

BETRAYED

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who have devoted themselves to medical research over centuries, which have made our lives so comfortable with the advances in medicine, surgery, and therapy over years, eradicating some life threatening diseases, providing relief in chronic conditions, helping us to live longer and productively without pain.

This book is dedicated to practitioners of the noblest profession, whom we reach out to when in illness, before we even reach out to God.

Anita

AMIT AND I had been together for ever and ever. Mom says we shared the same bathtub, pram and the crib, even the milk bottle when Amit's mom and mine went to the movies. What was a shared nipple when two young ladies were engrossed in the melodrama going on on the screen, soaking their handkerchiefs with tears, while the hero and heroine sang songs of love, longing and desire. We were classmates, teammates, 'hide behind the hedge' mates, and went on to study science in college. Then I split. Not with Amit, but with science; I was not meant for it. I realized I had to become an artist. I had no choice. My heart, my head, my shoulders and my hands would ache and throb, until I put whatever I had conjured into forms. Shapes and colours blurred my eyes till they were applied to canvas. Amit went on to medical college; I studied and practised art. It had to do with my soul, above my mind and reasoning. Though the doctor's white coat and life-giving injections, symbols of my medical ambition as I grew up, were a part of my being, before I gave them up for a paint brush. Ultimately, the medical syringe came to be represented in every piece of my work, however imperceptibly. It was always there with all its multitude of symbolic meanings, phallic and otherwise, differently perceived by me and the viewer. After my first year exams, I was assigned to look after an aunt recovering from surgery in the city's premium hospital, medical college and research centre, as I was 'free anyway'. This was ages before there were so many reliable private hospitals, and to get treated by a good doctor, you had to be related to his cook or driver or hair-cutter, or you had to have 'pull'. Well, aunt Geeta just had pull, so there she was, getting post-operative care and feeling awfully privileged. I sat around most of the day, walking around the hallowed corridors of the institution when aunty slept, leaving for home at night when a special maid came in to take over the night duty from the day maid. Getting a trained day nurse and night nurse was easy, but costly. The class IV staff in the hospital had to be cajoled into arranging these maids at a fourth of the cost. They took care of the patients well, and the hospital nurses were there anyway for the

medicines, injections and other trained care. Maya was the night maid, and on day three, I had begun to get restless after a hugely dull day, so I prepared to leave as she came in. But I delayed my departure by a few minutes so as not to seem uncaring to aunty while I made sure she had everything she needed. Maya had all the useless instructions I could give her. A middle-aged and fat man in khakee uniform passed by. He looked sternly at Maya and said, "Haazree laga de aakey", meaning, come and sign your attendance register. I sat down and told Maya to go, and I would wait.

"I'll do it tomorrow for both days," she said, and he replied, "how about getting one day's salary after working two days?" and left. Reluctantly, she followed him, and returned more than an hour later, to my reprimand. The next evening when she came in, I asked her to sign the register before starting to work, but she evaded me, dextrously filling the water in the flask, and fluffing up the bed. Again the man came by with the same rejoinder, and again she was gone for a long time. I hurried home after she came, but when I bent over my canvas that night, all I could see were her eyes. I became aware of them only then...they were all I could see that night, deep and purposeful, stoic and courageous, but hot as flames. She seemed to be in tearing pain, as if her whole being had been ravaged. But pain is bigger than any anger, and it showed as I struggled through my canvas, debating with the colours. I slept after having painted only a huge pair of eyes; soulful, painful eyes, coloured in the dark waters of the river, and the orange of the setting sun, with deep shadows beneath.

Next evening, the man in khakee was there before I could begin a meaningful conversation with Maya, as I had planned. To a young under-graduate, after identifying someone in pain, the next step is to try and alleviate it, and my enthusiastic youth believed that every pain could be eradicated somehow. Maya asked him to go ahead, she would follow. I said to her, "Why don't you go on and be done with it? Go on and sign your register, and I need to talk to you when you get back."

"Why should I have to go every day? It's not as if I am making thousands of rupees. I am poor, but how much should I suffer?" Maya almost cried.

"Come on Maya, it is only your attendance, it is good to have a regular record," I patted her as she pulled away and hissed at me, "Didi, how can you not understand? There is no register. That man wants to have sex with us in return for appointing us for one day's duty in the ward. We are not permanent employees, and get employed as temporary staff for a few days in a month, at this man's whims and fancies. If I don't please him, he will call in another maid, and maybe not give me work for a long time. All maids know about it but no one can complain for we need the work." And then came the old philosophy, "If we have to enjoy respect and dignity, we have to be born

rich; poor fools have no business to dream about it even. We should be grateful if we can eat and have a roof over our heads.”

I was so stunned by her speech, I forgot to swallow. My jaw drooped as Mom came in to look at aunty. Quietly I made my way out of the room to absorb slowly what I had heard, to believe it, and later to come to terms with it. How could this be happening here, in the Mecca of the noblest profession, this place that proudly sends out the best doctors? How could it be happening at all? I found the senior nurse and took her into confidence. I told her I wanted to make a complaint, but she said, “Why? Does Maya think she is a princess? We all make compromises. And you please don’t mess up things for us. If you make a complaint, Maya will stop getting work, then how will she pay her childrens’ school fees?”

“Getting work at what cost? She will find a way to make honest money; we ought to help her,” I continued.

“Listen, let’s talk tomorrow, I have work to complete.” ‘Tomorrow’, mysteriously, I was no longer required to be with Aunty, and over some days the outrage of the day got relegated to the weaker areas of my memory, and life moved on.

I shared the experience with Amit when he came for the weekend, and he said, “Now you’re so upset, but when I shared with you how I was ragged in Medical College— you laughed; it was so much fun for you. I was assaulted continuously for a month. Almost all the seniors took turns, even the girls did not spare me. Stop yourself now. When one can do nothing about the system, it’s better not to talk about the issue. We can discuss the problem endlessly, but unproductive discussion is as futile as foreplay without making love.” And we talked of other things—his studies, future dreams, my work, the weather, and cinema.

I graduated from Art College, and got an interesting project to work on, planning the art display in the lobby of an upcoming five star hotel. When I began, I thought of it as a very pleasant place, with an atmosphere of comfort and beauty. Then I did a study of the prospective visitors to the place, and the projected clientele. The statistics were not much different from the statistics about the type of people visiting any other place, be it the market, the railway station, the airport, or hospital. Happiness and suffering, joys and sorrows, satisfaction and unrest, success and failure, are equally distributed to the human race, over all classes and ages. I decided to remember this when designing the lobby—a beautiful place has to have a perfect projection of all human emotions, and the shapes and colours that go with them. I filled my syringe with the colours of life, and injected life in my work. Meanwhile, Amit began his internship, in the same hospital where I had spent time with Aunty. I would spend a

day there sometimes, to be with Amit, and to observe people. The hospital was full of suffering but it was also full of hope, denial, and also acceptance.

The gynaecology ward was the most interesting, with all the women chatting all the time. They simply had to describe their lives for everyone, their pain and their struggles. Their joys and their hopes had to be shared, and the experiences of others had to be known about. I think it made the pain less, and the future brighter, just talking so much about it. Also, as I realize now, there were no television sets in hospital wards then, and no mobile phones either, making conversation the only entertainment. Then, there was this corner ward, with twenty women, which had no number or status written on the door, and very few doctors or nurses going in and out of it—just one nurse sitting on duty inside the ward, and, strangely, the women hardly talking to each other. Some very young ones, teenagers actually, had a mother or sister accompanying them—but most women were essentially alone. Surprisingly, this was a very quiet ward. Occasionally, a woman could be heard sobbing, or groaning. Most were clutching their stomach, or tossing in bed holding tight the metal rods at the head of the bed.

Being Amit's fiancée, (though we were not formally engaged, it was simply taken for granted that we were engaged), I had a run of the place. After several small conversations with the patients in the ward, and the nurses, but chiefly the women who came in the most often to clean the two washrooms shared by all the women, I gathered a lot of information. Sharda would stub her 'beedi' just outside the ward before going in, and light a new one as she stepped out after cleaning the washroom, so I targeted her. I offered her a tip of ten rupees for 'beedi', and started talking. "You should give up smoking, you know, it is bad for the lungs. One gets TB and even cancer from smoking so much."

"Ha! The doctors have a cigarette hanging from their mouths all the time, and nothing happens to them, so how can a small beedi harm me?"

"Tell me Sharda, how long have you been working here?"

"Since I got married. It was my mother-in-law's job, and she passed it on to me." I kept on, "Oh, you must have been her favourite." "Obviously, no one worked as hard as me. I did everything possible to please her, I even gave her my gold chain that my

husband got me; after all, if Ma was wearing silver, how could I wear gold? She really loved me.”

“ I see you have a heart of gold. Tell me what are these women being treated for in this ward? I think, after so many years you know so much, you are almost a doctor yourself.”

“Of course,” she said, “the doctors do so much book learning, but we learn the practical way, by observing the doctors and nurses, and when we offer to do some tasks for them, they actually teach us some tricks also. You will be surprised—I can give simple injections, take the temperature and blood-pressure, and even do normal deliveries. Experience makes you perfect. In my locality, I am often called to do deliveries; they believe I am a midwife. You know poor women cannot afford a hospital, specially when they are having a baby almost every year, so I go to their house and deliver. I make good money too.” I was shocked, and wondered how anyone could be so reckless.

“Now tell me about this ward. I just cannot understand what these women are being treated for.”

“Naturally you can’t.” Sharda was on a roll now. “It is a secret research. A woman with an unwanted pregnancy will go to any limit to end it. Here, after a general check-up, the lady doctor gives the pregnant woman two pills to swallow on an empty stomach in the morning, and assigns her a bed to lie on. After some hours, the woman begins to get labour pains, slowly increasing in intensity till they become unbearable. Ultimately, it is like a natural abortion. When the pushing of the muscles is strong, she is guided to go to the bathroom, and the foetus is pushed out as she squats on the lavatory. Then she informs the nurse, who checks to see if the foetus is really out, and calls one of us to clean the washroom. The patient gradually gets relief from the pain, and after some time she is given food, and some pain-killers. Six hours after she has aborted, she is sent away after giving her some vitamins to take for some days.”

These were obviously the ‘morning-after pills’ that are sold over-the-counter these days. Trials on humans were being conducted, but on unsuspecting poor women, it seemed.

“What if something goes wrong, if the abortion is incomplete, or the pills don’t work for someone or if there is a reaction or something—how are the patients cared for then?”

“Things do go wrong sometimes; in that case, the women are advised to get admitted to the hospital formally, and they are treated by the gynaecologists.”

I persisted, “Don’t their families quarrel with the doctors? Aren’t these people afraid of having legal action taken against them?”

“Who will fight for these women? Most of them are prostitutes, sex-workers, some are unwed young girls who are brought here to hush up their condition; even older married women who have a relationship out of marriage. People will abandon these women rather than fight for them, they are of easy virtue anyway. Some cases are really sad. Young girls who have seen nothing in life, like that Preeti on bed number eight—she has been brought here for the second time in six months.”

Shocked, I went towards the bed and found a young girl, almost a child, groaning with pain, and her mother rubbing her back, while her own tears flowed unchecked.

I asked her, “How old is Preeti?”

She burst into fresh tears as she said, “only thirteen.”

“Then you should check on her boy friend and teach her good values; this procedure is so risky, she could lose her life.”

“No boy friend, Didi, she is home all the time. She never even goes to play. Her own uncle does this to her, she has yet to learn about life. Poor girl, she does not know what has happened to her, and why she is here, and what is being done. She thinks she has a very hard stool to pass, and there is something wrong with her digestion.”

“Then why don’t you protect her? Can’t your husband take his brother to task, and see that he cannot harm her?”

“My husband? I dare not let him know anything.”

“But you must for Preeti’s sake.”

“He will only blame my child and maybe even kill her. We live in the same house with my brother-in-law, and I go to work as a domestic help. I lock Preeti in the room when I go out, but somehow that wretched man gets to catch her.”

I pondered and said, “Will you be willing to let Preeti come home with me. I can assure you she will be very safe, and I shall arrange school education also for her. She can help my mother with some housework, and we will pay you well. You can also come to meet her when you want.”

She wept some more and thanked me, while I promised to take Preeti away next morning from the hospital itself. I felt satisfied that I could help one young girl at least. When I went next morning, there was no sign of Preeti or her mother. I asked the nurse on duty where they were, and she said she didn’t know. I threatened to create a scene, and insisted to know, and she said, “I really do not know where they live. No one knows. Initially we kept registers, tried to contact the women, even for research purposes, but we realized that they almost always gave us false names and

addresses. You can see what category of women come for this treatment—they are either the nameless scum of society, or women hiding their sin from their families. They always come alone, having heard of this place from friends or someone. We did target the red light areas for our research and spread the word that we were helping with unwanted pregnancies; we explained the nature of our work to women who came in, but they were least interested. They just want an easy, non-surgical method of abortion, which is also free. I am sorry, I can't help you more than that. Even if I was allowed to give you Preeti's address, I am sure you will find that neither is Preeti her real name, nor is her address correct. Even today, we have in the ward six 'Preetis' and eight 'Sonias', so you can guess how many are real."

This left me so disturbed, I could not sleep for many nights. I hated Amit's profession; I hated the poverty in my country; I hated myself for being so blessed and fortunate. And my canvas was full of the colours of fire, and blood, and the deep colour of pain; and the syringe spewed forth foetuses of many shapes and sizes, but all throbbing, and all red, on to the blotched white background of hospital sheets.

A happy sojourn and a wedding

I NEVER got to do the design for the lobby of the five star hotel. I was told I had no sense of aesthetics. I wanted to do the project quite desperately, to prove to myself that I was a professional artist, but my idea of beauty conflicted with that of the management. They wanted to tell me what goes in the design, and I said that I believed that it was to be my design. I realized the futility of an argument, and resigned before even having joined.

Meanwhile, Amit began his post graduation and senior residency, and had no time for me or for himself. Sulking took away a good part of my day, and soon I was stagnating; so I decided to travel and see new places and people, particularly hill people. I had never lived in the hills, and always found them exhilarating. Naini Tal was the place I chose to be my base for I had a friend who belonged there and had a family and a house there too. The first time I saw Naini Tal, I thought it could not be real, it just had to be a huge painting; the beauty of the place took my breath away. The hills were green, a deep thick green, with a house here and a house there, with colourful flowers around and sloping red roofs; one could actually count the houses, and the locals identified each house by its owner's name. The scent in the air was almost tangible, and the lake was so green too, with ducks swimming across in a single file to the sunny side, and beautiful, colourful boats, idling in a neat row.

I occupied a room in my friend's house, for the family's hospitality would never let them accept rent from anyone, and as I lived there I learnt that it was the custom there. People living there would welcome any number of relatives and friends into their houses, especially in the summers when the plains were sweltering with heat, actually feeling offended if the guests even mentioned a hotel. They would happily feed them and load them with gifts when they were ready to leave, making them promise that they would come again soon. 'Wow', I thought, 'such generosity you cannot even think of in the city.'

I walked around Naini Tal everyday. It was such a sparkling clean town, I thought I could go without a change of clothes for a month. But I hardly painted. The boats on

the lake, the hills and the clouds, already looked like a painting, there was no point copying it. So I began to go to other small towns nearby, higher up in the hills, and in the beautiful valleys. Though every valley astounded me with the different colours of nature, and how a passing cloud would change all the colours, and the mountain breeze would make whole hillsides sway, it was the people there whom I transferred to my canvas. The chubby children with rosy cheeks, the old men and women with deeply grooved faces and crinkling eyes, rich skin, glowing with a permanent tan, young boys and girls, all were immensely beautiful. There seemed to be no obesity at all, and the people walked very straight with a particular gait, thrusting their shoulders before their bodies while going uphill, which I could not copy, though I felt it would cause less exhaustion for the weight of the body was spread a bit.

I guess one needed the practice of decades of hill climbing to achieve that gait. Also the way these people would squat on their haunches for hours, defying arthritis. I painted the women toiling in the fields, the men grazing sheep, and groups of older men and women squatting in a circle smoking their 'beedis'. Every few days, I needed to go to Naini Tal to restock my paints and canvases, and draw money from the bank. On this particular trip to Naini Tal, there were other guests visiting my friend's family, and I was requested to escort them to see the scenery from 'Snow View', a popular tourist point. All went well, but on the return journey, while walking back, I slipped and fell. There was a pony trotting down the slope with a toddler on its back, and as I rolled over to avoid coming in its path, I went flying down the hill to the road, some seven feet below, and fractured my leg. The bone snapped like a twig and the jarred end could be seen through the skin. I refused to get up and asked to be taken to a hospital immediately, but the guests knew nothing of the place, and would have had to walk back and get someone from my friend's house which would take an hour at least, while I was crying in pain. Luckily, an officer passed by in his jeep, and took me to the hospital. The doctor in charge saw the condition I was in, and admitted me at once to the ward. He said the senior doctor would come in some time. My companions went back to make a call to my parents, for I would certainly need my family by my side now.

Now began my most horrible, and painful experience in a hospital. Starting from the afternoon, I lay groaning and weeping in bed, it was sheer agony. My friend's relatives came back in the evening, getting me food that I could not eat anyway. But there was no sign of any senior doctor. Every time I requested, or screamed for a doctor, the junior resident came in and apologised, saying it would take some more time. Night fell, and there was still no senior doctor. Someone instructed the junior doctor to give

me a Pethidine injection, to help with the pain. I am sure it must have been given so that I would get some sleep and not disturb the other patients in the ward. I could not control my frustration, my anger, disappointment too, for what do you do in a hospital without a doctor to help you, when your problem is so obviously intense and urgent. I had never felt so helpless in my life.

Next morning, at 4.30 am, Dad arrived, having travelled by the night bus. Seeing him, I started to cry like a child. Even he could not believe that I was lying there unattended since the previous afternoon. He went chasing the staff that was available, and gave them a piece of his mind, but realized that nothing could be done till the senior doctor in charge of the hospital came in. But his investigations with the lower staff revealed a terrible truth: the doctor had spent the previous day writing reports of the 'Vasectomies' he had performed during last week, the incentive money he had disbursed, and other details.

We were stunned. How could he have been making reports when people like me were suffering? Infection could have set in and the delay in the treatment could have caused permanent damage to the fractured tissues; only doctors are supposed to know what complications could have arisen. And the civil surgeon of the district was busy writing reports of 'Vasectomies'?

By then, the junior doctor came again to tell me that I should go 'nil by mouth' (fasting), for my leg had to be plastered. I said, "How could this decision have been taken when the doctor has not even seen me?"

And he said, "Madam, I have been informing him. Please do not be upset, now-a-days it is so. It is mandatory to perform the stipulated number of Vasectomies every week, and if the report does not go on time, Sir can be suspended or transferred to some obscure place. We are living in an 'Emergency' you know. Even if we do not cure a single patient, our hundred Vasectomies have to be done, and duly reported."

I was shocked and I told him, "Why did you not tell me yesterday? I would have gone to the *Zanana* (ladies) hospital. At least I would have got some help."

"No madam, you would get no help, for the doctor there also has to do the required number of 'Tubectomies' or the sterilising of women, and make the reports. She has even less time than Sir. We are living in an Emergency you know. But don't worry, Sir will come at ten o'clock and plaster your leg and then you will be fine. I am sorry for the delay."

"Listen," I said, "the Emergency means that our country is under threat from people trying to disrupt the government,

or damage our administration; how does it mean that doctors have to only sterilise people and not treat the sick ones?”

“I am a government servant, Madam, I cannot comment. The people in Delhi are committed to reducing the growth rate of our country’s population, and we doctors have been given orders to sterilise a certain number of people every week, if we are to remain in service.”

“But how many women and men are there in these scantily populated hills of the productive age that you can sterilise?”

“We do not bother whether they are productive or not; we send out agents to collect men and get them here, and there is a financial incentive offered, too. They may get us eighty-year-old widowers, we don’t bother, we have to get the numbers, that is all.”

I thought of all the handsome men I had met in the tiny villages and towns in the hills, and wondered how many had succumbed to the meagre financial lure and lost their ability to procreate, their liberty to procreate. And how many, like me, had been denied timely treatment in their illness, so that the doctors could fill the files. I had seen the ordeal of getting a sick person to hospital from a village; he would be carried on someone’s shoulders till the bus stand, to wait in agony till the bus arrived, then gone through the arduous bus journey, with head banging bumps and losing his balance on the steep curves, then to be carried a further two kilometres up the hill to the hospital, or, if one could afford it, hire a ‘Dandee’ in which four men carried one passenger on their shoulders, only to toss painfully in bed, because the doctors were busy with their Vasectomies and reports.

I was ultimately wheeled into the X-ray room, and with a wet X-ray to guide the surgeon, into the OT where I passed out under the chloroform. As I was coming out of the ether, I dreamed of spraying the ministers in Delhi and the doctors in Naini Tal with bullets from my syringe.

Some three days later, when my pain was bearable, Dad hired a taxi to take me back home, where I would get better care and rest. Then Amit took over my treatment. He cried buckets having missed me, then the best Orthopaedic did my plaster over again, using better and lighter material. Then Amit announced that as soon as I was well, we both were getting married. This delighted me for I had been really missing Amit. I was ready to move in with him, plaster and all, but we were very orthodox back then. I had tons of questions about the Emergency but was told not to ask; even our freedom of speech had been compromised.

Being immobile turned out to be a good thing. I dreamed a lot. About the new phase of my life with Amit, how much I was going to love him, and also the logistics of the wedding ceremony. Both our parents were planning huge parties, and large gifts of jewellery and dresses, but the Emergency was playing spoilsport for them, there being a restriction on the number of guests one could invite to a wedding. It was dictatorial. Anyway, Amit decided upon a simple wedding, and requested our folks to spend their money on helping us to set up our house, for we had decided to live alone, and not with the family as was the custom. Three months went by in a dream. I was convalescing, so sarees were being brought home for me to choose, ditto with jewellery, and after the wedding ceremony we got the most pleasant surprise. We were taken to our new home, a two bedroom house, with small verandas in front and behind, bought for us by our kind parents, furnished beautifully, with a well equipped kitchen, a study, and a studio upstairs for me. We were delighted, and emotionally overcome. Then came the bigger surprise. Our friends had pooled in to buy a brand new shining motorcycle for Amit; this filled us with warmth and gratitude. God was so kind.

We didn't need to go on a honeymoon, for we were to be living alone anyway. We moved into our new house just after the wedding. Heaven had to be the size of our apartment. No bliss could have exceeded what we felt there. Amit and me and no one else. Time flew. Burnt meals, semi-cooked 'dal', boiled potatoes with salt, fruits and cookies sent in by our parents, eggs never fried right, these were the treats one ate in heaven. Music and dance. All over the floor, all over the bed, on the open veranda at midnight, sex happened all the time. The hero working shifts at the hospital, the heroine sulking at home; heroine going off to meet parents, hero boiling in frustration; and then making up on the dining table with more sex, what else? These were the rituals of heaven.

When Amit handed me his first stipend, I felt as rich as a queen, and spent the whole day wondering how I was going to spend it; though by evening I realized I wouldn't have much to spend, after the electricity and phone bills, the maid and petrol, and other small stuff. I told that to Amit, and he said, "Ok, pay the maid and the other bills, and we'll simply have sex for breakfast, sex for lunch, and, guess what—sex for dinner. As for food, we can have it over the weekend at our parents." I told him, "This is what everyone in India does when there isn't enough food, and if there is no money for food, there is no money for contraceptives, so the population multiplies, and there is again less food. I'm sure that is why we are having Emergency in the country. So let's eat over the week and have sex on weekends." And my

paintings began to depict physical intimacy, in the blending of the colours, the blending of the forms; the piston in the syringe moving smoothly to pour out pictures full of love—deep love, passionate love, craving for love, dying for love, from orange to purple, pink and red, all hues of love.

This was the beginning of a new life with Amit.

Proudly, a small name plate, designed and painted by me, was fixed on the gate of our house saying ‘Dr Amit Biswas MBBS.’

‘Mrs Anita Biswas Artist and Designer.’

After this we became famous. People who had looked through us before came visiting us, saying, “Oh! Your husband is a doctor. So noble. Even my son is working hard to be a doctor; maybe he can come sometimes to get guidance and help from your husband.” Another one said, “You are just like my own daughter; count on me whenever you need any help; I am so proud my daughter’s husband is such a nice doctor.” Then people began to come over to consult Amit, and he did not refuse for that was his profession. People refused to understand that our house was not a consulting room; they believed a doctor could be consulted anywhere, anytime. So we added a sliding panel on the nameplate which said “IN” when Amit was free, and “OUT” when he was not. This helped a lot. We had to get a trolley on which Amit could examine his patients, and soon they began to insist that Amit accept some payment, for they said, “We will not feel comfortable otherwise; after all, how many times can we have a free consultation?”

Now Amit was earning more, but had very little free time. When I grumbled, he said, “These folks are enriching my experience, and besides, isn’t it a doctor’s duty to help the sick and suffering? Remember that doctor in Naini Tal? How bad you felt then.” That was that then. I mean only a fool would marry a doctor, a cricketer or a filmstar, and expect privacy in her life. For that one had to marry a shopkeeper.

Then a month later something weird happened, which made us feel as if we were members of some underworld gang, or extortion outfit. A man came cycling up to our gate and asked for Dr Amit Biswas. He handed Amit an envelope, and turned to leave at once. Amit shouted to him to stop, but he said he was in a hurry, and it was his job to only deliver and leave.

“At least tell us who has sent you,” Amit said, and he replied, “You will come to know. I cannot stop and I cannot talk to you.” And he cycled away. Crisp hundred rupee notes slipped out of the envelope, to our shock, as we wondered if there had been a mistake, or whether we were being set up in some income-tax scoop.

“I don’t even earn enough to have to pay income-tax,” Amit said, and pondered over the mystery. We worried what damage could happen to Amit’s career, for it had to be shady money, considering the way it was remitted. Would Amit be asked to do something unethical, in return for this money? No, he would never do that, come what may; there was some law and order in the country, in spite of the Emergency. He would see his friend’s uncle who was high up in the police department. But first, we had to discover where this money had come from. The envelope was put on the mock mantelpiece over a mock fireplace. Houses at the time still made these decorative features in memory of real fireplaces, and we waited for someone to unravel the mystery.

That happened soon enough. While walking in the park next morning, a well groomed man came up and said, “Namaskar, Doctor Sahab, I am Dr Sarthi from Perfect Pathology Lab. I hope my man reached you yesterday. For a beginner, you are doing very well. We will pay you our respects regularly, and count on your co-operation.” Amit’s face was a picture of surprise and shock, but even as he began to protest, the man hurried away, whispering, “See you another time, we have to be cautious you know.” Amit decided to visit his Lab and thrash out things, now that we knew where the envelope had come from. That he did, and continued to go to the Lab for several days, only to be told, “Dr Sarthi is not in.” We just could not understand.

“Then who is in charge when he is not there? I wish to meet whoever is the manager here,” said Amit.

“Right now no one can see you, we will contact you later,” he was told, and that was that. Anyway, one morning again, Mr Sarthi met Amit in the park. “Please do not come to the lab again, you can tell me your problem now, but hurry, I don’t wish to be seen with you; its the Emergency and the place is full of policemen in plain clothes.”

“But I have done nothing illegal,” Amit said. “Our transaction according to the rules is illegal. Any cuts in the medical profession are illegal.”

“What cuts? Every time a patient comes for investigations to our lab, we automatically pay twenty per cent to the prescribing doctor. All labs and X-Ray clinics, all have the same rate.”

“But I never referred anyone to you or anyone else.”

“That is not necessary. Your signature on the prescription is enough.”

“But I do not want to receive the cuts. That is the reason I have been visiting your lab. I want to return the money. I am still studying for my specialisation; I just help some neighbours who come in. Please take back the money you have sent, I will not use it; and don't send me anything again.”

“That is not possible; our accounting system has been set like that—all doctors get their due, none more and none less. And I shall not be meeting you ever again, and please never mention my name to anyone. If you happen to see me, ignore me. Goodbye.”

And he was gone. Amit and I were more perturbed now. Amit carefully brought up the topic with a senior, and was told that it was the universally accepted kickback; it was part of the system, and why was Amit trying to fight it. Months went by, with more patients, more investigations, and more envelopes coming in. How long would they last on the mantelpiece? Soon the currency poured into our wallets. It spelt the difference between straining the means and having ample funds, between being neatly dressed and being elegantly dressed, between perpetual vegetarianism and frequent fish meals, between an occasional coke and an occasional beer; major changes for a small salary earner. The voice of conscience is a very soft voice, when we begin to ignore it, gradually whimpering away to silence. It is loud when we are content, and we can afford to listen to it without fastening any belts. It is a really loyal pet. My easels and paints were so costly too.

Meanwhile, the Emergency simply dragged on, bringing fresh assaults everyday on different parts of society. There were pictures in the newspapers of a particular civil servant, who began to be known as the ‘bulldozer man’, wearing thick specs, bulldozing a cluster of hutments one day, and bulldozing an established market on another; ordering people to break down the front of their shops and make them all identical, with identically painted boards, and people quietly doing it. Was he trying to plant date palms in Siberia? How can you make Indian cities look like London? Everything was stupefying—the worst was the lack of the liberties that we had been used to. We were cautious about what we spoke and to whom—anyone could be an informer, or one could just be misrepresented. This was not our India, this was a paranoid country, very alien to our culture, where we were used to calling in unknown people for a cup of tea, saying, “How can you go without some hospitality?” Something terrible was going on. And just when we began to think that it would never end, there was a huge uprising, and the government saw better sense and the

Emergency ended. Our spirits soared, and how. We began to breathe the air of freedom, to laugh aloud, to cheer after so long. We were not richer, but we definitely lived in a brighter country now.

The media went berserk with rejuvenated freedom; my paintings too acquired a whole new colour scheme. I began to experiment with absurd shapes and forms, stark colours, and enjoyed the brightness of white like never before. And the paintings started to sell well, too. I would share exhibitions with other new painters, and often sold a couple of pieces at a good price. I learnt that the higher the price you ask for a painting, the higher the interest it generates in the viewers, and the quicker it sells, but it should be good too, and ultimately it is the viewer's perception and aesthetic intelligence that decides what he will buy. But I was encouraged, and happy. I made many friends among the artists' fraternity. Most evenings were now spent meeting them over coffee, frequent browsing at various venues, inspiring conversation. I was loving my life.

Meanwhile, Amit was completing his post graduation, specialising as an orthopaedic surgeon, not such a popular stream then, for any surgeon could set a fracture, so it was believed. He was assisting his senior, Dr Subrot, who had been his mentor for two years. Dr Subrot trusted Amit enough to allow him to do complete surgeries in Dr Subrot's name, thus gaining immense experience and expertise. Socially too, Dr Subrot liked having Amit with him on almost all occasions—family functions, medical seminars, or weekend gatherings. After Amit cleared the exams and was officially given the degree of MD Orthopaedics, Dr Subrot invited us to a very special weekend party, for now we were one of them and Amit would be practising independently. I had just conceived, and did not feel fit enough to go. Even my mother had advised me not to venture out much from home, "Caution," she said, "is better than regret later." And with such a precious cargo, even I was not taking any chances. Amit was eager to please his Subrot Sir, but I declined, and he had to go all alone. He returned next morning, and was in such a daze, I was shocked. I nagged

him to tell me what had happened, but he was reluctant, though by afternoon he could not hold it any longer, and blurted out, "You won't believe me Anita, what happened at the party. I went with Subrot Sir to a huge bungalow far from the city, with lush green lawns, landscaped gardens, stunning patches of flowers, and a private swimming pool. The top doctors of the city were there—surgeons, cardiologists, gynaecologists, neurologists—I was overawed. Some of them I knew. Sir introduced me to the others, and kept telling everyone that I have a very charming and talented wife who is an artist. I blushed. Everyone was disappointed that you were not with

me. I told them you were in the family way, and they congratulated me. Music played softly and drinks kept coming on with loads of rich snacks, the kind I have never tasted before. There was lots of joking and laughter and the drinks were loosening up the talk, and even vulgar jokes were being shared. All the doctors were laughing. The same people who are so rigid and upright otherwise, were having fun like teenagers at a college social, but I thought everyone needs to let their hair down sometimes.

“Slowly the music got louder and faster, everyone was dancing like mad, partners were changing, steps were erratic, there was more fumbling and fondling than dancing. Then around midnight, two waiters came in carrying trays with some capsules and some pills, and served them around.

Some guests took pills, some took capsules, and some took a combination of both. I pretended to swallow a pill; I dared not take anything for I did not know what it may be. Then a huge screen lit up, and a pornographic movie was projected with a powerful projector. By then I think all the guests were very high. I don't think any of them were in their senses. It was really weird; I was both stunned and shocked, and could not believe it was happening, or that I was a part of it. Whenever Sir passed me by, he would say, 'Cheer up man, loosen up and enjoy.' Slowly they all began to take off their clothes—all of them—men and women. Like the actors in the film, most men had erections and it was a complete orgy. One could not see who was making out with whom, and nobody bothered either. Some couples were having sex on sofas, some on the floor, some walked into the swimming pool, completely nude, and many of them were doing threesomes and some foursomes. Seeing them in the throes of so much unnatural passion, devilish energy pervading them all, I became disgusted. Nobody was aware of my presence anymore, so I sneaked out into the hall, and surprisingly, the hall showed no sign of what was happening inside. I reclined on a sofa and soon fell asleep. I had drunk many times more than I had ever drunk. I woke up when a number of waiters trooped in carrying trays with cups and teapots. I realized the movie had been turned off. When I peeped into the party hall, folks were lying asleep, semi-dressed or nude, as may have been the situation when they passed out ultimately. For a moment, that scene reminded me of our mortuary with bodies of different shapes and sizes lying immobile. A bell went off, and I walked out as they began to awake and pull themselves together, but within an hour they all came to the hall freshened and spruced up, impeccable pictures of dignity. It was amazing. The bonhomie persisted, and compliments were passed about the drinks and snacks, and the party generally. They were all fresh again.

“Sir said the party was very well organised. Breakfast was quickly served in the hall, which all ate greedily, and speedily took their leave. On the way back, I confessed to Sir that I had not been comfortable, but he said, ‘Amit, we doctors are under immense pressure twenty-four hours a day, every day. When you reach my level of practice you will understand. Even while sleeping, we are alert—emergencies happen round the clock. Once in a while, we too need to unwind, to get some recreation. The tougher the pressures in our lives, the tougher the measures to relieve them. We have to totally lose ourselves, to become fresh again. If the release is not there, our mental faculties will slow down, reducing our performance professionally. And permanently living under pressure will make us sick. Senior professionals everywhere

keep finding smarter ways to unwind. It’s normal, son. Relax.’ This is an account, Anita, of last night’s party, and I regret that I ever went. I am feeling disgraced already.”

“You are not guilty. Relax and come for lunch.” But I was far from relaxed; actually I was terribly apprehensive. Very, very apprehensive. It was a crucial period of my life. I was expecting my first baby, blooming as an artist, and my husband was at the threshold of a promising career. But something changed. Amit changed. Gone was the simple, ambitious young man, gone were the noble aspirations; he looked like a cub who had had the first taste of blood, and who knew nothing would be enough again. I could feel the shift from a good healing doctor to a famous, prosperous, successful and renowned surgeon that the new Amit looked to be in the future. I was not comfortable with this new person, but I was tied to him for life, and I loved him. Loved him more than I could ever love myself, had always loved him, and would always love him.

The pregnancy that had delighted me, now gave me nightmares; the syringe squirted embryos, red and palpitating, and I imagined Amit with various women, fondling them; it was terrible. Amit noticed it and I shared my demons with him; I guess I had forgotten that Amit loved me as much as I loved him. He took great care of me now, rubbing the back of my neck to relax me, and scratching my back to help me sleep. He generally spent all spare time with me so I never felt neglected. And the human mind is so vulnerable, a little sweetness takes so much bitterness away, while small doubts can create so much hatred. With Amit’s arms around me, I was really reassured. Amit said this baby was very lucky for him for he was getting surgery cases almost everyday, and making lots of money. I reminded him of his resolve to treat poor patients free, but he said, “That will come later, darling; I need to save loads of money to begin my own practice, my own clinic; after all, how long can I remain

Subrot Sir's assistant?" I knew then that my Amit had grown too big, and the old one was never coming back. Money and success drove him now. He wanted to be like the very successful doctors he had met at the party; he wanted to be a part of their circle. I understood that, and despite all the conflicts in my mind, accepted him this way too. After all, as he said, "I would be enjoying the goodies too."

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