The shouting and screaming of his sister-in-law, punctuated by his brother’s more muted reproaches, filtered through the inner courtyard. Nabin closed his sleepless eyes, as if to shut out the sound. He was accustomed to these arguments by now, and to the complaints of his mother, lying on a torn mat, which nonetheless made him irritable. If only he could just run from the house and escape! His lips twisted into a sardonic smile. When had he ever run with his all but nonexistent legs? But his spirit was whole. When his father was alive, Nabin had run countless times on his shoulders, and he got mad if he wasn’t taken to fairs in nearby villages. Perhaps it was this physical impairment—his inability to stand on his own two feet—that made his father so devoted to him. His father would breathe fire if anyone dared to make fun of his son.

Once, when he was still quite young, a fair arrived in a neighbouring village. Lifting Nabin onto his shoulders, his father had walked the two miles so that they could watch the puppet show. He sat him down in a corner outside the main gate and went off to buy the tickets. Festivity hung in the air. The place was elaborately decorated, and, as Nabin looked with some bewilderment at the brilliant blue and red lights, someone dropped a ten-paisa coin into his lap. And lo and behold, within minutes, countless ten-paisa and twenty-five-paisa coins piled up in his lap and
around his missing limbs. He looked up at the people and then down at the two short stumps of flesh that were his so-called legs and started to cry.

When his father returned with the tickets and found him with the small heap of coins, he was furious. In a blind rage, his father, who hadn’t laid a finger on Nabin in his whole life, let loose a barrage of kicks and slaps. He thundered at people passing by, “You think my son is a beggar, do you? And you are all such great babus that you gave alms to my son! Did he beg money from you?” Hearing his tirade, a small crowd gathered around them. “Oh! Stop it!” someone cried, while another asked, “What’s the fuss about? You’ve made some good money off your son and now you’re angry about it?” As Nabin sniffled and sobbed, his father lifted him up onto his shoulders and stormed back home. After that day, wherever he went, he never left Nabin, even for a moment.

His father wanted him to get an education, so Nabin was enrolled in school. While his father was alive, he used to take him back and forth to school. His brother was already in Class 9, while Nabin was only halfway through his education, when their father died suddenly of a snake bite. And, like a wheelbarrow toppling over, Nabin’s life was abruptly upended. At the sight of their mother’s grief-stricken face, the two brothers fell silent, and their pranks ceased. Nabin’s mother and brother began working as day labourers in the house of the same zamindar whose farm-land his father used to till. What they earned was enough to quiet the pangs of Nabin’s stomach but failed to satisfy his soul. He felt unwanted, as though he no longer had a place in his family. His world was now limited to his room and the veranda outside, although once he went as far as the bank of the river, balancing somehow on his brother’s frail shoulders. Slowly, he learned to plant his hands on the floor for support and drag his body painfully along, and this became his normal practice.

In the meanwhile, the young bud was quietly unfurling into full bloom. At times, his aunts who lived nearby would stop in to see him and lament, “God has sculpted his face like that of a prince . . . but . . .” One would hide her face with her sari and wipe away tears, and another would ruffle his mass of curly hair. His body was like burning coals, tormenting his skin and bones. For no apparent reason, he would grumble at his mother and refuse to talk to his brother for a day or more. All the same, when his brother wasn’t around, he felt completely forlorn. Even though his brother
was not as magnanimous as his father had been, Nabin loved him deeply. Nabin was only two years younger, but his brother treated him like a child. Nabin was also good friends with the small children in his village. They would sit on his lap while he showed them card tricks, played the flute, and made funny faces, causing them to roll about with laughter.

No one from his own age group became Nabin’s friend. Who would be interested in being friends with a cripple? But Nabin never felt sad about this. He may not have legs, but he did have two arms as strong as crowbars. His mother brought him clay, and he moulded it into beautiful dolls, decorating them with vibrant strokes of colour. He also painted strips of bamboo and then wove magic with them, designing lovely winnowers, hats, and baskets. But he never bothered to learn how much money his handmade goods brought in or what it contributed toward the monthly household income. All he cared about was that he was not worthless. That was enough. When his mother and brother weren’t home, he worked away and sang songs to himself. People who heard him singing said that his voice was beautiful. He laughed at this compliment. Still, it brightened his spirits.

One day, Sebati, a girl who had studied with him when they were small, listened to his songs and looked at the dolls he had made and showered him with praise. That night, he couldn’t sleep properly. The slow smile playing on Sebati’s lips and the sparkle of her eyes floated like shadows through his fitful sleep and captivated his heart in his dreams. He understood, better than ever before, that he wasn’t a child anymore. That feeling buffeted his soul deep within and made him strangely desolate. The vast world outside wasn’t meant for him: he could be an onlooker, but he couldn’t join in. This truth dawned upon him in a fresh way. And so his days went by, with his mother, his brother, his dolls and songs, and his dreams of Sebati.

Everything changed the day his brother got married and brought his sister-in-law home. His sister-in-law quickly became a close companion. Her bashful look and soft rippling words made him oblivious to his own physical impairment. They played games together, like snakes and ladders or dice, and their discussions ranged all over the map. When they were alone in the house, they would sway back and forth listening to the song “Dei ja dahiwali.”
For some reason, though, after her second child, she became very irritable. She didn’t laugh the way she had earlier; she just looked sour the whole day long. And then, only a year later, she gave birth to a baby girl. Three small children now clung to her frame, which was as frail as a vine. Nabin’s mother no longer worked, since she was beset by assorted ailments. Nabin’s dolls, winnowers, and baskets piled up in a corner by their house. Who would go out to sell them? Every now and then, someone would wander along and buy one or two. Nabin didn’t sing anymore, nor did his soul beckon him to decorate the dolls he made. If only he could find a way to entertain those three children, it would lighten his sister-in-law’s load and allow her to finish up household chores more easily. But he couldn’t run after them or take them out for a stroll.

Eventually, the stacks of things by their house got so tall that they spilled over to the house next door, and the pitch of his sister-in-law’s voice likewise grew higher and higher. Seven starving bellies—seven downcast faces stared at the two hands capable of earning something. Nabin’s mother wept inconsolably, her body emaciated from her prolonged illness. The reality of his incapacitated state made him restless. He felt like jumping into the swollen river or killing himself by eating rat poison. Only the thought of his ailing mother held him back. Poor thing, it would be a great relief for her if she died, and then nothing would dissuade him from choosing his own path.

Daylight sliced into the semi-dark room. Nabin had no desire to move, but, as he did every morning, he dragged his body up and began his daily routine. Leaning against one of the pillars on the veranda, he sat quietly. Then, late in the morning, when his sister-in-law placed a cup of salted black tea and a fistful of puffed rice near him, he slowly fed his mother. She had stopped complaining. She simply looked on, tears streaming from her eyes, which were clouded by cataracts. Of late, when his gaze fell on his mother’s face, his heart writhed in pain. He stretched out his hands and stroked her head gently. She resumed her incessant sobs.

At that very moment, he heard his brother’s voice from outside, “Naba . . . Oh, Naba . . .” It had been ages since he had last heard his brother call out to him so cheerfully, and he was startled. Then his brother swept into the room like an unstoppable breeze and hugged him tightly. “Guess what, Naba! The government has decided to give wheelchairs free of
charge to people like you. I’ve put your name on the list prepared by the village sarpanch, humbly asking him to give you one.” He rattled all this off in one breath and then lifted Nabin up and cradled him in his arms like a baby. Their mother wiped away her tears and, with clasped hands, stood in front of the calendar of Sri Jagannath, printed by the cigarette company, to pay her obeisance, murmuring something indecipherable. His sister-in-law rushed in, setting aside her load of work. Nabin was caught in a dilemma, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. The beaming face of his brother, the joy brimming in the clouded eyes of his mother, and the wide smile spread across his sister-in-law’s face—all sent shivers down his spine. Would he really get a wheelchair? he wondered. He wanted to believe it, but in his heart he wasn’t convinced.

The following month, the Minister was scheduled to come to the Block Office, almost five miles away. There he would give wheeled chariots to those, like Nabin, whose bodies had no wheels. Nabin’s brother heard that four names had been recommended from their village. Of the four, Nabin had the most severe disability, and everyone assumed that whether the others got a wheelchair or not, he would certainly get one. Some thirty days melted away like ice turned to water, but Nabin was strangely unable to feel the time passing. His nights were spent with open eyes, while his days were filled with dreaming. The sway of the kash flowers by the riverbed, water like the sparkle of stars dripping from the ivory of Sebati’s bare waist—his eyes were lined with the kohl of dreams. The fragrance of thousands of blossoming flowers and the shining wings of swallows turned his life from a flowering plant rooted in the earth into the call of blue clouds. He felt neither thirst nor hunger. It was as though his stomach was filled with sweets that satisfied all desire for food. Days were like fleeting moments, while every moment had become an interminable age. As he was counting the countless waves of hope on the Yamuna River, the month came to an end—and, while he was waiting for this moment, the small circle of his life had expanded.

For Nabin, night had ended, although it seemed that the reddening of the eastern sky and the cawing of crows at daybreak were purposefully delaying their arrival. Even his mother was listening intently to catch the first caw. Though crimson hadn’t yet splashed the sky, the entire house was already in an uproar. All three children were begging to go with their
uncle. Nabin wanted to be able to show them what, for him, would be the wealth of all kings, his priceless Kohinoor diamond. But the children were so small—how would they cover a distance of five miles? Moreover, his brother would already be exhausted from carrying him on his back or shoulders. And the day wouldn’t end there. The Minister would come!

Perched on his brother’s shoulders after he didn’t know how many years, he left the village. By the time they reached the meeting place, the sun had touched the noon sky. There was a huge gate with two flowering banana plants on either side of it. From the gate right up to the main dais hung strings of deodar leaves and multi-coloured streamers—the blues and reds and the flags. He felt as though it was his marriage day, as though all these festivities and beautiful decorations had been made exclusively for him. Sitting on his brother’s shoulders, he felt a sense of triumph, as if he had won a great victory. His brother made his way through the boisterous crowd and, placing Nabin on the ground close to the dais, began to massage his own aching back. Poor fellow, how he had laboured over those five miles. Had it been some other day, his brother’s pain would have made Nabin blame himself, would made him feel inferior . . . But that day, he looked at his brother’s face and murmured to himself: “For this day only. Will you ever carry me on your shoulders again? From now on, won’t I be able to go wherever I wish on my own?”

There was no sign of the Minister, even after Nabin had emptied two cups of tea and munched on the chops and gulgula that his brother bought for him. Again and again, each and every pair of eyes swept down the road, newly covered with red carpet. Sweet memories were about to envelope him—and then the Minister arrived amid a huge fanfare, as people blew on conch shells and trilled their tongues. The sarpanch scattered flowers along the Minister’s path, led him up to the dais, embraced him, and placed a garland around his neck. Once the sound of clapping hands had died away, the Minister began his speech. What a kind-hearted man he was! His heart seemed to bleed for those who had a disability of some sort. Like the rest of the crowd, Nabin swayed his head and clapped, just like a wind-up toy. He smiled at the people around him, but his eyes remained glued to the stack of new wheelchairs gleaming in the sun.

His speech concluded, the Minister stood up to give away the wheelchairs. He looked like the generous Karna of the village opera. Next to him
stood the Block Chairman, who read out the first name from the list. And the smiling Minister caressed the disfigured body of the incapacitated and helped him into the chair. From that day forward, the chair belonged to him. Nabin didn’t blink an eye. It seemed that someone was hammering on his chest. His throat was parched—dry and sticky. He felt that the moment his name was called, his life would force its way out through his eyes. He licked his dry lips and swallowed. He looked at those who had already been given wheelchairs, whose eyes were brimming with gratitude. He clasped his brother’s hand tightly.

One more wheelchair . . . the last one. Now it was his turn. His brother patted him on the back and stood up to lift him onto his shoulders. He felt that he would burst into tears any moment. Perhaps everyone present could hear the loud thudding of his chest. He clutched his chest with one hand and with the other supported himself to jump onto his brother’s shoulders. But why didn’t his brother lift him up? Instead he stood immobile, like a wooden doll, eyes fixed on the dais. Nabin, too, turned to look. Their village sarpanch was making his way toward the Minister, holding Satiya Barik’s hand. True, one of Satiya’s legs was little short, but he hopped around the house and could easily do all his work. He limped and hobbled more than usual, though, while he was led up to the chair. He clasped the Minister’s hands and sniffled tearfully.

Nabin again scanned the scene. Why weren’t there any more chairs? Where was his? Where were the shining blue wings of his swallow . . . the winged chariot of his dreams? He was unaware of the staff he was holding slipping from his hands, of falling under people’s trampling feet, of the crowd scattering after the ceremony. He felt only the soft familiar touch of his brother’s hands and the unintelligible words in his choked voice. The riverbed, the swaying kash flowers, the moonlit night and the ruptured dreams of Sebati that had left him breathless. With one hand, he clutched the deep cry of despair rising from the bottom of his heart and, with the other, he groped for the strewn dreams that he had seen with open eyes. His brother’s ice-cold hands picked him up and held him close. He beat his head against his brother’s stony chest and wailed, “Give me my wheelchair, brother! Oh, give me my chair!” It seemed that from the village orchard, someone grimaced at him, echoing his words: *Give me my chair . . .*