“And then?”

“Then Sister-in-law brought me here. I came. Because nothing could have stopped me from coming. At first, I liked Sister-in-law very much. I did all the housework. I combed her hair. I did the washing. I did everything for her.

“Perhaps she, too, was very fond of me. Yes, she was, or else she would not have left the management of the entire household to me. I did everything.

“She did not belong to our religion. She was a Christian. And extremely beautiful. Maybe it was her looks that made me love her so much. Although I did not always remember my mother, thoughts of her often crossed my mind. She was in very poor health—I always worried about how she was getting on. But she was not used to writing letters. I wrote to her regularly but never received a reply.

“We have already spent a year in this huge city, Bombay. At first, I thought that although the city was vast, staying here would make me get used to it. But I don’t like it anymore. Maybe one likes a city for a time and then it loses its appeal. Now I often feel the pull of the old house with the dirty front yard and the tulsi plant on the altar in front of it. I feel sad and think of Mother. She died last month. She succumbed to her last illness.”
“What? You knew she was ill and yet you did not visit her even once?”

“I could have gone . . . but I didn’t . . . I had no idea her condition was so serious. Brother is away from home for most of the month, and the few days he does spend at home, he attends parties and goes to the club. Sister-in-law accompanies him to all these. I long to join them, at least once . . . Exciting things must happen at these parties. Why else would they go to them so often? But I have never been able to bring myself to ask them to take me.

“Sister-in-law does not know our language. She and I communicate through signs. And to get to see Brother or speak to him is next to impossible. Whenever he leaves for parties, he is in such a hurry that I don’t dare tell him anything. He and his wife go away and I am left behind, alone and uncared for.

“Then they come back, accompanied by friends who are complete strangers to me. I would like to talk to them, but I can’t speak their language. At first, I could not understand it at all, but gradually, I began to understand a little. It was my job to serve them tea and snacks.

“The first blow came when Sister-in-law introduced me to them as a housemaid. When she said this, Brother looked at her with a strange expression in his eyes. This led me to guess that she had said something nasty. And that it referred to me. Knowing this, and my shabby clothes, made me extremely reluctant to face their friends, but I did so all the same, even when no one asked me to.

“Very soon, I noticed that I was being completely cut off. Brother would not utter a word to me. The old woman who stayed with us resembled Sister-in-law, but Sister-in-law refused to recognize her as her mother. She would say she called her ‘mother’ and showed her respect because she had been reared by her. She would claim that her real parents lived in Britain. The fact was she balked at the thought of telling my brother that this woman was her mother. I never heard her say a kind word to her. I was not allowed to either. The old woman wept, and her sad eyes made me feel very depressed.

“As for Sister-in-law, she could not have cared less, for her friends kept her busy. And what of me? Day and night I remained occupied with household work. Whenever I had any free time, I spent it knitting woollen sweaters. I now have a pile of pullovers. What am I going to do
with these? However, I must admit that my kind brother and sister-in-law bring me wool and knitting needles. But I was once shut up for two days in a room and made to knit a pullover to be given to someone. I was let out only after that man left the hotel.

“This house is a hotel after all . . . all manner of people come here. I try to figure everyone out from a distance, to get under their skin. I feel the urge to approach them, to tell them many things and ask them all kinds of questions. If I could talk to them, all the words lying frozen in my head would melt away. But I could never meet them.

“I am never allowed a moment’s respite. No matter what I am doing, Sister-in-law’s eyes follow me everywhere. She is afraid that I may fall into conversation with someone. She warns me that girls lose their reputation if they talk to riffraff.

“If a human being is not allowed to exchange a word with another, will she remain human anymore? Yes, I do talk with my parents . . . in my dreams . . . but when I am awake, I talk to the stars, the clouds, and the moon.

“In time, I came to realize that Sister-in-law never really liked me. What I had mistaken for fondness was but a chain meant to keep me in bondage. And whatever she did to draw me to her and make me loyal was but a trap.

“One day, I chanced upon a packet containing two or three letters from Mother, all torn to pieces. Sister-in-law could not read our language. Since she had married Brother against Mother’s wishes, she destroyed the letters, thinking that they might contain things against her. One day, I saw her burning a sheaf of papers in the kitchen. But she had not yet had a chance to destroy these two or three letters. Alas . . . what a terrible thing . . . and I always thought Mother never replied to my letters, that she had forgotten about me. Brother was so dear to her. It was only because of him that she had agreed to send me to such a far-off place.

“Mother must have filled her letters with many things: household problems, her illness, everything that happened before she died. But we never got to know anything about these things.

“I will go away . . . I have often thought I should return home . . . but return to whom? Who is there? To whom? Mother is no more. I know no one here . . . I have found you today. I want to run away with you. I
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will go wherever you take me. I wouldn’t mind if you took me as your maidservant. I can’t go on living this life any longer. God has given me this opportunity. I feel as if the burden oppressing me is falling from my shoulders. Please take me with you.”

“Me? Where will I take you? I don’t have even a place to live. I leave for Britain by ship today. Where will I take you? Go home.”