He lay flat on the hospital floor, undisturbed by the hum of visitors, the traffic of nurses and attendants, and the stench of disinfectant—even by the buzzing of the flies that swarmed around his face. The other inmates of the ward, denied sleep by their assorted pains, aches, and other complaints, looked at him enviously as he slumbered blissfully through the afternoon.

There was overcrowding everywhere, from the maternity ward to the mortuary. So what if he had been denied a bed and dumped on the floor? Was it such a calamity? Even that seemed a luxury to the old woman. When she had set off with her young son in the back of the old truck for the hospital in Cuttack, everyone in the village turned out to offer advice. She wouldn’t be able to get a bed for her son, she was warned, unless she knew some doctor in the hospital. She ignored them and rode off, after she had pawned her few bronze utensils.

Although they didn’t get a bed, they did manage a place on the floor large enough for him to lie down—and that without a single acquaintance. She felt as though she had successfully crossed the ocean in a flimsy dinghy, without an oar. Did her son need a bed? Had he slept in one at home? Wasn’t the smooth concrete of the hospital infinitely cleaner than the soggy mud floor of her hut? They had given him a plump cotton
mattress to sleep on, instead of his filthy cotton quilt. At home, the sun and the moon peeped through the thatch, but here he had a solid roof overhead. Wasn’t that enough? Why yearn for a bed in the temporary home of a hospital? Greed led to sin and sin to death . . .

As soon as the word entered her mind, her heart began a furious drumming against her ribs. What an inauspicious thought; she cursed herself. May she be consumed in the flames of her own foul mind; what evil there lay in a woman’s tongue!

To drive the thought away, she turned to look at the people around her in the ward. Everywhere, the sick and the maimed. Some with bandaged heads. Others with layer upon layer of dressings encrusting arms, legs, backs, bellies . . . peeling away, like insects moulting. Hollow eyes peeped out from scarecrow faces encased in bandages. How frightening! As if they were masquerading as ghosts to scare you. But no, this was no masquerade: the wounds beneath the bandages were real. In comparison, her son was unscarred. Not a scratch on him, not one scrap of bandage. Naked he had been, except for a loincloth, when he clambered up onto the babu’s roof in the village to mend his thatch, in return for a day’s wages . . . before he slipped and fell to the babu’s stone courtyard. And, still almost naked, he now lay on the hospital floor. By the grace of the goddess Jagulei, not even his skin had been broken by the fall. He had merely fainted from fright.

The village’s ayurvedic doctor had tried in vain to bring him back to his senses, and charms and spells were both ineffective. The lad had always been restless and fidgety, even as a child. And who could blame him: had not he lost an older as well as a younger brother? He must have been scared out of his wits, the rascal. Well, he would soon be up, once he got over the fright. The babu’s daughter, who went to school in Cuttack, had made a senseless remark. After a fall like that, she said, people often remained unconscious for months; they could even be paralyzed. It was she who suggested that they go to the hospital in Cuttack, where he would be cured.

The old woman was furious at first. Who had ever heard of a man remaining unconscious for months? Was he a human being or the demon Kumbhakarna, who slept for half a year? But who can argue with the powerful? Besides, once the remark, however silly, reached the woman’s
ears, she simply had to take her son to the hospital. She had a mother’s heart, after all, though she knew quite well it couldn’t be anything serious. If he had bled or broken some bones, she might have worried.

She had seen people knocked unconscious by a blow on the head—and not just seen it. She had lost her own husband to such a blow.

The family home was being partitioned, and a fence was to be erected across the courtyard. The brothers were disputing a patch of the courtyard no wider than a hand span. Words led to blows, and heavy wooden sticks were raised. She jumped in to intervene. “Stop!” she shouted to her husband. “Your elder brother has already claimed the lion’s share in everything else. Does it matter if he gets an extra hand span of the courtyard? Is it worth fighting over?”

The courtyard was crowded with menfolk, and he could not afford to be seen listening to the counsel of a mere female. “Go away, woman,” he roared, giving her a shove, making sure it was observed by everyone. “Who asked you to meddle in the affairs of men? Do not forget your place.” And turning to his brother, he said, “The fence will be raised where I draw the line, or else . . .”

The words were scarcely spoken when the stick his brother was holding descended on his skull. Like water from an overturned pot, the blood streamed, bathing him from head to foot. He collapsed like a tree felled by an axe, never regaining consciousness. The corpse was carried out through the door, and the fence rose where he had drawn the line with his own blood. She remained, reluctantly, to bring up her fatherless boy, not knowing why or for whom she had survived but growing to a ripe old age, never once allowing herself to think of death but hoarding her happiness like a miser, through all her sorrows, until she saw the face of a grandson. Well, that’s life. If one were to abandon it for the sake of another, would the world continue? The Almighty’s design may be praised.

But since her son had not even bled, how could life ebb away as he lay unconscious? She bit her tongue again. How could she have such black thoughts when her son was sleeping beside her?

Her gaze turned from the bandaged patients in the ward to her son. How meek, how gentle he looked in his sleep, not that he was any different awake. She stroked and caressed him from head to foot. His face
looked exactly as it had in his childhood. Was it because they had shaved off his hair? It had been shorn once before, when he was seven, when his father had died. His tears had been more for his flowing locks than for his father. She had made a vow to offer his hair at the goddess’s shrine when she could afford the ceremony, and so for seven years, no blade touched his head and he romped free like the infant Krishna, dangling his shoulder-length curls festooned with crow and pigeon feathers. Holding to his lips the short whip his father used to drive the bullocks as if it was the infant god’s flute, standing with one leg across the other, his body triple-bent in the tribhanga posture he had seen in the plays performed in the village. “Look!” he lisped. “I am Ma Yashoda’s darling son.” The proud parents laughed at the child’s theatrics.

How charming those thick hanging curls had looked against his chubby face—and how he had treasured them. Poverty allowed him no other indulgence, so he pampered himself with his hair. He hadn’t even a rag to cover his back, but he would arrange his hair with infinite care before he set out to work. Passersby stopped to admire his crowning glory. Starvation robbed him of flesh and blood, dimmed the glow on his face, but not a hair of his head could it touch. And then the doctors in the hospital had to shave it off! Why on earth?

They had insisted it was necessary as they would have to take a picture of his head to find out if there was any injury inside. How odd. How could there be an injury inside the head when there was not even a scratch on the outside? God alone knows what the doctors saw in the picture, but all they did afterwards was lay him down flat on the floor. Not one drop of medicine did they give him, nor a drop of milk. No attempt to bring him back to consciousness. Doctors and nurses trooped past him to attend to the other patients, giving them medicines, injections, milk, fruit, and biscuits, but no one so much as looked at him.

As if there was nothing the matter with him—as if he was lying there for the fun of it. As if he would get up and walk away when his sleep was done. Well, God grant that it be so. But how could he leave in his present state? She pestered the doctors and nurses with her questions, but the only reply she received was, “We have to wait, Auntie, until his consciousness returns. Trust us—we will give him all the care he needs. But at the right time.”
“I know,” the old woman said, “but if he were to get some medicine or some milk, perhaps it would make him stronger so that he could regain consciousness sooner.”

“Be patient, Auntie,” they replied. “How can a man swallow anything when he is unconscious? It would stick in his throat.”

She prayed to her gods, as she continued to stroke him. “Please, god, make him conscious now so he can have something to eat. He must be starved.” All he had had since morning, when he went out to mend the babu’s thatch, was some water in which they had soaked rice overnight. The rice itself was gone—her two grandchildren woke before the first crow cawed to gobble it all up. The gluttons. Her poor son had nothing. But why blame the children? That was the fate of the poor. Their pots were always empty, but never their bellies. Hunger filled them up. How strange God’s ways were.

The stroking and caressing continued. Suddenly, she felt his fingers tightening, as though he was trying to clench his fist. Was consciousness returning? She massaged his palm and fingers, trying to straighten them out, to pass on the warmth of her own body into that cold hand. Her fingers came to rest on the middle finger of his left hand. For ages now, the old silver ring had gripped his finger tightly, as steadfast as an old friend that had sworn undying loyalty. Their hopes of getting a gold ring for his dowry were doomed, for providence had already chosen a poor widow’s daughter to share his handful of rice. Where was her mother to find a gold ring? The boy’s mother understood her plight. Since she was happy with the daughter-in-law, she chose not to make a fuss over the ring. Before the wedding, she had her old pair of silver toe-rings melted down into a solid ring for her son, which he accepted without a murmur. Thus are the golden dreams of the poor turned into silver or brass, or even mud and gravel. Compromises have to be made or life would be impossible.

The flat ring of beaten silver burned on his dark skin like a ruby. No ring of gold could have shone as brightly on his grimy, sweaty, knotted finger as the silver one did. At best, it would have looked pale, like brass, or like a faded gourd flower.

When he cleaned his teeth each morning with ashes from the hearth, he scrubbed and polished the ring as well—but gently, lest the metal should wear away. But no amount of care could avert the inevitable: hard work
was scraping the flesh off his bones and, along with it, the silver from the ring on his working finger. It was wearing thin. When it was new, one could see some fine engraving on it, but not anymore. The upper surface had been scrubbed as flat and shiny as a tamarind seed. Being pure silver, it was naturally soft, like her son.

What a misfit he was in the present age. Other labourers might shirk, but he would do the work of five. But the more hardworking one was, the sooner one became worn out. Old before one’s time. Why did he have to climb onto the babu’s roof? Couldn’t he have remained on the ground and flung the bales of straw onto the thatch? There were other labourers working, too: surely one of them could have mended the thatch. But bow your neck once and the whole world will rush to strike you down. Someone as meek as her son was bound to attract trouble.

She went on caressing his face, his hands, his fingers, and the ring. The visitors were beginning to depart; it was already evening and it wouldn’t be easy to find a bus back to the village. Kala Miyan, the truck driver who lived in her village, had been leaving for Bargarh with cargo when the mishap occurred, and it was in his truck that she and her son had travelled to Cuttack. He had left them at the hospital and driven away, telling her not to worry, since he would inform a few of their fellow villagers who were now working in Cuttack, and they would come to the hospital and look after them. Medicine and food for patients were provided free at the hospital. The old woman would have no need for money, other than the bus fare back to the village for her son and herself.

She would have liked to buy a few of the sweets wrapped in shiny paper for the grandchildren, as well as a whistle for her grandson. But where was the money? She had a two-rupee note folded and tied up in a knot in the tail end of her sari, but that was all. The children would sulk if she brought them nothing. They had wanted to accompany her to Cuttack; they even ran for a distance behind the truck shouting, “We want a ride!” Her nine-year-old grandson was a regular imp, while the granddaughter, two years younger, was as quiet as a lamb. Her brother had outdistanced her as they ran behind the truck, and as she tried to catch up, she tripped and fell on her face. The blood streamed from her split lip, and her scream of pain was so drawn out that the old woman thought she wouldn’t breathe again. And that stupid daughter-in-law of
hers had stood there like a log, looking at the departing truck with wide eyes, instead of picking the child up and soothing her.

“I’ll get some sweets and toys for you,” the old woman shouted as the truck went around a bend in the road. She couldn’t see their faces any longer. Poor dears—how would they manage without her? There wasn’t a grain of rice in the house. How long could she beg and borrow? They would be waiting anxiously for her to return.

Her own stomach was churning with hunger. A few morsels were all she normally ate, but since the night before, it had been a total fast. Her son would have bought some rice for them with the wages he would have been paid when . . . well, that was all over now.

The hospital provided meals for patients but not for the relatives or friends who tended to them. As for her son, he was sleeping so soundly, there wasn’t even a rustle. That afternoon, they had served rice, dal, and curry to the patients. Even though she hadn’t tasted the food, she could tell from the aroma that the hospital had skilled cooks. She had tried to shake him awake. If he were fed, she could have something to eat as well.

She wanted to tell the attendants, “Is he going to lose his share just because he is asleep? If he can’t eat now, there’s always his mother.” But she was too shy to say anything. What if they refused? She had never begged, even during the worst times. Would she bring disgrace upon herself, now that she had come to the city? Everyone in her village would come to know about it.

But where were the people from her village that Kalu Miyan was supposed to have informed? He had been in such a hurry to leave. How would she manage without help?

She felt a slight tremor in his hand. The breathing quickened. Was consciousness returning?

The nurse doing her rounds stopped to look. She quickly ran to fetch a syringe and gave him an injection. Two men in white aprons rushed to his side and pressed down heavily on his ribs. Good god! Even a healthy person would collapse under such rough handling. Was this how they treated patients at the hospital? And was it for this that she had brought him here?

“You’ll smash his ribs,” she shouted angrily. “Do you want to cripple him? Who’ll look after his family? Can’t you be gentler?”
They left him and walked away. Had she annoyed them? But how could she have remained quiet after what they had done to her son?

He wasn’t stirring now. The nurse covered him from head to toe with a clean white sheet. The patients in adjoining beds craned their necks and peeped curiously like tortoises. All eyes were on that white sheet. But why? Couldn’t he have a clean sheet, even though he was poor? It was the government that provided it, not them—so why should they whisper and mutter? Her son wasn’t going to walk away with that sheet; he would surely return it when he left. He wasn’t the sort who took what didn’t belong to him.

That nurse seemed always to be in a great hurry, rushing madly around the ward. In her haste, she had even covered up the boy’s face with the sheet. Wouldn’t he suffocate? Even in the coldest winter, he liked to sleep with his face uncovered. “I’ll choke to death in my sleep if my face is covered,” he would say. “When I depart, it’ll be in broad daylight, and not like a thief in the night,” he had always joked. As if it was a joking matter. She quickly uncovered his face, folding the sheet back. He felt cold to her touch. The fever must be coming down. Thank God.

The nurse came back, looking anxious, as though a debtor was about to run away with her money. “Auntie,” she said to the old woman, “do you have any relatives in town? Send word to them.”

“I have no one here,” the old woman replied, not comprehending. “All strangers. What do you want me to tell them?”

“You have no relatives in Cuttack then?” the nurse repeated. “And in the village?”

“No one who can help,” the old woman said. “The daughter-in-law is a simpleton; her children are babies. This son is the only support I have.” She stroked him fondly. Poor lad, she thought, has he had one decent meal since his father died, or a day’s rest? Carrying the entire family burden on his shoulders.

“Do you have any money?” the nurse asked again.

“Of course,” the old woman replied. “Could I have come to Cuttack empty-handed? There, that’s a two-rupee note. You can have it if you need some money; the medicine and food are free here.”

“No, no, you keep it,” the nurse said hurriedly, “I don’t need it. It’s you I was thinking of.”
“Me?”

“Yes. There’s no point in taking him back to the village now.” She saw the confusion on the old woman’s face, hesitated, and then went on. “If you have neither money nor help, how will you manage here?”

“Well, if I could bring my son to Cuttack without help, I should have no trouble taking him back,” the old woman said emphatically. “Once he’s awake, we’ll go back. What do I need relatives for? Has anyone ever come to help?”

“Your son is no more, Auntie,” the nurse said in a firm voice. “There’s no use taking him back. You have no money. The funeral can be done here; the hospital staff will remove the body.”

She couldn’t understand at first and only stared. Then the great rasping sobs came. She lay down flat, covering his body with hers. Pulling the sheet away, she caressed the still, cold body with both hands from head to foot, from foot to head. She covered his pale face with her kisses, until his cheeks glowed red with their blood. Pressing her face down on his, beating her forehead against his shaven skull, she howled out a lifetime of grief, reliving the past, flooding him with tears and memories of the games he had played in the dust as a child, the games that a cruel divinity had played on him, of laughter, tears, and hunger. Her fingers tore at the earth, ripped it apart. Then she beat the earth with her head. Scooping up a handful of dust, she smeared it on her son’s face and body, howling madly, screaming, “Listen, you three hundred million gods, wherever you may be. Bring my son back to life! I don’t ask for wealth, for palaces to live in. Only for a little air. Let him breathe again.”

Her grief touched everyone in the ward. Eyes grew moist as they looked at her.

Her sobs subsided as she became exhausted. The sound of her sobbing changed. Grief turned to anger: she cursed her treacherous husband, the murderous brother-in-law . . . her son, whose treachery was greater even than his father’s. She cursed the cruel gods who held in their hands the keys to life and death. The people of her village, the other labourers who had been repairing the babu’s thatch, the babu himself, Kala Miyan the truck driver, the doctors and nurses, the hospital attendants. Those wretched patients in the ward who were witnesses to her grief.
Pain wrenched her ribs, her bowels, her flesh and skin, milked her entire being dry. The curses flowed in broken strings.

"May you find no peace in the three worlds, O father of my willful son. If you had to abandon me in my youth, why did you come in procession to my door with music and lights? Who asked you to parade your manhood, you eater of my happiness? Wasn’t it enough that you stripped the bangles from my wrists? Didn’t that satisfy you? You had to leave your seed in my womb, you cheat. And that son of yours, fourteen times worse than the father. What did you gain from cutting my throat, you fiend? Was it for this day that I nurtured you in my womb? And what did you profit from devouring my son, daughter-in-law, you wretched widow’s offspring? Is your thirst quenched now, husband-eater? And that demon, my husband’s elder brother—are you happy now? May the gods strike you with their thunderbolts . . ."

The sounds and language of her grief changed constantly, tender at one moment, harsh or obscene the next. The onlookers watched in silence. Did grief have so many faces?

Anger turned into a mother’s tenderness, into hurt pride. “Go, go where you please, wherever you can find happiness,” she said indignantly to her son. “Let your mother suffer. Let her face the world alone. How does her plight affect you? Can’t you see for yourself how strong she is? How did your conscience allow you to abandon her, with the burden of three helpless souls on her shoulders? What tricksters you proved to be, father and son. Shirkers both. You were too cowardly to face the world, so you left a feeble woman to carry your burden. Why did you build a nest? Well, go, go. If you had no time to think of me, why should I be bothered with you? Does one have any claim on another in this world? It’s all deceit, all illusion. Nothing but lies.”

She consoled herself into silence. Turning away from her son, she fixed her vacant gaze on the darkness outside, as though she had not a care in the world, or was too exhausted to care. Thus she sat for hours, immersed in her own thoughts. When she seemed to have recovered her composure a little, a nurse and two attendants approached her. “Auntie,” the nurse said, “we will have to carry the dead body away. The doctors won’t allow a dead body to lie here all night among the living patients. Your son’s funeral rites will be performed well, Auntie. Don’t be worried.”
She looked up, startled. In a pitiful voice, she said, “All I have is this two-rupee note. Will it be enough?” She burst into tears.

“There’s no need for money, Auntie,” the nurse said. “It’ll all be free.”

“Don’t delay now,” the nurse said to the attendants. “Make arrangements to remove the dead body.” Then she left.

The two attendants bent low to whisper to her, “How can it be entirely free, Auntie? Give us whatever money you have.”

Eagerly, she untied the knot in her sari and gave them the two-rupee note. There was not a trace of miserliness in her. He had never been anyone’s debtor while he lived; would she allow him to be a debtor in death? Why should strangers remove his body free of charge?

She caressed him one last time, pouring every drop of love into that last kiss. “Go, my son,” she said, bidding him farewell. “You never knew what happiness is. Perhaps you’ll have some happiness now.”

The attendants reached out to lift the corpse. Bending, they said, “Auntie, let him go now. It is getting late. Why such fondness for a mere lump of clay?”

Slowly, gently, she brushed her hand across his face and body, gripping his rigid, half-clenched fist in her quivering fingers, allowing the last tender drops of love to drain away. Then she got up and shook herself free.

The attendants lifted him off the ground; one gripped his arms, the other his feet. The old woman’s fingers were still interlaced with his, as though locked into them. She could feel the ring, so dear to her son. Suddenly, as though she had abruptly come to her senses, she clutched the ring and tugged at it with all her strength. The attendants had been eyeing the ring hungrily. “How greedy you are, old hag,” they said. “Robbing your dead son!” But she ignored them. Finally, the ring came free.

The onlookers, who had been numbed by her grief, were shocked. Sympathy turned into loathing. “How mean!” they said. “Is she a mother or a block of stone?”

The attendants carried the corpse away.

“Where are you taking my darling son, you wretches?” She howled as she followed the attendants through the door, out into street, for a short distance. “May Death take you!” The mother’s grief stunned sky and earth, tree and leaf, into silence. The darkness swallowed up her son. Only the ring glistened in her fingers.
With infinite care, she secreted the ring within seven folds of her sari’s tail end and tied it up in a knot, her eyes focused on the path along which they had taken her son.

How dark it was.