The Lotus Man

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Niranjan must know. Subhadra felt anxious. While sipping his morning tea, Niranjan asked, “What’s the matter with you, Subhadra? You haven’t seemed your usual self for the past three days.”

Subhadra didn’t respond. But Niranjan was persistent. He coaxed her a little and asked again, “Please tell me.”

“Oh, why are pesterling me? Nothing’s the matter. Nothing at all.”

Niranjan began to blabber on about his plan, as he had before: “At last, Madhuri and Nirmala agreed. I told her straight: a sick wife like you, a scoundrel of a son like Ajay—I would have committed suicide, but Subhadra saved me. I’ll give her a plot of land. I’ll build her a house. Otherwise, where would she stay? She has no one to call her own. Madhuri growled and went away, her face all twisted. Such an unattractive face—and would twisting it up make it look any more beautiful? Then, yesterday afternoon, my eldest daughter, Uma, came over from her in-laws’ house. As she was massaging my limbs, she started in. ‘Father, just give Subhadra Ma some money. That plot of land would cost fifty thousand rupees. And then you want to build a house for her on it! Father, we aren’t your own, but she’s your everything. I can’t show my face in
shame before my in-laws—please have mercy on us.’ Uma was sobbing. But did I care?” Niranjan was boasting.

“Let it be. I don’t want anything. Don’t say all this—I don’t like it,” Subhadra said.

Niranjan always spoke like this. He claimed his rights over her, but he didn’t trust Subhadra. She was not his wife. She was not his beloved. Subhadra had brought Niranjan into her life and offered him a wife’s trust and a beloved’s longing, but what everybody said was that she was Niranjan’s mistress.

The vulgarity of the word “mistress” stung Subhadra, deep within her bone marrow, every moment, like a dark spider. It wove its web. Sometimes, she came face to face with that spider. Her stomach would writhe and she would immediately go and vomit. At the beginning, though, it was different. She thought a divine love tied her and Niranjan together. The love she read about in stories. Love between souls, love with great sacrifice and profound dedication—like that of great poets, great men and warriors. Gradually, the truth revealed itself. She was no beloved, no wife. No, she was not even a friend—a friend was never tortured like she was. There was no place for suspicion in friendship. She was just a mistress—how humiliating.

Beyond this routine, their relationship could not move forward. Niranjan would come every night and leave before daybreak. Sometimes they would go to the city and have dinner together, or watch a movie, or do some shopping. Or Niranjan would be seized by some sudden suspicion and beat Subhadra until she offered an explanation. Their relationship was formed within these limitations. There were moments when they tried to break out of this rut—moments when Subhadra cried, burying her face in Niranjan’s chest, and moments when they listened to beautiful songs on the tape recorder.

Subhadra had passed her matriculation exams and had been teaching at the village school. Niranjan was a successful contractor in a nearby village. Upon hearing of Subhadra’s reputation, he had come to ask her to tutor his younger son. Eight years ago. Subhadra had gone to his house, but as the relationship developed, she left tutoring behind. Niranjan’s wife was a sickly, short-tempered woman. She was very frail. The eldest son had turned out badly. Nirmala was his second son. Fearing that his
younger son might not take any interest in his studies, Niranjan had hired Subhadra as a tutor. Subhadra’s lonely life had become more secure as both became dependent upon each other. Subhadra’s mother went mad, and, one day, her dead body was found floating in the village pond. Had she committed suicide? Who knows!

Niranjan had not come for three or four days, and Subhadra felt helpless. Sitting alone, she cried all afternoon. In the evening, God knows why, she walked down to the pond. She slumped down on its bank. One side of the pond was full of weeds and lotus flowers. The water stirred in the cool breeze. The vermilion dust and smoke of the evening had settled on the water, on the lotus leaves and petals. As the temple bells rang amid the sound of gongs and conches, a strange mood descended on her. The water crows flew and dived at the water, while a flock of birds rose from among the weeds and disappeared into the multi-hued clouds. Subhadra sat in a trance.

Three or four days ago, Niranjan had arrived at night—drunk, too drunk. He had scolded her, saying her sari was too thin. He had forced himself on her. He had insulted her crudely. That day, Subhadra had taken a good look at Niranjan’s face. She had noticed his greying moustache, his red eyes, his rough face, and the ugliness of his thick lips. It occurred to Subhadra that she must be quite a bit younger than Niranjan. He was going bald: his head had just a few remaining hairs, some grey, some still dark. His limbs and hands seemed to be made of bricks and cement. In the past, she had taken to him—why? Such shame, belonging to this man—and she belonged to this man for the rest of her life! Subhadra suddenly pushed Niranjan away. He fell out of the bed. Subhadra threw up violently in the bathroom and then went off to sleep in the kitchen. Angered, Niranjan had not come back to see her since that day. Subhadra was upset, very upset. That was why she sat on the bank of the river. One day, her mother’s corpse had floated in this water. Somewhere here, her mother’s ghost might be roaming.

Subhadra looked around. Dense kia bushes spread far into the distance. A few stars twinkled in the sky. A flicker of light could be seen from the village. She could see her village and her one-room house. She sat there quietly. The darkness thickened. Suddenly, a splashing sound came from the water. Who? Subhadra’s feet and hands were icy with fear. Who was coming?
A shadow emerged from the lotus bushes. The shadow stood very tall. Subhadra thought of running away, but she could not move. The shadow walked across the water, drawing closer. Subhadra saw that it was a man, his body twined with lotus flowers, his limbs and hands made of lotus stems. Nothing else was clear—where were his nose and his eyes? This man made of lotuses—who was he? Subhadra stayed sitting down—she could not escape. She closed her eyes. “Get up. Come with me,” the lotus man said, not in words but in silence. Subhadra felt exhausted. The fragrance of lotus filled the air. Who was he? He lifted her by the hands. As though she was under a spell, Subhadra followed him. They entered the wet kia bushes in the moonlight. They sat there. The lotus man asked her a question, and Subhadra responded.

The echo of that response came from the sky, from the pond, and from her small pathetic room in the distance. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Infinite unfulfilled desires rang like bells.

Subhadra hung like the golden dust of the lotus from that man and rubbed herself against his entire body. The lotus man pulled away the past and present that had spread within Subhadra and threw them into the river. How new everything seemed, how new everything was, she thought, and, later, she could not remember how she had taken leave of the lotus man and gone home.

Niranjan came to her the next night and begged forgiveness for his behaviour. But Subhadra didn’t remember anything. In that state, day after day, for four or five days, Subhadra went to the bank of the pond. After she had sat there for a while, the lotus man would emerge from the water, and the moment her eyes fell on him, she would close her eyes. They would talk to each other in silence, touch each other. He would lead Subhadra into the dense kia bushes.

No matter how hard she tried, she could not open her eyes. She thought of telling him and asking him so many things, but she was at a loss for words every time. Who was the lotus man? Was he a god? Or someone’s spirit or ghost? All day long, she would mull this over, unable to do any chores properly.

An hour or two seemed like ages to Subhadra. Those moments seemed like a festival of strange union. When it came time to say goodbye, Subhadra would be completely exhausted. The lotus man would put a lotus
flower in her hair. He would touch her closed eyelids, lips, neck, back—and then gradually move away. Subhadra would walk back to her house. She would take the lotus out of her hair, still feeling as though she was under a spell, and place it carefully in a water jug on the table by her bedside.

When Niranjan came in the night, Subhadra did not have the slightest idea what he said or did. She seemed to have lost her reason.

She would look at the withered lotus and kiss it, plucking off its petals one by one. One day, Niranjan asked her, “Who gave you this lotus flower?” Subhadra lied and said that her maidservant, Shanti, had brought her the lotus. Niranjan did not trust her, and finally one night he said knowingly, “You’re trying to hide something from me—you’ve fallen in love with someone else!”

Then he tied a thin, glittering gold chain around Subhadra’s neck. Her mother’s memory came to Subhadra’s mind. Subhadra’s mother had worked as domestic help in other people’s houses but had made sure that her daughter got an education. Subhadra had not seen her father since childhood. When she was offered a job, she promised her mother that she would one day buy a gold chain and ring for her, but, only three or four years later, her mother began to lose her mind. Maybe her mother had drowned herself because she was in anguish about Subhadra’s relationship with Niranjan. The dream of buying a gold chain had died with her mother. That was why she had no desire for anything.

All she desired was the lotus man—she wanted nothing else. If Niranjan found out, he was sure to cause trouble. But he had some clues, and his jealousy was evident in his behaviour. He was rough and vulgar at times, but Subhadra didn’t care at all. Since the day she had first met the lotus man, all her nights were dreamy. Butterflies flitted about where she threw away the withered lotuses. She would see the lotus man inside her house, in the prayer room. Sometimes a dot of fire dazzled between her brows.

Trust, mistrust, reality, illusion—what do these words mean? she asked herself. But she had no answer. Could her destiny turn so divine? To whom would she confide all this? But why should she tell anyone? Niranjan’s mistress, Subhadra, had, in reality, become an exceptional creature. At times, though, she would be filled with anxiety. What if she got pregnant? So far, she had not been pregnant—it was impossible. But now?
Could she rear the lotus man’s child? What would she tell the world? Niranjan would kill her if he ever found out. What would the lotus man do? He would be lonely.

She would ask the lotus man. If he didn’t answer, she would make him. She would open her eyes and see him. What game was he playing? What would happen to Subhadra—did the lotus man know? She would ask him today.

But Niranjan arrived that evening. He was supposed to have come at midnight. Subhadra couldn’t go to the pond. Niranjan had brought food for Subhadra. He caressed her repeatedly. Her stomach churned. She felt like vomiting. Irritated with Niranjan’s violent embraces and kisses, Subhadra asked him, “What’s come over you? Do you think I’m some kind of puppy?”

“I’m so happy. You would not forget me for a lotus flower.”

“What do you mean?” Subhadra asked with a start.

“I followed you the last three days. What kind of obsession, you crazy girl? Wouldn’t I have got a lotus flower for you, if you’d asked me? But you wander about at night all alone, among the kia bushes, in the pond—a snake could have bitten you, a ghost could have devoured you, my Subhadra. I’ve had the pond cleaned—now, if you like, go sit there. Ah, your obsession with lotus flowers. What’s come over you these last couple of days, acting like a stick of wood. My Subhadra, my golden girl, my treasure.” Saying this, Niranjan kissed her again.

Suddenly, that big dark spider in Subhadra’s blood laughed out loud. The insect had such a big family, and all of them leaped around in her veins. Inside her head, a sea of failure started pounding. Subhadra pushed Niranjan away and vomited in the bathroom. Niranjan turned his face away and fell asleep on the bed. Subhadra lay on the veranda floor, crying.

Niranjan left before daybreak. Subhadra washed her face and went to the pond. It was true—there wasn’t a single flower in the pond, nor was there any trace of weeds. Instead, there was just crystal clear water. A pink sun sparkled on the water. Who laughed or cried among the kia bushes? No one, no one at all. A broken clay pot lay nearby. Subhadra scooped up a little water from the pond in it. The water carried the fragrance of lotus. In her house, on her bedside table, Subhadra kept the water in a bowl.
and said, “Stay here. I may wither, but please don’t you ever wither.” The water rippled—somebody laughed or cried somewhere.

But what if Niranjan came again and saw? Subhadra was restless with anxiety. Again she spoke to the golden water, “You wouldn’t let anyone enter this room, would you? What do you say? I wouldn’t let anyone in, would I?”

What the golden fragrant lotus water said in reply no one but Subhadra could hear.