They hadn’t seen, nor did they want to see, each other before their marriage. Only after the proposals were made and the parents had given their consent did they accept each other in heart, soul, and mind.

On the fourth night after their wedding, the night of consummation, they were alone together for the first time. After lifting her veil, Swapnesh looked intently at Amrita. He swooned over her beauty. The poet in him said, “I knew it—you are like the petals of a rose. Your smile is like the moon. You are the amrita, the nectar that your name implies. In fact, I fell in love with you the day I heard your name and will continue loving you throughout my life.”

The room was filled with the fragrance of flowers, the echoes of sweet nothings spoken. Amrita lifted her eyes to look at Swapnesh, who had turned poet in this dreamy ambience, and said, “I, too, have loved you since I first heard your name, and I have woven my dreams around you, my Swapnesh, my lord of dreams. I am very sensitive, so please don’t shatter those dreams. Don’t ever betray me.”

Usually, such honeyed talk ends with those sweet nights. The stark reality of life takes over, and dreams evaporate—life, where flowers bloom only alongside thorns. Only for the lucky few do dreams never shatter.
and thorns never sting. The two walk the path of life together, hand in hand, like companions.

Amrita and Swapnesh seemed to be among those fortunate few. After the honeymoon, they did indeed face many hurdles, yet they never allowed them to affect their life adversely. The sweet fragrance of that first night was still with them, and they felt proud that the dreams they shared continued to swathe their lives in the perfume of flowers.

Amrita felt that they were a couple unlike others. There was no streak of suspicion or any feeling of misunderstanding between them. Neither of us is superior or inferior to the other, Amrita would think. Whatever there is in us to be admired, we admire, and whatever to be ignored, we ignore. Like a seed, these thoughts germinated in her mind to become a magnificent tree, full of leaves and flowers. The nectar in those flowers sweetened their lives at every moment.

Swapnesh was a bit fickle, a little undisciplined, with a carefree disposition. He was absent-minded to such an extent that he would look for his pen, which all the while would be in his pocket. He forgot to carry his important files when going to court but remembered Amrita’s zodiac sign and birthday, as well as their wedding anniversary. On those special days, he would come home early with a bouquet of flowers as a gift, smiling like a naughty boy. Amrita, too, would smile. She also remembered his likes and dislikes, his wants and wishes. She eagerly waited for him to return every day and then talked to him softly and lovingly.

Swapnesh always had a soft spot for the poor and the helpless. Whenever any of them came for legal help, he gave it for free. Amrita admired him for this. But, at times, she was critical of his down-to-earth nature, which seemed to her almost too straightforward. He was a reputable man and was well established in society. She wished he would behave more like a person who had authority, power. But no, he was always the same—good old, open-hearted Swapnesh. Friends, relatives, colleagues, everyone seemed to like them both. Anyone who came into contact with them could tell that they were a truly happy couple. They were special—although, of course, they were not wholly without enemies. While many liked them, some envied them.

Ten years of their life together passed ever so swiftly, ever so happily. Yet, in spite of giving them all this happiness, life withheld something
from them. That something grew in Amrita like an insidious virus, to the point that it overshadowed almost everything else. Real happiness eluded her. However much she tried to get that something from life, it was denied to her, as if life was playing a game—a game of giving something one did not want and keeping back something one wanted so much. At times, she thought she had overcome that grief. But can any woman really overcome such a want? Because this one want creates the greatest of all great voids in a woman’s life.

Yes, Amrita was childless. She always wanted a little Swapnesh, but this little Swapnesh never came into her life. Medical reports made it clear that she would never become a mother. She cried her heart out that day, resting her head on Swapnesh’s chest. He wiped away her tears with his lips. “Everyone has some grief, some want. One has to live with it. One has to bear the joys and sorrows of life, Amrita. The rules of fate are very strange. She who wants a child remains barren, yet she who doesn’t has many children. Many unwanted children are born on this earth. They have neither the warm cozy laps of mothers nor the strong hands of fathers to comfort them. These orphans look for some shelter, and that’s how orphanages have come to exist. In our city, too, there is one. It’s called Ashray. Would you like to go there? If you want to do something for them, they would need you, love you, and call you Mommy,” said Swapnesh.

Amrita kept quiet. Swapnesh thought that maybe she wasn’t interested. But she went. When she looked at them, something in the faces of these poor, helpless children made her feel suffocated. She was about to go back home when a tiny girl came and stood in front of her. Holding Amrita’s hands, she said, “Whoever comes here goes back never to come again, but please do not go away. We don’t have anyone . . .” Amrita couldn’t go back; she went to the market and bought fruit, bread, and biscuits for the children. She distributed these things with her own hands. After a few days, she went again.

Amrita’s regular visits slowly but steadily pulled her closer to the children in a bond of love. She gave them not only fruit and biscuits but also her love and affection—she became a mother to them. Only then did she feel that she had overcome that want of hers. No longer was she the dried-up parched land, but a fertile one with an incessant rain of love pouring over her. She became acquainted with other social organizations
and began spending more and more time outside the boundaries of her home. She shared the happiness as well as the grief of others. Rumours began to spread that Amrita was going to join politics and run in the elections and that this was only the first round of preparation.

But Amrita knew that it was not politics but a principle that she had adopted. Swapnesh was always at her side, encouraging her. A few years passed like this for Amrita and Swapnesh, both losing themselves in the work of weaving dreams. But in spite of their busy schedule, their love and trust for each other always remained, making their home a happy one.

One fine morning, Swapnesh got up early and went out to his car, telling Amrita that he would be away for three days. “Do have your meals on time, go to bed on time, and take care of yourself,” said Amrita, with wifely concern. “Remember what happened to you after your return from Kalahandi? If it happens again, I won’t allow you to go out any more.”

Swapnesh promised to take care of himself. “You, too—promise to stay indoors all three days, read books, watch TV, and listen to Ghulam Ali’s love songs,” he said before leaving.

Amrita suddenly realized that she had not read any books or listened to any music lately. After Swapnesh left, she did decide to spend all three days indoors. She would spend the whole time on herself alone. In the afternoon, when she was watching TV, a telephone call came from Ashray. The girl who had been brought to the orphanage only a few days ago had suddenly fallen ill. Amrita felt a little irritated and said, “I’m also not feeling all that well. So please ring up the orphanage doctor. He can come and see the girl.”

But after saying this, she began to feel restless. The face of that little girl danced in front of her eyes again and again. She asked for an auto-rickshaw and went straight to Ashray. On her way home, she suddenly got a jolt when their car drove past her auto-rickshaw. She could not believe her eyes. Is it Swapnesh? she asked herself. She could be wrong about the car, but she could never make a mistake about Swapnesh. Had he not gone away? Or had he come back? Reaching home, she inquired and found out that Swapnesh had not returned. She became worried and restless. Neither book nor cassette could take her mind off Swapnesh. A host of doubts assailed her.
Swapnesh returned on the third day. The moment he arrived, as was his wont, he took her into his arms. She freed herself and looked intently at him. It was the same Swapnesh whom she had seen that day. She felt like asking but held back. Approaching herforties as she was, her eyes could have deceived her. She thought of this and kept herself under control.

Again one day, Swapnesh said, “Look, I have an important appointment today. So I’ve got to leave early.”

“The workload has increased for you as well as for me. But how long can we go on like this? We have done enough work, enough social services. Now we should live only for ourselves. I should devote all of my time to you and you to me,” replied Amrita, as she prepared some tea.

“All right, all right, as you please, but I do have to go early today,” said Swapnesh.

He finished his tea and went to the portico to start the car. “I’ll be having my lunch out; so you should have yours at the regular time,” he said, starting the car.

No more of this. I’ll keep you close to me, let the world think what it likes to, she told herself. After lunch, she got ready to go to Ashray. That day, a Gujarati couple was to come to adopt a girl child. People would come to adopt these homeless and helpless children, and this was a tremendous thing. Amrita was lost in such thoughts. Suddenly, the rickshaw stopped. Her thoughts were disrupted. The rickshaw puller fixed the chain, which had come off, and wiped the sweat off his body with a towel before starting to pull the rickshaw again.

“Stop, please, stop.” The rickshaw puller was a little taken aback and looked questioningly at her. At that moment, her eyes were fixed on a distant scene. It was like the scene of an earthquake. Was it real or a dream? No, the sun was still shining, so it could not be a dream. Her eyes were wide open. She saw Swapnesh and another woman walking together after getting out of the car. They entered a house and closed the door. Look, I have an important appointment today. So I’ve got to leave early. These words were ringing in her ears.

She wanted to run to him and ask, “Whose house is this? Who is this woman? Why have you come here?” But she could not utter any of these words. Instead, she asked the man to go faster as she was getting late. She entrusted the little girl to the Gujarati couple, crying hard all the while.
She slept that night with a fire raging in her heart. Swapnesh returned late. He wanted to sleep holding her tight, but she moved a little away, not allowing him to touch her. Whatever he asked, she answered with a yes or a no. She pretended to sleep, but sleep was miles away from her. The whole night, she tried to find out the truth, but in vain.

The next morning, after Swapnesh had gone to court, she went to that same house with a thudding heart to get her answers. She knocked at the door. The one who opened the door was not the same woman whom she had seen the day before. This was a girl, about seventeen or eighteen. She had a certain freshness about her and her face resembled the full moon in the month of Chaitra. “What do you want?” asked the girl with inquisitive eyes.

What did she want from this tender-aged girl? For a moment, it seemed as if she had come to the wrong place. But no, it was the same place, the same house where she had seen Swapnesh the day before. But this fact she kept to herself. “I have come to take a survey, but suddenly I feel thirsty. Could you please give me some water to drink?” asked Amrita.

“Oh, of course, come inside and have a seat,” the girl said and went to fetch a glass of water.

Looking at the girl once again, Amrita said, “You are really very beautiful. What’s your name?”

The girl felt a little shy at this. Tying her hair into a bun, she replied, “I’m Kumari.”

“Oh, what a beautiful name! Do you live here alone?”

“No, I have a daughter. She is asleep.”

“Oh, you are married then . . . your husband?”

The girl giggled at the word “husband” and said, “I am not married. But I have a home and a child.”

“How come?”

Suddenly her giggles stopped, and she looked sad.

“No, I can’t tell you. Sir has asked me not to tell anybody. If I do that, he’ll sell me in some place far away.”

A shock ran through Amrita at this talk of selling. Holding Kumari’s hand, she made her sit on the cot.

“You have given me water to quench my thirst. You seem to be having some problem. Why don’t you tell me? I am like a mother to you. Who is he? Who would sell you?” asked Amrita.
Kumari stared at Amrita. Clearly, she had never heard such kind and loving words. Her eyes became moist. It seemed to her as if Amrita was indeed her mother and would not sell her. Leaning a little closer, she asked, “Have you heard the name of Kalahandi?”

“Yes, I have.” The name Kalahandi bothered her a little.

“Mahul Gharana is a small village in the Kalahandi district. I belong to that village. The village was so called because at one time it was overgrown with mahul flowers. But there are no more of them. It is a dry, lifeless place now. Everywhere there is only hunger. Everybody is overcome by hunger. It is a dream to get a handful of rice. For days altogether, the hearth is without fire, so there is no question of the pots and pans getting burnt.

“Because of this hunger, many people left for Raipur. Many have died from eating wild plants that turned out to be poisonous, and many parents are forced to sell their offspring for paltry sums of money, only to survive a few more days. There is no more work, no labour, no help, and no hope for us.

“At a time like this, some gentlemen from the city came to our village. They held some meetings, took our photographs, and said that they would go and appeal to the government on our behalf. There was nothing to be cooked in our house or at anybody’s house. My mother and we two sisters had only some forest potatoes and berries to eat.

“One of the gentlemen came to our house and took our photographs inside. My mother said, ‘When will the government listen to our plight? That we do not know, but we know you, because you have come to us. If you listen to our problems, you become the government for us.’ Then she showed him my seven-year-old sister and said, ‘I would like to sell her. Are you interested in buying?’

“The man saw my sister and also me, standing by my mother. He looked at my body and said, ‘Perhaps she is your eldest daughter. If you would sell her, I would buy her for three hundred rupees.’

“How much is that?” my mother inquired. The man made her understand the value of three hundred rupees by showing her how much flour and rice she could buy with that kind of money. At that time my mother was crying, holding my hand. She wiped away her tears when she understood the value and said to me, ‘Go, go with him, Kumari, now that I have sold you to him.’

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“I said, ‘No, I don’t want to go with him.’

“Then my mother said, ‘Your best friend has also been bought by another gentleman. She is in the city now. She is getting two square meals every day. If you go too, you can also get rice to eat every day.’

“I fell into the trap. I thought that if I agreed, my mother and sister could survive for a few days. So I came with him. When I was sitting in the car, I asked whether I would get rice every day or not. Pressing my arms, the man said, ‘If you listen to me, I’ll give you rice and also mutton. Besides, I’ll give you many other things.’

“What do I have to do?’ I asked.

“Pulling me toward him, the man said, ‘I’ll take care of your hunger, and you take care of mine.’

“I said, ‘Are you joking, sir? You people come from the city. How can you still be hungry?’

“‘You are grown up—how can you not understand that, like the hunger for food, there is another hunger, the hunger for flesh?’

“The way he was sitting, the way he was talking, I began to understand that there was this other hunger for flesh. Yet I said, ‘What about your home, your wife?’

“‘Yes, I do have a wife, but she is not enough to satiate my hunger. That’s the reason I bought you. I’ll give you a place to stay in and also good food to eat.’

“Sir told me all these things. And he kept his word—I don’t have any wants. But when I conceived this girl, he did not feel happy. He said, ‘I don’t want any complications, any problems. If you deliver this child, you will lose your figure, your beauty, so let’s go to the doctor and abort this child.’

“But I didn’t agree to this. I gave birth to this girl. He got annoyed and changed his behaviour toward me. After this incident, he no longer bothered about me. Yesterday, he brought another girl here. When I complained, he said, ‘If you tell anyone, I’ll sell you again somewhere far away. So you had better keep quiet.’”

Amrita was listening. She was staring at this girl, Kumari, unblinking. She had no words to utter. Finally, with great difficulty, she said, “What is his name, Kumari?”

“I don’t know, but there is a photograph—do you want to see it? Yesterday, he forgot his purse. His photo is in there. Please come, come inside.
See my daughter and see her father also. Look, I tell you all this, thinking that you are so close to me. Please, do not tell this to anyone.” Kumari stood up. Once again she invited Amrita inside. Amrita had no strength in her legs to go inside. Before her eyes, her trust of the past twenty years was going up in flames, leaving her world in darkness. Although she got up, she was thinking and hoping against hope: Let it be someone else’s purse; let the photograph be someone else’s.

Kumari handed over the money purse to her. She recognized it immediately and closed her eyes with a feeling of excruciating pain. But behind her closed eyes, she was seeing Swapnesh. Her mind was swimming in a pool of anguish; her body was burning with the fire of humiliation. Yet she was forced to keep quiet. Slowly, she opened her eyes, looked at the sleeping child, and turned her face away. Dragging her legs, she came out of the room and said, “I’m going, but I’ll come back.”

She did come back, but as a different person. Kumari was applying oil to the baby, who was giggling.

“Suppose he sells you elsewhere?” Amrita asked.

“I won’t go. I’ll report him to the police. And I’ll appeal to the government.”

“But if no one listens to you, not even the police and government?”

“You promised to do something.”

“Yes, I’m thinking of sending you back to your village.”

“Sir has bought me. Do you think he would allow it?”

“That’s my problem. You have been sold, but that does not mean that your owner can make you his slave for life. You are free now . . . So please go away.”

Kumari did not like this development. She lifted her baby and brought it close to her chest and looked thoughtful. After a moment’s silence, she said, “Even if I go back to my village, I have to face the same fate—the hunger and going without food for days. Now I have this baby. She also would need food. Madam, please, give us a little shelter in your house. I’ll do all the household chores for you.”

Amrita felt uncomfortable. Turning her face away from Kumari, she said, “I already have too many servants in my house. So I really cannot keep you at my place. But why do you worry? I’ll look after you, and all the responsibilities of your house are going to be mine, including your

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mother and sister. Every month, I’ll send you money. You have to go back, but before that, you have to give me something.”

Setting her daughter on the cot, Kumari said, “What have I got to give you?”

“Yes, you do have something, you have a jewel. Can you give it to me?”

“Jewel?” What jewel did she have, wondered Kumari.

“I want your daughter.”

“What will you do with my daughter?”

She could not reply. There was a jumble of thoughts in her mind.

“You haven’t answered me,” said Kumari.

“I—? I’ll keep her with me, and I am not going to sell her to anyone.”

This made Kumari feel at ease. She put a black dot on her daughter’s cheek to ward off the evil eye, planted a kiss on the child’s forehead, and handed her over to Amrita, saying: “Once my mother sold me, and today I’m selling off my daughter, with a heavy heart, to you. This is all for this stomach, and this hunger.” Then she began to cry bitterly. The baby in Amrita’s lap opened her eyes at the sound of her mother crying and looked at her. She caught hold of a piece of her sari in her little hands, as if to say: “I am not an orphan. I’ll not go to an orphanage. Please take me home.” Her touch, her look thrilled Amrita. A gust of wind from somewhere blew away all the smoke of any doubts that she felt. The love of a child and its mother was something that could not be betrayed.

In a voice full of authority, she said, “I’m taking your child to give her the rights she is entitled to. Just like any mother, the mother from Kala-handi bears the child in her womb, goes through the pain of labour, and feeds the baby with nectar from her body. Like their fellow Indians, the children from Kalahandi have the same right to love, food, and clothing. They are not born to be sold.

“I cannot satisfy the hunger of all the people of Kalahandi or cry my heart out over their misfortunes, but I can tell society about your woes. I can tell the government that selling children is not some sort of Kalahandi custom. I can ask them to crawl out of their cocoons and go to see the mothers of Kalahandi, in whose hearts the fountain of love is bursting forth, as in mothers everywhere. They sell their children not for the fun of it but out of hunger, to live, to survive for a few more days. They sell their young girls to men from the city just to provide themselves and their daughters with a few morsels of food.”

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Kumari was listening to all of this with awe. She could understand some of it, and much went over her head. But one thing she understood: she would be going back to her village, and there she would get a square meal each day. She started to pack her belongings. Amrita stepped out and called to a man standing near the gate. She told him to take Kumari back to her village. She also put some cash into Kumari’s hands. The girl touched Amrita’s feet, kissed the baby, and left. But, from time to time, she looked back.