

THE DOOM

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The evening darkened and Mai got off the swing heavily to drag herself to the hall. She felt the switchboard with her fingers and the next moment the light filled the entire room. Mai's eyes couldn't take the sudden brightness and so they closed and blinked many times till they adjusted to it. Then Mai found herself sinking into the sofa, looking at the whole room with the eyes of a stranger.

Not only the front room, Bhausahab, her husband, took initiative in decorating the entire house. He had an eye for everything beautiful and he wanted it in the house; the chandeliers, the carpet, wall paper, everything arranged in the show case...each one of them had been his choice. He had never asked for her opinion. He simply got home whatever he liked, asked her to keep it at a particular place and she only arranged it. A slave to his command. Mai was suddenly very angry. The anger which never got translated into words. As always, she swallowed it.

Her movements were slow and deliberate when she got off the sofa and moved from room to room putting on the lights. When she reached Ninad's room, she stared at his photograph kept on the table. Her son. A part of her. Simple, loving child of a pure heart and clean mind. He had cried bitterly while leaving for South India. He didn't want to go so far away from his home and live by himself. For that matter, he didn't want to be a doctor at all. He wanted to study art. But Bhausahab wanted him to be a doctor and his wish was everyone's command. Ninad had an aptitude for art – both painting and sculpting. "I'll become a doctor because he wants me to. But my heart will not be in it," he had said. "I'll think of him and work but I'll never do too well in it." He was the second person to have been forced to do things without his heart in it. She was, of course, the first. But the other two people in the house were happy: Bhausahab and their daughter Radha.

Mai went into Radha's room. The room had Radha's photograph too. A smiling, happy picture of her's in a trendy outfit. She had taken after her father. His colour, complexion. His sharp features. Mai suddenly thought of her own looks. Her features were sharp too but Bhausahab had never noticed them or praised them. But he hadn't ever forgotten to criticize her dark colour.

Come to think of it, he had never made her feel loved. Their intimacy reflected it. He took what he wanted without showing any love for it: In a hurry, roughly, whenever he wished to. There was no tenderness, no romance. Her desires were never considered. Like she was some kind of a thing to be used and pushed away. He didn't care even when her period was on. She hated sex at that time but he didn't bother with her discomfort. Her body hurt, her mind was bruised but she protested only in her mind. Once he had told her the reason why they were together. "I married you because I was under an obligation of your father. I wanted to study and since my parents were dead already there was no one to care for me. I had suffered a sub-human existence. Your father picked me out of it and sheltered me. But it also meant that I laboured like a slave in your house. Took care of the cattle, fetched water from the well, watered the trees, took care of you and your sisters and brothers, tutored them...did just about everything. Your father had found an unpaid labourer and a son-in-law without having to spend a rupee on your marriage. I never said a word; completed my engineering studies. Your father, a selfish man, was simply waiting for me to find a good job and settle down in my career. The minute I got it, he talked of our marriage. He knew I would never refuse. I had doubled under the burden of his favours. That's the only reason why I married you."

His talk had benumbed Mai, she remembered. She remembered how she was attracted to him ever since she was in school. His well-proportioned body, his glowing skin, had always distracted her. And an incident had fuelled this attraction for him. She recalled how one day, as she had watched him milk the cow and had playfully patted his back, he had got a start and had fallen on his back, toppling her in the process. Bodies meshed awkwardly, his mouth had come very close to her budding breasts and she had felt warmth spreading in her body. Bhausaheb had apologised and got up. Nothing had happened but from that day she had tender feelings for him. They were never reciprocated. When she had heard why Bhausaheb had married her, she felt deflated. She had imagined him to feel love for her. He told her of what a terrible compromise it meant to him.

She was ecstatic when she married him. She was dark and a bit on the dull side who had failed her school-leaving exams thrice and then given up. She had imagined her life to take a turn for the better after marrying him. She was the eldest among a lot of children. Many of them had died but they were still three sisters and five brothers by the time she touched 30. Bhausaheb was the eldest son in law and an engineer. Her father was

fond of him. He himself had no relatives to speak of and so he was close to her family.

Bhausahab was a very calculating man. And he was a sweet-talker. He joined his workplace as an overseer and within no time rose higher. He was always nice to everybody, a popular man. Why he never spoke nicely to her was beyond Mai. It hurt her initially till she got used to it. Bhausahab continued doing well in his career. He gave her enough money to run the house and a complete freedom to run it the way she wanted to. If she tried to involve him, if only by giving him an explanation for the money spent, he was dismissive. He was fond of good food and was very particular about it. She had learnt to cook non-vegetarian dishes because he liked them.

When Bhausahab was transferred to Aurangabad on the Jayakvadi dam project the money started looking even better. Mai was happy because she was close to her family. Meanwhile, Bhausahab seemed to get more and more cash home, much more than what he did in the past. The money wasn't handed over to her under the pretext that it was for investing in land. Soon Bhausahab built a bungalow and she got some jewellery. He also bought a farm and since he didn't know much about farming had handed it over to someone to run it. Soon he was one of the most respected people in the neighbourhood. What does respect come of anyway? Mai thought cynically. If there's money, respect follows without much effort. As for happiness, Bhausahab had provided her with enough money and yet she wasn't happy. On the other hand, for him, money meant happiness. What are the right calculations to be happy in life?

Initially, she never thought about the extra cash that her husband brought home. She never thought of asking him about it. Later it dawned upon her that it was dishonest money and she felt repelled by its presence. She thought of telling him how she didn't need too much and was happy with whatever he brought home as his salary but didn't have the courage to voice her thoughts. What if he didn't like her talk and drove her out of the house? Where would she go? Her father's home? Her father and his family was under a lot of obligation from Bhausahab. He had done all of them favours: Helped out during Devayani's wedding (her father was trying to repay that money). Paid for her brother Ram's education. He couldn't have studied medicine otherwise. Her other siblings too had taken Bhausahab's favours. It was impossible for her to rebel against her husband. Who would support her? That put off any flame of rebellion in her mind even before it could flicker well. Then, by the logic of 'If-you-can't-beat-them-join-them'

she decided to give in to the situation and go with the flow. She started enjoying the dishonest money and became a regular at the society get togethers.. all lazy, rich women. Mai soon became the most respected women in that circle, all thanks to Bhausahab!

She got back to the present. Today she was slipping into the past far too much. It was time for Radha to get home. The girl needed to snack on something when she came back. Living in Pune had its disadvantage. She had to give up the luxury of having two, three servants at home, like she did in Aurangabad. She now had just one domestic help who came in once a day, did her work briskly and went away. Mai had found a young girl, a live-in maid, once but she had to be removed. She shuddered at the memory but today memories kept coming to her, gnawing at her mind.

In Aurangabad Bhausahab had made too much money for him to know what could be done with it. He had already invested in land, jewellery, a bungalow and there was still far too much. So then the Rummy Club had started. The members were the other engineers on the project. Along with the cards came liquor and soon a lot of outsiders, the other respectable people of the city had started coming in. Bhausahab lusted for Mai's body only when drunk. She hated the smell of liquor. It made her feel puky but she always swallowed the feeling in front of Bhausahab.

Then she had started facing something worse. People talked of Bhausahab's relationship with some woman. He had stopped having sex with her. Soon she heard of many more names of many more women who were supposed to be close to her husband. It made her feel ashamed of the whole situation. She was watching a man turn into an animal and she could do nothing to stop it. She didn't have the strength to confront him. One day he told her why he earned so much money. "It's a revenge that I seek on my own past," he had said. "Your father treated me like a servant; the whole world made me feel like a beggar. I grew up to understand that money is the biggest thing in this world. I had decided long back that I would make the wheels of life turn. That I'd make people beg me for favours. And I've managed to do just that. I've sought a revenge on your father by treating his daughter like the way he had treated me. Today, his family comes to me grovelling for money. I reassure them and give them a helping hand. I'm going to settle a lot of accounts like this. You have no idea how badly I have been hurt at a young age."

"What is this? A vendetta film? A tale of revenge?" she had, for once, said what she felt.

I'm no villain. Have I ever abused you physically?" he argued. "You too enjoy my money. Have I ever hurt any of your relatives by my words? I help them all the time. Somebody should spare a thought to what has made me the way I am." She had shut up at this. There was no sense in arguing. In any case their relationship had soured beyond recovery.

Till the time he kept his associations with other women beyond the four walls of the house, it was still possible to ignore them but with this young maid even that feeling was taken away. The maid was a goodlooking girl and if she had worn Radha's clothes she could have passed off as a family member. She was good at her work and very polite. Mai was happy with her and things were going well till one day Bhausahab came home early under some pretext while the rest of the family was away and tried to molest her. The girl resisted, made a noise and he was forced to back off. When Mai was back she told her what had happened and left that house. "She's lying," Bhausahab tried to say but his denials had no life in them. Mai had shut up. In any case she would have. There was nothing else that she could do anyway. She learnt a lesson. Never again was a young girl to be employed in the house. She didn't want these vile things to happen under her nose.

Bhausahab eventually paid for his corruption. He was transferred to Pune. The situation eased off a bit. The rummy club stopped, he was actually working more and the extra money wasn't so obvious. But he never touched her again. Once in a while he went for the horse races. Mai had never thought that her life would take this turn. Every dream of her's had died. But then there was Ninad. She had to get a grip on herself for the sake of her son.

Mai had just reached the balcony slowly when the doorbell rang. It was Radha. She had to drag herself to the door to let her daughter in. Radha looked so much like him. "Oh Ma, you take real long to open the door. Let's have some help at home. And I'm famished. I need to eat something... When will Papa be home?" her daughter chattered incessantly.

"If I had known when your Papa would come home, life would have been very different," she said.

"The kind of things that you say all the time..."

"I always speak the truth. Now let's find you something to eat," she said and turned. She mouthed an old prayer when she saw the lights. She couldn't even pray in front of the daughter and her father. They laughed at her. "You recite this when you are young, not at this age," she was told. The house had lost its innocence and that is why they were at this juncture of

life, she felt. She got her daughter something to munch on.

“Devayani is coming over with Mrunal to stay for a few days. I received her letter today. They will reach here tomorrow,” she informed her daughter.

“That’s wonderful! I haven’t seen Mrunal for ages. Isn’t she two classes ahead of me?”

“Yes. She’s doing a course in Home Science.”

“It’ll be fun. She can be with me.”

Why was Devayani coming? And why was she to get only her daughter with her? What about the younger ones? Mai wondered. Devayani’s husband was a government servant but he was honest and so their financial condition wasn’t too good. And building a bungalow was a bad idea for them. They had taken a lot of loans. Devayani was fed up.

When they had thought of building their bungalow, they had consulted Bhausahab because he was an expert in that field. The area that they had chosen was new and still under development. It would have fetched a good price later but Bhausahab advised them against it. This is not a good place, he said and gave some technical mumbo-jumbo. He told them to find a place in the interiors, an old area. “You can’t afford to build it with cement,” he had said. “It’ll get too expensive.” In a huff Devayani got it built in cement. The whole project went much beyond their budget. Later they had come to know that the original place which they had decided upon was good enough. That they had been misled.

Devayani had come home, angry. She had blamed Bhausahab for giving a wrong advise deliberately and for getting her husband addicted to gambling as a part of the rummy club. “Your husband should have used his own judgement. He’s intelligent enough,” Mai had said. “He reads so many books all the time; on the other hand, my husband never even reads a newspaper. Why does he listen to a man like that?”

“I can only blame my stars,” Devayani had said bitterly. She talked of how her husband had started coming home late, some times even the next morning. It happened at least twice a week. She had then burst into tears.

Mai didn’t know what she could offer other than sympathy. She couldn’t bear to see her younger sister’s life go the same way as her’s. There was no point in telling her own husband anything. She knew him far too well for that. “Take care of your husband. He’s a good man, unlike mine,” she had said.

So why was Devayani going to come? She told Bhausahab about it at the dinner table. He didn't show any enthusiasm. Devayani came over the next day.

"The bus was delayed," she said.

"Where are the younger two?" Mai was curious.

"You know how self-respecting they are. They never go to anybody's house. Get books from the public library and keep reading them. This one doesn't like to read. She's more like me."

Mai looked at Mrunal, smiling. "She's like you, very charming." She thought of her own dark colour. Devayani was fair. Her daughter had taken after her.

"Let's have lunch and then we can talk," Mai was suddenly filled with enthusiasm. Radha too came in.

"I won't leave Mrunal for the next four days," she started making plans.

Ninad should have been here, Mai felt. He's away, all by himself. He was two months older than Mrunal. He was born after eight years of marriage. People had said all kinds of things during that time. Bhausahab was confident that there was no medical problem with him and so to prove to the world had insisted on having a child. "People should not feel that I have a problem. We ought to have a child." After a lot of rounds to the temples and many bargains with God, somehow Ninad was born. Bhausahab was thrilled. He showered all the affection on his son but Ninad didn't seem too impressed by his father. The distance between the father and son grew with each passing year. Mai was happy. Ninad was growing up the way she wanted him to.

She settled down to a chat with Devayani after lunch. Her father had passed away some time back and Bhausahab had somehow assumed the role of a patriarch. His word was final on any given matter. The only one who didn't care for him was Vikas, the eldest among the brothers. He hated the kind of importance that everybody gave Bhausahab, couldn't do much about it and then out of anger left home after passing his exam in Indian Forest Service, went to live by himself in the forests. He didn't keep in touch with anybody. Mai was very fond of him. But he didn't like Mai. He had no clue how much of anger she had for her husband buried in her mind. But it was impossible to vocalise it. Vikas considered Mai responsible for everything and kept away from her. She could never sort out the misunderstanding between them. Why do people fall short of communicating right with each

other? Mai wondered. Other than Vikas and Devayani, to a certain extent, all her siblings were seemed to be under Bhausahab's thumb. Devayani was hurt by the bungalow episode. Now was the time she could be pacified, Mai thought.

Meanwhile Mrunal and Radha got busy in their own world. Both Mai and Devayani were tired and decided to have a good nap. When they woke up it was almost early night. Radha and Mrunal had gone out. Mai and Devayani got down to the business of making dinner. Bhausahab came home late in the night.

Just before he went to bed Bhausahab told Mai the he had bought tickets for a play for the next day. "I didn't know Mrunal was to be here too. Radha wants to see the play. You can decide who is to be left out," he said. Since they had come to Pune, Bhausahab had got interested in theatre. He always took Mai along with him and felt good about it.

"I'll ask Devayani tomorrow. If Mrunal isn't interested, she can stay back, otherwise all of you can go. I'll be home," Mai said.

Radha was disappointed when heard that somebody had to drop out. "We'll buy extra tickets and Mrunal and I can sit separately, away from all of you," she suggested.

"Why don't you go and get extra tickets?" her father offered her the money.

Mrunal wasn't interested in theatre. She thought it was extravagance. She never watched plays even back home so she opted to stay back. Devayani didn't feel good about letting her stay alone in the house. "I think all of you should go and both Mrunal and I will stay back," she said but Mai persuaded her to accompany them.

Mrunal was fine about being by herself. She had made it clear that she didn't want the plans disturbed for her sake. Finally, her mother decided to watch the play. It was a brilliant play and all of them were enthralled by the performances. In the interval, Bhausahab got munchies for everybody. Devayani wasn't very comfortable with all that. She wasn't used to eating out and this was only the second time she had visited a theatre. It was getting difficult to make ends meet, entertainment was nowhere on the list of her priorities.

The play resumed. Devayani had Radha and Mai sitting on her either side. Bhausahab had occupied the seat next to Mai's. After a while Devayani happened to have looked around and noticed that Bhausahab was missing.

“Where’s he?” she asked.

“He said he was feeling unwell and so went home,” Mai said but she too seemed to have lost interest in the play.

“All of us could have left,” Devayani said.

“He said, don’t let me disturb you,” Mai added, not so happily. She didn’t feel good about what had happened and regretted not having accompanied her husband back. Mrunal was alone at home. But the sisters couldn’t discuss much. Somebody hushed them. The play was great but Devayani couldn’t stop thinking. Would anything vile happen if Mrunal was left alone with Bhausahab? His reputation was awful, she knew it. But then she looked at Radha who was completely absorbed in the play. Mrunal was Radha’s age. No, Bhausahab wouldn’t sink to such depths, she told herself. Mrunal was, after all, his niece.

Somehow none of them spoke much on their way back after the play was over. Bhausahab was fast asleep in his room. Mrunal looked very down.

“Are you alright?” her mother asked her.

“Yes,” she said, dryly. A bit too dryly, both her mother and aunt thought.

Meanwhile, totally unaware of the tension Radha started chatting incessantly, telling her cousin how good the play was and then the atmosphere seemed to have turned normal gradually.

The next day Devayani started telling her sister how difficult it was to run the house and how her husband didn’t bring in enough money. The children were growing up, their schools, college education, the expenses were growing by the day. She talked again of how her husband was addicted to gambling and how it was impossible to avoid creditors now. And that she didn’t have enough money even to buy groceries. Then she told her sister candidly how she had actually come to ask for some money.

Mai had an idea of the reason for Devayani’s visit. She wondered why life was so kind to her in terms of money and so cruel to her sister. Her brother in law was a brilliant man, a senior officer in a government job but her husband had got him addicted to gambling. Devayani was miserable because she didn’t have money but was Mai happy despite the money? But then Mai at least had the resources to make her sister happy. She gave her the amount that she needed, very discreetly.

“Don’t mention this to anybody,” she whispered. Devayani’s face was full of relief. Both the sisters lay down to rest, quietly. Radha had taken

Mrunal away to her college.

The next day Devayani and Mrunal left. Mai noticed that Mrunal was silent and it disturbed her. Before they left all three of them had tears in their eyes.

Days passed. The climate had changed. The month of Shravan started. Sun peeped out of the clouds after every little shower. Mai sat in the balcony thinking of her son. Ninad hadn't written for quite some time now. How was he? She would have continued thinking of him hadn't she noticed Devayani and her husband get off an autorickshaw. She got up with a start.. What had brought them here all of a sudden? They didn't have any bags which meant that they hadn't come to stay over. Did they need more money?

The couple came inside. Both of them looked exhausted.

"What brings you here?" Mai asked and Devayani said nothing. She looked at her husband. Mai offered them water and Laxmikant, her brother-in-law, spoke in between rapid gulps of it.

"We could never imagine that your husband would sink to such levels. We had heard of his loose character but with his own niece..." he found it difficult to speak any further but continued. "He has raped Mrunal and now she is pregnant. He's ruined our lives."

"He did that when all of us had gone to the theatre and also threatened her that if she told anybody the consequences would be disastrous," Devayani added. "She kept quiet till her physical condition gave away. I asked her over and over again and she told me what had happened. The doctor says that since she has completed four months, it's not possible to terminate the pregnancy." Devayani was panting by the time she finished.

Laxmikant was suddenly angry. "Call your husband home this moment. I want to confront him. Where do you think we should take our pregnant, unmarried daughter now? He has really crossed all limits. I'll see that he's behind the bars."

Mai didn't know what to say. "I agree that he's not a good man but your daughter isn't a kid either. She may have had sex with some man of her choice and is now pointing fingers at my husband," she tried to convince herself even as she spoke. Devayani was livid.

"So, then, Mai looks like you too help your husband in all this! Why don't you run a whorehouse for him?" she screamed.

"Mai, you have to call him here right now. We'll see to it that he's legally punished," her Laxmikant repeated his threat. Mai gave him Bhausahab's office telephone number. Laxmikant spoke to him.

“Bhausahab, you be here within half an hour or else...” Mai watched him threaten her husband and felt happy. It was the first time somebody had spoken to her husband like that. It was a good feeling. She had tried to defend her husband without wanting to. How could she have told her sister that it was alright to get him thrown in the jail. What if it really happened? What would happen to her? She wouldn't be able to face the world. But then he also had to be punished for this heinous act. Was it possible that he would be punished strongly without going to jail? She wondered.

Bhausahab really did turn up after some time. He was scared and it reflected on his face. He knew that it was a serious issue. The moment he stepped in Devayani took him to task. “You have ruined our lives. Now will you leave my sister and marry my daughter? Do you have the guts to be known as her child's father in front of the world?”

Bhausahab was silent for a while but then spoke up calmly. “It's not sensible to bring this out in the open,” he said. “It's too shameful for all of us. I am in the middle of my life but Mrunal's life is yet to start. If this matter becomes public no one will marry her. Your going to the police will also not help. They will ask you a lot of uncomfortable questions and reporting a rape after so many months is going to be difficult. I will get out of this easily. I can help you out right now but if you go to the police, I won't. Is it possible to terminate the pregnancy? If not after a few days let Devayani take Mrunal away to Pandharpur till the whole thing is over. Or then Mrunal can be there by herself too; I'll make the arrangements. Don't worry about the money. It's my responsibility. If you wish, I will pay off all your other loans. Let's get Mrunal out of this problem and later on all of us can start life anew. If you want to accept my proposal we can take it further otherwise you can do whatever you feel like.”

“Are you trying to buy us off, Bhausahab? You've insulted my daughter and now you are insulting us,” Laxmikant shouted.

“I didn't imply any such thing. If you wish, you can stay here tonight and think over it calmly. In this whole episode Mrunal's character and reputation is at stake too. She will not be respected by the society even though she is the victim. But we can't do anything about it; it is the society's outlook that has to change,” Bhausahab was unperturbed.

Devayani and Laxmikant fumed but shut up. Mai was watching the entire drama unfold. She saw how cleverly her husband had got away with the rape of his niece, what a supreme scoundrel he was. And how her sister and brother-in-law had shut up after a bit of noise. What was she to do?

Both of them should have done something, taught Bhausahab such a lesson that nobody in the society would dare do something like this ever again. What if somebody had done that to Radha? She shuddered.

“Do you admit to your crime?” Laxmikant tried to ask Bhausahab sternly. But his words lacked the punch.

“I have admitted to it already,” Bhausahab said.

“Right. Now we’ll decide the next course of action. You will rot in hell for what you have done,” Laxmikant’s voice broke. Mai thought that he was going to burst into tears.

The miserable couple got up to leave.

“Don’t leave like that. Have some coffee. Lunch is ready. Rest for a while and then leave,” Mai pleaded.

“We won’t touch a drop of water in your house,” Laxmikant shouted at the door. Devayani followed him. Bhausahab went to his room calmly and lay down on his bed like nothing had happened. Mai stared at him for a few moments. Her body shook as she walked to him. He had felt nothing, nothing at all. She thought of Mrunal, so beautiful, so violated! Her young mind withered by this ugly episode. How would she cope with it in her life? How would she respond to her husband later in life? Would she ever look at intimacy between a man and a woman as beautiful? Why was a woman always the victim of lust? Why was Nature so unfair to a woman? Mai lay down next to her husband.

“What if somebody had done this to Radha?” she asked.

“I would have chopped off his member,” Bhausahab got up angrily at the thought.

“Then why shouldn’t Mrunal’s rapist get the same punishment?” she asked him calmly.

“Don’t be silly,” he laughed. “Some calculations are different. The society and its take on relationships are very complex. Such things cannot happen in my case. You can try helping your sister and check out for yourself,” the man was completely unabashed.

Mai was tempted to give him the punishment that he had recommended the rapists. His member needed to be cut off. He would have deserved it.

Bhausahab sleep fitfully that night. Mai kept awake. She thought about how she couldn’t take any stand in that situation. All she could do was to watch her husband’s brazenness and audacity in the face of his crime. Bhausahab deserved to be punished severely, be taught a lesson of his life,

but was getting away without as much a warning. The room was engulfed in darkness and Mai wished the darkness would devour her voraciously.

After a few days her younger sister Shobha and brother Ram came to see her. "Laxmikant and Devayani had come to see us," Ram said. "In fact, they are going to all our relatives asking them to boycott Bhausahab for what he has done. But I don't think it's the right thing to do. He is human and history and mythology is full of examples of how even sages were distracted by a woman's beauty. Besides, we can't forget that he had helped us build our lives. I could become a doctor because of him, Shobha's wedding would not have taken place had he not helped with the money. He has admitted that his behaviour was wrong; this acknowledgement should be enough. This issue should end here. We came to tell you that." Ram repeated this to Bhausahab at night when Radha was asleep. He didn't react other than a brief "You've made the right decision," as they left.

That night Bhausahab looked at Mai and laughed a short laugh. "Didn't I tell you that this society and its relationships are very complex?" Mai smiled a pale smile.

Mai decided to meet her mother who lived with her youngest brother Arvind. Both of them lived in a huge bungalow. Arvind was dull and couldn't even pass his Board exams and yet Bhausahab had got him a government job. The bungalow that they lived in was paid for by Bhausahab. Her mother had rented out most of the rooms and lived off that rent. Wherever Mai went, there were footsteps of Bhausahab's favours. Her mother too was bent under the feeling of gratitude. "I heard that Devayani is busy instigating everybody against your husband," she said.

"What's your stand in this entire affair?" Mai asked her mother.

"My stand? Does anybody really care what my stand is going to be? It's Bhausahab's prerogative to be listened to," her mother said. "Whatever happened was bad but you need to stand by your husband at this hour of crisis."

"Then this conversation is over. There can't be any further discussion of what is right or wrong or just or unjust. You were my last hope but all of you seem to be spineless. What else can one expect out of people like that who don't live but simply exist because they have been given birth to?" Mai said bitterly.

"Does Vikas know about all of this?"

"Bhausahab had written to Vikas but he has decided to support Devayani. He said that he supports the idea of getting Bhausahab arrested."

But Vikas had stopped at the letter. He didn't bother to visit his family in the face of this gory episode.

"Each one of you is impotent," Mai told her mother.

"I understand how you feel but what if I go against him and then Bhausaheb asks me to repay the loan that he has given for this bungalow? Where would I get the money from? I hope I die as early as possible. It's getting unbearable," her mother said. Mai felt broken.

One night Laxmikant came to Mai. He looked very haggard and exhausted. "The child was stillborn. She is free now," he informed Mai and Bhausaheb about Mrunal. "I had vowed not to come to your doorstep again but I need money to go to Aurangabad. Devayani doesn't have anything other than the wedding chain. She's willing to sell it but I'm not. Both Devayani and Mrunal are waiting at the bus stand. We need to reach Aurangabad. I've decided to stop gambling too. Hopefully, life will improve now."

Bhausaheb went inside and came back with as much money as he could. "Don't ever worry about money," he told Laxmikant. "We are a family. You can come here anytime. In fact, I suggest all of you stay here tonight and rest. I'll go and pick up Devayani and Mrunal from the bus stand."

"No, it's ok," Laxmikant said and left with the money. "I'm grateful to you. I don't know if I'll ever be back in this house. Please don't let Radha know any of this." As she looked at the retreating Laxmikant carrying Bhausaheb's money, emotions churned Mai's body and mind violently.

One afternoon Mai was reading Ninad's letter. He had written that since he felt like a stranger in his father's house, he would have preferred her to go to Hyderabad and stay with him for a couple of days. As Mai re-read, the phone rang. It was a man calling from Aurangabad.

"Bhausaheb was here and suffered a heart attack. None of us knows what he was doing in Aurangabad but we have informed your relatives here. Laxmikant is with him. Please come urgently."

Mai felt benumbed. So the end had finally come. But was Bhausaheb going to give in or win this time too?

Mai sat still as more and more people came in to console her. Bhausaheb was very popular. A lot of people talked about his generosity and how he had helped so many people in life. Tears refused to flow from Mai's eyes. She never uttered a word. Bhausaheb looked at her, smiling, from a framed photograph in front of her. He wore a garland of fresh flowers. Why had he gone to Aurangabad? Nobody ever found out. He had held Laxmikant's hand during his dying moments. Why had Laxmikant rushed to him before

anybody else could see him after so many years of anger? Bhausahab was invincible all his life and yet had felt the need to hold her brother-in-law's hand as he died. Ninad was with her like her shadow. Now there were three of them Mai, Ninad and Radha, in that house.

Then the lights went off, there was a power failure. Mai's chain of thoughts was uninterrupted in the pitch darkness. She couldn't ever express her anger at that man when he was alive. Everything had remained buried in the darkness of her mind. She now needed to be free of it. Mai got up and felt her way through the darkness. She tried to focus her eyes and moved towards the wall. Her walking stick lay by her side and she pushed it away.

"Ma, don't move; be where you are, I'll be there," Ninad called out.

Mai picked up a high stool and tried to climb it to reach the photograph. She was too old for it but she had made up her mind. Her hands touched the picture frame and the fresh flowers and her anger burst violently out of the dam of her mind.

"Laxmikant might have forgiven you, but I won't, ever. I don't have the greatness of mind that he has," she muttered to herself and managed to unhook the photograph. The picture remained in her hands for a moment before she flung it to the floor with all her might. It shattered into many pieces. Both Radha and Ninad rushed into the room. The lights had started flickering. Mai's children saw her standing on the high stool looking at the broken photograph on the floor.

"How did you reach there?" Radha was both angry and shocked. Ninad came to his mother and gently held her hand. He patted her as if her emotions had reached him. The flickering lights didn't quite make it. The room drowned in darkness again.