Halfway down the road, it occurred to Bunu that he had not had anything for breakfast before leaving for school, and now large flames of hunger leaped in his stomach. How could Mother do this to him? How could she send him out without food?

His eyes moistened. Had or hadn’t he asked for food? Yes, he had. What was Mother’s reply? Bunu tried to recollect. “There is nothing to eat now. Go to school. I shall have watered rice and roasted potatoes ready for you when you return.”

Watered rice with roasted potatoes!

Bunu could almost taste it. But why could the roasted potatoes and watered rice not be prepared in the morning? And exactly by what hour of the morning, according to Bunu’s calculations, should the food have been ready? He used to start for school at nine-thirty. He had gotten out of bed at seven-thirty. Bunu could tell whether it was seven or nine in the morning by watching the position of the sunlight on the wall at the back of their house, and when he returned from school, it would be one in the afternoon. His mother had taught him just that much about measuring time.

But how was it that Mother did not give him anything to eat this morning?
What did he eat last night? Bunu tried to remember but could not. He had fallen asleep by evening. There was just the faint memory of Mother waking him up and making him drink some sort of warm, thick liquid. Whatever it was, it had not been tasty, nor had it satisfied his hunger.

His stomach churned. He dismissed the idea of going to school and walked back home. His father had gone out in search of work. He could not see his younger brother and sister. His mother was sitting outside, holding the baby, the youngest, in her lap. Maybe she was breastfeeding the baby. “Mother, where are Manu and Kunu?” Bunu asked.

“Who knows? Maybe playing in the dust somewhere,” his mother replied distractedly, as she gazed at the file of ants crawling along the ground below the veranda.

“I am hungry. What is there to eat?” Bunu asked in a low voice. Mother looked at him in surprise, as if jerked out of a reverie.

“You have not gone to school! Didn’t I tell you to?” “But I haven’t eaten anything. I shall have something to eat and then go.”

“What? The studies will wait for you? Impudent boy! What can I give you? There is nothing to eat today. Go to school, or else go to hell,” Mother snapped fretfully. “These children will eat me alive!”

Bunu looked at Runu, who sucked at Mother’s breast with a contentment that was almost divine. Bunu was stricken with envy. For a moment, he was tempted to wrench Runu off Mother’s breast and dump her on the floor. Bunu wanted to usurp her place in Mother’s lap and suck the nectar to his heart’s content. But the next moment, he realized how absurd his wish was. What a shameful idea! Mother kept on reminding him that he was already ten—a big boy. How could he suck at Mother’s breast like little Runu?

How did Runu like the taste of the milk? Bunu wondered. When had Bunu himself last had milk? He had forgotten the taste, but it must be extremely delicious—Bunu was sure of that. He glanced once more at Runu from the corner of his eye and immediately looked away. After all, she was his own little sister! The greedy glance might cause her some harm!

Meanwhile, Mother had probably forgotten her anger against Bunu and kept looking at the wall, as if she were talking to someone who couldn’t
be seen. Bunu went to the backyard of the house. Manu and Kunu were playing there, sitting on the bare earth.

“Come here, brother, and eat,” the tousled-haired Manu called loudly as her eyes fell on Bunu. Bunu glanced at her—her nose running on the left side, her right cheek smeared with dust, a rubber band holding her wavy and matted copper-coloured hair behind her head. She wore an oversized frock; its neckline hung loose from one of her shoulders. It must be from someone else much older than Manu. Just like the pants Bunu himself wore. Mother must have got the frock from someone’s house, just as she had the pants, Bunu guessed.

Unconsciously, Bunu’s hand touched his pants; he hitched the single knot at his belly a little tighter and looked at the food Manu was pointing at. There were some pebbles, flowers, and tiny pieces of leaves in three or four coconut shells. An arum leaf was nearby. Manu took out a little of each from the shells and put them on the leaf.

“Brother will eat this,” she said and watched Bunu eagerly.

“Shut up, you fool,” Bunu said and rapped her lightly on the head. Then he ran away. When he reached the edge of the pond, Bunu turned to look. He saw Manu rubbing both her eyes with her dirty palms.

Why is the hunger so acutely felt when there is nothing to eat? Last night, he had gone to sleep almost without food, but he had not felt hungry. Hunger is a strange passion, Bunu thought. The more he tried to drive it out of his mind, the stronger it grew. It filled every nook and cranny of his mind; he could think of nothing else. Bunu walked along the bank of the pond and went down the steps that descended to the water. At that hour of the morning, all his friends were at school.

Bunu collected some stones and began throwing them one by one into the water. He had heard that there were many fish in that pond. There had been a feast in the village sometime back, Bunu remembered. The fisherman had caught a number of fish from the pond in his net. The entire morning was spent in the fishing operation. Bunu and all his friends thronged the bank of the pond. Several species, big and small, were caught in the net; there were big catfish, gudgeons, carps, with many small fish among them. The fisherman picked out the smaller ones and threw them back into the water. Bunu and his friends asked the fisherman to give some of the small fish to them, but he refused.
After midday, all the fish were laid down on the nearby platform. Amid quarrels and heated arguments over the division, the families finally received their respective shares. The fish were either given whole or cut into pieces so that everyone would get the same amount. Bunu’s family received a large gudgeon as their share. His father grumbled a little because he did not get a carp, but in the end, he had to compromise. He returned with the big gudgeon; Bunu and his brothers and sisters followed him home. It was late afternoon by the time Mother had cleaned and cut up the fish and cooked the fish curry. Rice had been cooked that morning. They sat down in a circle around the rice pot and the pan that contained the fish curry and ate to their heart’s content. Bunu’s mouth watered as the memory of the delicious food came back to him. Ah! What a cheerful day that was! Father had not gone out to work but had stayed home to eat rice and fish curry.

Couldn’t a large fish come within the reach of his hand? Bunu thought wistfully as he sat on the steps watching the water of the pond. He would have grabbed it quickly and given it to his mother to cook. But nothing like that happened. Bunu’s mind was filled with bitterness.

Bunu stood up abruptly, as if remembering something, and walked straight back home. “Mother, has the rice been cooked?” he asked his mother with an air of maturity, but without looking at her.

“What rice?” Mother snapped back. “How can you ask for rice at ten o’clock in the morning? Nothing is going to be cooked now. I am busy. I have so much housework to attend to, and just see what the boy is asking . . . Go away.” Mother appeared to be utterly vexed.

“What happened to the rice I brought from that paddy?” Bunu asked in a serious voice, pretending not to have heard what his mother had said. Again, he did not look at her face. Despite the serious veneer he kept up outwardly, inside Bunu was afraid that his mother might ask him to go back to school.

“Which paddy? You speak as though you have remembered something very important!” said Mother. Her tone sounded amused.

“The paddy that I picked up from the Mohanty family’s field at harvest time. That paddy is mine. Cook the rice from that paddy now, and give it to me.” This time Bunu’s voice was even more serious, as if he was demanding justice. Perhaps Mother has forgotten about school, Bunu thought, and he felt bolder.
His mother burst out laughing but stopped just as abruptly. “Why, you have become very bold, it seems!” she snarled at Bunu. “You picked up just about one kilogram from that paddy in ten days. Nearly six months have passed since. Do you expect the rice of that same paddy to be still there for you to gobble up? And what about the rice this family of five is eating two times every day? A chick of a boy! Just imagine his boldness! He is claiming his own share of rice! Get away from here or I’ll thrash you with this piece of split log! You won’t be getting rice or anything else before midday. Do you hear?”

Mother’s voice sounded somewhat weak and depressed toward the end of her outburst. There was something in her tone that made Bunu feel uneasy; he turned and ran out of the house through the back door.

“Really, how can poor Mother help it?” Bunu reasoned with himself. He knew that there was nothing to eat at home. Madhu Sahu, the grocery-shop owner, refused to give anything on credit. Bunu himself had returned empty handed from the shop more than once. Mother would then ask, “Did you ask him with real earnestness? Have or have you not assured him that we would pay within a couple of days? Didn’t he agree to give even one kilogram of rice, if not two?” Bunu could still hear the distress in Mother’s voice as she said that.

Hunger dragged his feet to the small snack-shop at the crossroad, but he knew that it was no use. The sight of tasty snacks would only increase the hunger. But he seemed to have lost control over his feet; they moved toward the shop as if pulled by some unseen force. Bunu stood in front of the shop. On the wooden counter was a big aluminum platter that contained some vadás and a few pakodas. They had been fried earlier that morning, but these few had remained unsold, Bunu guessed. It was nearing noon. Who would buy such items at lunchtime? People would return home from work to have their midday meal. These things would be left and Jagu Anna, the shopowner, would surely give them away to somebody, Bunu thought, still staring at the platter.

“Hey, why are you standing in front of the shop? Haven’t you gone to school? Go away!” Jagu Anna yelled.

Bunu did not move. He looked once at the platter and then at Jagu Anna, who was putting the teakettle on the stove. Only two men sat on the bench inside the shop. One of them held a tea glass in his hand; the other’s hand was empty. Perhaps Jagu Anna was going to prepare tea for
the other customer, Bunu thought. But would they like to eat these *vadas* and *pakodas* that had been fried in the morning and had become hard and cold? Never! Bunu was sure of it. Would he ask Jagu Anna to give him a few? Bunu could not decide; the words remained stuck in his throat.

“Leave here immediately or face the consequences! Obstinate boy! Hanging around here when you should be at school. Wait—I’m going to report this to your father.” Jagu Anna put down the kettle with a bang and stood up. He had wound a red napkin about his waist. His belly was black and bulged out awkwardly as a result of the malnutrition he had suffered in his childhood; it seemed to have grown bigger in his excess of anger.

“How he drove me away!” Bunu reflected gloomily as he ran from the place. “Go to school, go to school; everyone says the same thing. Does anyone want to know if he has had anything to eat? No one says, ‘You don’t have good clothes, you don’t have a pair of slippers, the book satchel is ancient, dirty, and tattered. How can you go to school?’ Does anyone have any sympathy for me?” Bunu thought bitterly.

Hadn’t Bunu gone to school before? He had passed Class 2 and was in Class 3. Last year at school, they gave *khichdi* to the students at noon. He would eat his fill and return home in a joyous mood. The year before last, they had been given large, puffy buns during lunch hour. How delicious they tasted! Soft, like cheese. But nobody knows what happened—the practice of giving lunch to the school’s students was discontinued six months ago.

Bunu turned off the straight road and stepped down to the narrow footpath leading to the farmland. There was a thick bush at the edge of the field. A slight movement caught Bunu’s attention. He stopped. What was it? Bunu came a little closer and looked. Why, it was a hen! A lone hen of a reddish-brown colour! It was moving about and pecking at grains. How had the hen come here to this lonely spot? Bunu wondered. Where were the others? Bunu looked around but saw no one. He was curious and ran a little closer to see its reaction. At first the bird continued indifferently to peck food from the earth, but it hopped away as Bunu came closer. Again, Bunu tried to reach it, and the hen ran about in different directions to dodge him. Bunu’s curiosity grew; he tried to play cat and mouse with the bird, following it more cautiously. The hen, too, became cautious and watched the boy from the corner of its eye.
Bunu advanced toward the hen step by step, hiding himself behind the thick bushes. The hen had stopped moving; it was perhaps a little tired after all its exertions. It moved its head around, probably to see if Bunu was somewhere close by. When it did not see him, the hen seemed relieved and went back to pecking at the earth. Bunu waited patiently for some time. His heart was thumping and he was sweating profusely. He waited until the hen had got over its fear completely and was pecking at the grain, its back to the bush. Without making the slightest noise, Bunu lunged at the hen with all the force he could gather and fell over the bird, crushing it with the entire weight of his body. The hen was not at all prepared for such an attack and surrendered without offering any resistance. Perhaps such an experience was not new to the hen; the master’s young children had often played games like this with it. Bunu lay on top of the hen for quite some time. When he became convinced that the bird had become calm and steady under him, he rose triumphantly, clutching the creature to his belly with both hands.

“Come, I shall take you back to your home,” Bunu said patronizingly. “You belong to the Dasa family, don’t you? What are you doing here alone in this jungle? Aren’t you afraid of the jackals and the wild cats?” Bunu asked the bird. The hen remained motionless against Bunu’s belly; perhaps it was trying to draw warmth from him. It did not make the slightest noise.

Bunu walked off, still clutching the hen to his body. After he had walked a little distance, Bunu stopped abruptly and looked at the hen. It was a plump bird. There was a small orange-coloured crest on its head. Bunu wondered how many eggs were inside the hen’s belly. How tasty is egg fry! Bunu had eaten egg fry long, long ago, when he was very young. The children of the Dasa family must eat egg fry regularly, he thought enviously. The Dasa family had a number of such fowls: a couple of cocks and many hens. They roamed about the threshing yard, pecking away. Periodically, chicks would appear. Bunu had seen all of this looking over the fence that enclosed the threshing yard. He wished to catch hold of a chicken or two and take them home for him and Manu to play with. He would rear the chicks; they would grow to become hens and lay eggs!

But what happened to the chicks of the Dasa family that grew up to become hens or cocks? Could it be that the Dasa family killed them and
ate their flesh? Yes, Bunu decided, they must be doing that! What would chicken curry taste like? His teacher used to say that one has to eat meat and eggs to gain strength in one’s body. That must be why the Dasa children looked so healthy and strong and had such self-confidence—it was because they ate rice and chicken curry, Bunu concluded.

Rice and chicken curry!

The hunger came back to haunt Bunu’s stomach. What would it be like to eat the flesh of this red hen? Bunu wondered. But, for that, the bird would first have to be killed, then skinned and cut into pieces. It could be cooked only after that. As he thought all this over, Bunu turned and walked back to the bush where he had first discovered the hen. He sat down near the bush, holding the hen in his lap. Bunu’s body almost hid the hen; only its head was sticking out. Bunu stroked the bird’s neck and tried to feel it. The hen’s neck was slender but strong. Bunu tightened his hand around it, slowly at first and then with more force. The hen was startled and tried to turn its head away. But Bunu clutched it more tightly, squeezing its throat. Nothing happened. The frightened hen only stretched its neck a little and wriggled and writhed, attempting to release itself from Bunu’s tight grip.

Then, with both hands, Bunu grabbed the hen’s elongated neck and twisted it, applying all the force he could muster. The hen trembled hard in Bunu’s lap and scratched at his thigh. But Bunu kept on squeezing, harder and harder. The hen stopped scratching. Bunu released its neck, and the hen’s head dropped to one side. Bunu threw it down on the ground and stood up. As soon as it fell, the bird began to flap its wings hard and scratch at the air and the earth in mortal pain. Bunu looked around, picked up a large stone, and began hammering at the hen’s head and neck. After a few blows, the hen became still. Blood began to drip onto the ground from its battered head and neck, and a layer of yellow slowly spread across its half-open eyes. Bunu picked it up and cast a furtive glance around him. He hugged the bird tightly to his belly and, hiding it under the school uniform he was wearing, ran back home at great speed.

Bunu’s mother was lighting a fire in the hearth; perhaps she sensed something as she swivelled around. Her eyes opened wide in astonishment and fear. The front of Bunu’s school uniform was soaked in blood. Without wasting time, Bunu squatted down and took the dead hen out
from under his shirt, placing it on the kitchen’s earthen floor. He did not glance even once at his mother’s face as he did so.

“Hey, what is all this? Whose hen is this? Where did you get it?” his mother asked, completely taken by surprise.

Bunu didn’t answer all the questions his mother asked. “I got it on the footpath between the paddy fields,” he said shortly.

“Tell me whose hen this is.” Mother’s tone was sharp.

Bunu shook his head to say he did not know. But he could not bring himself to look at his mother, because this time, too, he was lying.

“We shall have chicken curry.” Bunu’s voice was a little above a whisper; he raised his face and looked imploringly at Mother.

The hard lines on the face of Bunu’s mother slowly disappeared, and her eyes sparkled in excitement, but she did not express it in words. “Your uniform is a mess. Quickly—take it off and hide it under that empty gruel pot. Wash yourself, then go and play outside. Ask Manu to come to me.”

There was an unusual kind of enthusiasm in Mother’s voice. She took a five-rupee note out of the knot tied in the corner of her sari end and gave it to Manu, asking her to get one kilogram of rice from the shop. She said to tell the shopkeeper that they would pay the rest of the money when Father returned from work. Mother asked Bunu to fetch water from the well; she washed his blood-soaked school clothes inside the house. Then she cut the hen into pieces, hiding its feathers, bones, and all the other waste under the inverted gruel pot, and busied herself cooking rice and chicken curry.

Bunu’s father returned home after noon, and Mother briefly explained everything to him.

Father slapped Bunu hard on his back. “You are a mischievous boy,” he said. But Bunu didn’t feel the pain. He had expected worse punishment than this from Father for the crime he had committed.

Everyone greedily ate the rice and chicken curry, Bunu noticed. Saliva all but dripped from his sister Manu’s mouth as she devoured the curry. But Bunu could not enjoy the food with the others. Time and again the memory of the red hen sitting quiet and still in his lap, and the yellow parchment that had covered its eyes when it died, returned to him. But the hidden pride of being able to get such a delicious meal for his own family soon drove Bunu’s uneasiness away.
When night came, Bunu’s parents went to the back of the house; his father carried a hoe and his mother carried the gruel pot that contained the hen’s feathers and so on. They dug the earth quietly and buried the remains of the hen. Bunu’s mother washed and cleaned the kitchen. Then they slept peacefully.

In the morning, Bunu heard a noise as he was examining his school clothes to see if they had dried properly. He turned and saw the Dasa family’s second son standing in the front yard. There was a policeman with him. Bunu’s father was sitting outside; perhaps he did not have to go to work that day.

“There he is, the thief! Look at him sir, how he sits like a gentleman!” said Dasa’s son, pointing at Bunu’s father. The policeman looked grimly at Bunu’s father for a moment; then he tramped into the house, heading straight toward the kitchen, Dasa’s son close at his heels. Bunu’s mother quickly got up, drew the veil of her sari over her head, and came out of the kitchen. Bunu’s father had also followed them inside the house.

“Try to smell it, sir—these people have killed our hen and eaten its flesh. Look sir, look carefully.” The young man went on speaking. Bunu’s mother stood plastered to the wall, as if she would push herself inside it. His father stood in silence. The policeman sniffed as if trying to trace the smell, then turned and walked out to the kitchen. With his stick, he toppled and shifted some of the small pots and other items kept there, and then strode out to the backyard. Dasa’s son and Bunu’s father followed him.

Bunu’s heart was beating hard; he well knew the nature of this second Dasa son. He was the worst tempered and most dangerous one in their family. Bunu remembered an incident a couple of years ago. He had plucked two cucumbers from their orchard, and, while he was running away, Bunu had come face to face with this particular young man. Bunu could still feel the burning pain on his cheeks of the two hard slaps he had received from him.

When Bunu’s parents had buried the hen’s remains in the darkness of the night, they must have let some clue go unnoticed. The keen eyes of Dasa’s son immediately found it. He began to dig the earth. He picked out the hen’s feathers from inside the hole and stood up triumphantly, as if he had seized a fortress. Standing aside a little, Bunu watched his
father. The policeman was asking him something and he was shaking his head in denial.

“He is a habitual thief, sir,” the young man said emphatically. “He steals everything, big or small, that he can lay his hand on. Last year, some of my mother’s jewellery was stolen—it was never recovered, nor was the thief caught. I am sure this fellow committed the theft and sold the jewellery. You yourself now have proof that these people are professional thieves; they can’t even let a hen alone.” The pitch of his voice rose as he spoke.

“What was that again? I have stolen your jewellery? How dare you bring these baseless accusations against me!” Enraged, Bunu’s father rushed at the son of the Dasa family.

“Who else if not you? It is by sheer chance there’s proof of your crime this time. Otherwise you would have gone scot-free like you did in the earlier instances,” declared the policeman, as though pronouncing a verdict.

“I have not stolen anything, sir. Please do not listen to him,” Bunu’s father implored.

“Shut up, you liar—you have sold the jewellery you stole. With the money, you had earrings made for your wife and got new clothes. I know everything,” Dasa’s son said loudly.

“Now you will reap the consequences in the prison cell.” The policeman jeered at Bunu’s father as he hit at his knees with his stick.

“You have joined hands with them, haven’t you!” said Bunu’s father accusingly. “And why not? You have been handsomely paid—you will readily accept their lies as the truth.”

“Really! How dare you talk so big! You notorious thief! Come along, let’s listen to what you have to say.” The policeman struck hard at Bunu’s father’s knees and propelled him out of his home with the help of the stick, much like one would move cattle.

“He is innocent. My son killed the hen unwittingly. Please let him go—we shall buy a hen and give it to them.” Bunu’s mother came running after them. All of them stopped for a moment.

“Look, sir, the thieves now admit their crime!” the son of Dasa declared proudly. “Return the jewellery you have stolen from our house. These people do not let us live in peace. See how the wife puts the blame on the son to save her husband! You people do not have one iota of shame.”
He spat on the ground in utter disgust. The face of Bunu’s father looked discoloured and ugly. The policeman gave him a hard blow on the back with his stick, turned to look at Bunu’s mother for a brief moment, and then prodded him out of the village.

Bunu stood rooted to the ground, watching the departing trio. He stood there until his father, the policeman, and Dasa’s son disappeared from sight. Then he trudged back to the backyard. The hen’s head and legs, and a few feathers that the policeman had dug out, lay scattered there. Won’t someone bury me in that hole? Bunu thought in utter despair. The chill of an indefinable woe ran through his bones, making him shiver even in the heat of the late morning.

Every morning before getting out of bed, Bunu hoped secretly to see his father sitting on the veranda, slurping tea from an aluminum glass. But the picture of contentment that his hopes painted in his mind never materialized. His mother sat for long hours on the veranda, her sad eyes staring blankly at the street. She did not seem to mind if baby Runu put earth into her mouth; she did not admonish her, nor did she try to scoop it out of her mouth. Bunu did not ask his mother for food even if he was hungry. He could manage with just gruel twice a day. A hunger of a different kind, much more overpowering than the one that his stomach experienced, constantly tormented him. It was the hunger to see his father, to see the return of happiness to his mother’s vacant eyes.

“Mother, when will Father return? Shall we go bring him back?” Bunu asked his mother some days later.

“Who knows?” The reply, lifeless and flat, was heaved out of Mother along with a deep sigh. She did not look at Bunu.

“Let us go to the police station. I shall urge the police to release Father. I shall tell them that I stole the hen and they should put me behind bars instead of my father.” Bunu’s tone sounded serious.

“It would be no use. Pradhan Bhai said they have arrested your father for stealing the jewellery from the Dasa house. He was saying that the police have beaten him . . .” Mother’s voice choked. She could not speak anymore.

“Mother, I’ll go. I’ll tell them the truth,” Bunu said with determination.

“Never!” Mother snapped. “Don’t you dare do anything of the kind. Haven’t you already done enough? You want to go to prison and add to
it? Let that thought go out of your mind." Bunu could sense the impotent rage that smouldered inside her. His eyes filled with tears. He slumped on the floor and sobbed loudly for a long time, hiding his face between his knees. Neither Manu nor Sanu were with him as he cried to his heart’s content.

That morning, Bunu was busy fetching water from the well. As he brought the last bucket of water, Bunu noticed that his maternal uncle had arrived. He was talking to his mother, sitting on the outside veranda.

“There comes Bunu. He has become quite sensible, it seems.” His uncle said as he fondly stroked Bunu’s head. Mother did not say anything. Something inside Bunu had kept on telling him that Mother was angry with him, ever since the day the police had arrested his father—even though she did not express it openly.

“Bunu, you’ll come with me,” his uncle said. “You have stopped going to school. You cannot carry on with your studies in this place. You can go to school and study when you live with your aunt and me.” His uncle continued to caress Bunu’s hair.

The bewildered Bunu looked at his mother as if to find an answer to this mystery in her face. Father was not there—how could Bunu leave for his uncle’s house at this hour of crisis? Mother used to tell him often that he had become a big boy. How could Bunu go away when he had the responsibility of taking care of his younger brother and sisters in the absence of his father? But his mother did not look at Bunu’s questioning eyes. It was as though she had taken a vow not to do that.

“There is not enough food for all of you. This boy does not even have a good shirt and pair of trousers. What would he gain living here like an urchin?” Uncle appeared to be speaking to himself.

That, in fact, was true, Bunu agreed inside his heart. There was nothing much to eat at home. Earlier, they had barely been able to get by on Father’s wages, and things had become worse in his absence. Bunu himself, his mother, and his brother and sisters were beginning to look pale and wan, as if all their vitality had deserted them. Their hair looked dry and lustreless for want of oil. Probably Mother was sending him away because Bunu would get good food and clothes at his uncle’s home; he would start going to school again there, Bunu concluded. Could Mother be so concerned about a wretch of a son like him? Bunu’s eyes filled with tears.
“Let Father return. I’ll go after that,” Bunu said, as if he had made up his mind.

“No excuses! Get ready quickly,” Mother said in a waspish tone.

“Yes, yes, get ready now. Your aunt has been left alone at home with our one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. The baby does not allow her even a moment’s respite. Your aunt repeatedly asked me to hurry back.” Bunu’s uncle rose to his feet.

Was Mother driving him away? Was this the way she wanted to punish Bunu because he had been responsible for sending Father to jail? Bunu wanted to cry out at the top of his voice, but he could not. Instead, he walked inside with weary steps, took out the threadbare sling bag he used to carry to school, squeezed a torn shirt and pair of trousers into it, and came outside. A sob stuck in his throat and choked him. He did not meet anyone or say goodbye to anybody, not even to Manu or Sanu. He did not give a goodbye kiss to little Runu, cradled in Mother’s arms. He just walked behind his uncle out of the house without raising his eyes from the ground. He looked at his mother out of the corner of his eye as he crossed her path and had a glimpse of her feet and the lower border of her soiled sari just above them.

Bunu turned and looked back at his home when he reached the temple at the outer bounds of the village. His mother was standing at the front door with Runu in her arms, but he could not see her clearly. Runu seemed to be leaning out a little. They looked like an indistinct picture from a distance.

Bunu’s appetite, which had disappeared somewhere, seemed to return after he went to his uncle’s house. Here, he got food three times a day and in greater quantity. He had heard from his mother earlier that they ate well at his uncle’s. Bunu’s uncle, though, had not gotten Bunu admitted to school. Six months have already gone by, his uncle explained. It wouldn’t be easy for Bunu to cope with his studies in the limited time that remained. It would be better for him to get readmitted into Class 3 next year and start afresh. Until then, he could study at home.

It would have been a welcome idea were Bunu at home. Back there, Bunu had always wanted to skip school. But here it was different. He desperately wanted to escape somewhere for at least a little while. He did not mind going to school, as long as it offered him a little respite from the
loneliness he experienced here. Of course, he did not have much leisure. He had to do most of the housework, such as drawing water from the well, scrubbing and cleaning the utensils, washing clothes, and sweeping and mopping the floor. His uncle kept reminding him that since Aunt was expecting a baby, she couldn’t do those heavy chores. But his aunt cleaned and washed the kitchen herself and did not allow Bunu inside it. Bunu had to carry Uncle’s little daughter until his aunt was finished her work.

After a few days, Bunu lost interest in eating. He became obsessed with a longing to see his parents and his brother and sisters. Almost every day, Bunu asked his uncle if his father had returned home. He repeatedly told his uncle that he wanted to go back to his village. His uncle would give the same reply every time: Bunu’s father had not yet been released from jail, but he would take Bunu back to his village when winter was over.

In the meantime, his aunt gave birth to a son—a pink, chubby baby boy. The pressure on Bunu increased. Every day, he had to wash large piles of baby clothes and soiled diapers. Bunu had no objection to that, but his aunt had recently developed an irritable temper. Even after asking three or four times, Bunu had to wait hours before his aunt gave him food. She scolded Bunu all the time, at the slightest pretext. “The monster! Just gobbling up food and doing nothing! Both the mother and son have the habit of forcing themselves on others . . .”—she would go on and on. Sometimes, when Uncle heard his wife’s tantrums, he would try to placate Bunu, saying that her irritability was the after-effect of childbirth and he should not take it seriously. But Bunu had lost interest in everything. He missed his home, the backyard where he played, the narrow footpath between the paddy fields, and his village, which was not at all like the small town where his uncle lived.

One day, Pradhan Uncle came from his village to Bunu’s uncle’s house. They talked in low voices. Bunu’s uncle called his wife and whispered something in her ear; aloud, he asked her to fetch two glasses of sorbet. Then he dressed hurriedly and went out with Pradhan Uncle. His aunt kept going in and out of the house; she spat on her two children time and again, muttering to herself: “Oh my God! The foolish woman! What a hideous thing she has done . . . !”

Bunu’s uncle did not return that night. Aunt asked Bunu to sleep on the outer veranda and keep watch, but he could not sleep much. An
uneasiness he was not able to define haunted his mind for most of the
night. Uncle returned before sunrise; his hair was dishevelled, and his face
looked tired and grim. He walked straight to the well in the courtyard,
drew out a few bucketfuls of water, and poured it over himself. Perhaps
the sound awakened Bunu’s aunt; she came out of the room and went to
the well. She, too, took water in her joined palms and splashed it on her
body. “Come, draw a bucketful of water from the well and bathe your-
self,” she said, looking at Bunu.

People began to gather at his uncle’s house. Some called Bunu to them
and caressed his head. Bunu’s young mind tried to analyze what lay
behind the mysterious suddenness of things. Finally, Bunu learned that
his mother, along with her three children—Manu, Sanu, and Runu—had
jumped into the well in the backyard of their house in the dead of night.
Their bodies had been hauled out the next morning in the presence of
the police. Bunu’s father was brought from jail. After completing the
necessary formalities, the police handed over the bodies to Father and
Uncle. It was nearly midnight by the time the bodies were cremated.
Bunu’s uncle had returned home early in the morning, after all this
was over.

Bunu’s aunt and the women of the neighbourhood had begun the ritual
of lamentation. Who could Bunu ask about what had happened? What
could he say to them? Bunu’s uncle wiped his eyes with his napkin from
time to time. People around him talked and talked, but Bunu heard noth-
ing. His senses, though they had sharpened in that few months’ stay at
his uncle’s, were not able to take anything in.

His uncle told Bunu that he would take him to his village after three
days. Would there be no one at home when Bunu reached there? Bunu’s
mind refused to believe it. There would be no Sanu at home—Sanu, who
used to always get thorough beatings from Mother; nor Manu, his sister
who used to dish out sand, flower petals, and pebbles on broken pieces of
earthen pots and invite Bunu to eat; nor little Runu, who always leaned
out of Mother’s arms at the sight of Bunu! None of them would be there!
Or Mother either! Something exploded inside Bunu’s head. Mother would
not be at home! Not today, not tomorrow, not the day on which he would
reach home! Never again! How could this be possible? Bunu could not
imagine his home without his mother.
The memory of a day in last year’s rainy season came back to Bunu. It had been raining hard. His father could not manage to come back from his place of work. The roof of their house had not been thatched for the past two years; rainwater dripped inside their home from the innumerable holes in the roof and ran in rivulets along the walls and the floor. All three of them had sat bundled up in one corner of the house. Mother had spread a tattered blanket over them and sat close by, putting one of her arms around them. Runu, only two months old at the time, trembled with fever in Mother’s lap. That entire night, Mother was either mopping the floor, standing up with the baby cradled in her arms, or sitting down by her three children, holding the blanket firmly over them.

It was the fifth day after the death of his mother and his brother and sisters when Bunu and his uncle went to their village. The funeral rites were to be performed that day, Bunu’s uncle had told him, as hastily as possible. It was Bunu who had to perform the rites, since the police would not let his father out of jail even for just that one day. He did not have to do much, his uncle said, trying to console him. The priest would do everything, and Bunu would only have to sit. The rites would be over within an hour or so if they got there a little early. They could start back as soon as possible and reach home before sunset. Bunu’s uncle kept explaining all the way there.

His home had never looked so unclean and grimy to Bunu; it had never felt so different or so lonely. As soon as they got there, Bunu’s uncle urged the priest to begin the funeral rites. The neighbours started to gather at their house when they saw Bunu and his uncle.

And then they began to talk.

“There wasn’t much water in that well—the depth would have been just a few feet, and below the water another few feet of mud and slime. How could she have drowned in that? Yes, of course, there was enough water to drown the children.”

“Do you think she could have drowned herself to death? She must have squatted in the mud and somehow kept her head immersed in the water until the last breath of life left her body.”

“What an instance of cruelty! She could have killed herself if she could not help it, but she should have spared the children. How could be a mother be so ruthless as to kill her own children?”
Bunu heard the sound of someone letting out a deep sigh.

He did not glance at anyone as he entered their one-room house. He could suddenly remember the tender touch of his mother’s hand. He remembered the familiar, fond smell of his mother’s clothes when she woke Bunu up late in the night and fed him. He looked at the walls and felt as if his mother had drawn the pictures of their distress all over them, and those pictures told Bunu the tale of their woe. They told him how they went without food day after day; how Manu and Sanu could not bear the tyranny of hunger and cried incessantly; how Runu suffered from fever and Mother could not afford to get her medicine; how, in the end, hunger forced them to eat earth and leaves and roots of trees and whatever they could lay their hands on. No shopkeeper, not a single neighbour cared to lend them a few handfuls of rice! Shame forced them to confine themselves to the house. They were ostracized because the police had arrested his father, because his father was in jail, because his father was a thief!

Suddenly, a realization like something sharp and pointed stung Bunu’s heart. His father was arrested because Bunu had stolen and killed the hen! Yes, all these things had happened on account of him, Bunu brooded. He was behind this disaster.

With slow, heavy steps, Bunu walked to the well in the backyard. He looked inside. It looked muddy. There was almost no water. The slime and mud hauled out from the well lay here and there. Bunu wondered if the ghosts of his mother, Manu, Sanu, and Runu were there inside the well. No, no—they would not have turned into anything evil like ghosts! They would instead have become spirits, Bunu argued with himself. Could they see him?

“Please, Mother, forgive me. Forgive me, my dear Manu, Sanu, and Runu.” Bunu spoke inside his heart. “I am responsible for everything.” He waited there for some time, hoping that a spirit might hear him and answer.

“Hey Bunu, where are you? We must finish the work soon and go back. I have developed a cramp in my waist from holding this baby all this time. Bunu, are you coming?” Bunu heard the disgusted, shrill voice of his aunt coming from inside the house.

There was total silence inside the well. The spirits did not reply.
“Coming, Aunt.” Bunu looked into the well once more and turned back. Suddenly, he felt his shoulders sagging. Perhaps they drooped under the weight of the sins that had been laid down on them in countless stacks, one above the other, and seemed to touch the sky. The ten-and-a-half-year-old Bunu walked toward the house, dragging one heavy foot after the other.