unforgivable sin of that moment’s weakness . . . O Brahmin! Is my sin so great that there is no reprieve? Are even the doors of this temple closed to me now?”

The old man’s eyes brimmed with tears. He could not speak. He could only draw Malati to him with his thin frail hands and kiss her on the forehead. After such a long time, Malati found shelter in a calm and healing soul.

The more the old man was drawn, with care and compassion, to Malati, the greater was his anxiety. A fear dawned in his mind. Everyone was curious about Malati. Who was that maiden, whose soft smile brightened up the old man’s house? Who was she who waited for his return, with his two-year-old grandson in her arms, the child whose comforting laugh made him forget the fatigue of a long day’s work? When the old man was asked, he replied, “My daughter, who had been lost for many years, has come back home.” The child looked happily at Malati and called her Mother. Waves of tenderness, long suppressed and hidden, would surge within her at his call, and she would hold the boy to her bosom and think of her lost child.

One day, the fear that sometimes tormented the old man became a reality. Malati’s true identity was recognized, and if he did not drive her away from his home, he would lose his position as priest at the temple. “Dissolute old man—giving shelter to such a whore! We need a new priest. That fraud is unworthy of the Lord!”
The sky fell on Malati’s head. “What? In this old age you have to endure such humiliation for giving me shelter? Drive me away. Let me go off to some distant place. I can bear any amount of humiliation, even hatred, but I can’t tolerate your humiliation on account of me!” Tears streamed down her cheeks, each one of them striking the old man’s heart.

Gently caressing her head, he said, “All right.”

The young child pulled at Malati’s sari and cried, “Mother!”

Malati was bound to the old man with ties of love—how could he let her go? The old man listened to everyone, smiled sadly, and said, “It’s not possible, brothers. I can’t abandon my child.”

“Then leave this temple.”

Looking tearfully at the deity, the old man said with a sigh, “Fine. If that satisfies you, why would I stand in the way? Today I’ll leave this temple, but I cannot leave my daughter.”

After the evening prayer, everyone left the temple. The old priest meditated before the deity and then bid him farewell forever. In the gathering dark, he looked back one last time. His feeble eyes filled with tears. To suppress the deep hurt within him, he smiled and strode back home. The house was waiting for the old man, who called, “Oh, my child!” No answer. Again he called, but no one came running. Fearfully, the old man went in and found the little boy asleep. By his side, a lamp—but what was that paper lying beside it?

The old man picked it up. It was a letter in Malati’s hand: “I am leaving this world—I am a curse upon it. I not only suffer, I become the cause of unhappiness to the people who give me solace. Let your paternal heart bless me so that I achieve peace on the other side of life.” The old man, carrying the sleeping child in his arms, rushed to the riverbank. He cast his frail eyes into the distance, far away, where the water was still—something bobbed up and down a few times and then disappeared into the endless water.

Since that day, every evening, along with the child, the old man has waited hopefully on the bank—who knows, his waiting might bring back the dead from the other side. The child asks, “Mother?” The old man draws him close and points his finger—to where the water meets the endless sky.