The doctor turned away from the patient he was examining. Lakshmi, the maidservant, was standing at the door of his consulting room. “Sir,” she said, “The mistress wants to talk to you when you finish your work. Some people have come to see you and are waiting in the living room.”

The doctor looked outside. There were no more patients. He said, “Ask her to come here. I’m almost done.” Dr. Patnaik was a well-known healer, specializing in psychiatric ailments. He did not treat someone as just another patient—he tried to peer into their hearts and experience their pain. His advice was reassuring for patients, and his gentle touch helped many return to light from darkness and despair. They learned to love life again.

He wondered about the visitors as he was explaining the dosage of the medicine he was giving to the patient. Perhaps they were acquaintances of his wife, Sujata.

The patient left. Two women, one older and one younger, entered the room, along with Sujata. Subala Babu followed them. Sujata and the older woman were holding the younger one by the hand as they came in. The girl looked very weak—she was not even able to walk properly. The doctor asked them to have her lie down on the examination table.
He did not recognize the two women, although he had known Subala Babu for a long time. He belonged to Sujata’s village. The doctor had no idea whether he was related to Sujata in any way, but he was aware of the fact that relations meant very little to Subala Babu. He belonged to everyone in the village—a genuine social worker. But he was not the usual dhoti-and-kurta-clad social worker with whom we’re all only too familiar. He had remained a bachelor and had no kin of his own. Yet everyone was close to him. He was constantly busy helping people out. If someone’s daughter got married, Subala Babu would be looking after the cooking as well as the reception. Someone’s son had been admitted to a college, but there was no money for the trip, nor was there anyone to accompany the boy to his college. No problem! Subala Babu was there! When someone died or a baby was born into a family, the presence of Subala Babu was mandatory. The doctor loved this altruistic, helpful person. Sometimes Subala Babu came to his house, and when they went to Sujata’s village, they saw him there as well. The doctor smiled at the visitors and greeted them.

Sujata introduced the lady. “Don’t you recognize Kuni Apa? She’s the daughter of Vinay Uncle. You met her when we went to our village the last time.” The doctor could not recall the occasion. He wasn’t able to go to Sujata’s village very often, and, when he did go, many people came to talk to him. It was difficult to remember anyone in particular.

Sujata realized that her husband wasn’t able to place Kuni Apa. To jog his memory, she added, “Kuni Apa sent her daughter with jackfruit curry for you when you were at the village last time. Padma spilled the curry on you. Don’t you remember?”

Now the doctor remembered. A thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl had come running in with a bowl of curry in her hand, and he collided with her while coming down the stairs. The bowl dropped and half the curry fell on him. The other half fell on the ground. Terribly embarrassed, the girl began to wail. She had carried the bowl of curry sent by her mother for a guest . . . and it was gone. Mother would be terribly angry when she learned that she had spilled the curry on the son-in-law. Then she flushed and ran away. After a while, Kuni Apa had arrived with another bowl of curry. She had shouted at the embarrassed girl in front of him. The doctor smiled when he recalled the incident and said, “Yes, now I remember.”
Sujata said, “And don’t you recognize Padma? This is Padma, Kuni Apa’s daughter. She is not well, and Kuni Apa has brought her to you.”

The doctor looked at the young woman but could barely recognize her. The girl bore no resemblance to the doe-eyed, fair-skinned girl of that day, with her long braid of hair. She looked like a spectre. There was no smile, no sorrow, no expression on her face. She had turned dark and become thin as a pole. But it was apparent to him that she had married in the meantime. This was not the first time that the doctor had come across such a patient. They came to him every day. It was a case of severe depression.

He asked Padma’s mother, “When did she get married?”

Kuni Apa drew the corner of her sari over her head as she said, “About two years ago.”

The doctor then asked, “Your son-in-law hasn’t accompanied you?”

As she wiped her eyes, Kuni Apa said, “That is the root of all the trouble. I have no idea what disease she is suffering from, but she starts vomiting the moment she sets eyes on him. She insists that he stinks like rotten fish. She can’t bear the stench. How could the in-laws keep her in their house after listening to this kind of nonsense? The son-in-law has left her in our house. We’ve already consulted many doctors, but nothing has worked. Finally, Subala Babu advised us to consult you. He says that you have cured many such patients. Please do something for her; otherwise, she’s not going to live much longer.”

The doctor wrote Padma’s name, age, and address on his prescription pad. Sujata left them in order to prepare lunch for her guests. In response to the doctor’s questions, Kuni Apa started narrating Padma’s story.

“Padma was given in marriage to Minaketan of the neighbouring village two years back. Minaketan taught in a school. We were happy, since he held a steady job. He was slightly past his prime—around thirty-two—but that’s not important in the case of a man. However, there was a big difference in age between the bride and the groom. There was nothing that I could do, since I’m all alone. Padma doesn’t have a father or a brother. And there were two more girls to be married off.

“So we went through with this marriage as soon as the proposal came. Padma, too, was happy. But then she contracted this disease all of a sudden. All kinds of unpleasant smells seemed to hit her nose. She vomited everything she ate. She became so weak that she couldn’t even
move around. She was carrying at the time. We initially thought that she was throwing up because she was pregnant. Some pregnant women do smell strange odours. But she gave birth to a girl six months ago and still suffers from the same ailment. Some kind of weird smell will hit her all of a sudden and her head will start reeling. She can’t eat anything. She isn’t able to sleep for nights at a time. I have had her treated by several doctors, but to no avail."

The doctor turned to Padma and joked, “Padma, don’t you have anything to throw at me this time?” Padma did not reply. A huge baula tree laden with flowers stood in the doctor’s compound, and the courtyard was littered with its flowers. Their fragrance filled the air. “Can’t you smell the fragrance, Padma?” Padma did not answer that question either. She continued to lie quietly as if no one was around. The doctor checked her blood pressure. He tried his best to start a conversation with her. But she was indifferent to everything and remained silent.

Her mother said, “She doesn’t say anything. She just keeps quiet. Sometimes she will voluntarily talk about some stench or aroma. She says nothing apart from that. There’s no point in trying to start a conversation with her.”

Suddenly, angry voices could be heard from the main house. The doctor’s attention was distracted. Minakshi, his only daughter, had perhaps started throwing tantrums yet again. She was always obstinate. She wanted all her demands to be fulfilled right away, or else she would start shouting at the top of her voice and create a scene. Her eyes would turn deep red and she would break anything she could lay her hands on. No one had been harsh with her when she was young. But she was a grown-up girl now, and Sujata often tried to put her foot down. So mother and daughter shouted at each other every now and then. The doctor wondered what had made Minakshi lose her temper today. There were guests in their home, and Sujata must be terribly embarrassed. The sound of a glass breaking could be heard. Everything was quiet after that. Maybe Sujata had dragged Minakshi after her into the bedroom. The doctor tried to ignore the incident.

He turned toward Padma again to ask more questions. He was surprised to find her having a coughing fit. She might vomit at any moment.
The doctor held out a glass of water to her. Padma had to make an effort to regain control over herself.

The doctor asked, “What happened, Padma? Why did you have the coughing fit all of a sudden?” Padma looked at the wall and seemed to be talking to herself: “Oh! Someone is burning red chilies! My nose, eyes, and chest are burning.”

Padma’s mother exclaimed, “Did you hear that, Subala Babu? This goes on all the time. Someone has perhaps cast a spell on her. We have tried to exorcise all the evil spirits within her, but in vain. Instead, she is getting worse by the day.”

The doctor was intrigued. The smell of someone burning red chilies? No one else had smelled anything of the kind. Did Padma experience Minakshi’s outburst as the smell of burnt red chilies? She’d had the coughing fit after listening to the angry voices from inside the house. Now she was back to her usual self.

The doctor looked at Subala Babu and said, “You need to tell me everything connected with her. How can I treat her otherwise?”

Padma’s mother lowered her eyes. She again drew the sari end over her head and said, “I am not trying to hide anything. Why should I feel shy? We weren’t able to make inquiries at the time of Padma’s marriage. Later, we learned that the son-in-law had been having an affair with another girl, so he hadn’t agreed to this proposal. His mother had coerced him into marrying Padma. The son-in-law wasn’t happy with Padma right from the beginning. At first, Padma wasn’t aware of anything. But she’s a woman, after all. She could instinctively grasp the situation. She realized that her husband was keeping her at a distance.

“There was a change in her from that day. Gradually, she stopped smiling and became quiet. The illness started just after that. The son-in-law was always a hot-tempered person. He scolded her for the slightest lapse. He was like that from the beginning. All the same, Padma is his wife—he has never repudiated that. Besides, it is not as if there’s anything wanting in their household. She doesn’t realize that, as a woman, one has to bear everything quietly. She could be patient and stay there and take things in her stride. But why she should be afflicted by these smells I just don’t know.”
The doctor inquired about Padma’s mother-in-law. “Did she look after Padma?”

Kuni Apa replied, “She was quite nice in the beginning. Padma did all the household work single-handedly when she was in good health. But Padma now says that her mother-in-law stinks like the insects that feed on cow dung. Wouldn’t her mother-in-law react to something like that? I can’t really blame her. She won’t come near Padma anymore. She forced her son to marry Padma. She thought that her son would change after the marriage, but he didn’t. And then Padma came down with this terrible illness. Who would want to have a daughter-in-law like that around?”

“Is there no one else at their home?”

Kuni Apa said, “Yes. The son-in-law has a sister. She’s a nice girl. Padma and she are good friends. She looked after Padma when she fell ill. She served her and cajoled her to eat. She looked after her every need.”

The doctor asked, “Doesn’t she stink?”

“No, she doesn’t. On the contrary, Padma says that she smells like the champak flower.”

The doctor understood that all these strange smells arose from within Padma. Her subconscious wanted to push everyone away, using the smells as a pretext. She had probably never understood it consciously, but something inside her had sought out this path to keep her going. When she got married, she had stepped into a new world with great expectations. She thought that she was going to paint her house in the colours of her own imagination. But that dream shattered when reality hit her. The cruelty of the man of her dreams and the scandals associated with him darkened everything for her. She had stretched out her hand desperately as she found herself sinking into that dreamless pit. But no one grasped her hand. No one pulled her out of that darkness and led her toward light. Her own people told her that she had to make peace with her bleak future. She was forced to accept it, believing that that was her destiny. That was why her protest had taken such a strange shape.

The doctor explained, “You see, this is not a disease affecting the body. It has put down deep roots inside her mind. It cannot be cured by medicine alone. She wants to live, but she cannot figure out how. She can again live as Padma of the old days only if all of you help her to. Her life is like a
river and no one can stop the flow. The stream will find another course if it
hits an obstacle. And you have another weapon with you—her daughter.”

Tears rolled down Padma’s cheeks. The doctor prescribed medicine for
a month. He would examine her again after that time. Kuni Apa took her
hand and led her into the house. Padma walked away like a wind-up doll.

Several months passed. The doctor was busy with his daily schedule
and forgot all about Padma. Many such patients came to him. He listened
to all kinds of stories from them. Padma’s story was but one of these.

One day, in the midst of a conversation, the thought of Padma suddenly
crossed Sujata’s mind. Kuni Apa hadn’t come back after a month, as she
was supposed to. How was the girl doing? She had meant to ask her
brother about Padma when he telephoned. Then she got busy with her
household work and forgot to telephone her brother. Then, even when
he telephoned her, she forgot to ask after Padma.

Sometime later, Subala Babu again paid a visit. Sujata asked him about
Padma the moment she saw him: “She should have come back after a
month, but many months have gone by. How is she?”

Subala Babu smiled. He said, “If you’re asking about her health, then
you must think she’s still a human being. But she’s a goddess now—a real
one! She’s known as Mother Gandheswari. The newspapers went wild
over her for a few days. It must have somehow escaped your notice.”

Sujata was amazed. What with his busy schedule, the doctor never
had time to read that kind of nonsense in the newspapers. But Sujata
enjoyed all kinds of weird news: a calf with three heads, gods surfacing
from the bowels of the earth—many such tales were published every
day in the newspapers. Sujata read them all with great interest, although
she didn’t believe them. How could anyone believe such things in the
modern world?

Subala Babu explained further: “Padma improved a bit after returning
from this place. The Padma of the old days seemed to be peeping out from
inside her at times. Then her husband arrived one day and took her away.
We protested that she was under treatment and needed to stay with us
longer, until she had recovered. But he’s a very obstinate person. Who
could oppose him? Instead, he claimed that we were branding his wife as
a madwoman out of malice toward him. He threw the medicines away.
What could poor Kuni do? She’s a widow, after all. She had no choice in the matter when the son-in-law himself came to take Padma away.

“Later, we heard that Padma wasn’t ill at all; rather, she had been possessed by a goddess. At first, Minaketan hadn’t been able to understand this, but some holy man caught a glimpse of Goddess Bhabani inside her. Now word has spread that she is Goddess Gandheswari. Anyone who asks her a question receives an answer. Of course, all the answers come in the form of a smell or a fragrance. Ordinary people can’t interpret the answer. Someone has a fragrance like a flower, someone like tulsi, someone like a lemon, or someone like a heap of manure. Her husband explains everything in simple language. People are thronging to their place. Reporters come to photograph her. Her husband is on leave and stays at home. They’re making good money from this enterprise. Why have a job? He has already bought himself a motorcycle.

“Kuni, for her part, has chosen to keep quiet. Everyone is scared of interfering in matters involving gods—what if she really was possessed by some goddess? Padma is like my granddaughter. She grew up in front of me. So how do I now accept that she’s a goddess? I went to see her the other day. She kept staring at me. I thought her eyes resembled the eyes of a dead person. It was a blank stare, absolutely devoid of emotion. I don’t think she could see anything. I literally ran away from the place.”

Sujata looked away. She said, “The mother should be happy if the daughter is being worshipped as a goddess. The son-in-law did not bother about the daughter earlier. Now he sits near her all the time. Kuni Apa must be very happy indeed!”

Subala Babu and the doctor said nothing.

That night, Sujata woke up from a dream with a start. She was covered with sweat. She felt that her chest would burst. What a terrible dream!

Padma was gradually sinking . . . very, very slowly. There were big and small whirlpools all around her, spreading in all directions. But the whirlpools weren’t made of water. How could there be such whirlpools in space? Padma was not moving her limbs. She sank into empty space as Sujata watched. She vanished from sight. Many people stood silently and watched that scene unfold: Kuni Apa, Minaketan, Padma’s mother-in-law, Sujata, Subala Babu, and others. But was she standing with the others in that dream?
What a strange dream! Her throat was parched. She poured herself a glass of water and drank it, wondering whether she would be able go back to sleep.