Anila's Journey

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For David

In memory of
Gloria Rodriguez Finn
HOW TO BEGIN A STORY

THIS IS MY STORY and I think there is merit in setting it down, even if I am not a princess, or a magical bird, or a gentleman who has lost his ship and found a new land. When I am old I can shake my head at it. But it will still be true.

The only thing I would choose to change, and it is impossible, is that my mother be the storyteller, for she told the best stories in the world. Hers would begin with a stolen ring or the monsoon in its black cloak and boots coming, not in summer but in winter, everything out of order and impossible to put right. But they’d end with a wedding feast in a palace and all the devils tumbled backwards into the deep blue sea.

Ask her about our own story, however, and those devil horns would poke out of the water again, just high enough to trouble me. Life is different, she said, it’s just a line painted on an egg and if you think it has a beginning or an end you are bound for a fretful journey.

She took up my pen one day and drew a line on one of the smooth white stones from the fountain in the garden. She turned the stone round and round again, drawing all the while, until the line made fine bands all the way from top to bottom.

“There’s the end!” I said to her, triumphant, for she could go no further now. But she turned the stone again and I saw she had made a loop back to where she had set out, so that her line had not simply come to a stop.

“You see?” she said. “There is no place here you can say is the beginning or the end. That is the way our life is too, Anila.”

She believed in the wheel of life, absolutely. I was not so sure about that, not even when I was little, but especially after I was eight or nine and there were enough beginnings and endings around us for dozens of stories. I was impatient when she would not see this.

“But I began when you met my father,” I said to her. “And if that was an egg in your hand, not a stone, what if you broke it? Then you’d have a top and a bottom and a beginning and an end and you can just pour away. Or turn into something sweet for eating.”

She held up her hands as you do to play Ikri-Mikri-Cham-Chikri with a baby but she was trying to stop my words, not to play. By that time it was a rare thing to see her smile. She feared for me because of my boldness, and my thunderclapping, as it was called in the house with the fountain. But I only had a child’s desire to understand what was happening all around me.

Yet when I try to begin my own story, to write it down, all in order, in this
notebook, I find that my mother’s belief in the wheel makes a lot of sense after all. How is it possible to cut into the line of life and say, here it is, this is where it begins? It is not possible but surely a writer has to stab at it, like a baby bird seeking the softest part of the shell.
THE SCRAP OF NEWSPAPER

SO I SHALL BREAK my egg and choose to open my story here. Not with the ring or the storm, but with the scrap of newspaper that dear Miss Hickey, my guardian, put into my hand the day before she took ship from Calcutta for Madras.

She came into the salon where I was sitting on the old fainting couch, my legs tucked up under me. It was the only piece of furniture left now in that huge yellow room and it felt like a raft in the emptiness, with my cast-off slippers for fish.

“Anila! There you are, my dear. I’ve made myself hoarse calling for you in the garden. Look, see what a blessed find I’ve made in just the last little while, going through the packing cases.”

She stepped through the wide sun stripes cast by the windows where the dust hung, turning over as slowly as honey. There was a blaze of excitement on her face but all she had was a crumpled piece of newspaper, which she held out to me.

“We’ve had this in the house for a week or more,” she said, “but I’ve only now seen it, stuffed as it was inside the coffee pot, if you don’t mind, and smelling of camphor balls so horribly besides. Imagine how my father’s coffee will taste! Here, read it, child, don’t let me ramble on, let me sit beside you on that battered old thing. You look very comfortable.”

She sat beside me and smoothed her skirt. I could smell her English lavender water but also the strong whiff of camphor from the newspaper. It was a notice from The Gazette, torn from the pages that carried news of ships’ landings and departures and the city’s theatricals and balls. No wonder then that Miss Hickey had not seen it. She never read the notices.
I read the piece twice and I must still have been showing the whites of my eyes to it because Miss Hickey started to explain.

“Avian means birds,” she said.

Well, I knew that much. After all, I was the Bird Girl of Calcutta, according to Mr Hickey, the Famous Painter of Calcutta.

“And draughtsman means an artist, a professional kind of person. Apprentice, alas, means that there is not much to be expected in the line of fortune out of this. But never mind that, Anila. Here is an opportunity for you above all others. I know my father would write a testimonial for you if he were here, so I shall do so in his place.”

She sat back and I had to turn a little to see her face. My brown sparrow of a guardian had a sweet little puckered mouth at the best of times, a butter-wouldn’t-melt mouth, her father called it. But when she was intent on any matter that mouth settled into a straight line the way a monkey’s does when it has a plan. It was settled now.

I hardly knew what to say. The day I found the courage to tell Miss Hickey that I would not travel south to Madras with her to join her father, she told me I had broken her heart. She still said these words, yet several times in the weeks since then she had astounded me with her practical ideas for my future. I could not see any such thing on this scrap of paper.

“But it says draughtsman,” I said, “so we can know for sure that this Mr Walker is not looking for someone like me. I’m not a man and I’m not English and he is surely looking for both of those things.”

“Draughtsman is just a word like any other word, so it can be turned inside out like a suit of clothes. Never be outfoxed by a word, child. This Mr Walker may not yet be aware that he is looking for someone of your particulars, but he will be when he sees the birds you can pluck out of the air with a pencil and a piece of paper. It will be our business to convince him.”
Miss Hickey’s mouth softened a little from its monkey lines.

“My word,” she said, “when I think of you at your mother’s feet, biddable as a lamb you were then, and drawing away with your little piece of charcoal...”

She stopped. In our household we were accustomed to talking easily about my mother but perhaps Miss Hickey felt that this was a dangerous time to call her to mind.

“Think, Anila,” she said, very quietly. “You have not just your natural talent to support your claim but there is undoubtedly a certain liberty in your situation that I believe can aid you in this matter just as well as it might undermine you in other ways.”

She took a breath. “That is, of course, if you will not finally reconsider and come with me in the morning.”

The sly thing. This was the reason I had stayed all morning in the salon, though of course I had heard Miss Hickey calling me.

Her eyes were on mine, gimlets, though someone watching us might have said no, hers were blue and frank and pleasant while mine were the whetstones. I stood up from the couch and nearly fell, for pins and needles started to attack my poor legs.

Oh, but it was hard enough as it was! Ever since Mr Hickey had decided that there were too many new painters arriving every month in Calcutta and that he would make more money in Madras, my mind had had no peace. I could see every reason why I should go with these dear people who loved me, and only one why I should stay.

There was such sense in leaving. The Hickeys were my protectors and I had no others in Calcutta who truly cared whether I lived or died. We had all seen the truth of that when Miss Hickey finally bowed to my mutiny. She began to trot me out then among her lady acquaintances, looking to find me a position.

How Miss Anila Tandy could read and paint and sing, goodness, every English child in Calcutta would cry himself to sleep if he could not win my company to his house as a teacher. And Mrs Panossian of the great store near the Bowbazaar, with her famous coffees and syrups and preserved fruits and flower waters all the way from Europe? She had to agree that those goods needed clever Anila’s tending as surely as if they were goats on the road to perdition.

She sold me very well, Miss Hickey did, but there were no takers, not really. There was a promise from Mrs Deering that I might come and look after her little girl whenever the ayah would declare her weaned. No ayah existed who would be that stupid, of course. Mrs Panossian, who knew my story long since, leant across her gleaming dark counter and said I was welcome to come and work a day with her so she might judge if I were as good a totter as I was a dauber. Everyone else smiled sweetly at me, the jackal-coloured girl dressed that day in a frock, her braids tied in matching
ribbons. One for her father, missing, one for her mother, dead.

Except the rector of St John’s, of course. He saw through that frock so clearly I might as well have danced into his study wearing my mother’s old bangles, and bells round my ankles. He stroked his long beard, brown and grey underneath the snuff stains, and looked me up and down the way soldiers look at horses. Finally, the rector turned to Miss Hickey and asked her whether, as my guardian, she had a record or a witness to my baptism. This request made her turn so white I thought she would faint on the spot. But she stood up and told the reverend sahib that she had not yet stooped to stealing their faiths from other people and so we would bid him good-day. I was proud of her then, proud to have her fierce affection.

It was even better when she turned back to him at the door.

“Moreover, sir,” she said, “I dropped my own baptismal name long since, when I was Anila’s age. Helena is my own choice from my favourite of Shakespeare’s plays and your church can claim no hand, act or part in it.”

We had not seen him since. But of course he would have spread the story among his parishioners. At any rate, there had been no other offer that, as Miss Hickey put it, addressed my talents. So she had made her own secret arrangement with me. That was how things stood, I believed, but as the time for parting came nearer I felt as weak as a bird in a storm, and she was not much better, pushing me one moment, pulling the next.

So, what on earth should I think now about this Mr Walker and his expedition?

I began to walk the length of the salon, keeping my steps within the boards. Such strangeness the room had now, without any of its chairs and little tables, its rugs and tapestries and the pearl-coloured blinds. All the good furniture had been taken away in the week past by coolies and wagons.

Those things had just vanished but the cherry harpsichord had left its claw marks on the floor, like the sulky monster it was. When the rains came not even Miss Hickey, who was a pretty player, could make music with it.

The walls too, bore traces. All Mr Hickey’s paintings, both his own works and his collection, had been taken out of their golden frames and rolled up like rugs. I had helped with that, carefully wrapping the canvases in further rolls of stuffs, so they were safe as babies. Now you could see the different pale shapes on the walls where each picture had hung. But the two paintings I remembered best had never lived in this room at all.

“Anila, stop pacing like a creature in a menagerie!”

Miss Hickey stood up and caught my arm as I passed her again, holding me from my march.

“It seems impossible,” I said to her. “But the drawing work is something I would enjoy. And you are right. I can do things that English girls might not.”

“Child, there is nothing at all to lose by trying. Go and get your drawings
collected now so that we may arrange them to best impress this Mr Walker. I am going up now to unpack some of my writing paper to write a testimonial for you. Truly, I feel something might come of this and it makes me feel a little more hopeful about your staying behind in this city of scoundrels. Think, if you can do this work, a recommendation from this gentleman might get you appointed as a drawing mistress, or a proper governess, such a position that I have not found for you.”

That was my Miss Hickey, my dear mashi. For that was what I liked to pretend she was, my aunt, though I had none. She always spoke in long and perfect sentences like a book, unlike anybody else I knew and not at all like her father, whose few words came out in explosions.

There was indeed only one reason why I would not go with them. As long as I had no news of my father, I would believe him to be alive. And if he was alive, he would return to find me. He had promised that, even though it was so long ago now. He knew nothing of the Hickeys or their kind of people, so if I were not in Calcutta how would he find me?

His words had left tracks as deep as the harpsichord’s. As faint as the picture frames.
**THE IRON TEA HOUSE**

I WANTED TO REMEMBER the view from my window for ever.

“Why my father never painted this, I cannot begin to think,” Miss Hickey said. “It makes such a fine picture all on its own say-so.”

She stood beside me. Our work was done. My bird paintings were sorted and packed in tissue paper. Even the stitched sketchbooks made from my father’s old Company papers were wrapped and put safe into one of the tin-lined drawing cases she had purloined for me. Then, sitting on my stripped bed, Miss Hickey had written her testimonial note.

The garden stretched away down, sloping to the river. Today the river was just a grey line under a huge pale sky. In the new year, when the sky brightened, the water would turn the colour of golden mud. Then, on a late afternoon like this, all the ships and boats on it would look hugged by the water, as if the water was their mother. Today they were just painted puppet ships, gliding past. Even the great ones going downriver had only a baby swell of canvas in their rigging.

We stared until two ships had crossed the window frame from right to left.

“My ship is moored so far downriver,” Miss Hickey said, “it will take I don’t know how long to reach her, with all the hazards and shallows.”

She sighed.

Outside the evening crows were shouting.

*Anila, my little bird, the crows begin to make dusk before great Surya himself feels tired.*

Our garden was full of trees, over thirty different kinds, Mr Hickey said. Our neighbours grew neat grass instead, for their cricket games and garden parties. Their trees were prisoners in pots. They hid their dhobi washing tanks and their servants’ huts behind stands of bamboo. Our garden had its own proud little village surrounded by flowering plants. It had a lily pond and a huge silk cottonwood tree that dropped enough cobweb-soft down every summer to stuff all our pillows and cushions.

But it wasn’t always a peaceful place. The tall palmyras and neem trees groaned like devils when the storms came up the river or over the salt marshes. The winds snapped boughs off and threw hard fruits around until the doob grass had holes like bad skin.

Our house did not lie at the fashionable end of Garden Reach, where people kept their own boats to travel to and from the city. The Hickeys did not care to do this for the expense was great, and so our garden was enclosed and
separated from the waterside by, first, an iron fence and gate, then by a hedge of red oleanders. Abdul the cook claimed that all this protection was a good thing because, far downstream where we were, ghosts left the river every night. These were the ghosts of drowned people who tried to save themselves again and again until the dawn forced them to slip back under the water.

It was down there at the hedge that Miss Hickey’s and my secret lay, so far down I could not see it from my window. The first time I saw the secret, I could not believe how it had escaped me before. I who knew the garden as well as every thieving mynah that came for our prickly plums, our mangoes!

“Well then, Anila,” said Miss Hickey, one afternoon. It was a week or so after our unhappy visit to St John’s. “If you are determined to stay here in Calcutta, we shall have to find you a house.”

“A house?”

She was smiling her clever-me monkey smile which told me nothing, but in her garden basket she was carrying a couple of the syce’s horse tools. She would say nothing more but hooked that firm little arm through mine and led me all the way down to the oleander hedge. She right-turned us there like soldiers, over to the corner where the greenery was thickest. She put my hand on it and I felt the softer growth. These weeds and fronds were scrambling upwards to cover something.

“Think of the Reverend’s unpleasant facial hair trimmings,” Miss Hickey said. “Then we’ll have some pleasure in chopping them, don’t you think?”

That made me giggle. Most of the growth could be pulled away without cutting, though when I had to slash some vines I thought of dirty snuff-brown whiskers dropping off. But Miss Hickey’s words proved clever because as the greens fell away we found bones underneath, though they were neither human nor animal remains.

“Oh,” I said. “Oh.”

What could anybody say to something so perfect?

It was a tiny house made of iron that stood clear of the ground on six legs. Once it had been painted dark blue but now it was mostly rusted. Two boxy steps led up to a tightly closed door. This door had glass fitted into it, very dirty glass, smeared and sticky except at the top where it was cut into odd shapes in jewel colours, greens, ambers, crimsons and deep, deep blues. Tatters of faded cloth hung down in the window frames instead of glass. Six spikes on the pointed roof matched the six legs underneath.

It reminded me of the fat rocket firework that Mr Hickey had brought home during last Kali Puja when the city was ablaze with lights and excitement.

“Look at it,” Miss Hickey said. “All those sharp points and the glass lozenges and trefoils. Somebody pined for a Gothic fancy on the banks of the Hooghly and so here we have it.”

“But nobody has ever had tea here, have they?”
“Well, not us anyway, dear, not in all the time we’ve been here. I let it go, there was so much else to be doing here. But this little house might be a godsend to you, Anila, if you do not find a position before my father and I leave.”

My dear and proper Miss Hickey was saying such a thing about a house that looked like a firework?

She told me then that she had asked the syce to let loose his pet mongooses around the bottom of the garden so that the area should be free of snakes.

“Zakar will be staying on here as horseman, you know, so that should be a consideration for you. He’s no stranger and I believe he has a good heart.”

I thought about glum silent Zakar, who loved horses more than humans, and I wondered.

Miss Hickey took a key from her drawstring waist purse. It could not have belonged to any other building but the little blue house because the top of the key was shaped into points just like the roof. She fitted it and it turned easily.

We stepped in.

Something skidded by us and out the door and there was a scurry that we couldn’t quite follow in the halflight. I jumped back but Miss Hickey just poked her head outside again and said quite calmly, “That will be one of the mongooses. It must have taken up abode here.”

I was not so certain myself that it had been a mongoose though the little creatures do move close to the earth, and fast, in just that way. I hoped it was, and nothing worse. But I was trying to understand what was happening under our feet. The iron floor seemed to be heaving. Miss Hickey made a disgusted noise and stamped her little slippered feet down like a horse.

“The place is teeming with insects,” she said. “Take care they don’t go up your legs.”

Now that my eyes were used to the twilight inside I could see that the floor was crossed over and over with highways of ants and beetles, fleeing our feet. A spider the size of a lemon skittered into a corner. There was a strong smell of mice but I supposed the mongoose had taken care of that job already.

“Well, indeed, it’s not exactly the garden house of Eden, is it?” said Miss Hickey. “I shall have to send Zakar on a little expedition down here tomorrow. But look – what pretty drapes these were once.”

On the torn strips of brocade you could still make out flowering trees, swallows and ladies and gentlemen in strange costumes crossing little humped bridges.

“I had a bedroom made up with chinoiserie like this when I was a girl in Dublin,” she said, almost as if to herself. “It tells a story of two lovers. Do you see them there?” She laid a finger on one of the lady figures but the stuff came apart in her hand and crumbled, just like Mr Hickey’s dried tobacco when he crushed it to fill his pipe. She dropped it.
“As you see, Anila, it’s not perfect. But for a bolthole you could do worse. Nobody comes down here from the house and the oleanders conceal it.”

“And I can sneak fresh water from the well in the garden.”

She looked at me and her mouth suddenly twisted

“Oh, child,” she said. “Do you really, really believe that your father will ever return to Calcutta? Else all this –” and she gestured around with her hands – “makes no sense, you know, and you should continue to be with us.”

I could say nothing because my throat was dammed with a lump. There was such weight and certainty in Miss Hickey’s kindness. I made as if to shrug my shoulders but she reached out her arms and embraced me. It was a very perfect action because neither of us could see whether the other was weeping, and that was fine with me.

“Promise me just this thing, child,” she said, letting me go at last. “You must follow us down to Madras within the half-year if your efforts to discover news of your father prove fruitless. Or at any time if your situation here gets parlous. I will leave a fiduciary note at the shipping offices for this very purpose.”

All I could do was nod.

We left the little tea house then, locked the door, covered up our secret again with some of the Reverend’s chopped green whiskers. Let him do some work for me, I thought. We went back to the house and set down again to the work of packing and labelling the best house goods and setting others aside for the servants.

But that evening Zakar was called into the house. He stood stiffly to attention in the pantry, smelling of horses, his stormy brows meeting in a line across his face. Miss Hickey told him what she wanted done at the bottom of the garden.

“Remember, silent actions breed the biggest rupees,” she warned him at the finish.

Miss Hickey normally spoke quite well in Bangla, our beautiful language that the English call Bengali. But that evening I wondered if she knew that her warning words to Zakar sounded like something a dacoit might say in a fairy tale. I tried to picture tiny Miss Hickey as a thieving brigand holding a dagger. The strange thing was that it was not impossible to imagine this.

I quickly explained to Zakar that Miss Hickey considered that he was bound to secrecy. About cleaning and outfitting my little house, and above all about my presence there. For this he would be paid. But he had understood, he told me. And then, when he was leaving the room, he winked at me, an unmistakeable wink under his black caterpillar brow. Zakar!

We were all dacoits in our separate ways, I thought. Miss Hickey with her fierce words and her belief that I could live like Mr Robinson Crusoe. Zakar with his thundery wink. And there I was now too, with my den down by the
riverside.

Now, weeks later, looking down from my window, I knew exactly what was inside the little iron house. We had hung fresh curtains all round the window frames. They were not at all pretty ones as the China patterned drapes must once have been. They were made of heavy oilcloth to give me some protection from the elements and were a murky green to blend in with the oleanders. The floor was spread with clean rushes and there was a small round of woven coir matting laid on top of them. A string bed hung high off the ground from two of the iron supports, a red satin cushion from the salon making it bright as a bird’s breast.

Miss Hickey had instructed Habdi, the kitchen boy, to find a clay oven in the bazaar and a basketful of charcoal and good firewood. When he looked confused she told him she wanted an oven just in case her ship should lack its own.

The only smells inside the tea house now came from the oleanders and, fresh on the breeze, the waterweeds and the river itself. I had placed my mother’s little Durga altar on one of the windowsills. For years the old clay goddess had sat on my bedroom sill and had shared my high view of the river. I thought she deserved to have no less in her new home. There was also a tiffin box with some cooked dal, a bag of rice, some eggs and a jar of English arrowroot biscuits. That was all, until I should carry down my bag of clothes and the drawings from the bedroom. I would sleep there tonight. Miss Hickey had insisted on that.

“So then at least I will know the first chapter of your new story,” she said. But her tone was dull, not keen.
MY MOTHER

MY MOTHER WAS PURE BENGALI, not half and half like I am. She was very beautiful. When we used to walk together down the lanes behind the houses, the birds sang louder. That is what I thought then. I was little and she laughed when I first said this to her. That night she told me one of her bird stories, about a bird that had no songs at all. It was the raven, who lost his singing voice when a demon locked him in a mine for nine hundred years, but his bravery never left him.

However, it was not only birds who thought my mother was special. My father followed her one day – this is before I was born – and asked if he could paint her. Of course she said no. She was a boatman’s daughter and he should not even be seeing her as he walked by that morning when she was casting off the ropes for her father. He should have passed on by. He should not be there. He should not look at her. He should never talk to her. So he had to go away and think again. He came back a week later and told her father, my grandfather, that he had bought her a house.

She was fourteen then. Her father said she should go, that her life would be better. Without a mother, brothers or sisters, she would be on her own when he died. He feared famine more than anything and girls and women were the first to perish in famines. He had no money to have her married to anybody, even though she was so lovely. She said that the day she left him the tears in his eyes were like the river in monsoon, overflowing and unstoppable. She could see her red sari in his tears, her mother’s bride sari he had kept for her. But she was not a bride.

Annapurna was her name, but my father called her Anna. Or rani, or queen. He liked those words for her but he was no king himself, no rajah. He was an Irishman and he never married her because it was impossible for somebody like him to marry an Indian woman. I found out later that that was not true but such was the story they told me, both of them at different times and in their different ways. And in their different languages. My father spoke to me only in English. My mother always spoke Bangla to me. She said English was like dry meal in her mouth, though she knew it well enough by then.

She called me Anila, which means the never-ending blue of the sky. My father thought the name sounded like “little Anna” so he was happy with it too.

I called her Ma or Mago. To her I was minnow, pearl, pipit – whatever small thing she was thinking about. She loved me and she was always gentle with me. What made her sad beyond everything else was that she could never go upriver with me to show me to her father, who still lived, she supposed, in their old cane house by the river. That was impossible. She had left that world behind.

It was not quite true that my father had bought a house for her. Many things
about my father were not quite the way he said they were. But I think that he believed they would work out to his plan in the end, that perhaps the gods would respond eventually to the click of his fingers. Of course they did not; they laughed.

The little house was there, yes, down a lane near an old temple on the high road leading towards the bazaar area of the city. That was where I was born. I can remember the house. It was square, with a pink wash over thin bricks held together with pukka mix, and a roof that you reached by steps at the back. A flame-blossomed gulmohar tree stood across from it. When it was in flower its petals would fall in front of our door and when we came out it seemed that someone had scattered bright Holi colours just for us. But the day my mother arrived there with my father, dressed in red, and, surely, her heart beating with fear and hope, she discovered that she had to share her house with two other women. My father had rented the space from a man he knew. It was really a very little house, with only one room that the other women had already divided with screens, so they were not best pleased by my mother’s arrival. And then she was so beautiful.

The two women were Malati and Hemavati. Like my mother, they were bibis – Indian women who belonged to white men. But unlike her, they were dancing girls and much older than fourteen. Malati was kind enough. When I could crawl she let me play with her anklets. My mother told me that I loved to shake them and make their hundreds of tiny bells lift our dull room into paradise for a moment. But the anklets were too heavy for me to lift out of the brass box where Malati kept her costume and clothes and I would have to flop down onto the floor again. Every time this happened my mouth would make a disappointed O, my mother told me. She had to run to pick me up before I cried.

“Then I would take you out to listen to the birds instead,” she told me. “You tried to talk back to them. You made a very good little pigeon!”

When Malati danced she told stories with her feet and hands and smile – not with words, like my mother’s stories. I loved her dances. She must have loved them too because she did not mind that her audience was just a little girl clapping her pudsey hands together. Or that the floor she danced on was not made of marble, just earth with reed mats to cover it. Or that she was hungry, or that there was shouting outside in the lane. Hers were love stories. Malati’s man was a soldier, handsome enough in his rough red coat, but I don’t think he understood her stories.

Hemavati was different. Hemavati was more light-skinned than my mother, with high cheekbones. She was from the mountains, far away to the north. We found it difficult to understand her at times, her speech was so throaty and different. Hemavati told us that she had been taken away from her home by temple dancers when she was about nine. It was hard to know when Hemavati was telling the truth. She stole kajal from Malati to paint her eyes, and paan from my mother, who used to chop the nuts, roll them in lime paste, wrap them in dark betel and sell them to the traders on the high road. And, before I learned to hide them, she stole chalks and pencils from me. She threw stones at the baby monkeys who came in the windows, as eager to steal as she was. Nobody else did this.

Hemavati would stroke my hair, and braid it when I grew older, but she would
never neglect to pull it hard and painfully before she finished. If I lay down beside her when my mother was with my father, she pinched my arms and stoved her dark dirty nails into my skin. I learned not to cry around Hemavati. Once when my mother was away with my father Hemavati pressed chilli seeds into my tears and rubbed them back into my eyes. I could not see for two days. But for those two days, Hemavati herself could not stop crying. She ran to the watermelon seller and brought back two slices for me and stroked me gently while I sucked them, my eyes stuck together tight and my body shaking.

Hemavati’s two children were dead, my mother told me, and she could not have any more. Her man was a sailor, a merchantman, but he stopped coming to her when I was a baby. Some said he had drowned. Malati said he had probably found another girl, a girl who smiled. Hemavati went to dance in the river taverns at night and sometimes she did not come back for a day or more, which was like a holiday for us. But she never saw her man again or, if she did, she did not tell us.

“There are plenty of men who are foolish with their money,” she said. “Better many fools than one.”

That was the harsh way Hemavati spoke.

If my mother was disappointed in the house, in the lie my father had told, she kept it to herself all the years we lived there. She cleaned and swept our corner every day and took our sheet outside into the air and shook it so that it flapped like a heron. Then she brought it back in and stretched it so that it was neat and tight on the bed. She plumped up the two small silk feather pillows, one for her and one for me. They were my father’s gift.

Our quilt was one my mother had begun to make as a child, and she was so very proud of it. Its top and bottom layers were old white saris as fine to the touch as a queen’s muslin. Its warmth and its thickness came from the inner layers of old cotton, my grandfather’s dhotis. All the layers were sewn together with silk threads and so was the band of birds down the centre. A peacock with his proud tail, a golden woodpecker and a fantastic purple dove lay on top of us every night. The dove had a gold ring in his beak.

When I grew a little older the quilt seemed to shrink and so she added another length to it. She stuffed that piece with a rectangle of blanket that she bought from a wandering kambulia for a few coins and a smile. On top of those new layers my clever mother fashioned a darter from green and grey threads. No one could call this final fellow a dainty bird but his long neck stretched over the end of our bed and it seemed as if he were fishing from the floor.

“See how your good grandfather made sure to keep us both warm,” she would say on winter nights when we snuggled together and kept the edges of the quilt wrapped tightly round and under us.

By the bed we had a green basket shaped like a bowl and there she kept the big bright feathers I collected on our walks.

“Your altar,” she told me. But she had her own altar as well, for her Durga made of clay. This little goddess she had brought with her from her father’s house. Durga
stood on our trunk inside a cave my mother had fashioned with palm fronds. Every day she was given fresh peepul or tulsi leaves or some frangipani, and some papaya or coconut that my mother cut carefully into pieces as small as a baby’s fingernail.

Our screen was made of cane wood and my father was begged to bring pins so that she could stick my pictures to it. My first pictures were made on palm leaves, but after a while my father liked to bring me ruined ledgers that his Company no longer had use for. There were always pages left blank that I could work on. He brought me chalks and pencils too, and one birthday, my last with him, a pen with a fine nib and a bottle of the blackest ink.

Hemavati never found that.