the unalloyed passion with which she gave herself to me. I was wrong. How do I now look at the severe, upright, innocent face of my wife? I head now towards a collision in the dark and that rock melon might be split and scattered all about the axis of my anxiety.


Mala

When Malati left school she came into full encounter with her family. Having dreamed and drifted through her education, she came to roost in her home. The neighbor woman soon branded her lazy and called her “Mala,” an abbreviation of the Malay word “malas.” The neighbor repeated it with the relish of an insult the more she saw the girl idle and happy. She was stuck with the name when her family began calling her Mala. There was an ugly sound to it whenever they were angry with her.

That was often enough. For some reason they felt offended if Mala hummed a tune in the bathroom or sat in the doorway reading a magazine. The father was a thin, tall man who only straightened from his stoop to deliver some uncouth reprimand. His colleagues at work never knew this side of him for he was always smiling. Mala’s mother clattered through her housework with a solemnity that made desecration of a temple seem like a prayer. Her two brothers, constantly running errands for their stout mother, looked at Mala with a sense of achievement.

Parental love pursued a twisted path here; it was expressed through a terrifying ritual of silence. Her indifference grated on their self-gratifying sense of diligence. The boys spent their afternoons desultorily digging at an unyielding plot of ground. Mala watching them, noticed how the handles of the changkul flew away from them. There was a dull thud as the changkul hit the ground. Their bodies were covered with a lackluster glow. Mala’s father clucked at the
chickens; they squabbled restlessly, refusing to be housed for the night. Mala’s mother looking on, gave some silverware a shine where none was necessary.

The punishment began the day they learned she had failed her final school examination. There was no show of anger or of disappointment. They withdrew into silence that froze her movements and her spirit. No talk passed between them. If they saw her they turned their heads away. Meals were swallowed in utter silence, beds made in rustling quiet. Outside the house they resumed interrupted conversations with their neighbors as if nothing had happened.

“Have I done something wrong?” Mala asked, unable to bear the cemetery quietness in the house.

They only placed their fingers on their lips and rolled their eyes in the direction of the family niche. Here resided not only pictures of gods and goddesses, but also photographs of a pantheon of dead relatives. Even on ordinary days the sight of these photographs revolted her. Now they produced a darkness in her mind. Not a day passed without their genreflecting before the staring, vacant eyes. Garlands, a week old, bordered the picture frames of these departed men and women. Mala had never helped the family string the flowers.

Mala began her own rituals. Getting up before the others did, she took a cold bath and went out into the unfenced compound. The dawn air hit her then, causing a shiver to course through a body that had just risen from sleep. The skin on her face seemed to peel away and reveal a new self. She stood under the mango tree and watched the sun rise over the hills. As the land emerged from the darkness and mist she felt herself torn up and rushed toward the brightening clumps of trees and hill slopes. Perhaps to replace the singing silence of the family there rose, beyond, a resonant clamor. She turned abruptly—a door had slammed inside—toward the house.

That morning she sat in the doorway, her eyes blinking at the mystery the trees were losing. The leaves slowly turned a flat green as voices from the neighboring houses reached her in monotonous waves. A breeze stirred the loose skirt she wore. She felt a gentle slap of coolness on her calves and thighs. Her mother came out with a bucket of washing, her lips twisted in perpetual scorn. The neighbor woman appeared at the door and whooped with delight.

“Ah, showing your legs to the world, Mala!” she screamed with unpressed pleasure.

Mala rose and went into her room.

The silence deepened. Her brothers sat in the cubicle-like living room, afraid of making the slightest movement. Mala’s mother was a squatting, impassive statue on the kitchen floor. A scrappy, cold lunch, garnished by the intolerable gloom of the house, had been eaten. The afternoon passed and brought Mala’s father back from his work. Her parents had a whispered conversation under a tree outside the house. The boys sat on, knees held together, biting their nails.

Mala’s mother stomped back, thrust the door of the room open, and tore off Mala’s clothes. She wrapped a white sari in sulcating folds around Mala’s well-fleshed body. As she was dragged to the bathroom, she saw her brothers cleaning the tray and lamps at the family niche. Inside the bathroom her mother poured pail after pail of water over her loosened hair. The water came so fast, the woman held her so tightly, Mala could not breathe. But her mother didn’t stop. She grunted and bent and slammed the water against Mala’s hair, eyes, face, breasts, and legs until the girl was thoroughly numb. She had been reduced to a nerveless, confused girl when her mother pulled her back to the niche. A lamp had been lighted. Mala’s mother pushed her down before the colony of deceased. Her father placed his hand on her head so that she would remain on her knees. Her mother brained her forehead with a streak of the holy ash.

At last, when he was tired, Mala’s father removed his hand. Mala moved in a daze to her room. The sari, having wrung the heat off her body, had almost dried. Mala changed and sat on the bed. Her immersion in the punishing waters had ended the silence. There was an unnatural gaiety as the family laughed at the talk of the father. A chicken was slaughtered, a feast prepared to which Mala’s father invited her with some cajolery. She remained in her room.

A fury broke upon her in the night. The snores of the well-fed and contented roused a rebellious anger within her. She wanted to
get out but the thought of bodies in various postures of sleep confined her to the bed. In her restlessness she tossed and turned and then lay rigid, waiting for the dawn. At the first cockerel's crow, she stumbled toward the bathroom. She stood there, unclothed, letting the chill prick her body. Then she splashed water on herself and soaped and rubbed her body so that the blood flowed again. And she recalled the red-tinged sky of the previous dawn opening upon a landscape, miraculous and fresh. She went out into the compound and let her warm breath thaw the dew and mist around her face.

“Mad Mala,” the neighbor woman said. “Standing like a ghost under the mango tree!”

The word spread. “She rubs her bad blood on her body! Stands naked in the mist!” The squat and ugly neighbor woman returned from the town, where she was believed and made its spokeswoman. The town gathered about her as if she carried in the marketing bag on her arm, colorful bundles of mysteries. She did possess strange powers and ways of knowing, sometimes accompanied by prophetic pronouncements.

“Mangoes are ripening,” she said, referring to Mala’s breasts. “Keep them covered with sacking. Hands may reach out.”

The warning was not heeded. Mala walked to her friend’s house beyond the bridge. She had felt stifled, closeted in her room. For an hour or so Susi, her friend, talked of Kuala Lumpur. Her brother, who had a small business there, had told her of the freedom, lights, and wealth of the city.

“Nobody knows you there,” Susi said. “Here everyone knows the color of your shift.”

The ugliness of Susi’s words didn’t jolt Mala out of the trance into which she had fallen. Had she not herself escaped, for a brief spell, from the daily torment, imprisonment, boredom, and slow dying? She returned home late to an angry mother.

“I’ll burn your legs!” she screamed. “Who heard of a young girl wandering wherever her feelings took her? Haven’t you brought the family enough shame?”

“Tame the goat or the rams will bristle,” the neighbor woman called sagely.

There was a whispered consultation that night between Mala’s parents.

A priest came to the house. When it had been washed and sprinkled with saffron water, to purify it. He sat in the living room and chanted until it was assumed that evil spirits had been cast away. Then he rose to go saying, “The dead came freely into the house.” He accepted a few dollars on a leaf and departed, mumbling, “Friday would be an auspicious day.”

Preparations were begun on Thursday itself. Flowers were gathered from bushlike plants in the compound, strung together, and left overnight to be moistened by the dew. The two boys wiped the picture frames free from cobwebs and dust the following morning. Highly honored among the deceased was Mala’s great-grandfather. Her father often recounted the story of his life, dwelling on his hunting activities.

“He was a wild man when he was young,” Mala’s father said. “Many women threw him glances until your mother’s mother showed him the good life.”

“Tell us about how he went into the jungle,” one of Mala’s brothers said.

“He disappeared for two or three nights. When he came back he carried the best wild boar meat slung on a pole across his shoulder.”

“No one helped him?” the other boy said.

“There was no need,” Mala’s father said. “He could carry two wild boars on his thigh, unaided.”

“He was never frightened of the tigers and elephants he saw out there.” Mala’s mother said.

“Not one word about jungles or wild boars after his marriage,” Mala’s father said. “He could change at the blink of the eye.”

“But he never did,” Mala said. “He died of the wasting disease.”

You told us.”

“Pull your tongue out!” Mala’s mother said. “That was God’s great test of patience. And your great-grandfather went like a warrior to Him.”

The great-grandfather’s virtues were extolled again that evening. The vegetarian meal they had had in the afternoon made them
particularly receptive. Laughter had been banished for the whole
day. Mala's father slaughtered three toughened cockerels that evening
with sacrificial zeal. The boys caught the blood, the woman plucked
the feathers, and the man chopped the meat into chunky pieces. Mala
had been told to remain in her room, closeted with holy thoughts.

The cooking nearing its completion, the boys took their baths —
short spurts of water thrown over their bodies. The parents wore
clean, white garments for the purification. Mala was made to stand
in a white sarung knotted at her breast while her mother repeated the
punishing bath ritual. Mala's initiation into the world of the dead had
been made.

Mala waited in her wet sarung watching her mother lay out the
feast for the dead: large scoops of rice, drumsticks, vegetables, chicken
curry, a bottle of stout (opened), cigars (for the deceased ladies), and
cigarettes (for the dead men and striplings). The boys made the
gestures first, bringing their camphor tray and incense brazier thire
around the closet of the dead. Mala's mother followed. She rubbed
the holy ash at the base of her throat and struck her forehead until
tears started. Mala's father made the full obeisance before the
pantheon of the good, undistracted life, now dead. He took a garland
that had been lying on a tray in the middle of the niche. He put it
around Mala's neck and thrust her forward. She performed the ritual
with brief gestures. The father then led them in favor-asking from the
dead.

"May you grant us sobriety," he called to the ancestors.
The others repeated the words solemnly, Mala with distaste.
"May you grant us the strength not to take the crooked path."
"May you grant us the swiftness with which to stop the blood
rising in anger, lust, and bestiality."
"May you grant us patience."
"May you grant us long life."
"May you grant this girl, now your daughter too, does not
shorten that life."

They took turns placing kumkum and oil and holy ash on the
part in Mala's hair. She was led to her room, where she barely
succeeded in keeping down the bile that rose to her mouth. For the
whole week she hardly left her room, suffering a depression that left
her convinced she really belonged to the dead. One evening she
escaped to Susi's house, where she listened to Sanker, who had come
on a holiday from Kuala Lumpur.

"O! O! The mangoes want to fall into some man's hands!" the
neighbor woman remarked loudly.

She had laughed over their method of "taming" Mala. Her father
reported that he heard the town laughing at him the minute he turned
his back.

"Better put an end to it all," Mala's mother told him with a certain
look in her eyes.

A different kind of word passed around this time. The neighbor
woman was then at the peak of her career: no men came to Mala's
house although it had been recurtained, redecorated, refurnished,
and, in some other ways, restored. A fresh string of mango leaves
hung over the front doorway.

Weeks passed. The mango leaves had curled and turned brown
when a man, accompanied by his son, called at the house. Mala's
father hurriedly put on a shirt and ushered them in.

"Is there anyone else coming?" Mala's mother asked, noticing
the absence of women.

The man looked around him unhurriedly and shook his head.
"Aren't we enough?" he said.

His son, clothed in tight pants, a broad belt, and tapering-collar
shirt, examined the various articles in the room. He paused a long
while at the collection of tapes, scratched his head as he read the
titles, and then turned, with a puzzled expression on his face, to Mala's
father.

"No modern songs?" he asked.
"We don't sell records here," Mala's father said.

The young man sat down and laughed. The proceedings were
conducted to the accompaniment of his laughter.

"As you can see, my son is educated," the older man said. "Good
music makes him go mad. Now what about your daughter?"
“She has been to school,” Mala’s father said.

“Come, come. Even a donkey can be led by the neck to school,” the man said. “Let’s go to other things. Jewelry?”

“I can only afford a chain,” Mala’s father said.

“A mare with jingling bells!” the man said, rising to go. “I was foolish to come after hearing so much about your girl.”

The next suitor came alone. From the minute he stepped into the house he would not sit down. His face was pockmarked, his eyes red, and his hair bristled like the back of an unruly bull.

“I’m a widower,” he said. “I’ve three children. I’ve a lot of money. The children need a mother and I want a woman. I know all about your girl. She needs someone like me to tame her.”

“Go and join a circus!” Mala’s father shouted. Thinking of the whole town turned out to see his daughter the mother of three children on the marriage day itself.

Mala heard the negotiations and, humiliated, thought of suicide. The eyes of the ancestors seemed to stare at her. She saw herself pinned between glass and wood, withered flowers garlanding her memory — a monument to sacrifice for the good name of the family. In that cold, hazy hour between night and morning, she let herself be peeled and revealed. She lived again, fiercely, stubbornly, in the light that spread over the country, knowing instinctively that there could be no greater darkness than despair.

“I’m going out,” she said firmly when she left that evening to visit Susi.

“Don’t you know about the auspicious period you’ve entered?” her mother asked.

“You can auction me off on the name I’ve got from this town,” Mala said.

Susi was in a thoughtful mood. She laid aside a letter from her brother.

“Sanker is thinking of marriage,” she said. “He has asked me to look for a girl.”

“There must be plenty of girls in Kuala Lumpur,” Mala said.

“He wants to marry in the old way,” Susi said, and smiled. “I hear your parents are looking for a bridegroom.”

Mala laughed but looked down shyly.

“I can’t even think of it,” she said. “My people are proud. They are known for their correctness in this town. I can’t leave the house except with the man my father finds for me.”

“My brother isn’t in a hurry,” Susi said. “Think about it. He can give you a good life.”

There was a certain breeziness about Sanker that she liked. She had only seen him briefly, but his confidence and sense of responsibility were evident. She put her thoughts away as she approached her house. Her mother stood talking with the neighbor woman and barely gave her a glance.

Then, Vasu, a relative of Mala’s father, arrived accompanied by a group of people crammed into two cars. It was an impressive show and even the neighbor woman was silenced. Perhaps she had met her match in Vasu. He had a reputation for lying, scrounging off on liquor, a habit of exaggerating, and possessed as well a sense of drama. He also had a son, of marriageable age, born out of wedlock. He got down from the car, smiling, and waited for the others to bring up the rear of the procession to Mala’s house.

Several women carried trays of fruits, sweets, and clothes. Vasu inquired for Mala’s father in a formal manner.

“We’ve come with the plenty of the season,” he announced when Mala’s father appeared and gestured them in.

The usual questions were asked and then Vasu jumped up as if possessed by a strange spirit.

“Don’t you really know me?” he asked. “I’m the man you spat at. At that old man’s funeral. What did I know about drumming?”

“I’ve forgotten all that,” Mala’s father said.

“Correctness!” the man hissed. “Each man lives differently. He has his feelings. You threw water on that fire. What’s happening to your correctness? This!”

The man spat on the trays he had brought as gifts. The sweat, the various perfumes the women wore, and the man’s raucous breath filled the close air in the living room with some kind of rottenness.

Mala appeared in the silence that fell over the gathering. She held a travelling bag and her eyes were red.
“I’m taking the shame out of this house!” she said and pushed past them.

She walked quickly toward the bridge.

The marriage, without any fanfare, was performed at the registry office. Mala’s father gave his unwilling approval. No one else was present at the official occasion. As they traveled down to Kuala Lumpur in a secondhand car Sanker had recently acquired, Mala looked at the country flitting past her. All her mornings, after those baths, she thought, had not been useless. She was coming into her own at last. She couldn’t suppress a sense of triumph.

They came to a busy row of shops, above which were flats. Sanker rented part of a flat. He had slept until then in his one-room office as a requirement of the businessman making his first million. The dust, the noise, and the traffic assaulted Mala even as she mounted the steps, behind Sanker, to the rooms upstairs. They had to share the hall and the kitchen with a woman and her child. Only the bedroom provided some space for a marriage to breathe, grow, and acquire some purpose.

“Lucy,” the Chinese woman said, coming out of the kitchen to meet them. “My son. No husband.”

But, looking out of the dirty window, Mala saw what had once been jungled hill and remoteness had been cut level and made a home. She smiled at Lucy and the boy, about three, whose face was still covered with the remnants of his breakfast.

“Sankah, good man,” Lucy said. “Make a lot of money. Like Chinese himself!”

It might have been the car journey or the windless hall, but Mala felt giddy and looked for a place to sit.

“Better go to the room,” Sanker said. “Rest.”

He opened the door to the bedroom to an undmade, stained mattress, and the barest of furniture. He ran down the steps and returned with some packages of food and hot tea in a plastic bag.

Sanker was at his office most of the day or out on assignments. Mala didn’t know exactly what he was doing. He thrust some money into her hands at night, after they had made love, and told her to buy the things necessary for a home.

“All this will change,” he said. “When we’ve more money. Just do some simple cooking. Make use of whatever we’ve now. Lucy manages even without a husband.”

Mala had adjusted a little to the situation. A meal was there if Sanker wanted it. The days he followed his business out of his office, she ate alone. Lucy had made it clear from the first day that she didn’t want her son fed by any stranger. She was, however, pleasant about other matters. Mala derived fascination just watching Lucy’s transformation in the evenings. She ceased to be the sloppy, flabby woman she was in the mornings. A smart dress emphasized her suddenly ample, firm breasts, the makeup gave her a newfound vitality. The boy had an old woman to look after him on some days. Where there was no one he cried and tired himself and lay curled on the cold, terrazzo floor of the hall. It was from there that Lucy picked him up, grumbling, in the early hours of the morning.

“Children, they give us no time,” Lucy said around noon, when she got out of bed. “Baw! Baw! All day. Prevent them.”

The advice was unnecessary. Sanker had taken Mala to a doctor, who put some metal inside her. After that Sanker ceased to be gentle in bed with her. She was reminded of the way her mother had punished her with water. The slapping, the bending down and the humiliation had followed her into marriage. There was the laryngitis too, the following morning.

“We’ll have children when we’re better off,” Sanker said to mollify her.

She cleaned the pots and pans, saucers and cups, sometimes more than once in the course of the day. She gave Sanker his tea when he ran up the stairs and burst into the hall. Dinner was soon prepared and then the waiting for her husband began. He swayed in some nights, reeking of liquor, mumbled something about “contacts,” and fumbled for her in the dark.

“I’m working hard for all of us,” he said the next morning, rushing through breakfast. “The ones who come later will benefit.”

He got a color TV for her, raking up the money from somewhere. Once she went down to the office to clean it. It was so bare that she
wondered how business could be conducted in it at all. Lucy surprised her as well. There was something common between her and Sanker. Lucy never mentioned the work she was doing but when she stayed home she displayed her fatigue as someone proud of having slogged away. She fed her boy something that made him sleep for hours. Lucy then sat on the floor, in a thin, loose dress, flipping through a pile of glossy magazines.

"Ask your man buy furniture," she told Mala. "Share half half. This looks like pig cage."

Mala passed on the word. Sanker and Lucy came to an agreement and the sofa, armchair, and coffee tables arrived. Lucy spent whole mornings on the sofa, under the dust-blackened fan that was never switched off. One afternoon a man delivered a sound system Lucy had ordered. It was an expensive, complex set. From it came all kinds of music, but mainly Chinese songs that filled the flat with militant resonance. Lucy never allowed the boy near it. Once she smacked his fingers for touching it and she wiped off the mark with a velvety, thick cloth. Mala had to distract him from his howling.

Sanker took her to an English film one night, sitting beside her with restless absorption. While he sighed in wonder, she watched with embarrassment the couple on the screen, half naked, embrace then dance in a nightclub led on by a bare-breasted woman who wriggled sensuously, and finally make love with unashamed hunger.

"See, see," Sanker muttered. "One day we could be like that." He was full of his dreams on the way back to the flat. They would buy a better, new car; move out to a house in a prestigious area; fly to a holiday in a foreign country.

"They showed all those things in the film," she said.

"What's there to be ashamed about?" he said, drawn out of his preoccupations.

Susi visited them for a week, dragging Mala out to the various shopping complexes. She bought a dress, makeup, and shoes.

"Have you anything to tell me?" she asked Mala confidentially.

"What do you mean?"

Susi giggled, rubbing her belly.

"He says when we've more money," Mala said.

"You should enjoy yourself," Susi said, accompanying Lucy out that night.

She left for home reluctantly. Sanker had changed during her stay. He made Mala discard her saris and wear dresses.

"Don't rub tumeric on your face," he said.

"It won't be smooth and clean," she said.

"I bought a lotion and other things," he said. "Lucy can teach you how to use them."

She submitted. Lucy worked like a magician on her face. When she showed Mala a glass, she gasped. Her face resembled that of the women she had seen at the shopping complexes.

"My! My!" Lucy said, slapping her thighs, pleased.

As Lucy removed the makeup, Mala's face felt cool and then shrunken. She cried on returning to the flat, after Sanker had her hair cut. The hairdresser had handed her the snipped hair in a bag that carried the salon's name and logo. She laid out the truncated length, once a part of her, which had reached down to her waist.

Lucy became attached to her. She described the places in the city she frequented and the food she ate, with guests, at large crowded restaurants.

"Why you like this?" she said. "All time in here. No children. Good time taste many things. I show you."

Mala shook her head, only accepting to look after the boy when Lucy went out. Lucy was not easily put off. Sanker was angry with Mala for refusing Lucy's services.

"She only wants to show you the city," he said. "You must learn about people and their ways."

"You take me out," Mala said.

"I don't have the time," he said, sensing that she accused him of not wanting to be seen with her during the day.

"He have woman work for him," Lucy told Mala one evening. "Plenty customers. That why he marry."

Lucy did not elaborate. Sanker grumbled at dinner. "Too much work."
“Did anyone help you before?” Mala asked.

“A secretary,” Sankar said. “She was too expensive. You could do some work for me. But you’re afraid of leaving this flat.”

Lucy’s boy was proving to be too wild for Mala. He had been left so much to himself that he turned aggressive if she fed or dressed him. Mala thought about Sankar’s suggestion. It was time she shed some of her fears. Lucy encouraged her.

“Go, help your man,” she said. “He goes mad, if not.”

“I can read and write,” Mala told Sankar. “Enough?”

“You must know typing, how to answer the phone,” he said.

“I can learn,” Mala said.

“Practice here first,” Sankar told her, smiling.

He bought her a second-hand typewriter and a manual on typing. Mala spent her mornings getting in practice. The process was trying. Her fingers flew all over the keys. She aimed for speed, but only achieved mistakes. A frustrating garble met her gaze during the first weeks.

Sankar sighed. He put down the copies abruptly.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked. “Have you got sticks for fingers?”

“I haven’t done this kind of work before,” Mala said.

“That doesn’t mean you’ve to spoil good, expensive paper,” he said.

Mala did not cook meals that day. Sankar had to buy dinner from the shop around the corner.

Though Mala was tired, her typing gradually showed some improvement. Sankar gruffly acknowledged her progress. She kept at it. The traffic roared past her flat. Lucy’s boy bawled for attention. Lucy herself would prattle away from the sofa, but Mala heard none of this. She was glad that she didn’t have the long hair that would fall over the machine. She had learned to write formal, pleasant letters, and correct simple mistakes when Sankar announced that she could go down to the office.

“Ask Lucy how to dress for work,” he told her.

Lucy bustled about Mala. She made Mala put on a dress, then take it off. She tried various tones of lipstick, eyebrow pencils, and makeup. Mala saw in the dresser mirror a girl stiff and frightened. Lucy had done good work — Mala hardly recognized herself. And she wanted to be that way. For a moment she recalled the dozens she had stood under the mango tree, up north. She had changed, she realized, but into someone not of her making.

Sankar ran a packaging business. He had the rates drawn up neatly on a card. The firm that provided the boxes had its phone number underlined in red, and pinned on the wall facing the typewriter. Lorry owners’ phone numbers were listed on a separate card. A little black book, indexed, contained clients’ names. When Sankar sat at his table on the other side of the small office, he was a different man.

“We aren’t husband and wife here,” he said on showing her into the office one morning. “Don’t bring unnecessary problems to me. Do whatever is necessary.”

He briefed her on the work at the end of which he relapsed, for a moment, into the Sankar she knew. In bed that night he was affectionate to her.

“It’s all for our own good,” he said. “Once I get my big contracts we can start a new life.”

Mala lay, consoled, on his heaving chest. When he talked about business a certain thickness entered his voice and he moved restlessly on the bed. She had to talk to him then, guessing at his ambitions, agreeing, and sympathetically massaging him into sleep.

In the morning he inspected her clothes, makeup, and the way she carried herself.

“You slouch too much,” he said one morning.

“Makeup mustn’t be that thick,” he said on another. “They might think you’re a country cow.”

“Clothes should follow the body, not hide it,” he commented on a third.

Mala had learned to adjust herself according to his criticisms. Always, he gave her an encouraging hug, just before they descended the steps to the office. Mala was careful to earn that affection. Though most of the time she could understand his ferocity or that distant expression on his face, she treasured these moments of nearness. They compensated for the silence of the family she had left behind and the scorn of that gossip, the neighbor woman.
Mala began to enjoy the activities of the day. Whenever she answered the phone she sensed the pleased pause at the other end. She gave the rates, the kind of services available, and took down times and dates if the client wanted to hear from the “boss.” It was strange hearing Sanker referred to as “boss”; he became someone important and unreachable in her life.

The office changed its atmosphere in the few months that Mala attended to its secretarial demands. Sanker was out most of the time, hunting down that first major contract. He spoke to her over the phone from various parts of the city. He described an individual in detail and asked if the man had shown up at the office.

“No,” Mala said.

“Be nice to him when he comes,” Sanker said.

In Sanker’s absence, a few men called at the office. These were lorry drivers or packaging subagents. They sat on the oblong, backless settee Sanker had installed against the wall. They flicked cigarette ash in the potted plants on either side of the settee.

“The boss isn’t in,” she said. “He will be back at eleven.”

“We can wait,” the young men said.

Mala typed or answered the phone. The men sat on, crossing and uncrossing their legs.

“How’s business, Miss?” one of the young men asked.

“Only the boss knows,” she said, too shy to refer to her husband by name.

“Secretaries know better than their bosses,” another said.

Mala went on with her work, glad if a phone call came through to break the tension.

“This won’t even talk lahi,” one of the young men said as they got up to leave.

Mala complained to Sanker when he returned from one of his fruitless excursions.

“Too many men come in here,” she said.

“This is a place of business,” he said, looking at the list of people who had rung up while he was gone.

“Lorry drivers and those other men!” Mala said.

“They may bring some orders,” Sanker said. “Get on with your work.”

At night he persuaded her that she must learn to take care of herself when he was absent. He emphasized how important it was for her to be courteous to them. He ended by saying, “A customer is always right.”

Sanker had stacked the folded-up cartons behind his desk. An almost empty filing cabinet stood behind Mala’s desk. Labels of his company were pinned on the walls along with posters of various foreign scenic landscapes. Sometimes there were busy mornings. Men came and went. Mala typed invoices, rang up lorry drivers, and made entries into the office ledger. Sanker stayed in the office on those days.

“A special client is coming today,” he announced one morning as they went down to the office.

He paid more attention to her clothes and appearance during that daily inspection. She wore a tight dress he recommended. Even Lucy came out of her room on hearing Sanker talk excitedly. She whistled on seeing Mala.

“You smart girl now!” she said. “Can even do my work.”

“Any woman can do your work,” Sanker said.

“What does she do?” Mala asked before they reached the office.

“Nothing you can’t do,” he said carelessly.

Mala watched Sanker seat himself upright at his desk.

“Order some flowers,” he told her, giving her the florist’s number.

The flowers, arranged in a boat-shaped container, gave the office a cold, formal color. Whenever the phone rang Sanker leaned forward quickly. At last, a nasal stream of broken English came over the line. Mala handed the phone to Sanker.

“Yes, yes,” Sanker said. “Any time. Come over. Everything will be ready for you.”

He put down the phone and rushed out of the office.

By the time the client arrived, Sanker had brought a smaller table from the adjoining room. A caterer delivered some savory, covered dishes, three glasses, a bottle of whiskey, and a jug of cold water. The man himself came soon after, a confident smile greeting them.
“My secretary,” Sanker said, introducing her.

The man shook hands with Mala, quickly, easily, in a burst of pleasure.

“Nice, nice,” he said, surveying everything.

Sanker nodded at her. Mala sat at her desk, confused by the signal.

“She will serve us,” Sanker said.

Mala understood and went with suppressed anger to the cloth-covered smaller table.

“No need to trouble her,” the man said, his pallid face crinkling into a smile again.

Mala got used to refilling their glasses unobtrusively while they talked endlessly and the man swallowed the balls of meat or bits of steamed fish. He drank more than Sanker, but he didn’t stumble on a single word. At last he rose, smiled at Mala, and moved toward the door, which Sanker held open for him. Sanker took some time returning from seeing the man off.

“We’ve something big here,” he said.

Then he noticed Mala’s expression and, breaking the office rule, came to her.

“I should have showed you how to serve the food and drink,” he said. “These are things we’ve to do until we’re well off.”

They had a quarrel that night, but Sanker was adamant.

“I saved you from that black hole up there!” he said. “Is this how you show your gratitude?”

“All I want is a child,” Mala said, sobbing. “Not to wait on any man who comes to that office.”

Mala didn’t go down to the office the following morning. Sanker pleaded with her, but she only put a pillow over her head.

“Yes, bury yourself like an insect!” Sanker shouted and stormed out of the room.

“Why make unhappiness, ah?” Lucy said, later in the morning.

“Just do what he wants. How I feed that boy? Obey men, that’s all. Want go out? Change place, change feeling.”

They wandered through the crowded, softly lighted cubicles of the shopping arcade. Mala followed Lucy wherever she was led.

Lucy stopped at a boutique and looked at the dresses draped over the mannequins. The dummies had blue, vaguely staring eyes. As the two women peered through the pane of glass, a man entered the case and stripped a mannequin with brutish efficiency. There she stood, bare, imperturbable, while the man arranged the latest dress over her shoulders and between her cleftless thighs. When the man had finished, he twisted her arms into a new posture. The dummy had acquired a fashionableness which Lucy praised.

Mala was tired, but she dragged on after Lucy. They sat, at last, in a low-ceilinged snack stall. The tables were small, neat pieces resting on a thick, stained carpet. Lucy picked a dirty well-thumbed menu and taught Mala how to choose her food. Mala went through the motions suffused by the steady, dull light and the cold that poured in via the air-conditioning vents. Mala recognized in the gestures of Lucy and in the pale smile of the special customer the day before the silent pressure of a force from which there was no escape.