



SHORT STORY

Aparichita

Rabindranath Tagore, 1916

Translated by

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Translated into English for the first time

I am twenty-seven now. My life so far has been remarkable neither in achievement nor in its length. Yet, for me it has acquired a certain value of its own. It is like a flower ripening into fruit, cherishing all the while the memory of the chance contact with a honey-bee which made it all happen. It was a brief encounter and I shall tell it briefly—for the appreciation of those who do not confuse brevity with insignificance.

I have come successfully through all the examinations in the university. My teachers used to compare me with the silk cotton flower and the bright but useless *maakal* fruit, in an obvious reference to my good looks. I used to be embarrassed by these comparisons but now I feel that if I were to be born again, I would like to look the same and gladly bear the taunts of my teachers.

My father had been poor once. Later he earned a great deal of money as a lawyer, but never had the leisure to enjoy his hard earned wealth. The only rest he had was when he breathed his last. It was really my mother who brought me up. Being from a poor household herself she made sure that I should never forget that we were rich now. I was pampered and fussed over as a child so much

that I probably never grew up. Even today I look as if I am the little brother of Ganesh, sitting in the lap of Annapurna, the mother goddess.

My guardian was my mother's brother, barely six years older than me. He had absorbed all the cares of our family, rather like the legendary river Phalgu which runs underground. You have to dig through the sand for even a drop of water. Because of him, I was spared all responsibility.

The fathers of all marriageable daughters would find me a highly eligible bachelor. I have no bad habits, not even smoking. I find it easy to be good because it calls for least resistance. I am an obedient son, because I lack the ability to disobey. Any woman seeking a husband would do well to remember that I have been trained under a feminine regimen.

Many rich families sought a marriage alliance with us. But my uncle, who was the arbiter of my destiny, had certain fixed notions on marriage. He was against daughters of rich fathers. He preferred a bride to enter our house with her head bowed down in humility. Yet his love of lucre was instinctive. He wanted as my bride a girl whose father would not be wealthy, but who could be imposed upon to provide some cash. In short, someone who could be squeezed, but need not be respected; if we offered the ordinary *hookah*, instead of the more formal *gargara* reserved for the distinguished guests, he would not complain.

My friend Harish who works in Kanpur came home to Calcutta during the vacation to plant the seed of restlessness in me: "My friend," he said "if you are talking of girls, I know of a very attractive one."

I had already finished my Masters degree. A vast and arid expanse of idle time lay before me as far as I could stretch my vision into the future. No examination ahead, no need to take up a job, nor look for one. I had neither the training nor the inclination to look after the affairs of the family or to prepare for any kind of work. All that I had was my mother inside the house, and my uncle to negotiate with the world outside.

Over the horizon of this desert of leisure the mirage of the eternal feminine loomed large for me. The sky bore her gaze, her breath was in the air, the murmur of leaves whispered her secrets. It was at this time that Harish arrived with his provoking words: "Speaking of girls" My body and mind began to weave tremulously a tapestry of light and shade as the new *bakul* leaves do at the breath of spring. Harish was a connoisseur; he could make his descriptions come alive with delectable juice and in any case, my mind was parched.

I suggested to Harish that he should broach the topic to my uncle. Harish had a knack of getting along with everyone. Even my uncle sought his company. The subject was duly

mentioned to him. My uncle was more concerned with the father of the girl than the girl herself. The father seemed to fit the bill admirably. At one time Lakshmi blessed their family coffers, filling them to the brim. These were nearly empty now but there were still the dregs left. Since it was no longer possible to maintain the old life style with his reduced means, the father had left his ancestral place to move westwards. In Kanpur he lived like an ordinary householder with limited means. Since this daughter was his only child, there was every likelihood that he would not hesitate to scrape the bottom of the family chest for her sake.

All these were positive factors. But my uncle was not pleased to know that the girl was already fifteen. Was there some flaw somewhere along the family tree? No, none whatsoever. It was just that the father had been unable to find a bridegroom for his daughter to his liking. Eligible bachelors were

expensive and his own expectations were pitched high. So he kept on waiting endlessly but time did not stand still for the girl.

Thanks to Harish's eloquent persuasion, eventually my uncle seemed to relent. The preliminary part of the negotiations went off smoothly. Any place outside Calcutta could as well be a part of the Andaman islands as far as my uncle was concerned. The farthest he had ever travelled in his life was nearby Konnagar where he was once forced to go on some work. Were he the law-giver Manu, crossing of the Howrah bridge would have been forbidden in his code. I could not summon up courage to mention that I would have liked to go to Kanpur once to see the girl.

The person sent to Kanpur on our

behalf to the negotiations was none other than my elder cousin Binu. I had full faith in his taste and judgment. On his return his comment to me about the girl was, "Not bad at all, my boy. Pure gold, to be sure."

Binu-*dada* is known for his understatements. What we describe as excellent, he prefers to call adequate. So I knew that in my case there would be no conflict between the deity of marriage and the god of romance.

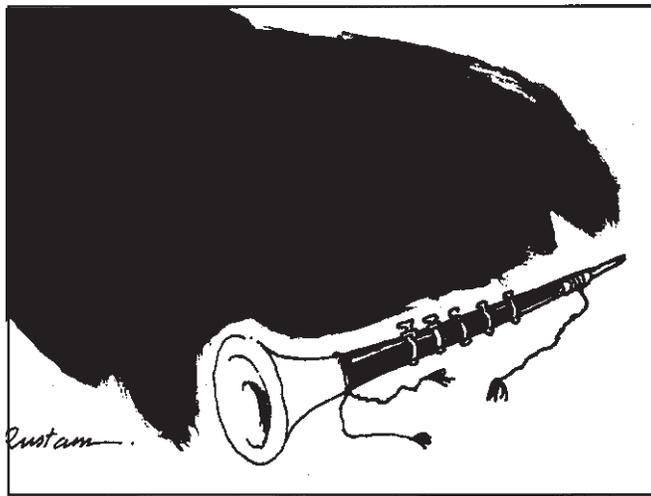
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and the wealthiest families in the city. Shambhunath Babu did not participate in this discussion, not even with occasional nods of assent or dissent. I would have been put off by his lack of response, but my uncle is not easily discouraged. Shambhunath Babu's silence convinced him that the man lacked spirit. In a way this pleased him because as a rule he preferred fathers of daughters to be subdued and diffident. When Shambhunath Babu left, my uncle bid him a curt goodbye and did not bother to go down to see him off to the carriage outside.

The amount of dowry had already been settled. My uncle prided himself on being extremely shrewd. He would not allow any vagueness in financial matters. Not only was the exact amount to be paid in cash stipulated, but the weight and quality of the gold to be given was also specified. Not being involved in these transactions I did not

know the details. But I knew that these crude calculations were an important part of marriage and the person in charge of it in our family would not settle for a fraction less than what he had demanded. In fact his shrewdness was a matter of pride in our family. It was taken for granted that he would win in any battle of wits wherever our family interest was involved. Even if we did not need the money, or the other party could ill afford to pay, our family pride required us to win at any cost.

The turmeric ceremony was held with unprecedented pomp. Indeed, one could have engaged a clerk to keep tally of the many men from our side who went bearing gifts to the bride's house. My mother and uncle chuckled at the thought of the hard



Needless to say, the bride's party had to come to Calcutta for the wedding. Shambhunath Babu, the bride's father, must have trusted Harish implicitly because he saw me for the first time only three days before the wedding when he came to formally bless me. He was a remarkably handsome man of around forty years. His whiskers were turning grey, but his hair was still black. He was the kind of person who would stand out in a crowd.

I hoped that he approved of me. It was difficult to tell because he was a man of few words. Even when he spoke, he did so without too much emphasis. My uncle on the other hand was in his element; he spoke incessantly to prove to him on every pretext that we were among the best

time the bride's people would have in tipping our bearers.

I arrived at the wedding place with the accompaniment of a brassband, flutes, cornets and all possible noisemakers, trampling underfoot the lotus pool of Saraswati—the muse of melody—rather like a mad elephant, a demon of barbaric cacophony. Bedecked in a glittering cloth of gold with rings and necklaces, I looked like a jewellery shop on display for auction. I was going to confront my future father-in-law with a price-tag on my person.

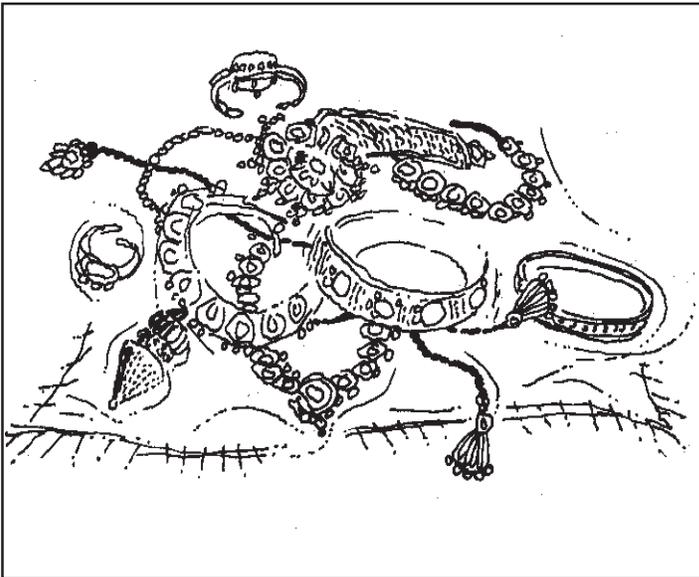
My uncle was upset as soon as he entered the house where the wedding ceremony was to take place. The courtyard was not large enough for the bridegroom's party to be comfortable and the arrangements were far from lavish. On top of it Shambhunath Babu's welcome also was not sufficiently effusive or obsequious. He hardly spoke. An immediate confrontation was averted by a lawyer friend of

Shambhunath Babu who made up for the host's reserve by his exaggerated politeness. A plump, dark and bald-headed man, he tied a shawl around his waist, and went around with folded hands, bowing his head, smiling ingratiatingly, and in his hoarse voice generally entertaining everybody from the groom's party including even the lowly cymbalist.

Soon after I sat down in the *sabha*, my uncle took Shambhunath Babu aside. I did not know what went on between them, but after a while Shambhunath Babu came to me and said, "My son, will you please step

this way?"

Then I knew what had transpired. Most people in this world, if not all, have a very clear object in life. My uncle's was the determination never to be tricked by anyone. He feared that the girl's father might deceive him in the quality of gold in the bridal jewellery. Once the wedding was over there would be no way of undoing the fraud. He had already seen evidences of Shambhunath Babu's miserliness in the choice of the house he rented for the wedding, in the amount of the tips given to our men bearing the gifts, and generally in the sparse arrangements for the marriage.



My uncle was not about to trust him about the quality and quantity of the promised gold. He had brought our family goldsmith with him. When I entered the room I found my uncle sitting on a bare cot with the goldsmith sitting on the floor by him, ready with his weighing scale and touchstone.

Shambhunath Babu turned to me: "Your uncle would like to test all the gold jewellery before the wedding ceremony begins. How do you feel about it?" I lowered my gaze and remained silent. "What can he have to say? Mine is the last word on the subject," my uncle intervened.

Shambhunath Babu looked at me "Is this true? Is it only his opinion that counts? And you have nothing to say about this?" I shook my head to indicate that the matter was beyond my jurisdiction.

He stood up and said, "In that case, please wait. I will go and strip my daughter of all her ornaments."

"Anupam has nothing to do here. Let him go back to the *sabha*," my uncle suggested.

"No, not to the *sabha*," Shambhunath Babu insisted. "He must stay here."

He came back soon with a bundle of jewellery tied up in a towel and

poured the contents on the cot where my uncle was sitting. All the designs in solid gold, not the flimsy filigree work one finds these days. The goldsmith picked one up and said, "No need to test. There is no alloy here. Such pure gold is hardly seen these days." His fingers pressed a bangle shaped like a crocodile's mouth and it bent quite easily.

As a matter of caution, he itemised the pieces of jewellery in his notebook, in case what was finally

given to the girl did not tally with what was being shown to him. He also checked the weight and value of the gold, only to find that the amount far exceeded his demand.

There was a pair of ear-rings in the pile. Shambhunath handed it to the goldsmith and asked him to test it. The goldsmith said "This piece looks imported. The gold content is rather low in this metal."

Shambhunath Babu put the ear-rings in my uncle's hand and said, "You'd better keep these." My uncle looked at the ear-rings and realised that these were given to the bride as

apresent from our side. His face reddened. He was not only deprived of the pleasure of catching out this indigent man in his attempt to shortchange him, but was humiliated in the bargain. With a gloomy face he ordered me, "Anupam, you may go and sit in the *sabha* now."

Shambhunath Babu stopped me. "No, there is no need to go to the *sabha*. You must have your dinner first."

"Dinner?" My uncle was surprised. "Whoever has heard of dinner before the hour of marriage?"

Shambhunath Babu insisted that we should not worry about that and go for our dinner instead.

Despite the outward appearance of gentleness, the man seemed to possess an inner strength which made my uncle accede to his request. The bridegroom's party sat down to dinner. The food was simple, but tasty, and it was served with such neatness and elegance that everyone was satisfied.

After their dinner was over Shambhunath Babu asked me to eat also. "But how is that possible!" my uncle exclaimed. "How can the bride-groom eat before the wedding ceremony?"

Ignoring my uncle's views on the subject Shambhunath Babu turned to me and asked, "What do you say? Is there any harm in your eating now?"

I could hardly defy my uncle, specially as he echoed my mother's commands as well. I did not agree to eat.

Shambhu Babu turned now to my uncle. "Please forgive us for the inconveniences you may have had to suffer. We are not rich. I am sorry we could not make the arrangements worthy of you. It is getting late, I would not like to cause you any more trouble. Let us then—"

"Yes, let us go to the *sabha*, uncle," I said.

Shambunath Babu said, "Shall I send for the carriages?"

Uncle was surprised. "Is this some kind of a joke?"

Shambhunath Babu said, "The joke was perhaps on your part. Anyway, I have no desire to perpetuate it."

Uncle stared at him in astonishment.

Shambhunath Babu simply said, "I cannot give my daughter to a family which considers me capable of stealing her gold."

This time he did not think it necessary to speak to me. It had already been demonstrated that I did not matter.

I do not wish to describe what followed. Before the bridegroom's party left the *sabha* they broke the chandeliers, smashed the furniture



and left a total wreck behind them.

On our way back there was no music. The brass band, the flute, the *shehnai*—all remained silent. The decorative lamps and the mica chandeliers disappeared in the darkness, leaving the job of illumination to the stars above.

III

Everyone in the family was furious with rage. A girl's father, and such audacity! What was the world coming to! "We will see how he gets his daughter married now," they threatened. But how did you punish

a man who seemed untroubled by the fear that his daughter would remain unmarried?

I must be the only male in all of Bengal to be thrown out of a marriage assembly by the bride's father. What malevolent star could have branded so highly eligible a young man with such a stigma—after so much pomp, music and bright lights? Those who had accompanied the bridegroom could never get over the insult of being tricked into a dinner when the marriage did not take place. The only way to get even, they regretted, was to have churned out their stomachs, spewing out all the food at the reception itself. My uncle raved and ranted about suing the girl's father for breach of contract and defamation, but his well-wishers reminded him that going to the law court would only add to the scandal.

I too was in a state. I twirled my moustache in anger and prayed that circumstances would one day force a contrite Shambhunath Babu to crawl and beg for our forgiveness.

But along with this current of black venom flowed another stream which was not dark at all. I could not release my heart from the unknown girl who had appropriated it. There she remained—bright behind the wall I was unable to cross, her face redolent with sandal paste and a maidenly blush, her figure draped in the red wedding sari and her heart brimming with emotions I would never know. In my imagination she was like a flowering creeper, ready to offer all her vernal blossoms to me. I could smell the fragrance in the breeze, hear the leaves murmur; she was just one step away from me— but suddenly the distance stretched into infinity.

Earlier, I had been haunting Binu-dada's house every evening. Every word of his cryptic description had sparked my imagination. I had realised that she was a person of extraordinary beauty, but alas, I never met her or

saw her picture. The image remained indistinct in my mind. She never came into my life in reality, but it was a pity that I had no way of even preserving her in my imagination. Like a phantom, my mind hovered around the uncrossed wall of the wedding chamber, mourning this loss.

Harish had told me that she had seen my photograph. She must have liked what she saw. There was no reason for her not to do so. I wanted to believe that she still had that photograph hidden in a secret place. On some lonely afternoon, did she not take it out behind closed doors? Did not the loose strands of her hair frame her face and fall on the picture as she bent over it? If she heard footsteps outside did she not quickly hide it in the fragrant folds of her sari?

Days went by. A year passed. My uncle was too embarrassed to talk about marriage again. My mother wanted to wait until the memory of humiliation had faded before she could start fresh negotiations.

I came to know that there was a very good offer of marriage for the girl but she had taken a vow never to marry. Somehow, I was thrilled at this news. I imagined her languishing for me. She hardly eats, she forgets to braid her hair in the evening. Her father looks at her face and wonders at the change that has come over her. I imagine him entering her room one day to find her eyes full of tears. "Tell me, my little mother," he asks, "Is anything the matter with you?" She quickly wipes her tears to assure him that nothing is wrong. An only daughter, she is the most cherished person in his life. He cannot bear to see her wilt like a flower in the season of drought. He swallows his pride and comes to our doorstep. And then?

The black venom that flows

in my veins coils up again like a cobra and hisses at me: "Very well, let there be wedding arrangements afresh. Let there be lights and music and let the whole world be invited. Then in the midst of it all you shall trample down your bridegroom's headdress and wreck the assembly by stalking out."

But the other stream, limpid as tears, assumes the shape of a swan to tell me, "Let me fly to her as I once did to the flower gardens of Damayanti, bearing the message of her lover. Let me go to the lonely one and give her the good tidings."

And then? The night of sorrows would be over, the first raindrops would soak the parched earth and the wilted flower would look up again. This time round the rest of the world would stay outside the wall and the only one person to go inside would be me. And then? Well, that is how the story would end.

But it did not end this way. Let me quickly retrace the point at which the story becomes endless.

I was escorting my mother on a pilgrimage. This task was given to me



because my uncle had not yet brought himself to cross the Howrah Bridge. As I slept on the train the rhythmic movement of the carriage triggered off a series of unrelated dreams that tinkled pleasantly in my mind. I woke up suddenly when the train stopped at a station which also looked like a dream. In that half-light only the stars looked familiar—all else was hazy and mysterious. The few dim lamps in the station only served to show how strange and distant the rest of the world was. My mother slept on her berth under a lamp covered with a green shade. Our baggage lay scattered around us as if in a dream, hovering in the green twilight between reality and fantasy. In this strange world, suddenly, in the middle of the unearthly night, a voice was heard: "Hurry up, there is room here in this compartment."

To my ears it sounded like music. To appreciate how sweet the Bengali language sounds when spoken by a Bengali girl, it has to be heard unexpectedly like this, in an unknown place and an unlikely hour.

But this was not just any female voice. There was a distinctive music in it the like of which I had never heard.

I have always been fascinated by the human voice. The physical beauty appeals to everyone but to me it is the voice that really conveys the essence of what is unique and elusive in a person. I quickly opened the window of my compartment, but nothing was visible outside. In the dark platform the railway guard held up his one-eyed lantern, and the train moved, but I kept sitting at the window. I had no clear image in my mind, but I had the vision of a person who, like the star-lit sky, enveloped you, but remained outside your reach. This unknown voice had straightaway made a place in my heart that is reserved for the most

intimate. In the restless flux of time, this music seems to have blossomed into a perfect flower, untouched by the waves of change.

The train moved to the beat of an iron drum. The refrain of the song in my mind was, "There is room here, in this compartment." Is there though? It is not easy to make room for, or to know, each other. But not knowing is like a mist. Once it is lifted, the recognition is for ever. O my ineffable music, have I not always known you? There is room, there is space for me. You asked me to hurry up, and here I am; I did not tarry a moment longer.

I did not sleep well that night. At every station I looked out of the window, afraid that the person I had not yet seen might get down before the night was over.

Next morning we had to change trains at a big junction station. We had first class tickets and I had hoped we would be able to avoid the rush. But apparently an Army General was travelling that day. As I saw the orderlies of the British officer waiting with his luggage on the platform, I knew I would have to give up the hope of boarding a first class compartment. All the other carriages were so terribly crowded I did not know how to get a comfortable place for my mother. While I was peeping dejectedly into one overcrowded compartment after another, I heard a female voice from a second class carriage calling out to my mother: "Please come into our compartment, there is room here."

Startled, I realised it was the same voice that had haunted me all through the night, and the refrain was the same: there is space. I lost no time in boarding the carriage with my mother. There was hardly any time to bring our luggage in. I am one of the most inept persons in the world. The girl had to come forward to help, hauling up the suitcases and the bedrolls from the porters on the platform, on to the

running train. My camera got left behind in the process, but at that time I hardly cared.

It is difficult to narrate the events which followed. I do not know how to begin or end describing the state of total bliss I experienced. Stringing word after word to form sentences seems somehow quite pointless.

The music that had echoed in my mind all this time was before me in person; even so, she still was a melody for me. I looked at my mother and saw that she too could not take her eyes away from the girl. She must have been sixteen or seventeen, but her newly awakened youth did not seem to have burdened her either physically or mentally. Her movements were unselfconscious, her gestures most spontaneous and the innocence of her beauty was incomparable. There was nothing awkward or inhibited about her.

I watched her, but the details are difficult to recall. I don't even remember the colour of the sari she was wearing. Her clothes did not overshadow her personality. She stood out distinctively from those around her, even as the stalk of the white tuberose exceeds the branch on which it grows. There were several younger girls with her and they talked and laughed companionably together. I was pretending to read a book, but my ears were eagerly tuned to their conversation. Whatever I overheard seemed to be in the nature of playful childish exchanges, but it was remarkable that the difference in their age did not seem to matter. She seemed to have gladly become a child with these children.

The girls insisted on their reading out a particular story from the illustrated children's book they were carrying. They must have heard the story twenty times before. But I could see why they were still so keen. The magic of her voice turned every word

into gold. Her gestures, her movements all sparkled with such joy of life that the girls seemed to listen more to her than to the story, letting the fountain-spring of her vitality flow over their hearts. This glow of life illuminated my day, and even the sky around us seemed to be charged with her pristine radiance. At the next station she called out to the hawker selling spiced *channa* and all of them munched it with obvious relish.

My mother was torn between fascination and disapproval. Here I was, a male of the species, sitting in the same compartment—but that did not seem to inhibit this girl in any way. My mother was particularly uneasy about her eating so heartily in my presence. But the girl did not give the impression of being brazen. My mother put it down to a lack of proper training in deportment. She was curious about the girl and would have liked to talk to her. But her long habit of keeping aloof made it difficult for her to communicate with strangers.

At this point the train stopped at another junction station. Some Englishmen, probably part of the General's entourage, were trying to board the train. The carriages were all overcrowded. They walked in front of our compartment a few times, making my mother freeze in fear. Frankly, I was feeling a little worried myself.

Just before the train started again, a railway officer came with some name tags and attached them to two of our berths. "The sahibs had reserved these berths earlier. You will have to vacate, and find places somewhere else," we were told. I stood up immediately, but the girl spoke up in Hindi: "No, we are not moving from here." The man was adamant: "You have no choice." When the girl made no move to get up, the railway officer called the station master who was an Englishman. The station master addressed me politely, "I am sorry, but

..." Even before he had finished I was calling out for a porter to remove our luggage. Her eyes blazed as she looked at me. "No, you will not move. Just stay where you are." Then she walked up to the door of the compartment and spoke to the station master in English: "It is a lie! These berths are not reserved." She tore up the name tags and threw them on the platform.

Meanwhile the uniformed Englishman had arrived, followed by his orderly. He had signalled the orderly to put his baggage inside, but when he saw the girl, heard her words and watched her action, he quietly tapped the station master on the shoulder and took him aside. I do not know

what transpired but the departure of the train was delayed till an extra bogey could be attached to it. The girl and her group bought another round of fried *channa*, and I looked out of the window to hide my shame as I pretended to admire the landscape outside.

The train stopped at Kanpur. The girl arranged their things together to get down. An upcountry servant who had come to receive them, helped her with the luggage. My mother could not restrain herself any longer. "What is your name, my daughter?" she asked.

"I am Kalyani."
Both my mother and I started.
"And your father?"
"He is a doctor here. His name is Shambhunath Sen."
And then they got off the train.



Epilogue

Defying my uncle's orders and ignoring my mother's objection, I have come to Kanpur. I have met Kalyani and her father. I have brought myself on my knees before them with folded hands. Shambhunath Babu is touched by my apology, but Kalyani says she cannot get married. I asked her why.

"My mother's commands," she said.

Good heavens, I thought. If there is a mother, is there an uncle too somewhere in her background?

Then I realised she was talking of

the motherland. After the fiasco of her marriage, she had dedicated herself to the education of girls.

But I did not give up hope. That music had entered my heart to remain there forever. Like the melody of a flute from a world beyond ours, it beckoned me to move out of my groove. The words heard in the darkness of the night—there is room here—have become my life's refrain. I was twenty three then; now I am twenty seven. I have not given up hope yet, but I have given up my uncle. Since I am the only child, my mother has not been able to give me up.

Do I have any hopes of marriage?
None whatsoever. I

live in the faith which an unknown melodious voice had instilled in me on a dark night: there is room here. There is room for me. There must be. Or else, where would I go? Thus years come and go, I stay on. I meet her; I listen to her voice; I try and be useful to her whenever I can, and my heart tells me that this is indeed where I belong. I have found a place for myself. O my unknown woman, I have not got to know you full well; I never will. But I am fortunate, I have found my space. □

(The translator acknowledges her debt to Hitendra Nath Bhaya for detailed revision of her earlier draft).