Nobody had seen Pata Dei since that fateful night of the Dola festival. It seemed as though the night itself had engulfed her. That night, the moonlight was spread clear and bright all over the village. After the ritual journey from house to house, the deities were being gathered in the field. The air was thick with the swelling crowds, the sounds of cymbals and bells, and the children smearing colours on one another. The excitement of the full moon night is very different from what follows the next day—the Holi celebrations. This night comes once a year, only to disappear before one realizes it was there. But the experience settles down like dust, like the colours, unnoticed by all. It clings to the body and mind the whole year long—piling up inside. Perhaps that is how, behind Pata’s pleasant smile, worries accumulated like layers of cloud.

On that moonlit night, Pata came back home from the fair after offering food to the deities. She even ate a bowlful of water-soaked rice with some fried drumstick leaves. And later, on the kitchen veranda, she rested on a mat, complaining of uneasiness in her stomach. Her father had left early that morning, carrying the deities on his shoulder to some faraway village. And there was not a soul at home she could talk to.

Mani Bhauja, the woman next door, came by with some others, asking her to play cards. But she refused to go because of her uneasy stomach.
They went away, closing the door behind them, laughing among themselves. Someone even commented, “She is simply lazing around without a care in the world. The stomach pain is just an excuse, believe me.” But Pata had no time for anything that day except her silent wandering thoughts. The bustle in the neighbourhood left her untouched. She did not want to be part of it.

People say that Pata left in the depth of that night without any fear of the jackals, dogs, and wolves, the lurking ghosts and witches. She left the village that was swaying with the rhythm of devotional songs, cymbals, drums, and the voices of the excited crowd. She locked the house and went to watch the celebration. Nobody came to open the latched door or worry about where she had gone.

The night-long festivities, the unfettered abandon of the following morning, and the play of colours left the village drained. People retired under their low roofs, catching up on lost sleep. No one had either time or energy to worry about others—who was where, whether anyone was starving, alive, or even dead. That night, again, there was the much-awaited mock fight between groups in the village. In this tide of excitement, nobody noticed the disappearance of Pata until Jaggu Behera, her father, came back tired and hungry the next afternoon. His anger knew no bounds when he saw the locked door. He called out for Pata, loud enough for the neighbours to hear, but got no response. He rested for a while and then went around calling out for her at the top of his voice.

How could he not go wild? He had sold off the little land he had to get her married. The son-in-law was as handsome as a prince, with a house and lands. There was also a lot of pawned gold in the family. But the girl had refused to stay there for even a couple of months. God knows what went amiss. She was a pampered child, he thought. Maybe she could not adapt herself to her in-laws. Poor girl, she did not even have her mother or a sister to confide in. And he was in no position to command authority over her in-laws. In the midst of all his work, he kept worrying about Pata . . . constantly.

It had been drizzling slightly the night that Pata had left her in-laws to come back to her father. A thick sheet of ominous ink-black cloud rolled across the sky. The frogs were croaking at the edge of the pond. Jaggu was fast asleep, covered with a sheet from head to toe, when the latch of
the front door rattled. Dismissing it as the work of some evil spirit, Jaggu had fallen asleep again when the latch rattled a second time. Irritated, he got up, took the sacred stick kept near the gods for protection from evil spirits, and opened the door. He was shocked to find Pata standing there. In amazement, he asked, “How is it that you are here?” She avoided the question and walked in, closing the latch behind her.

Jaggu was worried. “Why have you come in the middle of the night? Did you have a fight with my son-in-law?” Pata stood silently, leaning against the wall, her head bowed. He asked again, almost pleadingly. “Why don’t you speak up, girl? Did the old couple ill-treat you? Are you all right?”

Pata walked into the house without replying. Whatever the problem was, Jaggu thought, he would come to know about it in time. Why should he trouble her unnecessarily in the middle of the night? God knows whether she had eaten anything or not. She had always been a moody child. Seeing her sitting on the kitchen veranda, he said, “Will you eat something? There must be some rice in the pot.”

Pata placed her head on her knees and started crying inconsolably. She had never before cried like this, not even on the day she got married and left home. Wiping his daughter’s tears with the cotton towel hanging around his neck, he understood that his daughter was unable to stay with her in-laws any longer. He sighed. Maybe she is too young to bond in marriage, he thought. She will learn by and by. But when her husband or father-in-law comes to fetch her in the morning, he will certainly demand an explanation.

But that never happened. Nobody ever came to fetch her. Whenever he asked, she would stare at him with tear-filled, helpless eyes. For some reason, he could never find the courage to go over to her in-laws and try to sort things out. They both managed to carry on somehow, with whatever he earned from long days of back-breaking labour. Pata never tried to explain herself. At times, he thought she was stubborn, but he was in no position to complain. There was always the lurking fear of losing Pata.

People in the neighbourhood started gossiping after she returned to her father. Some said she had been thrown out after a fight with her in-laws. Some said she had to be thrown out because of her loose character. Embarrassed, Jaggu wanted to ask her the truth. He even felt the impulse to take
her back and leave her with her in-laws. But her fearful, helpless stare prevented him from doing or saying anything. He would leave for work at the crack of dawn, return at dusk, and fervently pray for a solution. After all, he would not live forever to take care of her.

Two days of fatigue and hunger were making Jaggu feel faint. His daughter should have been at home, waiting with something ready to eat. But no! She was away, probably laughing, playing cards, like other young girls. He would have to slog on alone until he was dead and ready to be carried away to the graveyard. Nobody will ever come forward to look after me, he thought angrily. He went around the village calling for her again. But he returned disappointed. Dusk was approaching fast. The shadows had begun to lengthen toward the half-lit backyards. Sitting on the veranda, Jaggu dozed off against the wall. At dawn, he woke to the call of birds and found the latch still locked, as it had been the night before.

People say he never stopped dozing after that. He sat there, barely aware of his surroundings. If anyone tried to talk to him, he only stared blankly. If any girl offered him food, big tears rolled down his cheek and he said nothing. The story goes that he became deaf and dumb, unable to tolerate the strange, scandalous ways of his daughter—that he breathed his last sitting there, staring at the latch, with swarms of flies buzzing around his stone-dead face.

Three years have gone by since Pata left home. Three years also since Jaggu Behera departed from this world. Thrice, the festival of Dola has come and gone. Thrice, the tiny raw mangoes have ripened and fallen. The tides of the river have swept the banks and flowed into the sea. Mani
Bhauja has become a widow with an infant playing on her lap. Pata’s friends, too, have gone their own ways, swept away by the course of their destiny. But nobody has seen or heard of Pata. All these years, nobody has given a thought to where she went, what happened to her. The sun, however, has risen every morning, the seasons have come and gone as usual, and Pata’s disappearance has remained a mystery in everyone’s mind—unasked, untold . . . unwanted, too.

The door of the house remained locked exactly as it was when Jaggu Behera breathed his last there. The torn mats, the bed sheets, and the few things lying around remained untouched. Nobody wanted to lay their hands on the cursed, unfortunate, unclaimed objects. After all, people were afraid of ghosts and spirits. The house was at the far end of the village, and the tree outside the house had stopped flowering long ago. There was no need for anyone to go near the house. Occasionally, people going by saw visions of Pata clad in white or heard the gruff calls of her father. It became a haunted house.

But one fine morning, there was excitement everywhere. The past three years seemed like ages now. It was difficult to remember bygone events. People who knew nothing started fabricating facts. People who knew started despairing . . . helplessly. And all this because that morning, Pata was seen sweeping outside of her house. There was a two-year-old child, too, sucking his fingers, following her around. Pata had fattened a little around her waist and in her cheeks. But her eyes remained the same—tear-filled, helpless, and bleak. The news spread like wildfire.

“Pata, the daughter of Jaggu, has come back with a child. Must be her own. Why else should she have the child around? Shameless, sinful woman. She abandoned a handsome, gentle husband. Couldn’t stay on with her father either. Had to run away with someone in the middle of the night. Who would look after such a woman all his life? After all, she is no longer young and tender. Now, with nowhere else to go, she has returned to her father’s old house.”

Pata had changed. She had become indifferent, apathetic. If an elderly person asked her anything, she turned aside and stood silent, covering her head with her sari. If women tried to talk to her or joke around, she just stared—the fearful, helpless, bleak stare. Sometimes, she laughed to herself or sketched on the mud floor aimlessly.
Everybody said, “She is a fallen, loose woman. Has anybody heard of any woman proudly displaying her motherhood after abandoning her husband and in-laws? Oh Lord! This is just not done. Is she a goddess from heaven to do whatever she wants and still live respectfully? How shameless! Couldn’t she find some poison for herself?”

Pata’s Class 3 education could not rescue her from her present crisis. She had no one to call her own who would protect her, fight for her. She had no guardian, either, to help her in difficult times or fight for her. The village elders finally made a decision. “She has to leave the village if she wants to live or else she will be burnt alive, along with Jaggu Behera’s house. She is a slur on the whole village. She has smeared every woman’s face black.”

That evening, all the villagers gathered outside her door to seek an explanation. Tightly clutching the loose end of her half-torn sari, she decided to face them all . . . boldly.

“Yes! Yes! I gave birth to this child. When my husband left me and went away to Calcutta the day after my marriage, my mother-in-law and my father-in-law starved me inside a locked room. Somehow I managed to escape from there. All the while I stayed with my father, I received only abuse from everyone. My father had to suffer endlessly in his old age to keep himself and me alive. But he could neither fill our bellies nor reduce our shame.”

Pulling the sari over her head resolutely, she went on. “I had no say in anything. I had nothing to say either. I couldn’t even die to save my poor father from bone-breaking labour. The cruel earth thrust this child on me and sent me back.”

One of the older members jumped up at her statement. Aggressively, he demanded, “Say that again—what did you say? The earth gave you the child indeed. You really have a way of putting things. Speak up now! Whose is this child?”

Pata pulled the sari covering her head even tighter. With a stammer, she slumped down, trembling all over. The child, clinging to her, had long ago stopped wailing. There was only an occasional hiccup coming from him. Someone kicked her hard—Mani Bhauja’s mother-in-law, a distant aunt of Pata’s—and screamed, “Aye! Do you have a frog in your mouth? Speak up. You could not stay even for a month with your in-laws. You
ate up your father alive. And now you say the earth has given you this child? Speak the truth. Who is the father of this child? Otherwise, I myself will cut you to pieces before the day is over. Don’t you know my anger?”

The old woman put her foot on Pata’s neck. All around her, amused men and women were looking on. Pata was gasping for breath. Sparks were flying from her eyes. No! She could not tolerate this any longer. The earth wouldn’t split up to shelter her, nor would Hara Parvati come down from heaven to protect her from shame. She would have to stand up for herself. She had to take control of her life now. Suddenly, she felt a surge of strength. She shook off the leg from her neck and stood up straight—a strong mature woman, five feet tall. On her face, a strange purple hue was spreading—a frothy mixture of strength, anger, and hatred. After a searching stare at the crowd, she pulled the wailing child onto her lap.

“You want to know who the father of this child is?” There, they are all standing here. Ramu, Veera, Gopi, Naria, and a couple more. How can I tell whose child this is? That night, during the Dola festival when the mock fight was going on, these men stuffed a cloth in my mouth and carried me away to the edge of the graveyard. There, behind the bushes, they chewed me up alive . . . like plucking flesh from bones. My mouth was closed, but before losing my senses, I recognized them all by the moonlight.

“How can I tell whose child this is? Ask that Hari Bauri. He took money from all of them to leave me at Cuttack. All this time, I didn’t come back because I didn’t want to bring more shame on my father. Since returning, I’ve revealed nothing. But ask them all now. Let them swear on themselves and decide who the father of this child is.”

Suddenly, there was confusion everywhere. The elders were left looking at one another. The youngsters were trying to suppress their giggles. But no one had anything to say. Mani Bhauja’s mother-in-law had slumped down, tired and speechless, on the veranda. Ramu, Veera, Gopi, and Maguni were standing with their heads hanging down, waiting uneasily, ready to disappear as soon as possible.

Pata Dei wiped away her tears and started sweeping the veranda of her house again. A while later, she flung aside the broom, wiped the nose of the child and lifted him up, saying, “Why should you cry, dear? Don’t be afraid of these people. None of them is man enough to stand up and
admit to being your father. But your mother is always there for you. You
don’t have to worry.”

God knows what the child understood. He started laughing, pointing
at the moon emerging from behind the clouds. The gathering had started
to disperse—heads bowed, in a confused hushed silence. The tree outside
the house had started flowering again. Mani Bhuja’s mother-in-law, too,
was disappearing with her walking stick.

Pata Dei looked around anxiously and spat a huge blob of spit on her
child’s chest to ward off the evil eye. “Oh God! My prince of a son has
shrivelled under the gaze of these people. Why do I need to bother? On
my father’s piece of land, I’m the master. I’m the queen; my son is the
prince.”

For a moment the earth stopped moving under the blue expanse above.
Pata Dei was looking up and down, laughing and crying at the same time.