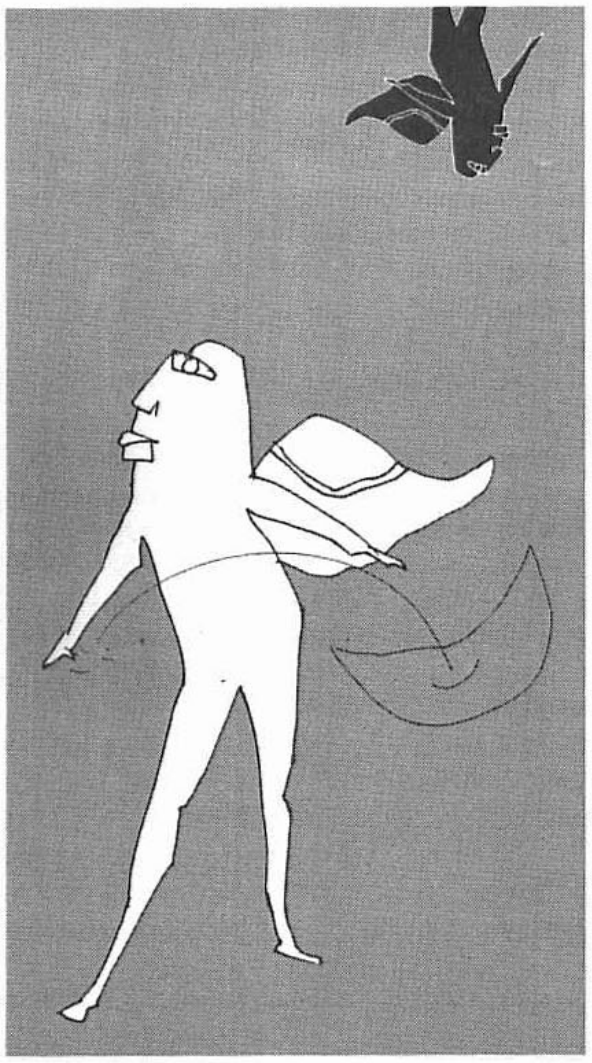

number. I'll be delighted."

In a hesitatant tone Jafor saheb says, "Madam, can I tell you something?"

Leena looks into his eyes with her own rounded ones. Then she replies disinterestedly, "Yes."

"Why do you prefer this thing to so many other things on earth?"

Letting out a breath of relief, Leena reflects on something. After a while raising her head, she again looks at Jafor saheb, wants to say something. But before she can speak, Jafor saheb again says laughing, "I have a cousin just like you. Her only concern is to buy saris. She arranges the saris in the almirah and counts every day to see how many saris she has in total. I used to know another such lady. Her hobby was to buy bangles of different types. She used to tell everybody how many dozens of bangles she bought."

"Very interesting."

"Yes, certainly interesting. People store away things, and then count to see how much they have stored away. People buy books, arrange them neatly in shelves, check on them every once in a while to see how many books they have bought. And you?" Jafor saheb keeps laughing and adds, "If you see a dead beast, you list it, skim through the list now and then and total up the number of dead animals you have seen. Interesting, very interesting."

Leena seems to be taken aback to some extent. She can't think of what to say at this moment. She does not feel well. She sits up straight in the chair, moving her back away from her chair. Pulling out an office file, she puts away the diary inside the bag. There's a lot of work today. Jafor saheb gets up and goes back to his table. Opening the file and running her eyes down it, Leena does not at all feel like in the mood for work today. No, not at all!

Leena thinks about her father. What a good person! He never spoke in a loud voice. He was also a man of few words, and nowadays he had become even more silent. This man has done good for others his whole life, which is why during their times of trouble they would rush to him.

Her father after his retirement seems to be lonely. He stays by himself the whole time, reading newspapers silently most of the time. He stares off into middle distance sometimes when reading the newspapers. He seems to be thinking of something in a desolate manner. Leena feels very pained at such moments: Is her father anxious over her, about her marriage? Leena can't guess what he's thinking about.

Sometimes Leena's father calls her to come over to him. He seems to want to tell her something when she is close to him but then can't say it. But she can understand what her father wanted to tell. A father burdened with the responsibility of a daughter whose marriage is long overdue is something that she sees on his face.

Leena often thinks, does every woman hides torments, untold torments, in her heart? Or is it only in her heart? A woman hides so many astonishing events in her life, forever. She does not share them with anyone, not even her near and dear ones. Women endure everything like the dumb animals. However, what is the difference between a girl and a beast, Leena asks herself, and then answers her own question. A beast dies one day with all untold sufferings of life unspoken. The difference between a beast and a woman was that while an animal died only once, a woman died many times over.

Leena doesn't want to remember how she began doing it, out of her own wish. When this habit began, however, she was a student of class ten. One day when she went to school in the morning, she was startled by something inside her classroom. The previous night had been stormy. A tiny baby cat, wet, was lying in one corner underneath a table. She tiptoed to it. Sitting on her knees, she gazed at it for a long time. It was still. The fur was smudged on the body. It seemed as if someone had combed the hairs with a fine comb. The kitten was lying peacefully. How soft, how cute! When Leena touched it with a finger of her left hand she jumped back with a fright. The kitten was stiff to the touch. The baby cat was dead. She had felt like crying. Thinking something for a while and then taking out the diary from the bag, she wrote about the dead baby cat. That was the first; that was the beginning.

Ratul was little then. One day, after listening to his continual pleading, their father had bought for him four baby rabbits. Ratul was very happy upon getting them. Her father loved all his children, but perhaps loved Ratul a little bit more. This charge could be made not only of Leena, but also by Deena. The birth of a son, after two daughters, had made their father more content. He had distributed sweets to the neighbourhood people on that occasion. Ratul forgot to eat his meals after getting the pets. He had just been admitted to school then. He became neglectful of his studies, always busy with the rabbits. One day in a rage their father hid the rabbits, including the cage, in one corner of the room. After about three hours he saw that the four rabbits were lying quietly. Thousands of red ants had bitten them to death. Quickly grabbing the cage and holding it up, he had shaken the cage up and down to get rid of the ants. The ants left them but the rabbits had remained still. Leena saw tears in her father's eyes for the first time that day.

"*Apa*, the chief is calling you."

Leena starts up at peon Moslem Miah's words. She quickly gets up from the chair. Pulling the end of her sari around herself forward, Leena heads towards her boss's room quickly.

"May I come in, sir?"

"Yes, please."

Entering the room, she stands in trepidation. Lifting his eyes from the file, he looks at Leena and says, "You look very absent-minded today. Sit down." Lighting a cigarette, he laughs and says, "Do you still have that hobby?"

"What!" Leena makes a show of not understanding what he is referring to.

"That hobby of yours where you make lists of dead animals?"

Leena feels shy; bows her head down. Her boss laughs loudly. This man who is the same age as her father is very simple. He never acted like a boss. He enquired after everybody. But he seems to have a great sorrow in his life. After the death of his wife who had left behind two small sons, he hadn't married again. His two sons were grown up now. They studied abroad, came to see their father once in a year. They would also visit the office, shouting and laughing. Then it would seem not an office, but a home.

"Anyway", he continues after having stopped laughing, "When I was entering my office a little earlier I saw you staring fixedly in front of you. I don't think you are feeling well today. Perhaps you should take the rest of the day off."

Leena leaves the room very quietly. She stands by her table for a while. She keeps thinking and then taking her bag begins to walk out of the office. Jafor saheb calls out to her from behind her back, "Madam."

Leena turns towards him.

Getting up from the chair, Jafor saheb comes forward towards Leena. She keeps on walking towards the door. Jafor saheb falls in step with her.

"Do you want to say anything?"

"Are you going?"

"Yes."

"I have something to tell you."

Leena looks at Jafor saheb, giving him her full attention. Jafor saheb bends his head towards her. At this moment she feels a tenderness for the man. With some effort Leena forces a smile onto her lips. Then she says in a soft tone, "Some other day, Jafor saheb."

Getting on the rickshaw, Leena decides to go to Rashida's house. It's been quite a while since she's been to Rashida's house. When they used to study together, they would rush to each other if they missed meeting each other even for a single day. There was so much to talk about; their conversation wouldn't finish. Everything changed after Rashida's marriage. Rashida and her husband live in the same city, but the two of them can't meet as they did in the past.

Leena laughs by herself on the rickshaw. A boy used to love Rashida but she couldn't stand him. One day he sent a letter written with blood. After scores of beseeching sentences, the boy wrote that he had written the letter after cutting two fingers of his right hand. Reading the letter, Rashida had gone straight to Leena. Showing it to Leena, she said that she was going to go to the boy's house. They put into action Rashida's desire instantly, and both of them went to the boy's house. Entering it, Leena and Rashida saw that the boy, accompanied by three other boys, was playing carom board. He was hitting the striker with the fingers of his right hand quite well. He was thunderstruck on seeing Rashida and Leena, and was sweating within a very short time. Getting close to the boy, Rashida said, "I thought I would sit beside you for a while,holding your bruised fingers but it's useless now. Now I wish I could cut your two fingers into pieces and eat them after cooking them. What an ass!" He as well as three