NEEL MUKHERJEE

The Lives of Others

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE BOOK

‘Ma, I feel exhausted with consuming, with taking and grabbing and using. I am so bloated that I feel I cannot breathe any more. I am leaving to find some air, some place where I shall be able to purge myself, push back against the life given me and make my own. I feel I live in a borrowed house. It’s time to find my own… Forgive me…’

Calcutta, 1967. Unnoticed by his family, Supratik has become dangerously involved in extremist political activism. Compelled by an idealistic desire to change his life and the world around him, all he leaves behind before disappearing is this note …

The ageing patriarch and matriarch of his family, the Ghoshes, preside over their large household, unaware that beneath the barely ruffled surface of their lives the sands are shifting. More than poisonous rivalries among sisters-in-law, destructive secrets, and the implosion of the family business, this is a family unravelling as the society around it fractures. For this is a moment of turbulence, of inevitable and unstoppable change: the chasm between the generations, and between those who have and those who have not, has never been wider.

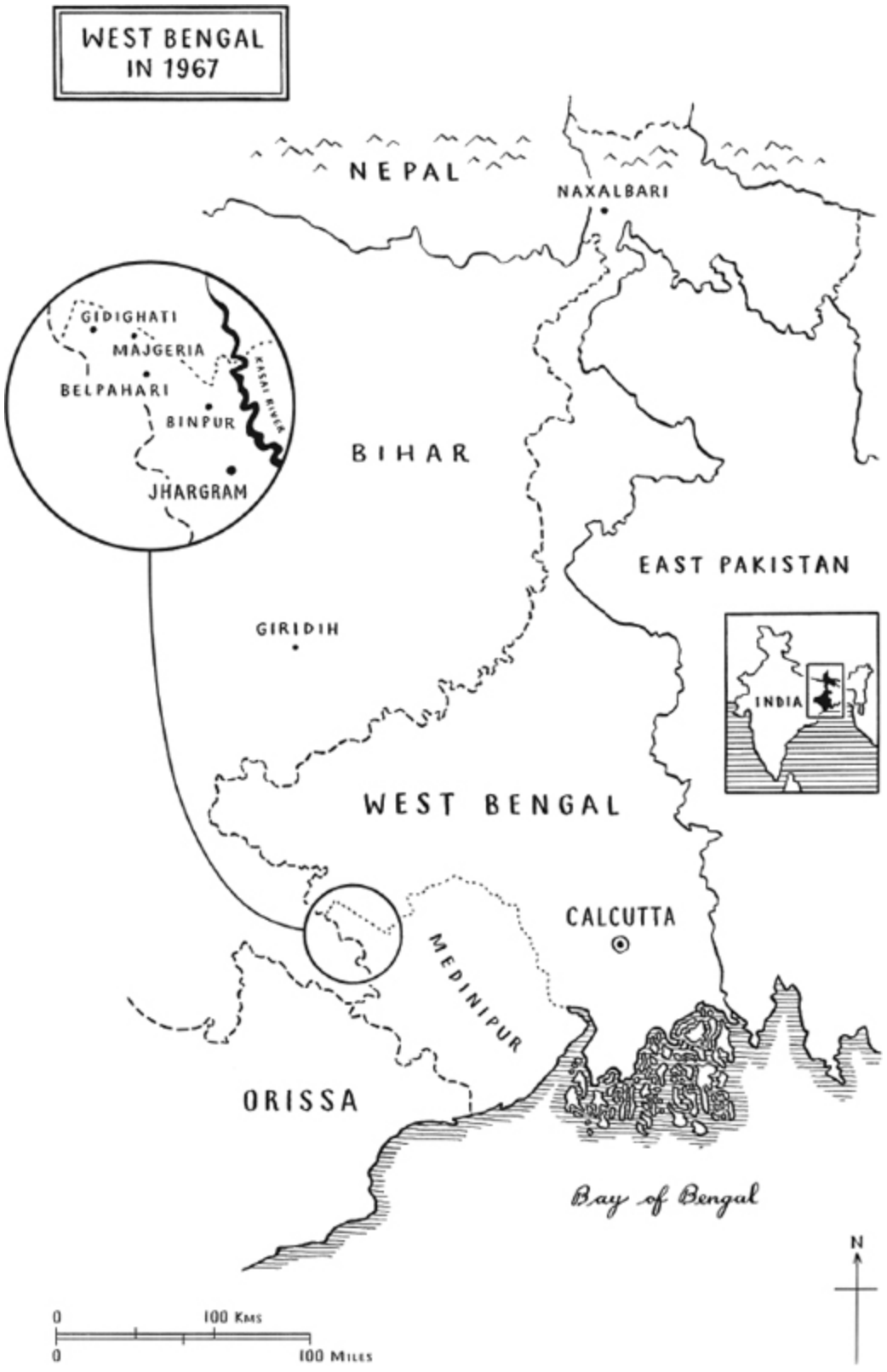
Ambitious, rich and compassionate *The Lives of Others* anatomises the soul of a nation as it unfolds a family history. A novel about many things, including the limits of empathy and the nature of political action, it asks: how do we imagine our place amongst others in the world? Can that be reimagined? And at what cost? This is a novel of unflinching power and emotional force.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neel Mukherjee was born in Calcutta. His first novel, *A Life Apart* (2010), won the Vodafone-Crossword Award in India, the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Award for best fiction, and was shortlisted for the inaugural DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. This is his second novel. He lives in London.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A Life Apart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IN 1967
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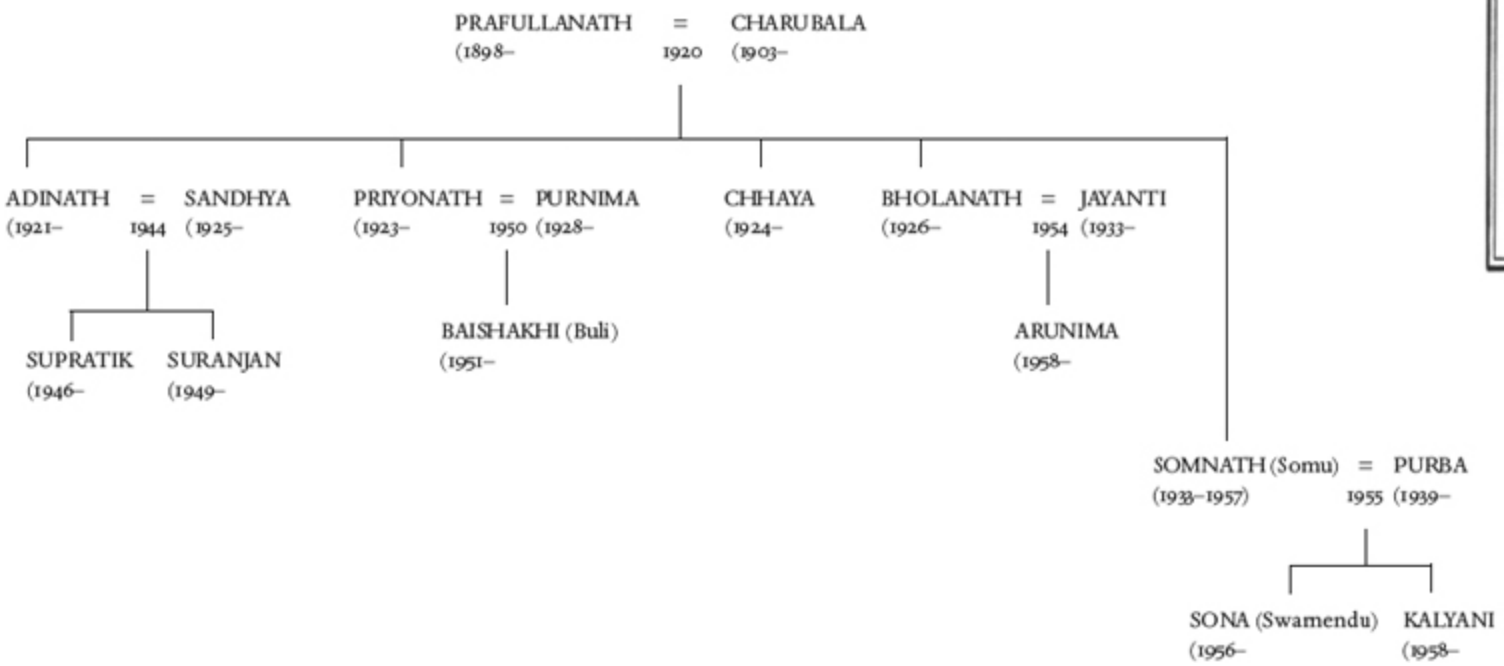
THE GHOSH FAMILY



Christopher

The Lives of Others

Neel Mukherjee

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

How can we imagine what our lives should be without the illumination of the lives of others?

James Salter, Light Years

It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

. . . things are the way they are and when we recognise them, they are the same as when recognised by others or indeed by no one at all.

Daniel Kehlmann, Measuring the World

In historical events what is most obvious is the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace

PROLOGUE

May 1966

A THIRD OF the way through the half-mile walk from the landlord's house to his hut, Nitai Das's feet begin to sway. Or maybe it is the head-spin again. He sits down on the lifeless field he has to cross before he can reach his hut. There isn't a thread of shade anywhere. The May sun is an unforgiving fire; it burns his blood dry. It also burns away any lingering grain of hope that the monsoons will arrive in time to end this third year of drought. The earth around him is beginning to fissure and crack. His eyelids are heavy. He closes them for a while, then, as sleep begins to take him, he pitches forward from his sitting position and jolts awake. Absently, he fingers his great enemy, the soil, not soil any more, but compacted dust. Even its memory of water has been erased for ever, as if it has never been.

He has begged all morning outside the landlord's house for one cup of rice. His three children haven't eaten for five days. Their last meal had been a handful of hay stolen from the landlord's cowshed and boiled in the cloudy yellow water from the well. Even the well is running dry. For the past three years they have been eating once every five or six or seven days. The last few times he had gone to beg had yielded nothing, except abuse and forcible ejection from the grounds of the landlord's house. In the beginning, when he had first started to beg for food, they shut and bolted all the doors and windows against him while he sat outside the house, for hours and hours, day rolling into evening into night, until they discovered his resilience and changed that

tactic. Today they had set their guards on him. One of them had brought his stick down on Nitai's back, his shoulders, his legs, while the other one had joked, 'Where are you going to hit this dog? He is nothing but bones, we don't even have to hit him. Blow on him and he'll fall back.'

Oddly, Nitai doesn't feel any pain from this morning's beating. He knows what he has to do. A black billow makes his head spin again and he shuts his eyes to the punishment of white light. All he needs to do is walk the remaining distance, about 2,000 hands. In a few moments, he is all right. Some kind of jittery energy makes a sudden appearance inside him and he gets up and starts walking. Within seconds the panting begins, but he carries on. A dry heave interrupts him for a bit. Then he continues.

His wife is sitting outside their hut, waiting for him to return with something, anything, to eat. She can hardly hold her head up. Even before he starts taking shape from a dot on the horizon to the form of her husband, she knows he is returning empty-handed. The children have stopped looking up now when he comes back from the fields. They have stopped crying with hunger, too. The youngest, three years old, is a tiny, barely moving bundle, her eyes huge and slow. The middle one is a skeleton sheathed in loose, polished black skin. The eldest boy, with distended belly, has become so listless that even his shadow seems dwindled and slow. Their bones have eaten up what little flesh they had on their thighs and buttocks. On the rare occasions when they cry, no tears emerge; their bodies are reluctant to part with anything they can retain and consume. He can see nothing in their eyes. In the past there was hunger in them, hunger and hope and end of hope and pain, and perhaps even a puzzled resentment, a kind of muted accusation, but now there is nothing, a slow, beyond-the-end nothing.

The landlord has explained to him what lies in store for his children if he does not pay off the interest on his first loan. Nitai has brought them into this world of misery, of endless,

endless misery. Who can escape what's written on his forehead from birth? He knows what to do now.

He picks up the short-handled sickle, takes his wife by her bony wrist and brings her out in the open. With his practised farmer's hand, he arcs the sickle and brings it down and across her neck. He notices the fleck of spit in the two corners of her mouth, her eyes huge with terror. The head isn't quite severed, perhaps he didn't strike with enough force, so it hangs by the still-uncut fibres of skin and muscle and arteries as she collapses with a thud. Some of the spurt of blood has hit his face and his ribcage, which is about to push out from its dark, sweaty cover. His right hand is sticky with blood.

The boy comes out at the sound. Nitai is quick, he has the energy and focus of an animal filled with itself and itself only. Before the sight in front of the boy can tighten into meaning, his father pushes him against the mud wall and drives the curve of the blade with all the force in his combusting being across his neck, decapitating him in one blow. This time the blood, a thin, lukewarm jet, hits him full on his face. His hand is so slippery with blood that he drops the sickle. Inside the tiny hut, his daughter is sitting on the floor, shaking, trying to drag herself into a corner where she can disappear. Perhaps she has smelled the metallic blood, or taken fright at the animal moan issuing out of her father, a sound not possible of humans. Nitai instinctively rubs his right hand, his working hand, against his bunched-up lungi and grabs hold of his daughter's throat with both his hands, and squeezes and squeezes and squeezes until her protruding eyes almost leave the stubborn ties of their sockets and her tongue lolls out and her thrashing legs still. He crawls on the floor to the corner where their last child is crying her weak, runty mewl and, with trembling hands, covers her mouth and nose, pushing his hands down, keeping them pressed, until there is nothing.

Nitai Das knows what to do. He lifts the jerrycan of Folidol left over from three seasons ago and drinks, his mouth to the lip of the plastic canister, until he can drink no more. His insides burn numb and he thrashes and writhes like a speared earthworm, thrashes and writhes, a pink foam emerging from his mouth, until he too is returned from the nothing in his life to nothing.

CHAPTER ONE

1967

AROUND SIX, THE zoo starts to shake itself up from its brief sleep. Lying in bed, wide awake, Purnima hears the stirrings of life, each animal, each part of each animal, becoming animated in slow succession. Under the mosquito net the September humidity is already beginning to congeal into the suffocating blanket it will soon become. The fan, running at its top speed of five, battles away, unmindful of its futility. The only thing it circulates around the room is the sound of the fluttery pages of the Ghosh Gold Palace calendar hanging from a nail on the cream-painted walls. That calendar is a sign of her defiance; by some silent understanding reached a long time before she arrived in this house, all tokens of Ghosh Gold Palace are forbidden here, so she has made a point of having their calendar on the wall in her room.

Beside her, Priyo sleeps the sleep of the sinless. His early-morning snore has a three-toned sound to it – a snarly growl in the inhalation, then a hissing during part of the exhalation, completed by a final high-pitched insecty whine. She hears the scouring sound of a broom sluicing out with water some drain or courtyard. Someone is cleaning his teeth in the bathroom of a neighbouring house – there is the usual accompaniment of loud hawking, coughing and a brief, one-note retch. A juddering car goes down Basanta Bose Road with the unmistakable sound of every loose vibrating component about to come off – a taxi. A rickshaw cycles by, the driver relentlessly squeezing its bellows-horn.

Another starts up, as if in response. Soon an entire fleet of rickshaws rackets past, their continuous horn shredding what little sleepiness remains of the morning.

Now she can hear other vehicles: the toot of a scooter-horn, the bell of a bicycle. This is how this world begins every day; noise is the way it signals that it is alive, indomitable. The sparrows send up a chinkless wall of manic cheeping. The doleful remonstrations of the pigeons, shuffling about on windowsills, sometimes tumble over into an aggressive chorus; they have the same merciless presence. The sound of water loops like a liquid thread through the other sounds; someone is beating their washing against the stone or concrete perimeter around a running tap. The clatter of metal buckets; uninterrupted cawing of crows; wrangling stray dogs; a distant conch-shell being blown three times in the prayer room of a house nearby . . . Here, up on the first floor of 22/6 Basanta Bose Road, all sounds converge as in an amphitheatre. Had she, her husband and their daughter, Baishakhi, lived on the top floor, where her parents-in-law and their favourite son, their eldest, Adinath, and his family have their quarters, it would have been so much less noisy, she knows. And away from the onslaught of mosquitoes, which would never have been able to ascend to the third floor. And, of course, more distant and safer from the troubles in the streets, bombings and murders, the terrifying stuff she hears about, that have started erupting in the city. Who can say that their street will not be the scene of such action?

From the thought of that one minor instance of preferential treatment of Dada to the real cause of all the rankling is a negligible distance. Dada, her elder brother-in-law, had been groomed to enter the family business, Charu Paper & Sons (Pvt. Ltd), from his school days and had obediently followed the path set out for him by his father, a trajectory as natural as the cycle of seasons. If family stories and reminiscences are to be believed, her husband, Priyo,

however, had never shown any interest in the business, despite receiving the same training and indoctrination that his older brother had. If this had once caused ructions and displeasure, they are long vanished now, or almost vanished, for it is so obvious and accepted that Adinath is going to inherit the greater share of the family wealth in all its forms – business, money, house – that it is, like the air one breathes, not noticed, not remarked upon.

Despite the pervasive chatter of how the Ghoshes have fallen on hard times, how the business has been doing badly for years now, resulting in the selling-off of most of their mills, even most of her mother-in-law's jewellery, Purnima has never quite believed these crafty, convoluted North Calcutta people. Well, maybe they don't live there any longer, Purnima concedes, but her parents-in-law were originally from North Calcutta and these traits are difficult to eradicate and, she's convinced, even passed down the generations, irrespective of location. Everyone knew what a big gap existed between what they said in public and what they did in private.

On paper, Priyo appeared to have equal standing with Dada, certainly as far as the burden of work went, but it was Purnima's unshakeable belief that Adinath drew a significantly bigger salary than her husband. While she had a fair idea of the amount Priyo brought home, she was still in the dark about her elder brother-in-law's takings; this ignorance was not for lack of trying on her part. It was made even more maddening by too much information from another, opposite side: Priyo's contributions to the running of the household, which kept rising. Over and above paying the electricity bills for the entire household, which had been his responsibility for as long as Purnima had lived here, and paying some subsistence money to Purba, his youngest sister-in-law, he was now expected to increase his regular contribution to the family purse. The rest of his salary was deposited in a State Bank of India account held jointly by

Purnima and Priyo. Part of this balance was cashed and kept by her in a locked drawer of their Godrej steel almirah, to dispose of and use as she deemed fit.

Despite being wholly in charge of this subset economy, Purnima felt that neither the money for her use nor the sum in the joint bank account was enough. She never reconciled herself to the fact that an increase in one meant a proportional depletion of the other. She wanted both to go up, and the mathematical impossibility of it irritated her so much that she often fell back on haranguing her husband. This, however, did not take the form of direct complaints about the meagreness of his income – it was not meagre – but about the inequitable nature of the levies imposed on her husband's salary. Why did he have to shell out so much? Adinath practically owned the family business, so he should shoulder most of the costs. Besides, being the eldest son, it was his duty to look after the younger ones. Did he, Priyo, *know* for certain that Dada's share of the costs was significantly larger or did he simply believe what he was told? How naïve was that? And what about her younger brother-in-law, Bholanath? He was the sole director of Charu Books, an entire company in itself. All his income seemed to go on the expensive education of his daughter in a fancy English-medium school. Where were his contributions? Exactly how much were they? And talking of dependants, shouldn't Dada have the sole responsibility of looking after that hapless widow, Purba? If all the brothers contributed equally, why should Dada get preferential treatment in the family? It was still the case that no meal could begin without Dada taking a big spoon to the virgin mound of cooked rice and breaking it, yet another irritating North Calcutta affectation.

These and other related questions had accumulated over the course of their seventeen-year marriage and now found expression in ever-longer sessions of nagging. If Priyo had tried, in the past, to answer a few of them with reason and

accuracy, he had long since given up, faced with the proliferating queries; now they went in through one ear and left through the other. And yet this is not the nub of Purnima's dissatisfaction. That lies in the future.

It is evident that after the deaths of Baba and Ma, her parents-in-law, Dada will become head of the family. But who will the house, this big, four-storey house with a rare back garden in the heart of Bhabanipur, be left to? Will the entirety of it go to Dada or will it be divided amongst all the brothers? If divided, how? Equally or commensurate with the differential treatment they have received?

Years of trying to extract solid information from Priyo had yielded nothing. He was either evasive and lackadaisical in his responses, saying, 'Let's wait and see', to which she always said that that would be too late, they couldn't do much *after* the division; or he sided with his family. 'We've all lived together happily in this home, sharing everything; the question of dividing it into units for the use of one and not another does not arise. We'll continue to live like this. Everything belongs to every one of us,' he'd say.

Purnima took this badly. A threatening cloud would settle over husband and wife until its inevitable precipitation into tantrums and shouting. 'I'll see who looks after you and your daughter when you're left with nothing,' she'd rage. 'They'll take everything, counting each and every brick of the house, each and every single brick, you mark my words.' The 'they' remained nebulous and unspecified.

The seven o'clock siren from a distant factory now adds its wail to the symphony outside. Like another clock, the blind beggar and his daughter begin working this particular patch of their beat, the sound of small cymbals accompanying their devotional duet, 'Let my soul blossom like the hibiscus at the feet of my mother-goddess'. Purnima reluctantly gets out of bed to begin another day in her prison.

Late that afternoon, Adinath, sitting on a tired cushion – battered and leaking dirty greyish cotton – on his favourite planter's long-sleever in the seldom-used drawing room on the ground floor, nervously contemplates the edgy story that the slim sheaf of papers left at a careless angle on the cane-and-glass coffee table is trying to tell him. Samik Sarkar, head of the State Bank of India, Eastern Region, had come in with the papers in the afternoon to guide him through that story; Adinath asked him to leave the documents behind. He fingers the packet of Wills Filter – several rungs down from Rothmans and Pall Mall, his brands of choice during easier days – but decides not to light up another one. The room is blue with smoke. Samik-babu had switched on the tube-lights before leaving and, in their depressing white glare, Adinath can see the oily iridescence of the film that has formed on the remains of the milky tea in the cups on the coffee table.

An extreme tiredness, seemingly from nowhere, suddenly clings tight to him; he lowers his head, takes off his glasses and passes his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair, once, twice, three times. He is happy to have the papers sit in front of him, unyielding with their slow, poisonous information. Numbers never lie; one can make them, of course, as one can make anything speak another story in another tongue, but they do not have the inherent falsehood that words carry. The moment he looks at the figures, whatever little scrap of peace there is in his mind, trying to hold on to some fragile ledge, will be dislodged into an abyss for ever. Suddenly the taste of exhaustion changes and modulates into fear: he almost feels that swift somersaulting of taste on the sour-bitter fur coating his tongue. Samik-babu had brought himself to utter the word 'repossession' and then quickly skated over his own embarrassment by suggesting that both outfits be sold to some Marwari buyer at whatever price they were willing to pay. The creditors won't be put off for too long now: that will

be the pointed truth at the heart of the thicket of numbers waiting by his side, resilient and impatient at the same time with their dangerous, whispery story.

The botched modernisation of technology at one of the factories, all that high-risk borrowing against capital – what enormous reach they had into the future, like those she-ghosts in the stories they were told when they were little, ghosts with nasal voices and long arms that could traverse fields and houses and ponds and grab your neck. There is labour unrest and unionism in the mills and, given the fragility of the coalition government and the way the left party is strong-arming, where will they be if the Communist Party, the CPI(M), actually comes to power? Which could be any day now, he suspects. Charu & Sons will have to accede to every demand of the unions; their contacts with the rapidly attenuating Congress Party will not be of much help in troubleshooting; the prospect gives him the gooseflesh of terror. But for how much longer can they continue hanging on to a factory locked up for two years now? The business with Dulal last year, that unthinkable gherao, all those workers swollen in numbers by lumpens brought in from the outside, all of them shouting, chanting, *You must, you must, you must listen to our demands. Break and crush the black hands of the owners* . . . There, another ripple of that gooseflesh rakes over him.

He hears his brother Priyo's wife, Purnima, upstairs cry out to her daughter, 'Buliiiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you.'

He knows what he needs now, while the siren numbers wait. He needs protection, insulation, someone, something to shore him up and whisper another provisional truth to him: that the world can look different, kinder; that it won't always be a merciless landing on a bed of nails, but sometimes a silky easing onto a lawn of down feathers. He needs a less vulnerable eye with which to see the world. He gets up from his long-sleever with some difficulty, his knees

sending out an audible crack (his father's arthritis, could it be? is arthritis hereditary?), picks up a hollow terracotta Bankura horse standing on the coffee table, removes its detachable ear and upends it. A little key clinks out. With that clutched in his slightly shaking hand, he makes his way across the room to the glass-fronted book-cupboard. He unlocks it, reaches for the topmost shelf, which houses the collected works of Rabindranath Tagore nestled tightly against each other, a uniform brown-spined army, and deftly removes volumes five to seven. The gap created by the removal of those three soldiers from their ranks reveals his pint-bottle of Johnnie Walker.

He hears the front door open, then the sound of his younger son, Suranjan, entering the house: that erratic, charmless clatter could belong to no one else. The boy would now thud his way up the stairs and shut himself in his room for the . . . But no, before he can complete his thought, the loud advancing footfalls alert him that his son's destination is no place other than the ground-floor drawing room. A nervous hurry ruins the ephemeral grace for which Adinath had reached out his hands.

On the second floor, Chhaya sits on the low stool in front of the dressing table in her room, looking into the gloom of the heartless mirror. She opens the drawer on her right and takes out a pair of tweezers, her heart beating out a hot tattoo of shame: what will everyone think if they find out that she plucks her eyebrows?

She nearly jumps off her stool when she hears Purnima's loud summons – 'Buliiiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you' – reach her, muffled and diluted, one floor up here. That coarse, vulgar, low-born woman, she thinks; braying all the time, not a whit of class about her, typical of her South Calcutta origins. Her voice is like a split bamboo. You can take the girl out of Behala, but you can't take Behala . . . Her familiar thoughts

run along the runnels made deep by the ceaseless flow of these very sentiments for the last seventeen years. She gets up hastily, shuts the door to her room, turns on the light and sits on the stool again. The open drawer, a tongue stuck out in shame, mocks her. The crowd of cosmetics on the table – face powder, creams, snows, skin-whitener, lotions, eye-pencils, perfumes, lipsticks, even, improbably, a tiny pot of rouge – didn't quite carry, collectively, the single charge of . . . of . . . *immorality* that the tweezers sent through her fingers.

After years of plucking and shaping her eyebrows, she still feels this heat of shame flushing through her. Oddly enough, no single act of her elaborate evening toilette – before she sits on the front verandah of the second floor for an hour or two until the light gives out, a ritual she has followed for seventeen years now, with only a brief interruption at the beginning – fills her with the kind of self-reproach that this does. The application of snow or cream to her face followed by face powder, then the painting of her lips and eyes, placing a beauty spot on her chin, wearing jewellery and an expensive, dressy sari, spritzing herself with perfume – none of it carries that sting. She wishes her face were a blank canvas on which she could compose her features anew every day, but she has been given, instead, an almost indelible painting, which she tries to paint over, brush out, erase and correct in order to have a more pleasing picture; every afternoon she fails and is left contemplating the unbending stubbornness and tenacity of the original.

She ruffles her brows, letting the unruly hairs stand out. Like weeds, they're going to be rooted out. She steadies her trembling hands, leans forward towards the mirror and brings the tweezers up to her face. Her hands won't be still and obedient, so she waits while she lets the old poison of her low sister-in-law surface again. It is best to think of something else while she plucks out the refractory hairs, and hatred is an ever-reliable friend.

Her hand inches closer to her right eyebrow, *for seventeen years she has had to, the whole family has had to, put up with that woman, that serpent*, one, there, the first one out, with that pricking twinge; two, the pain isn't negligible, it all depends on how toughly they are rooted in; three, ouch, *perhaps no one really knows the true depths of her evil, that crow pretending to be a cuckoo, but she has known, from the very beginning*; four; five, easy enough; now her left, *anyway, what does one expect, from a low-caste family, a Saha, all charm on the outside, 'Didi this, Didi that' on the surface, sticking the knife in afterwards* one, oh god, this is going to set her sneezing. She drops her tweezers, her face a comic mask in the first moments of being seized by an imminent sneeze, mouth open, jaw turned down, eyebrows furrowed, face lifted in expectation, as the sneezes arrive, one after the other, racking her short, pudgy frame in their cathartic succession.

Suranjan walks into the seldom-used drawing room on the ground floor, the LP held in his sweaty hands, almost clasped to his thin chest, as if he were guarding the elixir of immortal life. From the entrance to Basanta Bose Road he has heard Boro-kaki call out to Buli to come in from the verandah. Hopefully, at this time of the day, about to fold into evening, the drawing room will be empty and he will be able to listen, uninterrupted inside the still centre of concentration, to this album, *Revolver*, borrowed from his friend Bappa-da after weeks of begging, wheedling, cajoling, even offering money as security against damage by scratching or accidental loss. He is going to have to guard it with his very life. Not that that is going to be a problem, for ever since he heard the mournful strings of 'Eleanor Rigby' and the jubilant harmonies of 'Taxman' he has felt as if he has watched his own rebirth into a new being. The record in his hands is not an LP, it is his beating life itself. It is where

all the soiled trade of human life passed through and emerged as prelapsarian truth.

Enmeshed in purple rhapsodies, Suranjan takes a while to identify the sharp bouquet of spirits in the drawing room as he enters. Part of the reason for his slowness may be because he is thrown by his father's presence there. It seems Adinath has been waiting for his son, looking expectantly at the door, almost willing him, or anyone, to walk in. Frozen for a few moments by this unexpected and wholly unwelcome encounter, both father and son fall back on a default embarrassment – staring at the floor, mumbling, groping for excuses – until the smell of alcohol brings Suranjan back his presence of mind. It embarrasses him further and releases a sudden squirt of fear and shame in him, as if it is he who has been caught doing something illicit.

Muddied in his mind are two strains of thought; first, if he can smell the tang of alcohol in the room, does that mean that his father can detect the occasional whiff on him when he returns home after a bout of furtive drinking with his college friends? The second, even more disturbing, is the question of whether his father is going down some slippery slope; it is one thing to indulge in the forbidden pleasures of alcohol at the age of eighteen, quite another for that eighteen-year-old to discover that his father drinks too. What for him is both pleasure and transgression, a matter of guilty delight, can surely not be the same for his father? In the older man it is almost certainly a sign of dissolution. He looks at his father with hooded distaste, the LP in his hand, its promises of a transporting salvation lost in the very quicksands of family that he had been seeking to escape.

Arunima, seated on the floor, restlessly arranging books according to size, sharpening pencils to points capable of stabbing a small creature, cannot rid her mind of the image of the pencil box Malvika Tiwari brought to class that day.

Meanwhile, *her* sharpened Flora and Apsara pencils, ranging from 2H to 2B, are all going into the old, dented, lustreless Camlin pencil box. Malvika's shiny new pencil case, brought all the way from Singapore by her father, had a picture of a wide-eyed, golden-haired girl standing in a field of closed yellow buds, but if you tilted the box the girl winked and all the buds bloomed into a blaze of unfurled flowers. Ever since she had seen that, everything had flown out of Arunima's head, as from an open window, to make space for only one thing: desire. While the other girls had sat oohing and aahing, and some had even been transparent in their envy, she had fallen into a trough of silence, sad that such a thing existed, but not in her possession.

The only way she can have it is to ask her father to buy her one. But it has to be done without the knowledge of her mother. If she ever finds out that Arunima wants a flash pencil box, she will go out of her way to ensure that her daughter doesn't get it. She will tell her husband that his contribution to parenting consists solely of spoiling their child: *Before the words have left her mouth, you go and get her whatever she wants. You are eating her head. Can't you see what she's going to grow up to be, how much trouble she's going to cause all of us?* She can practically hear her mother's snapping words. Then she will add the clinching detail, a final, shaming cut, like that from paper and as annoying: *And in these straitened times, too. Do you think money grows on trees?* Her father will then sheepishly tell her, *Without Ma's permission, I cannot do anything*. That is what it always comes down to: her mother like an unassailable wall between her and everything she ever wants.

It seems to her nine-year-old mind that her mother had her so that she could have someone to punish, scold and thwart. And to stand between her and her father. Now, sitting arranging pencils in descending order of size, from left to right, in her unlovely pencil box, irritated already at

the sure prospect of them changing their assigned places during the journey to school tomorrow morning and upsetting the beauty of the ranking she has given them, she reaches inside herself and feels for the ever-present crystal of anger, commuting effortlessly between the minor pique with unruly pencils and the bigger frustration with her mother, and finds herself moved to a bitter joy at the hardness of that gem. She breaks the sharpened graphite points of each of the pencils, one by one, and starts sharpening them again with a rigorous fury.

The swish of sari, the rattle of keys tied to her aanchol, and the tinkle of bangles heralds the approach of Jayanti.

‘Is your homework done?’ she asks. ‘Arunima, I can only see tools of study, but not a single open book or exercise copy. You think I won’t notice?’

Arunima does not bother to look up.

Jayanti raises her voice: ‘Arunima, I’m talking to you, look up. Why don’t you have a book open in front of you? Don’t you have homework to do? Am I to believe it’s all done by half-past six? Where is your Bengali book? You got four out of twenty in your Bengali spelling test last week. Shameful, shameful! You can’t seem to get your head around the difference between the short and long ‘i’ sounds. And you’re now sitting here wasting your time sharpening pencils.’

Arunima has this all sorted out in her head, including the trump card she slaps down in front of her mother. ‘There’s no Bengali class tomorrow, Ma, only homework for Eng. Lit. and Drawing. I was sharpening the pencils for drawing class. You know how angry Sister Josephine gets if our pencils are blunt.’ Pause. ‘If you want, I can start on the Eng. Lit. homework instead.’

Arunima knows, with the confident cruelty of a child, that her mother increasingly fears all her subjects except Bengali, because everything else is in English and, therefore, outside her reach; the downside of sending her daughter to the English-medium Carmel Convent. Only after

she has said that does she look up to note the hesitating deflation of her mother, then she lowers her eyes, seemingly absorbed again in preparing her pencils exactly as Sister Josephine likes them. The jewel inside her flickers and gleams.

Jayanti, the wind taken out of her sails, aims for a swift rebuttal that would save her face, but all she can come up with is, 'Well, then, *after* you're done with Drawing and English, I want you to go through "Shiladitya" from *Raj Kahini*. I'll be back to test you on it.'

Feeling a sense of bathos at what she has just said, Jayanti adds, 'I don't want you sneaking out of the room before you're finished with your lessons. No inattentiveness' and huffily leaves the room.

Sitting on a battered rush mat on the floor of the dingy room, which she shares with her mother and her brother, Kalyani looks at the open book in front of her with a familiar mixture of bafflement, indifference and boredom. That dreary, unfathomable story again about those two impeccably good children, Hashi and Tata, and their strange relationship with a king with a toothsome name, Gobindamanikya. For all that she can make out, the lines in front of her could be the effect of a swarm of insects, their legs dipped in ink, let loose on straight, closed tracks on the pages; the letters and words, one after the other, make no more sense to her than that. She has difficulty reading on the very basic level of individual words. If she fails again this year, she will be thrown out of school. For two years running she has remained in Class Three of their local school, Katjunagar Swarnamayee Bidyapith. Without the help of her elder brother, Sona, she would have been expelled last year, for she had failed in every single subject. But Dada is busy preparing for an exam that will help him move, if he is successful, from the government school, where he is now, to the better, more prestigious Calcutta Boys, and it has been

decided that his fees are going to be paid by Mejo-jyethu, so Sona is putting in extra hours after school at his friend Sougata's home.

Which is just as well, because if he stays on late enough he is at least going to get a proper meal there, with most likely two kinds of vegetable dishes, fish, even mutton or chicken if he gets lucky, not the unchanging watery dal-rice-mashed-potatoes that they have every evening, unless someone from upstairs sends something down. By some unspoken agreement their dinnertime has been pushed further and further back, even within Kalyani's short living memory, so that they eat after ten o'clock now; perhaps in the hope that salvation in the form of leftover cauliflower-and-potato fry or egg curry or even stale, old food that the people upstairs won't eat any more will get sent down. Often, that does not happen.

She hears the call – 'Buliiii, come inside, don't stand on the verandah at this hour, everyone can see you' – in her aunt's ox-bellow of a voice, and the residue of guilt and fear that is left in her, pricking her to apply herself to the insurmountable nature of her school work, vanishes, replaced by colourful dreams of all the cosmetics that Buli-di has and which Kalyani so cravenly desires. Lipstick and nail polish are magic words to her: they can make the entirety of the known world disappear. As far as she can ascertain, Buli-di has one shade of lipstick – a pomegranate-flower red – and two bottles of nail polish: hot pink and scarlet. Buli-di isn't allowed to wear lipstick – Kalyani saw her hastily and brutally removing it from her mouth one evening last year during Durga Puja, standing at the corner before entering Basanta Bose Road; she had been out with her friends, doing the evening tour of the different pandals of South Calcutta – but nail polish, while not exactly endorsed by her mother, does not carry such a flagrant charge. She is not even sure if Buli-di owned the lipstick or was wearing one of her friends'. If the former, she would certainly have to keep