

Restless electron

It was a song never heard before. He concentrated to understand its meaning. But in futile. And by the time Nikhil opened his eyes, the room was bathed in bright light. Through the crack in the window, light had sneaked into the room and its path was illuminated by suspended particles in the air – the rectilinear propagation of light.

The girl from the calendar greeted him from the wall. Blades of the table fan split the light, and left him dazzled. He pushed the window open and a voice wafted in – the sound of a boy memorizing the alphabets. And came the spirit of the white clouds sweeping down from the blue sky. And drowning them all came the sound of the *Rabindra Sangeet* (the sound that woke him up) from the radio. His ecstasy dissolved with the melody of the song, like harmonic waves. He put a cigarette between his lips and stopped. The matchbox rolled down.

The events of the previous night came rushing back. He was filled with disgust as he looked at the film magazine beside the pillow, his own wet clothes and the crumpled bed sheet. The glory of a beautiful morning came to a sudden end. Why could not he embrace the morning in a befitting spirit? A disappointment...

The beginning of an usual day. *Bou*¹ gave him a cup of tea. "you have to get the clothes today. Don't look for an excuse."

"hmm," Nikhil sounded indistinct and aloof. The memories of the previous night haunted him like a bad dream.

"what hmm? Take the money immediately. The frocks need to be ready today."

Bad dreams? But he was not ready to hold himself responsible. But what stops you from admitting? Don't you have any moral courage?

"frock?" he suddenly responded.

"Xonti and her family are coming day after. No?" *Bou* said widening her eyes, "For Ila and Nila."

He remembered now. That Xonti his sister and her husband and their two daughters were coming. The faces of Ila and Nila floated before him. They must have grown up by now.

"yes I remember. Will you please tidy up my room."

Bou could not help smiling. Nikhil is afraid that Xonti will not spare him when she sees the state of the house.

"that will be done. But you have to leave now."

"Isn't there enough time? Why so much unrest?"

Bou made a face at Nikhil and that surprised him. He realized the reason. She must be impatient to shower her love for Ila and Nila. That's what he thought.

¹ Bou in Assamese is a woman who is equivalent to sister-in-law in English.

"need to clean up Manu's room as well. Xonti has the habit of getting after you."

Bou smiled as she spoke. Isn't Nikhil a sceptic? Why wouldn't he take a simple smile as it is? He felt *Bou* would fold up her clothes, hand over the broom to Bimala and go about cleaning the house. Xonti would then say, how the old man- their father must have seen her working to welcome his daughter, and how she got covered in cobwebs and had to leave her son on the bed. Xonti would say, how her father would be charmed by this staged appearance. He would be filled with praise and gratitude.

Or it is probable that he must have become a painfully narrow minded man. That *Bou* must be fulfilling her personal needs in the pretext of looking after their father... when did Xonti plant such a thought in his head?

Shameful.

"how is Ranu's wound? Was he given Burnol today?"

"yes. But it won't dry."

A shadow of concern on her face. An honest concern that Nikhil could not refute. Unmindful herself, she put another chapatti on Nikhil's plate. Nikhil could not fathom the depth of her aloofness. He took a bite. What is it that brought this change?

The house is plagued with sickness. One after the other.

"Did you hear? Nabin's mother got ill last night. The doctor came at 2 in the morning."

"is it?"

"the doctor gave some one lakh or two lakhs penicillin."

Bou laughed admitting her ignorance. That penicillin is calculated in units of lakhs is itself a matter of curiosity for her. Nikhil liked the smile playing on her face – she came across as a simple village girl who expressed herself plainly. Once again she lifted her hand mechanically and pulled out the collar on Nikhil's shirt that had gone in. It took him some skill to get up without allowing her hand to touch the packet of cigarette in his pocket.

A sound of coughing. A dry cough. Father must be up. His eyes wear the signs of a sleepless night. His old age drowned in uncountable thoughts. The flip flop of her sandals and the sound of *Mekhela*², as she walked – scattered his thoughts once again.

"Look how busy she appears, since father woke up," Nikhil felt he could hear Xonti taunting.

Again... once again Nikhil... you and your stinking narrow thoughts. The bowl had water in it. But *Bou* rushed in and replaced it with a bigger bowl for father to wash his face.

"Maina."

Nikhil walked and stood beside the old man.

"take money from *Bou* and replace the hookah's pipe. It's completely ruined."

The pipe is actually damaged. Its colour has transformed. The body is getting rust. His father chewed tobacco with dissatisfaction looking at the arm rests on the chair. The chair

² Mekhela : An Assamese traditional garment.

must be infected again with worms again. He was getting restless time to time. *Bou* had cleaned it with boiling water just a couple of day ago.

His thoughts became sceptic once again. What is *Bou* doing? Isn't she always preoccupied with her unruly children? A storm rages inside him - a turbulence in his mind and an unforgiving disgust at himself. The events of the previous night, his discontent with *Bou* (may be baseless) and suddenly a volcano of discontent erupted for the entire neighbourhood. Their faces floated before him - the selfish people, the opportunist neighbours.

"I think the insects have re-surfaced. I will get a bottle of DDT." He said to *Bou* walking into the kitchen.

"DDT does not work. Absolutely useless," Ranjan said with a tone of authority. He was staring at the soot blackened wall as he spoke.

"how did you appear this early?"

"Montu has been sick. I came to borrow the thermometer."

"what happened to him?"

"No, nothing much. Cold and fever," and a sense of displeasure on his face. He found it difficult to accept cold as a form of sickness.

Bou appeared concerned. Yet it was evident she was not too pleased to give the thermometer. What if it breaks, or what if it's lost. For the sake of politeness she cannot take money or even a replacement. Yet...

She tried to sound sympathetic while enquiring about Montu's fever. Nikhil contorted his face and Ranjan felt slightly embarrassed.

"the kitchen is very dark," Ranjan tried shifting the conversation. For Nikhil, Ranjan is a 'pedant'. And he didn't have to wait long for a proof. "there is no scope for reflection of light. The walls are so black."

"what is this Maina doing? Can't he call the carpenter and get the windows fixed?"

Ranjan looked at Nikhil and spread his legs sitting on the *pirha*³. Montu's fever doesn't appear to bother him that much. He appeared lost into other thoughts. The sunlight scattered upon landing on his tea cup.

"*Bou* look! Can you see the curve on the tea?"

"do you know why this happens? Do you Maina? It's called the caustic curve. When sunlight -"

"what is it called? Causti - " and *Bou* laughed.

"do you really need to flaunt your knowledge? We can live without knowing them." One could feel the angst in his voice. Nikhil is in a sour mood since morning.

"Can't read an A and we went to read a whole book." *Bou* said. "anyway there is so much work, where do I find the time to understand all these?"

³ Pirha: a very low, small wooden furniture used to sit.

Bou explained her situation well. She pulled the knife and started to chop vegetables. Her enduring smile could not revive Ranjan's spirit. "it seems you have no interest in whatsoever. He, Maina, he only knows how to sleep and roam. You have been possessed by the devil."

"oh. Now that I don't know your caustic curve I am possessed by the devil?"

"why? Why do you think that the sun will change course if you listened to me? Besides a man must have the curiosity to know new things."

"exhibition of knowledge!"

Bou laughed holding the knife, but Ranjan was unperturbed. Nikhil was indignant. "Desire to know! You have learnt a lot. Things that were better left unknown. Unnecessary things, even wretched things. And you get what you sow." Yet what is *Bou* wondering looking at Ranjan's pox riddled face, his thin famished frame.

"Ignorance," he said slowly and gravely, "is a blessing. When it is foolish to be wise."

This ruffled Nikhil. This idea, this view on the matter never registered to him. For once he looked at Ranjan with admiration. Did Ranjan see him watching? He quickly looked away.

"great! Now that you two have started. It's meant to go on and on."

Ranjan tried shaking off the old man's gaze. But the old man was vigilant. It's true; circumstances and numerous thoughts weakened his body. His eye sight was growing weak. Yet it was not easy to con him. The old man's resilience surprises Ranjan. He looks feeble but he never falls. Ranjan feels the pain and it surfaced on his face. This surprises Nikhil and *Bou*. Ranjan tries to hide that, sometimes by laughing out loud, like he was finding it entertaining watching the old man. And he would whisper, "unstable equilibrium."

"Is it Ranjan?"

Ranjan scratched his head and stood beside the old man. He spoke about Montu's illness.

"when are you leaving? When is your University re-opening?"

"twenty second. But I will be leaving on the nineteenth."

"Are you studying well? You have to secure a first class. Our Maina could not do much, but you should."

Maina sighed in the other room. He can understand. But...

"You have to go to Shillong one of these days. If you are not busy."

"Shillong?"

"You have to bring news of Dhon. Got a letter yesterday. It seems he has turned violent again."

There was an arc of worry on the old man's face. Ranjan didn't wish to find a parallel curve in science. He was equally worried.

"you have to leave tomorrow." And then calmly the old man explained the situation to Ranjan. Dhon has been paralyzed for seven months now. He undergoes mental fits from

time to time. He goes insane and begins to hallucinate, and tends to get violent. It appears his insanity has intensified. The old man himself was incapable of going. Nikhil had several work to look after. Ranjan momentarily wanted to ask about Kon. But the old man's worried face discouraged him.

It was a mixture of anger, frustration and helplessness. The old man picked up the newspaper and groped around for his spectacle's casing. He could not find what was lying right in front of him. Ranjan thought that the old man's close vision had become weak. He concluded that the accommodation of his eyes had reduced. How can Maina watch this like a mute spectator? He is a hopeless, good-for-nothing. Something should have been done.

Something should have been done. Even the old man thinks so. That old age will make him invalid and helpless – this was something he could not agree with. Yet he has never complained, and has never sought help. He does not understand opportunism and he has suffered for reward. Expenses have increased and money was fast disappearing. Both health and house, disintegrated bit by bit. Maina's mother passed away years ago. Their relatives were barely in touch. No one had a clue what Nikhil does. Was he going to sit for his exams again? He was barely at home and to top it all was Dhon's mental illness. Helpless and without support, he had to sell a piece of land. It seemed like no one wished to talk anymore. It felt like everyone wished to avoid the old man. With his disintegrating body and hazy vision, he tried to feel the world between the pages of the paper.

"BANK STOPS PAYMENT..."

A headline on the third page, second column. His eye sight became hazier and an alarm went off in the head. An insect bit his palm and took away a little blood, giving great pain. The sound of sewing machine came from the two storied house in the corner. The warmth of the daylight fast faded. His daughter-in-law passed by holding something in her hands. The sound of his grandchildren screaming. In the far distance, Nikhil and Ranjan went out through the door.

The duo stood beside the window. Niru – the advocate's daughter was seated on a cane chair in the adjacent house. She was holding a book, reading for her IA exams. She looked at them frequently. She is not bad looking and there was a pretty crease on her cheeks when she smiled. Nikhil often fell prey to her looks and Ranjan termed it 'coquetterie'. But today, the same Niru and her playfulness angered him. The white cat jumped on Niru and Ranjan just held himself from laughing. Niru was flustered and her married sister came and sat with her. Her sister was knitting something and Niru looked into her book.

"the old man's eye sight is wearing out."

"hmmm."

"nonsense! What's that supposed to mean? Why don't you do something? It infuriates me to think about you. What has gotten into you? Is your relation with this house merely economic and biological?"

Nikhil did not speak. "are you appearing for the exams this year?"

A disruption. The screaming of children. Ila dropped her brother from her lap – he cried. Runu and Funu were fighting for the wooden horse. Funu slapped Runu. The sound of louder crying.

"Silence." Ranjan roared. A moment of silence before the chaos resumed. This time with renewed vigour. They found a cause and screamed in unison, SILENCE, SILENCE.

"Boomerang!" Ranjan laughed and Nikhil laughed louder. The children failed to move him in the slightest way. Why couldn't he become a part of their joy? He himself felt like a worthless. Someone who had no role to play. Someone who destroyed himself day by day. Two boys ran across the street and gave flight to a paper kite. It climbed in the air and its thin red tail shivered in the wind. Mrs Dutta stopped the sewing machine and looked up for a moment. Niru looked up with indifference. A smile cracked through his face. Certain equations, certain diagrams, parallelogram of forces had started to occupy Ranjan's head. He felt the need to explain the principles behind kite flying and the flight of an airplane. But that vanished when he looked at Nikhil.

Nikhil looked disturbed. The neighbourhood meanwhile had picked up pace. He could see their greed, their lust, cowardice and opportunistic tendencies. A man has been sick for ten continuous days and Mister advocate did not consider it necessary to pay a visit. Mr and Mrs Dutta have gained weight feeding on the bribes. With the ill-gotten money from black marketing and CI sheet*, Mahendra Barsaikia is busy building a newly designed house. Lolit's mother, that old woman, she goes from house to house bitching about one another. And there is Mister Khagen Das, the war time contractor drowned in alcohol and has been acting mysterious lately. The new radios in the neighbourhood have turned living into a nightmare. The new Fords and D-Shots* slowly rolled out of the garages. The bank clerk Rambabu and the lawyer's accountant Sandi Kalita and the likes in that class saw their condition tilting in the opposite direction. Sandi Kalita could not afford to buy a new frock for her little daughter. For the past three months she has been wearing a tattered frock exposing her chest.

Indira Baruah walked past – an epitome of beauty and grace. Rajani Sharma looked through the window in a demeaning fashion. Mrs Dutta frowned and pressed on the sewing machine. Oboni a third year student, stood near the paan shop – waiting to light the cigarette. Gossips about Indira were spreading in the area. Professor Bhatt threw the shawl around him and climbed the cycle. Jhunu came running with a football in one hand and a pump in the other.

"will you help me pump the ball?" he asked Ranjan. He was wearing a white pair of shorts and his cheeks were plump like a football. Girija Sharma, the manager in the adjacent mess got off from his cycle. With a healthy physique and an expensive suit, he seemed to be earning well from his clothing store.

"I'll help you. Come." Nikhil took the cycle from Girija and Jhunu ran to Girija. Nikhil was generally hesitant to take cycle or any other favour from people like Girija. He somehow could not like the inhabitants in that mess. They appeared vulgar to him. Yet...

The tyres were deflated and so Nikhil went to get the pump from Girija. The door was locked from inside. He could hear Jhunu screaming. He hit the door and Girija appeared, drenched in his perspiration. Jhunu came out tying the buttons of his pant. A look of bewilderment written on his face.

"Oh! So this is this! This place, this entire place is going to hell." A stunned Girija tripped on the door's frame and fell over. Girija, a husband to a beautiful wife and a father of two sons. But Nikhil fell short of judging Girija. He choked within. What was he himself? A physician? HEAL THYSELF...

Nikhil recollected an incident that happened barely two months ago. His neighbor Rambabu's sister-in-law was new in the locality. They were acquainted for two weeks or so. One evening he jumped, this gentleman with refined taste jumped over the wall. Then he had realized what a coward he was. He felt scared and fled.

Niranjan spoke about Freud and about repressed desires. May be that explains. But Freud makes him go insane. Everywhere around him is a projection of vulgarism and its celebration. The roadsides are filled with film posters and our tables with vulgar magazines and books on sex. Indira's swelling breasts and her gaze. Did not they all contribute in his upbringing? This repressed desire.

Jyotibabu came inside and sat down. "interesting news! The police arrested Kamini Sharma today morning."

Bou dropped whatever she was doing and rushed in in curiosity, "What? Why?"

"Drugs. Smuggling opium."

Hearing about a controversy of a prominent 'patriot', Bou became eager to know more. The old man heard the news from his room. Kamini and he knew each other. He kept silent.

"they are the forerunners of our society. Corruption everywhere. Isn't this obvious? This is the foul stench of our dead and decomposing capitalist society."

Nikhil did not give an opinion. Bou listened with rapt attention, although she could not comprehend everything. "Capitalism," Jyotibabu quoted something he must have found somewhere, "stands on its last legs. How far will this anarchy last? Mankind has a threshold." Nikhil was curious. So is Jyotibabu finally a Communist? He looked at his silk suit with dissatisfaction and so did Bou. A Communist according to Bou (for instance our sister's son) is someone with disheveled hair and must be covered in dirt.

"these Communist talks does not suit you Jyotibabu." Nikhil laughed as he said. Jyotibabu felt provoked but he got the cue. "the objective of Communism is to raise the standard of living and not to bring it down." Nikhil decided to remain quiet and it was only when he had stepped outside, did he realize the commotion on the street. A gathering was being held in the evening to discuss the matter on Kamini Sharma. Rumours were flying thick. The gossips in the tea stall had picked up a storm. The Socialists were busy and youths clad in Jawahar coats were putting up pamphlets demanding exemplary punishment.

"the activities of the Socialists is ludicrous." Jyotibabu said pointing at their publicity pamphlet. They love sensationalizing less important matters. And miss the important ones. Jay Prakash goes silent with the mention of a revolution. They make a hue and cry about arresting a drug trafficker and betrayed the people in every laBour's strike.

Nikhil wanted to tell him that he was just an agent of Moscow whose job was to do what they said. They were the high brows who would not bother to get involved in smaller matters. So does this make him a Socialist? Nikhil smiled at the thought. Politics is a dirty business - he thought. It must be a business of people without conscience. Someone had said so. Perhaps it is true.

What would have Kon said about the matter?

He would have said, Kamini Sharma need to be hanged from the town center. His speech would have slurred with aggression and slowly the moderates and the middle men would have made an exit. Jyotibabu would have grown impatient and their debate would have lost direction. Are we going through a revolutionary time? Is it Marxist to participate in election and finally did Stalin betray the world revolution or was it Totsky who created German spies.

Who is eventually fighting for the interest of a nation? Nikhil felt helpless and confused. He felt ashamed at his ignorance.

He had went to his uncle's home sometime ago. He is a manager in a tea estate in Upper Assam. Nikhil wished to spend some time in quiet and alone. The sound of the mill, the melody of *Jhumur*⁴ and the passing trucks – everything seemed beautiful. He planned to read books beside the window, watching the birds on the telegraph cable. He intended to carry some light hearted books. Jyotibabu with a long note sent him a copy of TWO LEAVES AND A BUD. Nikhil dumped it to the box along with Huxley and Hall Crane. He instead read, Virginia Woolf, Jacob's room, Meredith and Hardy.

But the books remained unfinished. There was unrest in the garden. And the growing curiosity made him read the Communist pamphlets on salary hike, better housing, he ended up reading the declarations calling for Panchayati Union's struggle. He listened to the speech by people standing on the trucks followed by stories in the newspapers. The workers rounded up his uncle one day and some of them roughed him up. The Socialists and the Communists blamed each other. Workers' meetings were called, board meetings happened, the police arrived, shots were fired, the military arrived, opinions and explanations, arrests and suspensions, enquiry committees and tribunals...

Nikhil returned home. Peace was an illusion. A war rages everywhere by the exploited mass (Jyotibabu's favourite phrase). Jyotibabu says why should Assam be left out. In fact seeing the nature of it, the movement must spread here in size and speed.

"Movement is the preparation for battle," Jyotibabu said. Father said, "lawless elements." (the opinion of the editorials in his newspapers). Kon has said to Bou, we are passing through a revolutionary phase and these are its symptoms. Ranjan was thinking of differential equations. Bou was thinking about Runu's stomach.

Today Kon is running from the police, Jyotibabu is preaching around, Jawaharlal is talking of countless schemes. Socialists have covered the wall with pamphlets. What is it that everyone seeks? An innately simple matter. We want food and the freedom to live with dignity. Great! But then why does it gets so loud and complex?

"forgive me. You are a naïve," said Jyotibabu.

Possible. May be so is Ranjan. But of course Ranjan finds it difficult to agree with. He lambasted all the political parties and yet praised them one day on seeing their joint statement. Jyotibabu tried explaining the reasons behind political rivalries and conflicts of principle. "Stop!" Ranjan said, "Think of an atom. At its center is a positive charge. A negative charge revolves around it. Proton and electron. Above all is neutron, a chargeless particle. There is good and bad on earth, the pure and the impure and above them all is an unbiased group of people – neutron, who you call the neutrals. Every object has two sides, starting from an atom. Why should the political parties be an left out? Or why should men be left out? So is society. There is a strain. A force and a counter force, starting from an atom."

"agreed! Jyotibabu said without understanding his objective.

"you are trying to convert me (Jyotibabu shook his head violently, but Ranjan continued). Good effort. But why is it that a proton and an electron are different? What is the reason? And if I do not dwell on these questions would you have anything to say against that?"

⁴ A traditional dance form practiced by the Santhals (who mostly work in the tea gardens)

"I am unable to comprehend your exact meaning."

"you will. I have understood the difference. Yet I feel no necessity to write a thesis on that. I cannot say if you feel the same. The difference between the two lead us to some truths – some facts and figures. Based on that we, for instance designed the radio valves. Remember, electrons and protons can be found in lakhs in very small areas. A water droplet contains as many atoms that an equal number of tennis balls will fill the earth. Therefore similar to dealing with large populations, the rules governing atoms are mostly statistical. Bigger statistical laws are made based on these. And instead of going into their opposition and contradiction what if I offer you a new valve – something (extremely clever, Pedantism let loose, Nikhil laughed) that will have increased amplification and fidelity, will you have any reason to say against it?"

"definitely not. However – "

"that's what I am trying to say."

"but I did not get you," and Jyotibabu appeared a little embarrassed. "yes what you have just said is admirably dialectical. But that..."

"I have nothing more to say. Thing about it clearly."

It was difficult to know what Jyotibabu thought. He perhaps considered it better not to take it further. He could not ascertain Ranjan's character from what he just said. Was he an escapist or a deranged mind (I mean perverted).

Who knows, who roams around and with what motives. In a flash Nikhil regained himself. A group of college girls just passed by. He turned towards them mechanically. Perhaps there was lust in his looks. He felt ashamed. By the time he reached home he was in turmoil once again. Jyotibabu followed his glance and landed upon a film poster on the wall – Hollywood's glamour girl. The epitome of vulgarity and crudity in the name of romance in South sea island. "the objective of capitalism is to bring down our taste by using films, theater, literature and radio. So that people stay away from revolutionary ideas and they don't turn into militants, the capitalists have arranged for these diversions." Jyotibabu said.

It occurred to Nikhil that this must be one of the stronger arguments of Communist propaganda. But he did not have the courage to argue. He thought of Niru and he thought of the Khasi girl. He remembered how their little romance was stubbed by Mahibulla Master, who beat his daughter and how the window was shut down. To blame the society all over again appeared humorous to him. Whom should he blame for his inasane thoughts? Who can he hold responsible for his wayward thinking? Does he agree with Jyotibabu and jump from Freud's 'sensible mind' to the Communists' 'sensible society'? Jyotibabu said, "A man's mind is dependent on his environment." Above environment, their neighbourhood.

He may be correct. But this pointless anger against an invisible force frustrated him. His inability to breakdown complex thoughts into simpler thoughts and explain like Jyotibabu, infuriated him. He wanted respite. He wanted everyone to share his guilt. He wanted to pull the curtain and cry. His thoughts raced like a madman. He burnt the letters from Makhoni and lit countless cigarettes. He kept staring at the smoke rings until he found himself calm again. He took a vow – he rejected everyone.

SHE ALSO LIETH IN WAIT AS FOR A PREY, AND INCREASETH THE TRANSGRESSORS AMONG MEN... HER HOUSE IS THE WAY TO HELL, GOING DOWN TO THE CHAMBERS OF DEATH...

"Interesting incident!" Jyotibabu said excitedly, "who took out the pamphlet from the wall?"

Someone must have taken out the posters on Kamini Sharma's incident, leaving the film poster of the actress untouched – bright and without an enemy.

"the police tore it," the shopkeeper said handing a packet of cigarette to Nikhil. Jyotibabu looked at Nikhil, like it explained everything about the society. "even the police likes the glamour girl?" Nikhil could not comprehend Jyotibabu's laughter. In fact he found it sly. Perhaps the shopkeeper understood, because he laughed revealing his red stained teeth.

Jyotibabu's expression gradually transformed and Nikhil did not disapprove of him under the fluorescent light of the stationery shop. He looked like a loving husband and a dignified family man. Jyotibabu Bought a few things for his wife and he watched his face grow tender.

Jyotibabu has a family. Even a pickpocket, a scholar, a terrorist, a miscreant, a communist, a capitalist – everyone has a family. This surprised him. Ranjan had said, there is a need, for an occupation, something to care for – that is probably why a man raises a family. Even Marx raised a family. Ranjan had said he does not want to prove his theory. That it was his belief. May be a very radical belief. The cloud contains the rain water. But their formation needs dust particles, a nucleus, an electron, a dependence. Once while explaining the Millikan electronic charge calculation Ranjan had spoken like a visionary. For a stability, to form, a foundation is needed. The Wilson cloud chamber forms on an electron – a dependence, a something, a family, a wife, politics or a violin.

An extremely hasty decision, a baseless decision – thought Nikhil.

"marriage only with the desire of begetting a son," Niranjan said with an evil grin. Jyotibabu was protesting, he accused the old wisdoms and their proponents. That in a Capitalist nation a woman will never be free and whereas in a Communist state the woman will rise. Bou appeared to enjoy the talks that day.

The evening passed by in a wave of thoughts.

There is a peculiar silence at home. Is father asleep? The lights are out in his room. An indistinct sound of orchestra came from the mess. He stumbled on the door. Bimala was leaning on the wall, drowsy after a day's work. Did the commotion wake him up? The light from the advocate's house fell on their door step and the indistinct silhouette of Bimala leaning on the wall. There was light on the window panes. Niru must be studying for her exams. Is father awake? But there is no sound. He must be asleep. Nikhil tip toed towards his room. He looked at the curtain at the old man's room. High blood pressure, countless worries and weak eye sight leaves him with little choice but to hit the bed with sunset. Once in a while a friend or two came and they passed the evening sitting in the dark verandah. They used to speak in low voices, discuss and ponder. The trends on the road did not influence him. After a long and eventful life of hard work, his father was spending his last days like a handicap.

Kitchen. Funu's mother woke him up and started to feed him rice and fish. He looked at her helplessly as the bones bothered him time and again. But Bou could not pay attention. Her thoughts were elsewhere.

Leaning on the pillar Nikhil heard the disheartening news from Bou. Everything seemed to fall apart. It seemed nothing could be worse than a bank failure. He imagined his father's worried face. But surprisingly there was no trace of anger on it. The idea that, life is a struggle that we have to undergo and that disappointments and pain are a part that we

have to accept patiently. Why couldn't he live by it being his son? How come his father did not discuss a word about the bank with him? He just accepted the news silently. His calm, deep face floated before him. He wanted to bow in reverence. He wanted to say, father I am prepared to withstand all the pain that is yet to come without hesitation. I am your son.

SUFFICIENT UNTO THE DAY IS THE EVIL THEREOF...

But why couldn't he? THE PITY OF IT, IAGO, THE PITY OF IT! He stopped short of bowing his head. He remembered how worthless he was. It occurred to him that besides whiling away his time just thinking, he also had a duty. In a family without a mother, a dead sister, a son who went underground and a son with mental illness, he was now the eldest son.

But what is he going to do? What does he know? So leaving everything to itself, has father gone to sleep seeking peace? He sneaked his head through the curtain - the sound of lowered voices. The mosquito net hasn't been lowered. The old wooden wardrobes and trunks appeared indistinct and looked like ancient statues. A little light came through the bedside window and fell on the old books on the large wooden table. The room had a feel of antiquity. The smell of tobacco and the musky smell of time filled the room. He was sitting on the bed smoking the hookah. Karunababu was seated on a chair beside him, blowing wind into the amber. In the little available light, their faces became distinct from time to time. Had it been a different time, Nikhil would have believed them to be characters who had sprung to life from a Dicken's novel. Karunababu reverses the old man. He does not have the arrogance to show sympathy but he is always ready being a companion. After living a long life himself, he had found an ideal person in the old man. Someone who underwent the ups and downs with evenly, never once straying from his principles. Someone who had never inflicted any injustice and helped people unconditionally. The other day Noren the gambler went off to Bombay without paying the debts he owed to the old man.

"he will disobey me in this way. I did not know"

A chill went down his spine. Was he talking about him?

"what should I say to you. This is time. This is the problem of an entire generation." Karunababu lost the trail of their conversation.

"he should have looked at his once. He knows the condition," the old man spoke without malice.

"why are you sad? He has a conviction. He knows what is good and he is following his conscience. He did not go underground for fun." Karunababu tried to make sense.

The old man did not say anything. The gurgling sound of the hookah took over. He has no wish to question someone's belief. Yet he could have finished his education. But no, this is something the youth today wants to understand. It's like education is something nothing. An education of slavery, they say. They do not debate or reform the education system. It seemed probable that the old man had started liking Kon more than Maina. Atleast, he was trying something.

But what was he doing? Robbery and killings. At least that is what one gets to hear. How can the old man support and stand by him? He has been praying to God, to bring him back to the righteous path. But was God listening? The thought that his own son has plunged into barbarism was enough to feel sad.

"they have brought unrest to the country and that is what we see. Where is their responsibility to the nation?"

"Of course we see what is shown. But how many of us ever tried to understand? My heart does not agree that Kon or for that matter any other group are just there to create unrest. Everyone who plunged into this fight, is fighting for a principle." There was a deep faith in his tone.

"violence," the old man said slowly, "irrespective of reason, is a crime."

"that is a matter of opinion." Karunababu gathered courage to say it. Old man was a little surprised. "they say – a group of people say that they government today is completely fascist. Today there is no way to form an union legitimately – be it a farmer's union, or a laBour's union. There is no freedom to organize a conference or to write a few lines in the paper. So without a violent struggle – that is to say, people only see revolution as the only way of regaining freedom. Violence becomes inevitable. They say, 'the end justifies the means'"

The old man responded in sarcasm, "killings, robbery, arson – you mean they are eventually justified?"

"a revolution implies atrocities," Karunababu said it out with courage. A few moments of silence.

"I had never stopped him," the old man said very gravely slowly, "if he was driven by a cause, I had no right to stop him. But he took a drastic step."

The old man said something he had never shared before. He felt very light. It felt like a confession. Nikhil's heart felt like a clear sky. He could sense the good will in the old man's voice. He felt this sensation anew that Kon and he were brothers and that they shared an unshakeable relation. His consent will reach him like a prayer, no matter where he might be. No matter how far and no matter in what condition. The indistinct sound of the orchestra suddenly became distinct. Someone must have increased the radio volume, like an applause to what had just been said.

Karunababu left the room. He cleaned his spectacles and looked back at the room before calling out for Nikhil. "where is Bou? Alright no need to call her. Listen go and bring Doctor Nolini tomorrow morning before 8. I have spoken to him."

"Doctor Nolini?"

"your father's blood pressure need to be checked once."

Nikhil felt embarrassed. But Karunababu did not notice. He himself was a little embarrassed. He had said certain things to the old man today which were inappropriate. But he did that against his will to remove the coat of bitterness that had settled upon Nikhil's father. Karunababu's asthmatic pain started to trouble him. Nikhil saw him to the door and returned. His father was still awake. His appeared in deep thought in the faint amber glow.

Where is Kon now? How difficult is the life of an underground? Has he fallen into some serious illness? Who knows what he must have eaten... he remember Dhon and his desire for higher education. He had wanted to send him abroad. He thought of Amol (Moina's friend). His ship left Bombay on the 10th. Moina had brought the news. It was hard to believe that Dhon, once a brilliant student is now a mental patient. He heard an explosion somewhere, the sound of pistols, a group of farmers snatching rifles from the police – what has happened to the peaceful people of Assam. Who put the seeds of violence amidst them? A deafening noise, an anarchy everywhere, smoke and explosions distort the vision. Kon got

nabbed. He was beaten mercilessly, boots rained on his chest – a fear gripped him, he felt helpless and looked at himself in shame.

Haven't seen Xonti for many days. Whatever it is, the mind will be lighter when she arrives. In the near darkness of the room he looked at the wall. He could see Gandhiji raising his hand seeking peace. He could feel the calm on his face and he was filled with hopelessness – he had lost faith in mankind. Christ was put on the cross, Abraham Lincoln was shot and then man turned into beasts and finished Gandhiji. What is left of mankind to live for?

The threat of war is like a dangling sword, the power of atomic and hydrogen bombs, sickness all around, a jealous and opportunistic race that is mankind... the amber slowly extinguished.

The door to Manu's room was open. Nikhil could see that a lot of things had accumulated inside the room. He realized Bou must have cleaned the house today. Xonti was coming – he recalled. The house appeared tidier. She must have worked hard and he felt bad. How could a young man let his Bou do the hard work while he roamed around talking to the wind. Bou does not say anything, Bou she must have felt bad. He was pleased with Bou. It occurred to him that no matter what, she was his brother's wife. And how despite everything she managed to look after her children and run this dysfunctional house. Has he ever faced any hardship in her presence? Although Xonti says things about Bou, but did his father ever felt uncared for in her presence? If the dust and grime of a household rubs into her, can she be held responsible? He remember the look on her face, aloof, when she was feeding Funu. Bou was equally hurt when the news of the bank came. Bou is attached to the house as much as anyone else in the family. The joy of this house is her joy too. Its sorrows her own.

The eldest son Makhon had slept off putting his head on the table. The bulb's holder was not working (Ranjan needs to have a look). The kerosene lamp was burning near him. Its heat touched his face. A lizard crawled on the list of algebraic formulas on the wall. The shirt on the chair was lying on the floor. He felt a simmering anger towards his neighbours who played the radio day in and out without consideration for children and their studies. Easy money! Bhuban died of typhoid. Yet not even for a day or a night they had bothered to stop. Jyotibabu had mentioned 'the curse of civilization'. Perhaps this is what he meant. He did not feel like waking him up. He reduced the flame and walked into the kitchen.

Bou was not in the kitchen. She had dozed off in her room. The bed had been infested with insects. She along with her children had been sleeping on a mattress laid on the floor. Moonlight entered through the window and he sensed a divine mother figure in her – the light reflected on the feeding bottle. Beside the pillow was a *Kirtan*⁵ book, whose pages were red with her vermillion. Sometimes during her solitary moments she flipped through its pages.

He stood there motionless for a while. Bou isn't exactly asleep. Somewhere in the distance a *Kirtan* was in process, the sound of which entered the room. She could hear its sound in her slumber. GOPAL GOVINDA JODU NANDAN, KRISHNOR SORONE LOILA SORON... She felt an infinite peace and forgot her own complexities of life. Sleep was getting deeper, but she forcefully listened to the sound. She woke up suddenly. It was perhaps a mosquito. Maina was calling, "Bou wake up. Won't you give us food?"

⁵ A form of prayer

The sound of *khol*⁶ and *taal* mixed with one another and the *Kirtan* almost came to an end. Nikhil turned the lights on and started to write a letter. He has not written a letter to Makhoni in a long time. She might not have forgotten him. He held her responsible, for all his unexpressed love that must have led to his current state of mind. The memories of the olden days came rushing back to him. College and Cultural Revolution; Women and fashion. An anarchy everywhere and how he spent his days in an intellectual circle. There was Makhoni and her songs. There was a bit of Communism and a bit of poetry. Those were the illusion filled years.

Suddenly he thought of Kon and Dhon. Amol is on a ship now. He thought of Mishra's restaurant and their intellectual gatherings. A room inside the restaurant that they had almost occupied. Mishra's business partner was his brother (who was always trying to pull his trousers above his waist). They were in debt and Mishra's brother often taunted them. May be even the workers in the restaurant laughed at them in secret. There was a radio there, which they listened to all the time. They would raise a storm and debate over tea cups centering around their cultural magazine. They wanted to stay away from the self-centered people outside. They had chosen to stay away from the economic and political complexities of their times.

They were never present in any of the meetings – whether in college or outside. They were never a part of any rally. High thinking, poetry and drama, girls and love letters. And then there were those little unpleasant incidents. How they sneaked into the restaurant by evading the NO CREDIT signboard on the door. Mishra's brother used to get irritated time and again. The waiter had signaled against their habit of spending hours over a cup of tea. To embarrass them Mishra would turn the radio off from time to time, or turn off one of the lights. They could hear their own voices, LIGHT, MORE LIGHT.

Despite everything they had managed to carve out a world of their own. A fantasy world removed from the complexities of life. And they must have been proud of it. A noisy procession passed by, followed by the sound of the motorcars. They mocked radical thoughts and Communist propoganda and they looked down upon the rich and the materialists. They shouted at their noisy motorcars as they lived in their own world, stable, assured and confident.

The lights suddenly went out in the restaurant. Some cups fell in the dark and there was a little chaos and people screamed. Yet they were unperturbed. A matchstick lit up in the dark. One after another long white cigarettes appeared from the dark and curious shadows fell on the wall. and like Bohemian intellectuals they waited for the lights to be restored (Ranjan had signaled the worthlessness of his education when he could not repair the lights at home. That was one occasion when he felt the widening gap between theory and practice.)

But eventually everything was like worthless. Where did they all float away? Each took a different shape. Amol was sailing abroad on a ship, Jyotin was in jail, someone became a teacher, someone became a clerk, someone a professor. Everyone was occupied in their own world. Himanshu has vanished without a trace. One day he was outside the cinema hall listening to music. That's when he stumbled on Birek. They were overjoyed and they had barely spoken for a few minutes when Birekh started to open up. He flashed out a state express cigarette from his pocket and was being escorted to the special class in the cinema. The glitz of the cinema reflected on his eyes and his expensive suit. Nikhil expressed his honest doubts and Birekh explained without hesitation. That he was just a clerk in supplies and he took bribes. Intentionally and on principle.

⁶ Khol and Taal: musical instruments.

"Rob it brother. Everyone is looking for an opportunity."

Birekh was relishing the offerings of this material world. They spoke a lot in their little time. What was Jyotin doing in the jail, how was Makhoni and about Amol leaving for abroad. Their disdain towards cultural efforts and the new sensationalism in the affairs of the world. Birekh – he himself had become a part of it. "How is Narayan? Narayan Hazarika?"

"Oh, he committed suicide a long time ago."

Nikhil was stunned for a moment.

'There is a tide in the affairs of men...'

"what did you say? Was it Shakespeare? I have forgotten all that a long time ago."

"Its natural to forget. How can Shakespeare exist between files, accounts and businessmen?"

The loud speaker went silent and the show was about to begin. Birekh took leave.

He walked aimlessly from street to street. The world was floating away. He was floating away. There is a tide. Men have created a ruckus. What are they thinking? Only creating sound waves, Ranjan says. Narayan Hazarika – so the world finally murdered him. The death of a possibility. Ranjan sounded true now. The world is nothing but a play of waves. The sounds and the songs are only waves of wind. The sunlight and heat are waves too. Every incident and every little talk is a matter of waves – they come and they go, a constant vibration. Narayan came and left. Even father –

The train came and left. On the crossing, Nikhil leaned on the gate and looked at the distant light of a signal. Jyotibabu said that the rich government had increased train fare. No one said anything. Neither Ranjan nor Nikhil. That they stood there to watch a train like kids, surprised them. They spotted the red light in the distance. Nikhil could not think of anything to say. Jyotibabu did not feel the need to say anything from his Communist world. Ranjan did not say that they were just 6563 X 10 cm waves. They instead Bought cigarettes from the Nepali shopkeeper and stood waiting there. It was like the ceaseless sight of the coming and going brought everyone to that corner and caressed them in that lonely night. A huge mechanical giant, like the one eyed Polifamous. The shrill sound of its whistling and its crowded, unromantic coaches (the romance of travel is not for the masses – Jyotibabu) and the sounds of its moving pistons. The train stunned them and left. Like a wave that passed by. Only an expression of variation – the varying length of waves. The same reason why red and yellow emit brilliant light as opposed to gamma ray...

Ranjan is a wise fool, thought Nikhil.

"this is wonderfully dialectical" Jyotibabu said. "the change in property due to change in quantity is a core idea in dialectics. TRANSFORMATION OF QUANTITY INTO QUALITY and vice versa"

Jyotibabu is a canvasser, Nikhil thought.

The night had matured long ago. The Kirtan had been long over. People had gone to sleep. The only audible sound was his father coughing. And in the middle of the night, the mysterious Khagen Mahanta returned in his car. Drug dealing? No, the night's revelry was written on his face. Alcohol and women.

The old man's coughing was low but distinct. The billion sounds of Khagen Mahanta's car. The night has a tragic power...

But a night will morn eventually. He felt his head spinning. He recalled the train. He imagined Makhoni going to her in laws in the train. Its wheels churned in his head.

The wheels took him from pain to joy. Funu's new tricycle hit the door. The excitement in its wheels and the sound of a child's carefree joy. (Xonti's husband Bought a new tricycle for Funu). Having come home after many years, Xonti would not stop talking. Ila and Nila ran to hide behind their mother when they heard Nikhil's voice. Their hair kept falling on their foreheads. Out of excitement, Funu and Runu had created a ruckus in the house. Bou was trying to rein over them by holding Makhon's ruler while they hid behind the door. Their uncle brought biscuits for them. Bou was laughing, Nikhil's brother-in-law was laughing. There was even a trace of smile on the old man's face.

Xonti had gained weight. Ila and Nila were prettier than before. Their father was always fat, a large face, clad in a large shirt and a huge beard. He befriended Makhon within two days and both were talking of sports all the time. The house had transformed magically. Xonti wept seeing the condition of the house. Bou found it fake. The old curtain got replaced with a new one, the cobwebs vanished and his son-in-law brought fruits for him from the market. Xonti arranged someone to deliver small fish everyday for father. Apparently it's good for the eyes. Bou must have felt humiliated.

Ranjan brought bad news. Dhon's condition has become severe. His violence has intensified and he cracked a doctor's head. The old man sank into his bed in silence. Makhon's uncle stopped his sports talks and Xonti resumed weeping.

"there is only grief written in our destiny."

"there is no point being pessimistic." Jyotibabu tried to reason it out.

The night started to pass in silence. And in order to break the monotony, Xonti's husband started telling his travel stories. The fascinating story of Ajanta and Ellora. Soon after the mood in the room became easy and bearable. Yet Nikhil and Ranjan remained silent. Ranjan almost wished to snap ties with Nikhil.

"I heard about all your misdeeds." Ranjan said

"what did you do with Blue bell?"

Nikhil looked down like an offender. Everyone in the house was thinking about Dhon. Nikhil's brother-in-law suddenly realized that no one was listening to his story. Xonti was still weeping and was staring at the new curtain. Ranjan and Nikhil looked like enemies. Jyotibabu appeared to be waiting for some sound from the old man's room. May be Jyotibabu felt sympathetic to the old man. Xonti's husband suddenly stopped narrating his story.

"what after that?"

"it's enough for the day."

No one persisted and the night once again started to pass in silence. "can you do an extra for me? Makhon almost whispered to Ranjan may be seeing the situation. Ranjan was relieved to find something to do and he immersed himself in Makhon's geometry.

"what will happen to father?" Xonti said breaking the silence, wiping away her tears.

"it's sad to even think about it," Nikhil's brother-in-law sighed, "there is no one to look after him at this old age."

This must have hurt Bou. And although he did not mean it that way, Nikhil's brother-in-law was overcome with guilt. He felt angry at himself. Bou and Xonti exchanged a glance. Nikhil and Ranjan did not like what had just happened.

"couldn't Kon do anything else whatsoever?" Xonti spoke in grief. "now there is some disturbance on our land and the farmers have refused to give us grains".

"the area has been declared 'disturbed' two days ago," Nikhil's brother-in-law said having nothing else to speak of. "A full fledged terrorism rages there." Jyotibabu added, "the zamindar's house has been set on fire and granaries of the rich has been looted."

"aren't you people involved in all these?" Nikhil asked.

"No, not us. Communists don't do that. Communism and terrorism are different things." There was a brief period of silence.

"the little amount that we used to get. Even that's now gone." Bou said

"in this old age, why did Kon..." and Xonti's husband stopped.

"father is selfish," the words came out spontaneously and without warning. "the grains are gone, so let it be. A thing that is gone, is gone." This stunned everyone. Xonti was angry.

"have you ever considered how this house runs? Are you taking the same path?"

"for greater interest?"

"is it? For greater interest," Jyotibabu spoke patiently, "but whatever Kon and his likes are doing, we call it terrorism."

Ranjan was agitated at both.

"do you know in what condition and the kind of society your father had to work in to stand on his feet? Jyotibabu you had said, it was a time of great exploitation by the British. Life, food, shelter, the society could not guarantee any of it. Amidst great difficulty they worked hard and looked for means to sustain themselves. Today, if that little achievement, that little plot of land, a small amount of grains, slip from their hand, shouldn't he be upset? Can he be blamed for his attachment to his hard earned property?"

Jyotibabu and Nikhil looked at each other.

"aren't you to be blamed for your failure to convince the older generations?"

Jyotibabu remained silent.

"Jyotibabu will convince us about terrorism." Nikhil's brother-in-law said mockingly. That surprised everyone. A giant leap from sports to politics.

"but they only want Communism-" Bou said naively.

"in practice," Jyotibabu had become a little impatient, "Kon and the others, what do they call it? Terrorism or something else?"

"Partisan warfare," said Ranjan.

Jyotibabu paused. He groped for his stock of arguments.

"So is Jyotibabu a Communist?" after all these while, Xonti asked in genuine surprise.

Jyotibabu remained silent in acknowledgement.

"but I have this belief," Ranjan said, "given the situation around us, and the state of our nation, to be a Communist, one either have to be in jail or he has to go underground."

This must not have gone down well with Jyotibabu. Nikhil's brother-in-law moved a bit and Bou seemed clueless. Xonti smiled sympathetically. It almost seemed like Ranjan had exposed Jyotibabu's hollowness. At least that's how Nikhil felt. But Ranjan felt bad.

An uneasiness filled the room. Respite came in the form of a fault in the wiring and the lights went out. The old man must not have realized inside his dark room. The baby started to cry and the betel nut plate fell on the floor.

"this electricity is a pain," Xonti said with irritation.

"it quite a headache." Bou added. Bimala brought in a kerosene lamp and left.

"why does this happen?" Nikhil's brother-in-law asked Ranjan

"because the flow of electron stops." Ranjan attempted to complicate the matter. So in response, he said, "understood completely."

"your electrons should go to hell." Nikhil said.

"yes if you could restore electricity, we would have understood," Xonti said, "what have you studied?"

"theoretical physics." Nikhil said in a tone of mockery.

"my theory is better than your practice."

The tone of Ranjan's speech raised suspicion in Bou and Nikhil's brother-in-law. What was Nikhil's practice? They looked at each other.

"being in hell yourself, it suits you to send electrons to hell."

"what is it? What's happening?" Nikhil's brother-in-law intervened. Xonti was indignant. Bou had wisdom, she didn't show an interest.

"its nothing," Ranjan tried shifting the situation. "who isn't in hell?" That's true who isn't in hell, thought Xonti. Anima had come today. An old college friend, Anima Mazumdar. She sings for the radio now and is a lecturer in Botany. She is still unmarried. Her simplicity has vanished, her excitement and her sensitivity. Bou was overjoyed to meet an old classmate after so many years. She thought she will be taken back to her olden days even if momentarily, far away from her life amidst feeding bottles and oil clothes. But...

Jyotibabu wanted to take leave. He wanted to pay a visit at Karunababu's. His asthmatic pain had increased recently. "sit for a while," Bou said.

Jyotibabu was not liking it. Ila and Nila had slept off on Kon's bed. He watched them sleeping and he went into a thought. Nikhil's brother-in-law immersed himself in the newspaper. Someone was talking about the jet planes used in the Korean war. What is jet propulsion? He wanted to ask Ranjan. But he did not. Nikhil's father had him about it in the afternoon. He could not answer. The old man made Xonti's husband sit beside him, as he read the newspaper this afternoon. It was evident to him that the old man had lost faith in Congress and he believed that the Congress has gone down the drain after Gandhi's death. He did not agree with the United Nation's role in Korea or Kashmir. It was obvious that the General Assembly was an American puppet. Why didn't the American's leave Korea? The people there can sort out their differences, themselves. The old man's son-in-law said that the people in the Far East disliked the Whites. He then narrated a story that one of his widely traveled customs superintendent had said. It had happened in a port in Japan. They went on talking for a while. But all of a sudden he felt that his son-in-law was not enjoying the conversation. And his face drooped like a small boy. He felt his significance as a historian, had also come to an end. He took leave to get some sleep. Although Xonti's husband was relieved, but he could sense the undercurrent. Something inside him prickled like a fish bone.

"I have to leave. Besides Karunababu, I also have to meet Nabin's mother." Saying so Jyotibabu got up to leave.

"What is Nabin doing nowadays?" Xonti asked.

"that rascal is a spy – he has turned into an informer." Nikhil's brother-in-law roared, "he was offering toffee to Nila and asked her if Kon had come to see us. Fortunately he hasn't come. I did not suspect him at first, but it didn't take long. His mother is in her death bed and this is what he is doing."

"what can he do? Given his deplorable condition and his mother's illness..." Nikhil seemed like justifying Nabin's actions, "his economic condition is pathetic."

Jyotibabu spoke up, "this is how a Capitalist state ruins its people. Come to think of it, Nabin is our neighbor and we know him for so many years." But he stopped abruptly. He felt ashamed.

But involving a little girl is deplorable! Xonti scolded Nabin until her anger subsided. Even Bou said a thing or two out of anger. Nikhil was hurt too that the little girl was made a part of it. Nikhil recalled Jyotibabu had once spoken about individual freedom and about its absence in free India. When a baby for instance is born in this world, a new life enters this planet. But this planet has been taken over by the evil. Their omnipresence is watching us all the time. In a beautiful world that was meant to be seen, the baby will grow up suspecting his own shadows. Everything around him will evoke suspicion and uncertainty, mistrust and hatred.

Will there be shadows of mistrust and hatred on Ila and Nila's gentle faces?

Jyotibabu left. He was upset. Who taught something like partisan warfare to some like Ranjan. Does Ranjan read and understand Lenin? He looked towards the old man's room - a victim of Bourgeois politics. He no doubt holds a grudge against the new generation - more of a disappointment. How has society treated him? Who is to be blamed for our failure to find this simple and principled old man as our ally? Why are we passively watching them

embrace the mistruths of our time? Yet when did the Left ever had access to publicity? A fascist government never allows such privileges. Kon says, instead of tons of publicity paper, what we need is an action, an impact that is hundred times more effective, especially when there is no room for peaceful means. But then Kon is from the other side, an opponent. Jyotibabu's thoughts became more complex delving deeper into a quagmire called politics.

An impact frees the thought – "ACTION RELEASES THOUGHT FROM ITS BLIND ALLEYS AND VICIOUS CIRCLES"...they say. But terrorism is despicable. Does action only mean terrorism? Nikhil's brother-in-law was close by and he said, "our people have always been subjected to violence, always beaten. Kon believed it was time to pay them back. It was important to say that people can hit back. A policy of blood for blood. That it had become important to shake the laziness and the inertia of our people."

"Great. So banks have been looted and granaries emptied. Did that help? Did the inertia go?"

Nikhil was listening and trying to ascertain the core matter and leave the rest. He suddenly remembered something that Goethe had said. She suddenly heard himself shouting, "IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE ACT," surprising everyone.

Of all the people, Ranjan was the most surprised. He has been unable to get over the Blue bell incident. Everything that had been said; Bou, Nikhil's father, his brother-in-law, Xonti – everything that he had heard, created a chaos inside him. It seemed sanity was becoming rare. Everyone had become involved in everything, without consent. Strange thoughts came from strange mouths. Why had the bank failed? Even he had to listen to its explanation from Jyotibabu. The thoughts of Dhon, Kon, Anima and Makhoni disoriented him. Instability, uncertainty and eventual collapse. Patience is dying, Nikhil's father is dying. The milk in the saucepan turned into steam and evaporated. The alpha particles scatter spontaneously from a radium. In the grid inside the radio valve, restless electrons were randomly moving. There is no certainty anywhere, from particles to waves and from waves to particles, an anarchy everywhere. People are revolting; they are getting restless and disobedient. Electric particles break law by disobeying the potential wall. Dirac breaks the law by disregarding Delta function...

"Ranjan won't you go home? It's getting dark."

"In a while. What will I do at home?"

"how are your studies? And exams..."

"In a way. In a way. I want to get out of this place soon. This place is suffocating."

Xonti smiled sympathetically.

"I have decided to leave a little early. I should be leaving the day after."

"so soon. I thought you wanted to watch Anima's programme and Ila Nila's dance. Anima has become a fine sitar player."

"Oh, I need to finish the stitching tonight." Bou remembered she had to stitch two colourful shawls for Ila and Nila for the dance. "Xonti please don't go to sleep."

"and when they grow up I will get them admitted to Udayshankar's troupe," their father said with pride. Xonti also felt proud. Bou smiled, "everyone says that they dance quite well for their age."

"Nikhil wanted to watch them dance. He has been hearing so much praise. But he felt hesitant thinking about the environment of the show. The little girls will dance, Anima will play in rapt attention. Under the bright lights the smiling men and women, Bou and Xonti, Ila and Nila – everyone will look glamorous and romantic. With the rhythm of the music, Jyotibabu will keep delivering his opinions, Girija Sharma will be on prowl with his lustful eyes and Ranjan will speak of music as a spectrum of waves. Teenage girls will be walking everywhere. He himself might entertain shameful thoughts. Such thoughts will come and go through his mind. Khagen Das, who has been running around collecting funds for the evening, will be beaming with pride – how each of them will shape the mood of the evening.

"is it on the day of *Janmasthan*⁷?" Bou started to calculate the days on her fingers. She might have a lot of work at home if it is. She will have to return early. Some tunes will play in her head – in the empty house, the baby in her lap – her mind will waft away to the laughter and the bright lights of the stage.

(that's what happened. Bou was quite sad. So was Nikhil. A moment where someone could easily sing, OH THIS NIGHT, THE NIGHT OF HAIL AND STORM...)

"the lamp is so hot," Bou said. "wastage. Its burning too much." Bou reduced the flame and Ranjan paused before resuming, "the core thing is wastage. Whatever energy is gained from burning oil, only two percent becomes light that we use to read and see. The rest gets wasted. So much of heat is generated."

"and what is your science doing about it?" Nikhil's brother-in-law asked him. "heat less lamps. That's what they are trying to build. I wonder how can we stop this wastage of energy, or figure out a way to recycle them back into light and send it where it's needed. And theoretically that's possible. Because any form of energy – be it light, heat, electric, magnetic, sound, can be converted from one form into another. Imagine if we succeeded, how bright the earth will be."

"utopian," said Nikhil. But he should not have said that. Bou laughed and Xonti found this conversation trivial. His brother in law showed some interest but Ranjan did not pursue. Nikhil remembered Jyotibabu and imagined how he would have definitely said. Scientists today does not invent anything for the benefit of mankind. From the razor blade to the atom bomb, everything is designed to serve the capitalists. And even if a scientist invented a bright luminous light, he will not be allowed to apply it in the world.

Ranjan took leave finding no reason to hang on. Bou is almost done with cooking. Maina and everyone will wake up to eat. Xonti had dozed off on the chair and her husband yawned loudly. Bou saw that the feeding bottle was lying on the floor. Not a word, not a sound, a soundless empty house. A slight breeze left the curtain moving. Her face became tender and she picked the feeding bottle and began to feed Xonti's baby.

After several days when he woke up in the morning, he was surprised. Xonti's soft hands were touching his face. More surprisingly the radio was silent. As he woke up he saw Ranjan and his brother-in-law sitting around the table and they were laughing about something. Xonti joined them too. Ranjan pointed to a rickshaw on the street. Girija Sharma had loaded

⁷ A religious occasion.

the radio on it. On the plug meant for the fan, there was a door bell like device making a vibrating sound.

"they are taking it for repair," Ranjan laughed as he said. "I wished I could see the face of those people in the shop. They will be clueless. Because the problem is here."

"You and your little pranks."

"I did the right thing. I restrained them through science. They had created a nuisance in the locality."

Nikhil could not care less, about what a buzzer is or how it works. He just joined them laughing.

"isn't there still time for tea? I will get a shave."

He took out Xonti's husbands shaving set and sat down before the mirror.

"Oh my shaving set is up on the altar of inauguration."

Jyotibabu was about to enter. And Ranjan did not get the joke. He just laughed louder than the rest.

"what is this sound? Jyotibabu asked.

"Orchestra for Ila and Nila's rehearsal,"

"Anima took them with her in the morning." Xonti said holding a smile.

Sound came from the neighbouring house. This is the second orchestra. Ila and Nila received unprecedented success in the first.

Doctor Nalini arrived. The tea never happened. Everyone flocked into the old man's room. The mercury in the doctor's Blood Pressure measuring device rapidly went up, sending an alarm. But doctor Nalini gave them assurance and courage. He said, "you take complete bed rest. There are so many people in this house." The old man coughed a couple of times. "do I need rest?" and his eyes fell on Bou and he thought of something. Doctor Nalini left and the rest followed. The old then called Maina. "your Bou needs a little rest. How much can someone do, the kids and the house. You go to Nalini. He will prescribe some tonic for her." Outside the room, Bou cried unnoticed. On the other side of the room Xonti was talking to herself, "father is so gullible. He believes what he sees."

The mood of the house transformed soon after. The table was re-occupied with people and Bou headed to the kitchen. Ranjan abruptly jumped. Little Runu was trying to climb the stairs. He was unable to climb one of the taller steps and he kept on trying. Ranjan went close to him. Runu was about to give up. Nikhil was stirred. He ran and helped Runu climb the step.

The music rose from the neighbour's house. Bou and Xonti came out of the kitchen. Nikhil could see the stains left by the tears on Bou's face. He looked at Runu and heard his victorious laugh and the climax of the concert. A genuine smile came from within and he pulled Ranjan to sit on the chair. He wished to say something to Bou and Xonti. "GIVE THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD", he said.