

# To Paradise

FROM PAGE 24

Would I ever be able to leave again? Even during the day, perhaps because it was located on the landing and its length was three times its width, my room looked like a coffin. Opening the lid of this coffin, without any notice, my sister entered in haste.

"What's up? Why are you here?"

"I just came. I want to live, Apa!"

"You want to live? Oh. So does everyone else."

"No one wants me to study. I want to study."

"If you want to study, you should. But will that let you live?"

"Can't I live on that?"

"No. I mean, no one lives forever. That's all."

"Oh."

Avoiding my death-thoughts, my sister quietly went over to the kitchen. After moving the containers of rice, lentils, and spices around, she put on some *khichuri* to cook. I buried my face in the pillows and lay down on my stomach. How bothersome! She wasn't going to let me alone.

For the last six months, I had been suffering from an unidentified illness. The doctors couldn't tell what it was. If one

diagnosed a tumor in my ovary, another said it was a stomach ulcer. Another announced that a girl of this age could contract both problems simultaneously. I couldn't decide which to treat first.

I had spent many days lying in bed, and

I remembered  
after a long time  
how Ma would give  
me all the news  
about our small  
town when I went  
home from the  
hostel. Who knew  
that anyone could  
give such harsh  
descriptions?  
There was not  
much difference  
between my  
mother and my  
sister.

then surrendering myself for some time now at the doctors' chambers every evening, hoping for a decision one way or another. The doctors must have guessed my intention and kept telling me different things each day, leaving me hanging – as though I had been their enemy in a previous life. They would then scratch the name of one test on their writing pad one day, another test the next. The pathology centers were no less. Reports began flooding in. The doctor would open the envelop with the test results and smile to himself. He would hold up the x-ray plates and look at me askance. Once the envelop-tearing and looking askance was over, the questions began. Intimate questions. I figured that they thought I was a mental patient. I was glad to escape.

At dinner, my sister tried to piece together my distant past, the broken ties of my relationships. As she ate, she narrated the stories of those who had died in our city and how; how many new babies were born and what they looked like. In fact, she described the births and deaths of the decade-old city.

I didn't care much about births – they were dull. But the news of deaths made everything go haywire. So many deaths – and that too of known people, as we ate the *khichuri* made from the stale spices and bug-infested rice and lentils. I can't stop her. If I asked her to stop talking about deaths, she may start with the births. That was monotonous, painful.

All this time I had thought that I was in my mother's womb a decade ago. Then my life alone began, as I stepped forth uncertainly. Tripping, falling on my face – all this happened in this one decade. The time before this was dark, embalmed in the safety of the womb, memory-less. Her reminiscences made me nauseous. I threw water onto my half-eaten plate and got up. I don't dare look to see her reaction. Who knew which injury the restless girl would uncover next?

I remembered after a long time how Ma

would give me all the news about our small town when I went home from the hostel. Who knew that anyone could give such harsh descriptions? There was not much difference between my mother and my sister. And yet, Ma had spent her whole life clinging to her home. It wasn't easy for me to come close to a dangerous sister like her who defied all odds to study. What did she want? What did she *really* want?

At my unspoken question, she opened her suitcase and got out her books. She removed my papers from the table and arranged her books in rows, along with her cosmetics. I walked out to the verandah when I saw her take over my desk.

I had found this cave-room after a long search in the city. The attached verandah was precious. I never expected it. When I stood there, I felt as though I had discovered a new continent after many days of depression and rebellion, many stormy nights; I had landed on an unknown yet valuable space. When the landlord instantly agreed to my tenancy, I was afraid at first that he might impose himself on me at night. He might, under some pretext, even knock on my door during the day. A week or so passed with this anxiety. And then it so happened that I came fearlessly to the verandah to watch the *kalboishakhi*. When the howling wind was shaking the city and making it dance, I was standing on the verandah of my fifth-and-a-half story floor. I had let the perfect trails of blue-pea flowers sweep over the verandah grille. With the bougainvillea and the morning glory, the verandah became my home, my refuge. For as long as my new abode felt satisfactory, the bougainvillea and morning glory bloomed. Then, without my noticing, as I contemplated on how and when I had been betrayed by men, that my distrust in them was not unfounded, my garden began to shrivel up and die. Except for the blue-peas.

My sister loved cleaning up. Perhaps she would restart my garden. As I stood on the verandah, I decided that I would start going to the office again tomorrow. How long could I stay away on sick-leave? Besides, I needed money too.

When I came home from work one day, my sister came forward and asked, "Have you become a Hindu?"

"Why? Who told you that?"

"Look at this container of *shidoor*, this incense burner, these Ganesh-Durga statues. What are they doing in your room? You have returned as a Hindu after being with that man."

What could I say? I was about to pick up the Blackstone Ganesh and terracotta Durga from the waste paper basket and place them on the bookshelf when, as if to herself, my sister said, "Hindu men are very bad. Why? Weren't there any Muslim men in the country?"

I became suddenly furious. Spinning around, I saw the Blackstone Ganesh and terracotta Durga rolling around on the floor near her feet and I screamed, "Who told you that Hindu men are bad? You have to tell me who told you this! Where did you learn such things? Hindus, Muslims, they're not communal like you. Who told you I haven't met any Muslim men, huh?!"

Perhaps I shouldn't have made that last comment. It wasn't relevant. It was as though I had consciously stepped into her trap. My sister, very cleverly, immediately

