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SHASHI DESHPANDE

Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwar, India, and educated in Bombay. She now lives in Bangalore. Her short stories were first published in various English periodicals in India, and have now appeared in four collections: *The Legacy* (1971), *The Miracle* (1986), *It Was the Nightingale* (1986) and *It Was Dark* (1986), all published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. She has also written five novels of which the last, *That Long Silence* (1988), was published by Virago.

'My Beloved Charioteer' comes from the collection *It Was Dark*. The title refers to Lord Krishna who, in the epic *Mahabharata*, is charioteer to Arjuna, urging him not to falter in the great battle of Kurukshetra.

My Beloved Charioteer

I smile as I hear them at last, the sounds I am waiting for. A rush of footsteps, the slam of the bathroom door . . . I wince as the sound whams through the silent house . . . and, a minute later, another bang. And then, bare feet running towards me.

'You shouldn't bang the doors that way,' I say reproachfully. 'You might wake Mummy.'

She sits opposite me, cross-legged on the low wooden stool, hair tousled, cheeks flushed. 'Oh, she won't wake up for hours yet,' she says cheerfully. 'Have you had your tea, ajji?' Our daily routine. I can never confess to her that I have had a cup an hour earlier. This is her joy, that I wait for her.

'No, I've been waiting for you. Have you brushed your teeth?'

She makes a face. 'I'll do it later,' she says, trying to be brusque and casual.

'You'll do no such thing. Go and brush them at once.'

'Only today, ajji. From tomorrow, I promise, I'll brush them first,' she cajoles.

'Nothing doing.' I try hard to be firm. But I can't fool her. She knows I am on her side. She lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'Mummy won't know. She's sleeping.'

Now, of course, she leaves me no choice. I have to be firm. She goes reluctantly. And is back so fast, I have to ask, 'Did you really brush? Properly? Show me.'

'Look.'

I have to grin back at the grinning, impish face. 'Now tea for me.'

'No,' I say, 'tea for me. Milk for you.'

Ultimately, as always, we compromise and her tea is a pale brown. I switch off the Primus and, without the hissing sound, our voices sound loud and clear. We look at each other guiltily, thinking of the sleeper, and try to speak in lowered tones. Happiness can mean so many things to so many people. For

me, it is this. The beginning of a new day with this child. We talk of so many things. But too soon it is time for her to go to school. Bathed and fresh, she sets off.

When she is gone, silence settles on the house. A silence that will not lift till she returns. I had got used to this silence in the last seven years. It had never seemed terrible to me. It was a friendly silence, filled with the ghosts of so many voices in my life. They came back to keep me company when I was alone . . . my younger brother, my aunt who loved me when I was a child, my two infant sons who never grew up, and even the child Aarti, who seems to have no connection with this thin, bitter woman who now shares the silence with me. But since she came, the friendly ghosts have all gone.

It is late before she wakes. I have had my bath, finished my puja, and am half-way through cooking lunch, when I hear her stirring. I take down the dal from the fire and put on the tea. By the time tea is ready, she comes into the kitchen. Wordlessly she takes a cup from me. She drinks it in hungry gulps as if she has been thirsting for hours, then thrusts the cup back at me. I pour out some more. I, too, say nothing. Earlier, I used to ask, 'Slept well?' And one day, she had put down the cup with a trembling hand and said, 'Slept well? No, I never do that. I haven't slept well since Madhav died. I'll never sleep well again all my life. I have to take something every night so that I can close my eyes for a few hours. Now, never ask me again if I slept well.' Nine months I carried this daughter of mine in my body. I had felt within me every beat of her heart, every movement of her limbs. But . . . and this my doctor had told me then . . . my pains and shocks could never penetrate to her, she was so well protected. Even now, she is protected from my pains. Even now, I have no protection against her pains. I suffer with her, but like all my other emotions, it is a futile suffering. For I cannot help her. I can only fumble and blunder and make things worse.

'Why didn't you let me know earlier?' she had asked me angrily when she had come home after her father's death. 'Why didn't you send for me earlier?'

'Don't tell Aarti yet,' he had said, 'I don't want to frighten her. Not now specially.'

Habits of obedience die harder than any other. I had not

dared to inform Aarti. And the next day he had had another attack and died instantly. Three months later Priti had been born. She never saw her grandfather.

'Who is that, ajji?' she had asked me once, seeing his photo.

'Your grandfather, Priti.'

'My grandfather,' she had pondered. 'And what was he of yours?'

What was he of mine? The innocent question had released a flood of feelings within me. 'My husband,' I had said bluntly, at last.

As I settle down to cooking lunch, I wonder whether Aarti will today like what I am cooking. Whether she will enjoy her food and eat well. I know she will not, but the hope is always in me. Just as I hope that one day she will talk and laugh again. But that day, one day, when she had laughed, she had frightened me. She had burst into loud laughter, shattering the tenuous peace of the house. 'What is it?' I had asked her, wondering whether to smile, to laugh, to respond in some way to her.

'Isn't it gloomy here? The right atmosphere for a pair of desolate widows. That's what we are, aren't we?'

Widows . . . I remember my mother who was one. She had had a shaven head, worn only coarse red saris, and been shorn of all ornaments all her life after my father's death. And I think of Aarti, who for days neglects herself. And then, one day dresses up, makes up her face and wears flowers in her hair. And yet Aarti it is whose face has the arid look of a desert.

Life has been cruel to her. It was her father whom she had loved; and he died, while I live. It was her husband whom she had loved even more than the child; and it was he who died, while Priti is left to her. Children are more sensitive than we think. They understand so many things we think they don't. Otherwise why would she have said one day to me, 'Ajji, can I sleep in your room at night?'

I am old and grey and have lost all that I have loved in life but these two persons . . . but at her words, my heart had leapt in happiness. Yet, I had restrained my joy and asked her, 'Why, Priti?'

'I'd like to. You can tell me stories at night. And there are so

many things I suddenly remember at night and want to tell you. And . . .'

'But Mummy is with you.'

The child's face had fallen. 'But, ajji, if I try to talk to her, she says, "Go to sleep, Priti, and don't bother me." And she never sleeps at all, but just reads and smokes. And I don't like that smell.'

The child has a high and clear voice and I had hushed her in a sudden fear that she might be overheard. Yes, she smokes incessantly now. Earlier, she had tried to hide it from me. But not for long. When I was a child, in my father's house, it had been considered wrong even for a man to smoke. But today, I would of my own accord let my daughter smoke if I thought it brought her happiness. But it doesn't. She puffs out smoke as if she is emitting bitterness. There is an infinity of bitterness in her now. And I cannot help her. I can only try to look after her body. Such a small thing, but even in that I fail. She is thin and brittle. Most of the time she never dresses up. Just goes round in an old gown, her hair tied up with a rubber band. Priti, looking at an old photograph one day, had wistfully said, 'My Mummy was so pretty, wasn't she, ajji?'

The child's pride in her mother had roused in me a rage against Aarti. She seems to me like a child sulking because she does not have what she wants, wilfully ignoring the things she has. Has anyone promised us happiness for a lifetime, I want to ask her?

'Why don't you go out?' I had asked her once.

'Where?'

I had mumbled something she had not heard. She had gone on instead.

'There is nowhere I want to go. Everywhere, I see couples. I can't bear to see them. I could murder them when I see them talking and laughing.'

This talk amazes me. I cannot understand her. My niece had once told me of something she had read in an American magazine. About children of eleven, twelve, thirteen and fourteen who stab and throttle and rape and gouge out eyes . . . often for no reason at all. And I had wondered . . . what kind of parents can they be who give birth to such monsters? Now, I

know better. The accident of birth can be cruelly deceiving. We fool ourselves that our children are our own, that we know them. But often, they are as alien to us as baby cuckoos born in a crow's nest. And yet we cannot escape the burden of parenthood. If my daughter is so empty that she can hate people who are happy, the fault is, to some extent, mine.

These bitter thoughts do not often occupy me. I have my work. The quiet routine of my day is like balm to my soul. Daily chores are not monotonous but soothing. Now that the child is with me, the day is full of meaning. I wait, as eager as a child myself, for her to return from school. When she has a holiday, I don't know who is happier, she or I. If there is an unexpected holiday, we are equally full of glee. But when she, *my* daughter and *her* mother, comes to us, we feel guilty and hide our happiness.

'Do you remember your Papa?' Aarti had asked her one day with a sudden harshness.

'Papa?' There had been a moment's hesitation. 'Of course, I remember.'

'I can't imagine you do. You never speak of him.'

The child had stared at her with a frightened face, feeling guilty for she knew not what; and when Aarti had left us, she had burst into sobs, clinging to me. And I had been full of pity, not for her, but for Aarti, who could turn happiness into a wrong. But I can say nothing to her. She has never shared anything with me and now she hides her sorrow like a dog its bone. She guards it jealously and will not let me approach. And I have kept my distance. It was only in my imagination that I cuddled her as a child, only in my imagination that I shared her happiness and confidences as a young girl. And now I assuage her grief in the same way. 'Look,' I tell myself I will say to her, pouring some water into my cupped palms. 'Look,' I will say as the water seeps through, leaving nothing. 'You cannot hold on. You will have to let it go.'

But I know I'm fooling myself. I have no courage to speak. I am only a foolish, middle-aged woman who has never known how to win anyone's love. Priti's affection . . . that is a gift of Heaven, that ray of sunshine God sends even to the darkest corners. For Aarti, it was always her father. Even now, she

spends the whole afternoon prowling in what was his room. It is seven years since he died, but the room is unchanged. I have kept everything as it was. I dust and sweep it meticulously myself. But strangely, in spite of this, it has a neglected look like Priti has sometimes. Priti is well-fed and well-dressed; she has her tonics and vitamins and all the other things they give children these days. Still, a neglected child peeps out of her eyes at times, filling me with pity and guilt.

Now I can hear Aarti moving round in his room. Even after his death, he can give her something I can't. The thought hurts. Hurts? It's like having salt rubbed into a raw wound. Suddenly it is unbearable and I go and open the door of his room. She is sitting on his chair, her feet on his table, smoking and staring at nothing. As she hears me, she turns round startled . . . I have never disturbed her till now . . . and with the movement of her feet she knocks down his photograph which stands on the table. Now it lies on the floor, face down. She rushes to pick it up. The glass has cracked. Long splinters of glass lie on the floor and the photograph looks somehow naked. She looks up at me, something showing through the deliberate blankness. 'I'm sorry, mother. I'm sorry.' I stare down at the photograph and say nothing. 'I'm sorry,' she repeats. 'Don't look like that.' She passes her hand over the photograph. 'I'll get it fixed tomorrow. I promise I'll do it.'

'No, don't!' My words are harsh and abrupt and she looks at me in surprise. 'I don't care if it's broken. I don't want to see it here. I never want to see it again.'

She looks up at me, stunned, frightened. 'What's wrong with you? What's happened to you?'

'Nothing. I'm all right. But I don't want it. Let it go.'

'What are you saying? What is it?'

'Let it go, let it go,' I repeat. We are speaking in sibilant, strangled whispers. Can he hear us? Can he hear me?

'I don't understand you. Let what go? He is my father.' She is still crouching there on the floor, holding the photograph in her two hands.

'Yes, your father. But what was he to me? The day he died, I let him go. Like that.' Now I make the gesture I had imagined . . . cupping my palms together and then separating them. She

stares at my hands with fascinated eyes. 'And there was nothing left. Nothing.'

'But I . . . I am his daughter. And yours. Am I nothing? Am I?' She is panting, her eyes hot and angry.

'What are you then?' I ask her. 'You are just smoke and a bit of ash . . . like those cigarettes you smoke. Like my married life.' Pain lays its talons on her face. Her eyes are anguished. But I force myself to go on. What have I to lose? Nothing. Only the child's love. And this cannot destroy that. On the contrary, I have a feeling that she is with me now, giving me strength for the battle, urging me on to it. My beloved charioteer. 'He was your father . . . but what was he of mine? I lived with him for twenty-five years. I know he didn't like unstrung beans and stones in his rice. I know he liked his tea boiling hot and his bath water lukewarm. I know he didn't like tears. And so, when your baby brothers died, I wept alone and in secret. I combed my hair before he woke up because he didn't like to see women with loosened hair. And I went into the backyard even then, because he hated to find stray hairs anywhere. And once a year he bought me two saris; always colours that I hated. But he never asked me and I never told him. And at night . . .'

She is still crouching there, her hair falling about her face.

She whimpers like a puppy. 'Don't,' she says. 'Don't tell me. Don't.' With each negative she bangs the photograph she still holds in her hands and the glass splinters again and again. Now, he is totally exposed to both of us. But there is no pity in me. It is not the dead who need your compassion . . . it is the living. Not the dead who crave for loyalty, but the living.

'I don't want to hear,' she says.

How innocent she is in spite of her age, her education, her books, her marriage and child that knowledge can still hurt. It reminds me of the day she had grown up and I had tried to explain. And she had cried out in the same way, 'Don't tell me. Don't!' This is another kind of growing up, when you see your parents as people.

'At night,' I go on relentlessly, 'I scarcely dared to breathe, I was so terrified of disturbing him. And once, when I asked whether I could sleep in another room . . . I don't know how I had the courage . . . he said nothing. But the next day, his

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mother, your grandmother, told me bluntly about a wife's duties. I must always be available. So, I slept there, afraid to get up for a glass of water, scared even to cough. When he wanted me, he said, "Come here." And I went. And when he finished, if I didn't get out of his bed fast enough, he said, "You can go." And I went.' I know these things should not be said to her, his daughter and mine. But I am like a river in the monsoon. I have no control over myself.

'And one day when you were here . . . you and Madhav . . . I heard you both talking and laughing in your room. And I stood outside and wondered . . . what could you be talking about? I felt like I did when I was a child unable to read, looking at a book. Until then, I had hoped that one day he would say he was pleased with me. That day I knew it would never happen. I would always be outside the room. I would never know what goes on inside. And that day, I envied you, my own daughter. You hear me, Aarti? I envied you. And when he died, I felt like Priti does when school is over and the bell rings. You understand, Aarti? You understand?'

Why am I also crying? We look at each other. She looks at me as if she has never seen me before. Then, with a sudden movement, she springs up and glares at me. Whose is the victory? Whose? I have made her look at me. But what, my heart shrivels at the thought, if she does not like what she sees? And as she moves backwards and starts running away from the room, from me, I realise what I have done. And then I hear the cry, 'Ajji, I'm home. Where are you?'

'Here,' I call back loudly. 'I'm here.'

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VISHWAPRIYA L. IYENGAR

Vishwapriya Iyengar was born in 1958 and now lives in Delhi. Since 1978 she has been a journalist and writer of plays, poems and short stories. Many of her articles have come out of research into the social and economic conditions of the fisherfolk of Kerala and children's working conditions in Tamil Nadu. Her short stories have been published in magazines and journals: she is now working on a collection. 'The Library Girl' was published by *Imprint*, Bombay, in 1985.

The story is set in a Muslim neighbourhood or basti, where everybody is addressed using kinship terms (like *Baba* 'father', *Beti* 'daughter') even when they are not related.

The Library Girl

and by...
Tipping on the torn seam of her ghagra she ran quickly through narrow paths that turned into corners at every few steps. Quickly, before the corrugated ripples came down and the eye shut. 'The eye of the basti,' Talat thought fancifully.

A sore or a showpiece, but the eye? Ridiculous. The library was the most incongruous place in the basti. The basti was many centuries old; the grave of an honoured poet and famous saint gave it historical authenticity. No, they would rather the eye was in the tomb.

Asad Baba removed the tin tray from the oven. The soft smell of freshly baked rusks spilt out into the open road. Va'al-e-qum, Baba. Asad Baba shook his head: No, not even the rusks would tempt Talat to pause for a conversation. The fire in his oven and the hot tray – black with years of baking – made him feel lonely . . . He would have liked to share the evening batch.

Zahir and Ali called Talat the 'library girl' just as many others in the basti did. They flocked to secret corners watching her go and return.

general
'Quickly, quickly, before the library closes and my book is lost inside . . .' Va'al-e-qum, Baba. Va'al-e-qum, Baji. Va'al-e-qum, little brother. Va'al-e-qum, little goat. Tomorrow they will dress you in chillies. A tiny rat lay dead on the circular iron lid of the sewer. The powerful smack of a broom. Talat laughed. Va'al-e-qum, pest.

Aziza Baji was not just a librarian, thought Talat, she was a social worker. She was important. What she liked best about Aziza Baji was that she never smelt of cooked food. The library was like a palace with so many beautiful books. She liked to sit on the cold white steel chairs and open the pages. She liked to become a tiny ant that moved between the letters of the words. Karim Baba sat in his closet-like shop surrounded by a dozen century-old clocks encased in rosewood coffins. Only one worked but it did not have an enamel dial. On the white paper

disc it said a quarter to six. His hands had shaken when he wrote, 'Made in England'. He could sell it for two hundred rupees if the paper disc was not discovered. Va'al-e-qum, Baba. Va'al-e-qum, Beti. His temples throbbed against the stiff skull-cap. She ran like a bolt of sunshine, little library girl with her book clutched to her bosom. He watched her disappear around the corner with immense sadness: some buds would never blossom in this basti. Eventually there was never enough sunshine and the soil was too cold. She would have reached the library now. He closed the door and fixed the padlock. He pressed the cold, tarnished brass key to his lips and put it in his pocket.

Talat was sixteen or seventeen years old, she did not know for sure. When she was younger, she used to go to school and then one day it had stopped abruptly. Maybe Father had quarrelled with Mother about money for school fees or Mother had quarrelled with the school teachers about money.

Only two days after she had left school, Ammi had taken her to the bazaar in a cycle-rickshaw with the promise of a wonderful expedition. Ammi wanted yellow satin, the colour of the noonday sun. The shopkeepers had laughed at this ghost-woman in a burqa who spoke so intensely about yellow. But they had found the exact shade that Ammi sought and along with it they had bought silver star-shaped sequins. Sun and stars, thought Talat, feeling a mixture of exhilaration and despondency as she sat watching an azure twilight and listened to the cycle bells of the rickshaws.

For many days Talat prayed desperately for a wedding in the family so that she could wear her new ghagra, but there had been none.

Ammi sat up all night sewing the ghagra-kameez for Talat. The kerosene lamp had become black and smoky but Ammijaan had sewn like a possessed woman. Towards dawn she began fixing the stars and Talat fell asleep reciting her numbers. It did not matter if she awoke late for there would be no school for her the next morning.

Another day she had heard Ammi and Abba quarrelling bitterly and it had frightened her. Ammi was asking how, if there was money for Tahir's education, there was none for

Talat's. Her father had laughed and then shouted. She stood at the edge of the ditch outside their house and overheard, 'Buy her silk, satin, velvet, silver – but, fool woman, don't compare her with Tahir.' Even now when she remembered the low husky voice of her father droning those words, Talat shuddered. When he left the house, she had slipped in with the shadows.

Ammijaan's eyes were red and her face covered with tears. Her hands were shaking as she slashed the meat with her long iron knife. Kheema, thought Talat, will she put peas in it? Ammi had screamed when she saw Talat creeping in. 'Go wear your new ghagra and go out and play.' Talat felt bewildered; she wanted to ask, 'When will the kheema be ready?' She had worn the ghagra-kameez and stood for a long time before the mirror. She could see Ammi in the kitchen and knew that Ammi too could see her. Ammi's long thick fingers were a little blood-stained and she stroked her cheeks. Mother and child gazed at each other through the mirror. But her mother had frightened her. Her eyes were like crows trapped in the cage of her face.

Talat had gone out to play. In the giant-wheel of mirth she had forgotten what she had played and where. But someone had been jealous of her yellow satin suit because many sequins had been torn and ugly hand prints of grease had been smudged on it instead.

Whenever she thought about school there came before her a picture of her grease-stained suit.

The library was opposite a hide shop. Hides hung in neat rows from the beams. Brown, dry hides in the exact shape of a goat. The neck and the four legs all sewn up. They made good water-bags. But the library had a curtain that was always drawn. It was the only place in the basti that did not have to exhibit its wares. A red curtain like the skirt of Anarkali.

Talat parted the curtain with restrained excitement. 'Salaam al-e-qum Aziza Baji,' she smiled in triumph. She looked shyly at Aziza and then went to the book-shelf. Her arms filled with books, she sat down on the steel chair. There were pictures in the library that she loved to see: aeroplanes, trucks, and women working in the fields. The walls in her house were bare. There were many marks on the walls and when Ammi's lamp moved

its flames to the wind's music, these marks would become pictures, but she did not like the stories they told.

Today she read a story about a dancer who tried to escape death. She told death to dance in her shadow and sang to the sun, asking him to kill all shadows. But the sun said, 'How can I kill death if there is no death?' So the dancer told the sun to give her night and the sun agreed. In the night the dancer lost her shadow and danced forever. The attenuated cries of 'Allah ho Akbar' froze her fantasy. The tick of the library clock became the pricking of a sewing needle upon her flesh. Abba would soon be returning from the Azan and it was time for her to be back. Tomorrow Aziza Baji would give her a book about a famous doctor who had helped the poor people of China. Aziza Baji had told Talat many stories about this man. Talat liked to read about people who change things that seemed unchangeable. 'Until tomorrow, khuda hafiz.' Talat ran through the narrow road that twisted and slipped into a darkness called home. The book about the dancer was well hidden in the folds of her kameez. Little lights burned on the road as the library girl returned. Old eyes, young eyes, men's and women's eyes: in curiosity, in envy and in desire these lights burnt, unseen by the library girl who ran in trepidation as the name of Allah rose and fell on the ear-caves of a bleak evening.

And then it was a month of festivities.

Talat sat on a low divan, her arms propped against a blue velvet bolster and she read about the doctor in China. The velvet too, smelt of curry and her fingers curled around the fabric with hesitant sensuality.

They heard the crunch of gravel beneath thick boat-like leather soles, and the rubbing of the soles on a mat. Ammi wiped the moisture from her upper lip with a cloth kept for cleaning the kitchen. Abba lifted the curtain and stepped in. Above the doorway was some ornate Persian lettering, in praise of God, Talat presumed. She did not understand Persian. Abba had a bulky brown-paper packet underneath his black coat. Today he had been to Jamma Masjid and he must have shopped. Talat gave him a glass of sweetened water. Rose petals floated in the water. He stared at the child with mock seriousness. He drank hastily and little droplets clung to the

hair of his beard. Talat gave him a towel but he did not wipe the water away. Instead, he sat down on the divan, exactly on the spot where she had hidden her book. It was safe underneath the mattress, but she was still afraid. 'It's Persian,' he said, pointing at the mysterious package with a dark, dry finger with a long nail. 'Open it, it is a gift for you, child.'

Ammi watched through the mirror. Grandmother, who was crocheting a white skull-cap on her knee, jutted out her neck as Talat delicately eased the jute twine out. She put her hands into the paper packet and shuddered with delight: 'Ooh, it's as soft as a new-born kitten.' 'It's Persian,' her father repeated. He would never say 'Iran'. She pulled out a long black cloth of silk. It slipped from her hands and fell. A black cat slept on the grey cement floor. Grandmother's old fingers knotted the white thread. Ammi rubbed rock-salt on the goat's leg.

Talat picked up the black fabric and she exclaimed with delight, 'Why! It is the most perfect burqa ever!' She lifted it up against her for all to see. The face mask was a fine net mesh. 'See, the net is as fine as the lattice-work in Fatehpur Sikri.' Her mother rubbed salt into the goat's breast and did not know if glass crystals were not being rubbed into her own. The old woman dropped her eyes onto a crocheted flower.

Only her father's eyes shone with pride and pleasure. Talat wore the burqa for him and smiled. She turned to the mirror. A wooden eagle held the mirror between its claws. Talat laughed. Ammi took out her long black iron knife and began to rub salt into the rust spots at the tip. She saw her beautiful sun and star child become night in the mirror. In haste she cut the meat that had not yet softened, in haste she cut her thumb.

Talat saw her own veiled face in the mirror and felt afraid. She had also seen her mother's face. In the cage the crows had died. Her father said, 'I have business to attend to,' and left. The old woman let out a scream of exasperation. The skull-cap had disintegrated into a confusion of knots. Grandmother slapped Tahir hard on his cheeks. He distracted her, she said, asking for star-sweets. There was the mark of her bony fingers on his plump cheeks. Tahir ran out crying disconsolate sobs. Still wearing her Persian burqa Talat took her book from under the mattress and ran behind Tahir. She lost him around

a corner and when she found him again he was with a group of boys. In his hands he held a stick like a gun and was pointing at a horse. Bang . . . bang . . . boom. Talat smiled at him. Play with your sticks, little brother, but I will cut the meat.

Talat ran quickly, quickly before the library closed. Va'al-e-qum, Baba. Va'al-e-qum, Baji. Now she would go to the library and exchange her book. Aziza Baji had promised her a truly wonderful book. Va'al-e-qum, little sister. She ran trailing her black Persian robe down the dirty streets. Today she would pause and speak, she thought, as she gathered up her robe. Asad Baba was putting a tray of buns into the oven. Talat smiled. Va'al-e-qum, Baba. He thought his old eyes were playing tricks on him and he burnt his fingers as he placed the tray a little too deep inside the oven. The library girl had not come today and he watched instead a burqa-ed woman turn the corner. In the little attic room above the bakery, Ali and Zahir played chess. Between moves they glanced at the street through the little window. It was turning dark and the library girl had not come.

Inside the veil Talat felt sick and cold. Today no one had smiled back at her and no one had said her Persian robe was beautiful. Karim Baba stood outside his clock shop. He clutched the key in his pocket. He had waited a long time. He wanted to tell Talat that he had sold the round clock with the paper dial for one hundred and seventy-five rupees. He would have liked to have given her a few rupees for an orange dupatta, or, he smiled distractedly, for a book. Tomorrow would be too late, his begum would have appropriated the money. Why hadn't the child gone to the library? Had the bud already begun to wither? dry up

When Talat smiled at him through the black net he had turned his back. Neither the mad dog nor the enchanted child had stalked the streets today.

Within the veil, a darkness seized Talat. It bandaged her mouth, her eyes, and sealed her voice. Today her smiles had lit nothing. Blank faces had become ash in her gaze. She wanted to . . . she wanted to lift the veil and say, 'Look . . . it's me. Only me in a Persian robe. It's a joke.' But the robe had hands that clapped her mouth.

VISHWAPRIYA L. IYENGAR

Quickly, quickly, before the library closes and the eye shuts forever. But the eye was in the tomb and had shut a long time ago. Two more corners to turn and she would be there. That wonderful book. What was it about? She had already forgotten. One more corner and she heard the corrugated shutter being pulled down. The clink-clink-clink of Aziza Baji's glass bangles. Turquoise blue? She ran, shouting, 'For the love of God wait for me. Do not close the library yet, give me my book.' She ran, tripping on her black robe.

She could not see the red curtains. Grey metal shone dully, very dully, in the moonlight. Aziza had seen a woman in a burqa waving her hands, falling down and weeping. Inside, evening had stretched the emptiness taut; she was very exhausted. Aziza had to catch a bus, she lived a long way from the basti.

Talat cried and Talat screamed inside her black veil. But they did not hear and did not see. Long after the name of Allah had turned evening into night she walked home slowly, very slowly.