



To Be Myself

by Deepa Shah

How often for the sake of a surface quiescence, or because of pusillanimity, we live a lie in our relationships with others. Living a lie does not necessarily refer to hypocrisy. It also hints at a passive acceptance of exploitation. Life chugs on and then fate forces your hand. You stand bemused in a benighted place and then, to your horror, you see the hostile faces closing in upon you, tightening the circle of danger as they draw nearer and nearer. At that point you may make a dash for safety or close your eyes and bow your head, bleating plaintively to be slaughtered.

“How selfish can you be,

Pratibha?” Her mother reacted sharply, sitting up on the *takhat* where she had been, she said, trying to sleep off a headache. But that day, Pratibha did not enquire even perfunctorily.: “Do you need an aspirin. Mother sat cross legged, an elbow resting on her lap and the fingers delicately massaging the forehead and temples where, she said, the pain was located. She continued in a scolding tone, her dark blue *sari* “clashing garishly with the canary yellow and shocking pink checked sheet which covered the *takhat* that served as Kishan’s bed at night: “There is Bina who has to be married and settled and Kishan is still doing his

intermediate, and here you are, thinking of getting married and that too to that slob of a Prakash. Heed my words, daughter, he merely eyes your salary and wants a working wife to supplement his income.”

As usual, Pratibha kept quiet. She was sitting on a floor cushion, peeling potatoes over a newspaper spread out in front of her and then immersing the skinned ones in a vessel filled with water, prior to slicing them. It was evening and she was making preparations for dinner. “Daughter”—why did that word jar on her ears? Pratibha thought sadly that mother had long ago relinquished the privilege of using that

endearing term of address for her, but this realisation in itself had come recently to Pratibha. Mother was a shrewd tactician and with that word she had tried to balance the asperity of the reprimand. Pratibha's silence assured her that her point had been taken and, groaning loudly, she lowered her heavy frame on to the *takhat*, which creaked politely in protest. Mother of course blamed her avoirdupois on some latent malignancy which the quacks—most of the doctors were charlatans, she said—had not been able to diagnose. Mother must have been an attractive woman once, but adverse circumstances had crowded out all the gentleness, and a selfish shrewdness had stepped into the vacuum, leaving her a rather slovenly creature with strands of peppered hair hanging about her face and flinty eyes that glinted balefully, darting here and there with the swiftness of a snake's flickering tongue, not misusing much.



Seven days ago Pratibha had begun a subtle transformation, dating from her last meeting with Prakash and now, she felt, she had changed completely. In these seven days she had reflected seriously on Prakash, mother, Bina, Kishan and herself, but most of all on herself. This was a novelty because all these years she had never found time for Pratibha. The transmutation within her had made her vision keener, her senses more alert and both seemed to be now in collusion to inveigle her to react overtly to things that impinged on her life. For example, she noted, disapprovingly, Bina buffing her nails, instead of helping with the domestic chores, and mother lost in a novel, her headache a necessary expedient to avoid assisting Pratibha. What was more startling was that this incisive perception, which had initially come in spurts had over these seven days become the weft and woof of her nature. Pratibha often wondered how such momentous changes had not been noticed by her family members. Pratibha could feel a new vigour and confidence coursing through her

veins and then oozing out of every pore of her being—why, her very hair smelt of the change, her eyes reflected it, but no one was aware of it. Why? Maybe because they were accustomed to ignoring her—no, taking her for granted.

“Prakash and I are planning to get married”, a new Pratibha had remarked tentatively that day, but mother and Bina had thought it was the old Pratibha speaking and, accordingly, they had bristled and sneered. “He is so ugly.” Nine-teen year old Bina wrinkled up her nose in disgust as she applied the first coat of nail polish. “Positively repulsive”, she added, admiring her long fingernails. Pratibha looked at her sister fleetingly—petite and fair with light coloured eyes and shoulder length hair. There was something unusual about her appearance, but more weird than attractive, which made people look at her twice and this had ingrained in her a self-fixation. Bina thought she was a replica of a popular heroine of the silver screen. She had just completed her BA and had enrolled for a postgraduate course with the predetermined goal of getting married as soon as an opportunity came her way. “No career for my Bina, she is just not cut out for it”, mother often said. “She is so fragile and pretty,” Pratibha let the effrontery of the damsel go unparried, but didn't forget it. It seemed she was carefully, deliberately, collecting data, but Bina didn't consider the lack of response from her sister unusual.

It still rankled when mother talked of Bina's marriage. When mother had first remarked: “You must start looking for a boy for Bina”, Pratibha had been terribly hurt. She had, till then, simply surmised that mother just didn't think about such things, some people were like that. Of course, usually mothers weren't. But why had mother never thought of getting Pratibha married? “The day Bina is settled and Kishan secures a job, my responsibilities will be over”, she was heard saying, as she sat gossiping with neighbours and visitors.

“Whose responsibility am I?” Pratibha

had then asked herself dismally, as she prepared tea and snacks for the guests. At Bina's age she had shouldered the family burden and now mother talked so glibly about “her” responsibilities. “So I am like a stray dog, unowned, uncared for”, she had concluded, wryly. Didn't mother ever think that Pratibha would also like to have a home and family of her own or at least a separate existence in which her mother, sister and brother did not figure? Apparently, she didn't. Mother had this strange ambivalence towards Pratibha, her eldest child. It dated from 15 years before, when her father's untimely demise had compelled her to take up a job. Her BA results had just been declared and she had done brilliantly. “Learn typing and we will adjust you in the office on compassionate grounds, as there is no earning member in your family”, her father's sympathetic boss had told the thin, serious girl who had approached him regarding her father's provident fund and insurance money.

The benevolent gentleman had later, with some thought, enquired, when Pratibha had come with her application form and attested marksheets: “Is your mother educated?” She was, and could easily have been assigned the same job. Mother was no fool and with her native perspicacity she had grasped the fact even before the boss had thought of it. But mother was a confection of mental and physical lethargy and when the boss had personally visited her and broached the subject, she had become the prostrate, grieving widow and the embarrassed man had beaten a hasty retreat. Pratibha had joined the office on probation and once she had secured a recognised secretarial diploma, she was confirmed in her job.

“You are like a son.” How dewy eyed mother: had been when Pratibha had handed over her first pay packet, and if she had felt any compunction she hastily stifled it. “You are robbing her of her youth.” Severe remonstrations would sometimes escape the subliminal, in an unguarded moment. “Why didn't you take up the job?” she would be quizzed and

when this happened mother retaliated in her inimitable style in order to exonerate herself, by cossetting Etna; once, she had been grateful for her elder daughter's competence, but gradually her attitude had stiffened and she had accepted Pratibha's favours as a right.

“Prakash and I are planning to get married...” she had announced with great aplomb, that evening, to mother and Bina and yet why had she made the announcement, when she knew all was over between them? Mother had often averred in the past that it was her working status that had elicited those overtures from him. Pratibha had seriously studied

herself in the mirror—she was painfully thin, with a narrow face, wellshaped nose and lips, but small deepset eyes with dark smudges under them. She wore her hair parted down the middle and then gathered together in a tight plait, making her face appear more drawn and pinched, and yet there was an innocence and vulnerability which 15 years of tapping away at the typewriter and preparing files had not obliterated. Yes, she understood her mother's implication—she was not good looking but maybe Prakash liked her for herself, she had thought—such things happened, didn't they? But the last and final meeting had proved that mother was right—not that Pratibha hadn't suspected

it, she had only refused to admit it

But in this past one week she had dispassionately arranged portions of her life in heaps and examined them telescopically and she admitted to herself, grudgingly, that even deluding joys should be treasured because happiness is a rare commodity. How jubilant and flustered Pratibha had been when Prakash, an employee in the office adjoining hers, had shown interest in her. Something dormant had been caressed into wakefulness, like the unfolding of a flower, and she had savoured the inexplicable bliss in the thought that someone loved her, cared for her. She had brought him home and mother had realised that unless the



nonsense was scotched, it would usher cataclysmic changes into her household. Mother and Prakash were twin souls, and they had warily eyed each other's selfish motives, like slavering hounds, stalking from opposite ends a lone rabbit frisking about, happily unaware, in the green.

Pratibha and Prakash had been going out for a year, their courting a tepid affair, limited to meeting in a small restaurant after office or to Prakash escorting her home. Last month, Prakash had issued an ultimatum. "Either we get married or let's forget all this", he had said as they sat, sipping tea. She had wondered then, as on other occasions, if life with Prakash wouldn't be too difficult because other people's views, obligations, compulsions, were concealed behind impregnable walls, as far as he was concerned. But she had tried to cajole him with the indulgence of a woman in love, explaining gently: "Mother, Bina and Kishan..."

"Well it's up to you to decide", he had said brusquely. Pratibha had, in past discussions, said she would marry Prakash, but keep her job in order to support her family.

"My family won't like that", he had stated peremptorily and yet she knew he would like her to carry on working. "With both of us working, we can have a better life", he had told her casually once. In the following days Prakash had not broached the topic again, but there was the subtle reticence of the aggrieved in his manner. Then, a week ago, had come the final showdown. She had made her way to the little teashop; it was a windy day and she walked, bundled in a shawl, slightly stooped at the waist, as though to rebut the unfriendly wind tearing at her clothes. Prakash was already there. Normally he was peevish at her lack of punctuality, but on that particular day he greeted her quietly, but refused to meet her eye. He was a thickset, dark man, with blubbery features and a big mole on his right cheek from which sprouted inchlong strands of coarse, black hair. He was given to

guffawing loudly and, very often, Pratibha would wince selfconsciously as people craned their necks to stare at him. He was an exhibitionist, who liked to make his presence felt when in the company of equals and inferiors. But on that particular day he was quiet. Pratibha didn't notice his silence for some time and then it struck her—something was wrong.

"Prakash", she began anxiously. There was a pause and, then Prakash told her bluntly: "I am getting married." "What?" It seemed a crushing weight had been put on her and she was unable to breathe.



"I have chosen a girl."

"You have chosen a girl — Prakash, you?"

"I mean my family", he hastily corrected himself. "'She has a good job and is pretty.'" Pratibha might have pleaded, but "pretty" and "good job" stopped her. If it was simply a choice based on weighing looks and job, the other girl was welcome to Prakash. Prakash realised his gaffe; he was expecting a whining woman, not this dignified, aloof individual, who picked up her bag, politely said, "Goodbye", and stalked out. "It was your fault, you and your family", his words had tried to stop

her, at least draw her into an argument, but Pratibha, had kept walking away, carrying in her mind the image of Prakash nervously twisting the hair in the mole, as he said: "I have chosen..." She had gone home late that day, sat on the parapet of the temple complex and tried to confront reality. What did Prakash mean to her? "Be frank", she told herself cruelly and then she accepted brokenly: "He was my hope for the future. Someone through whom I would have my own life and existence good or bad." In the sacred precincts of the temple, where by ringing bells, offering money and

flowers, a begging humanity was asking favours of a whimsical god, a new Pratibha was taking birth. That was seven days ago.

Pratibha picked up the newspaper by its edges and screwed it into a ball to be thrown in the dustbin in the kitchen; after that, she collected the peeled and sliced potatoes and as she was entering the kitchen, she threw out loudly and firmly: "But I am going to marry Prakash". Her words pricked the bubble of complacency which her mother and Bina had jerrybuilt over themselves, after delivering their disparaging remarks. Mother was compelled to put down the novel, sit up

again and resume massaging her forehead, while Bina, who had applied the first coating of nail varnish and was now wafting her hands to dry it, deigned to listen in and aid mother, if necessary. She was her mother's true daughter—only loyal to herself and her interests.

“God will never forgive you if you forsake your widowed mother and orphan sister and brother.” God was so conveniently available to take up cudgels for people like mother—god had been so unfair in making her a widow, and yet it was god's grace that Pratibha had landed a job, and it was god's will that she provide for the family and god would punish Pratibha if she flouted his will.



“Hell, this house is hell, what with you women constantly bickering.” Kishan had heard his mother's cantankerous harangue as he entered the room and threw his school books on the table at which Bina was sitting. He had Pratibha's sensitive looks, only they had a more relaxed air. He was neatly dressed in jeans and a printed shirt. Before following Pratibha into the kitchen, he looked at himself in a small mirror above the table, and ran his fingers through his wavy hair in emulation of a young hero riding the crest of success.

“Didi, give me Rs 10.” But Pratibha didn't answer; she was pottering about in the kitchen, preoccupied with her thoughts. Mother was right, she conceded, about Prakash; but who would tell her some truths about herself? All these years Pratibha had slogged, oblivious to unfairness, insensitive to her own sacrifice because she had felt that at some stage she would break free and live for herself. With her inborn naivete she had even hoped for divine intervention in the shaping of her destiny and then Prakash had appeared, providing some glimmerings of hope, which had gleamed from afar, never coming nearer with greater radiance. Now with Prakash definitely out, her future looked bleak, not that she was heartbroken over him. But then Pratibha had reached down within herself and

discovered treasuretroves of courage and fortitude. A second self emerged, guiding her and telling her that if others could not be instrumental in changing her lifestyle, she would work towards altering it herself. No one had even guessed about her parting of ways with Prakash and yet she had made the dramatic announcement. Of course mother's and Bina's reactions were as expected. Pratibha didn't speak, but within her, forces were mustering. Her hard toil, her lost youth, had distilled into vitriolic acid drops, bottled up within her.

“You are so stingy, Didi”, Kishan's petulant tone uncorked the repressed emotions. Pratibha carefully put down the oil container she was about to tilt over the utensil on the gas stove, when Kishan said those words. The crisp sound of a hard slap followed and Pratibha screamed with a shrillness her tone had never known : “Get out, don't dare talk to me like that again.” Kishan was stunned. What had happened to Didi ? The eyes sparking anger, face contorted with disgust—that was just not Didi. Bina and mother had also heard the crack and exchanged a swift glance. As Kishan rushed out, face flushed, one hand covering the punished cheek, mother abandoned her perch on the *takhat* and confronted Pratibha. Her hair was dishevelled and the loose end of the *sari* had fallen and trailed behind her.

“How dare you hit my son !” Pratibha was stirring the potatoes to brown them and she didn't even bother to look at her. Mother's face was contorted with fury; she could have grabbed handfuls of Pratibha's hair in her hand and slapped her to oblivion with the other. Pratibha's mind seized only “my son” and played around it, wondering : “Who do I belong to ?” Weren't these “mys” and “yours” setting up barricades between Pratibha and the rest of the family ? As she sprinkled spices, over the potatoes she once again reminded herself that she had ceased being mother's daughter the day she had refused to bear the onus of the family. Pratibha's silence incensed mother even more. “I have never hit my son. What gave you the right to

slap him ? Speak !” And then Pratibha broke her self imposed silence. She covered the cooking vegetable, lowered the gas and, turning to her mother, she said coolly : “Let's go to the other room.”

Mother obeyed, disconcerted by the coldness in Pratibha's eyes. And yet there was a film of moisture in them, as though a few droplets would ooze out if she screwed up her eyes tightly. Bina was, unconcernedly applying the second coat of varnish; she inhabited the outskirts of the family's traumas and the imminent maelstrom didn't touch her, she thought, so she remained detached. A window was open, just to the side of the table, beside the door. Pratibha, with long, purposeful strides, walked upto Bina, picked up the bottle of frosted mauve nail polish and flung it out of the window—it was her second overt gesture of retaliation against life which had tried to browbeat her, through overbearing relatives, into becoming a shadow—literally and metaphorically—an undernourished, underweight girl, no woman, who had never realised that time had purloined her youth and left her yoked to the family—living and toiling for its survival: and growth.

“Didi !” Bina wailed truculently.

“And, *tnemsahib*, do us the honour of listening to what is being said. Sit down, mother.” Pratibha pointed to the *takhat*. Mother was bristling but Pratibha's confident, imperious stance had made her wary.

“Mother, you asked me a minute ago what gave me the right to slap Kishan; well, it was a right engendered by the responsibility of feeding and educating him. Do you understand ?” How gentle her tone was and yet the impact had the sharpness of a knife's edge, Pratibha stood in the centre of the room, a towering personality in her newfound confidence. Where was the self effacing Pratibha with her apologetic smile and obliging mannerisms ? There was an elegance about her, which Prakash had noticed seven days ago in the teashop. Mother of course was

furious. Was that chit of a girl throwing her weight around because of the piddling sum she brought home, with which they could barely make ends meet—and she said as much.

“Piddling sum ! Ha !” — was this the same Pratibha who had lived with them all these years— “Then why didn’t you take up a job to supplement my meagre salary ?” she asked phlegmatically. “Many mothers work. Look at Ramvati, our maidservant, she washes dishes to support her family.”

“And, you slut, you would prefer to see your mother a maidservant. A curse on you !” Very adroitly, mother manoeuvred the conversation on to a different track. But today Pratibha felt herself shedding the years of inhibition which had shackled her to the household, while mother’s awesome figure had guarded over her; with this acceptance the umbilical cord was finally severed.

“Don’t be ridiculous, mother,” she countered politely, “and stop wallowing in self pity”, she added on seeing the glint of tears in mother’s eyes.

“It’s all because of that ugly toad of a man”, Bina interposed pertly, “and why did you throw my...”

“Shut up”, Pratibha turned on her and Bina flinched at her ferocity.

“Of course it’s because of that ugly man. You think he loves you ? See yourself in the mirror. It’s your job that is beautiful”, mother twitted her, dipping each word in poison before discharging it. But Pratibha was unperturbed by the rancour in her voice, as she manipulated her temper to suit her words.

“You are right, mother, Prakash wants to marry me for my money, just as you want me to remain single for the same.”

“It is your duty to support your sister and...”

“Yes, it was my duty, but now I have completed it.”

“Completed !” Incredulously, mother repeated Pratibha’s words like a parrot. “Bina has to be married and Kishan...”

“Mother, how is it that you ask me to

remain single in order to settle Bina ? I have educated her and today I am doing my last duty by her.”



Kishan had returned, after roaming around desultorily for some time. He was upset at Didi’s anger. He loved and respected her and Pratibha too had a soft corner for Kishan and she already regretted her harshness towards him, but it was imperative under the circumstances. How often he had marked the weariness on Didi’s face when she came back from office. “Didi, when I get a job, you can rest at home, like mother”, he had promised and Pratibha had been touched. She realised that was his concept of happiness for her, something that he could give her. Now he stood on the threshold—the atmosphere was bedevilled with rancour and promises of more unpleasant exposures. Pratibha was reaching out for her bag, old and wornout because she never had the money to buy a new one. It was hanging forlornly from a nail, above the *takhat*.

“Didi, I am sorry”, Kishan went up to Pratibha.

“And I am sorry for slapping you”, she said gently, “but then you are my little brother”, and she ruffled his hair affectionately. Bina and mother were thankful for the shift in Pratibha’s mood. They must now strive to keep the pendulum moving the other side by mollifying her.

“Beti.”

“Didi.” Bina and mother simultaneously tried to placate her. They had, surprisingly, still not fathomed the depth, of Pratibha’s disenchantment with them and .explained it merely as a passing phase in her life, like utitiraely, cyclonic rains.

“Pratibha has to be separated from that man”, mother thought.

“Didi is really getting senile”, Bina decided smugly, and then she remembered the nail polish and got up to retrieve it, if possible, but Pratibha was at her side and very roughly she pushed her back on to the seat. She placed before Bina a

completed form, requiring merely her signature.

“Sign here”, she pointed to a space where an X had been pencilled in. “From next month, you will join my office as a junior typist. From tomorrow you will start typing classes.”

“I won’t”, Bina replied dourly, and then lashed out viciously: “You are jealous of me, my youth and looks. Do you think I’ll work in your office, with you? You want me to become a snivelling doormat like yourself.” Pratibha heard her out, while each ‘ word hammered away at the monolithic family structure, chipping and fragmenting it, causing each piece to fall away and make its own destiny.

“Yes, dear, and after the speech”, Pratibha said simply, “sign the form. I have recommended you to my boss.” Pratibha had always been a sincere worker, respected and sympathised with by her colleagues and friends, who appreciated her gumption, but also felt she was being exploited. “And don’t worry, Bina, you won’t have to work with me because by the end of this month I’ll be leaving for Nagpur. I have received transfer orders.” Pratibha’s diligence had stood her in good stead and within seven days the almost impossible had been done as friends and wellwishers helped her escape the cage in which she had imprisoned her life. Mother sat down heavily on the *takhat*, next to Kishan, who sat, head bowed, looking and feeling miserable. Pratibha let the information filter in—the doormat, the ugly daughter, had snapped the moorings and they were now adrift.

“Didi, did you find a job for me too?” Kishan asked innocently, and for the first time Pratibha’s heart ached. She realised that his predicament was similar to hers, when their father had expired. How helpless she had felt then as mountains of trouble collapsed over her, not big boulders, but raining a fine spray of mud, which filled the eyes, nose, mouth, and suffocated one slowly, agonisingly. She went up to him and put her arm around him, “Foolish boy, I’ll never desert you. You’ll never have to

work before your time as long as I am alive”, and then her tone changed, it became matter of fact. “I’ll send you the money for Kishan’s education. He could stay with me, but, of course, mother, you won’t allow that. Bina will defray the household expenses and I am always there in case of an emergency. In course of time, after Kishan has secured a job, Bina can find a husband, not a toad like Prakash, and settle down.”

“But when are you marrying Prakash?” mother wanted to know.

“Never”, she replied cryptically.

“Then why are you leaving us?” mother demanded. Her fragile mind scrambled frantically down the dark tunnel of hopelessness, on spying a chink through which a tiny radiance squeezed in.

“How can you forsake us, Didi?” Bina said in a small voice, her hitherto lacklustre eyes alight with the same light mother had detected. They didn’t consider it necessary to ask : “Why are you not marrying Prakash?” because it wasn’t important, as far as they were concerned. Kishan’s face alone registered surprise.



For a week Pratibha had planned her manoeuvres. The most tricky part had been arranging the final confrontation with the family. Pratibha had skilfully brought matters to a head and her reference to Prakash had been a masterstroke. She had anticipated mother’s and Bina’s reactions and like well rehearsed stage actors, they had done justice to the script Pratibha might well have written out for them. She noted apathetically the two drowning women clutching a straw!

“Why should you leave us to live alone?” Mother was insistent now, almost wishing she would marry Prakash, because this enigmatic Pratibha somehow frightened her.

Pratibha didn’t know how the characters had rearranged themselves, as though tinder someone’s subtle direction—she was sitting on the *lakhat*, detached from the family nexus, and the three were standing in a row facing her;

mother looked fierce, Bina cowed but hopeful and Kishan timidly curious. She looked at each one in turn, feeling weary and drained, then she addressed mother, drawing the curtain down on the last act of the play.

“I have been the eldest child and elder sister for too long. Now I want to be myself”, and even as mother opened her mouth to say something, Pratibha’s voice carried on: “I want to live, mother. When I breathe I want to inhale the freshness of open spaces; when I stretch out my arms, I want to feel emptiness so that I can move freely; when I speak, I want to hear the echo of my own voice. Do you understand?” Her tone was soft, slow, languorous, like rolling breakers, tumbling over the sand and obliterating footprints. The listeners didn’t understand the words but the meaning was clear.

The next few days did nothing to allay the family’s fears. Pratibha was adamant and life had to run a new course for everyone. There was a cheerfulness about Pratibha and she looked younger and happier as she prepared for her departure. “Didi, can I visit you? Nagpur is not very far away”, Kishan asked timidly. “Of course. I’ll come and fetch you myself”, Pratibha had said, sunnily. And then Kishan had blurted out : “I am glad you are happy, Didi, but I’ll miss you.” Pratibha had fought hard to retain her composure.



Only a few days were left for Pratibha to hand over charge and she was making her way to the office, picking her way carefully because of the slush due to the previous night’s downpour, which had washed the mud from a nearby construction site on To the main road. Pratibha paused and looked at the yawning cavern in the ground, torn open with pickaxes. Soon a new house would grow out of the ancient beleaguered earth. Stones would be hewn, wood split and planed, nails driyen in, and the infallible truth, underlying everything, would emerge—that the birth of anything new is accompanied by travail. Next to the area stood an apple tree, its limbs a startling

black against the white cluster of blossoms from among which a few green leaves peeped, coyly, as though uncomfortable among strangers. A sparrow hopped in the branches new up, now down, playing a game by itself, savouring the fragrance. Pratibha noticed all this; somehow, the very landscape had widened and she discovered so many new and entrancing features which she had always overlooked. Since the denouement a new lease of life had been awarded her. She had won her case in an important court.

As she started moving forward again, a voice hailed her from behind. “Pratibha.” Pratibha knew it was Prakash; she slackened her pace, but didn’t stop for him. She looked back and acknowledged him with a nod. Prakash caught up with her, panting heavily. Pratibha looked at him briefly and noticed a thin film of sweat on his dark face.

“I am in a hurry. Anything important?” she asked.

“I rejected that girl!”, he told her, still breathless.

“Probably it was the other way round”, Pratibha thought.

“I hear you have been transferred to Nagpur. We have an office in that place and I am also applying for a transfer to Nagpur. And then we can get married.” How smug Prakash was, how sure of Pratibha. She was looking down to avoid stepping on spit and dirt and soiling the lower edges of her *sari*. Prakash threw a sidelong glance at her—so demure, with eyes downcast, hair tied back in a plait, a small *bindi* on her forehead. Really, she was just the same, he thought in exasperation—so slow, so reticent about everything; in fact, he was surprised she had decided on a transfer; but then she did dote on him. Didn’t she? “Well”, he said testily.

Pratibha stopped in her tracks and faced him squarely, looked at him carefully, and then said calmly, as though she were commenting on the weather: “You know, Prakash, you are really quite ugly”—and she hurried on, rapidly increasing the distance between herself and Prakash. □