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## Dhowli

Mahasweta Devi

1

The bus starts from Ranchi city in early afternoon and reaches Tahad around eight in the evening. The bus stop is in front of the grocery shop, also the only tea shop, both run by Parashnath, next to the post office. The *shop-cum-leastall*, the post office, and the bus stop form the downtown for the cluster of villages. The passengers get off here and walk the rest of their way home. This is where the unpaved wide road ends; so also ends the outside world with which Tahad is connected by this once-a-day rickety bus run by the Rohatgi company. The Punjabi company runs a brisk fleet of forty buses connecting the business centers in Bihar, twenty going up the highways and twenty coming down along the three routes connecting Ranchi with Patna, Hazaribagh, and Ramgarh. For dirt-poor, remote places like Tahad or Palani, they have a few dilapidated buses running off and on. On the three market days each week, the bus is filled by tribal villagers out to buy and sell. On other days, the bus is almost empty and runs irregularly to cut the company's loss. During the months of monsoon the bus does not come up the unpaved road, and the villages then remain cut off from the outside world.

This year, the rains seemed to be coming early, at the very start of June.

Dhowli was waiting at the bus stop, standing very still, her back to the shop, facing away from the shop's light, the only light there. Parashnath closed his shop when it seemed to him that the bus was not likely to come. He asked Dhowli if she should not be going home now. Dhowli neither answered nor looked at him. She just kept standing. Old Parashnath muttered,

worried, as he left for his home at the back of the shop. His wife was sitting there alone, smoking and thinking. Parashnath told her about the girl waiting again for the bus so late in the evening.

"She'll be finished if she keeps up this way."

"If the landlord comes to know what she's been doing . . ."

"That'll be her end. How long has it been since the Misra boy left?"

"Nearly four months now."

"What does she think? An untouchable, Dusad girl can make a Brahman give her home and food?"

"God only knows. But she's not going to be able to hold off for long."

"What makes you think so?"

"The contractor, and the gang of coolies."

"Yes. She doesn't have much of a chance. Such a young girl! Going back and forth alone in the dark night. What for? Isn't she afraid?"

"The wolf was out last night."

Dhowli had also heard that the wolf was out, but she forgot about it. The unbearable pain just under her chest made her forget everything else. The pain would stay there and then move down her body, as it was now. Dhowli did not know what to do; she could not think of anything.

Dhowli walked back home in the dark. To the shack dimly lit by the smoky oil lamp; their bed on the bamboo bunk; three goats tethered under the bunk. Her mother, lying in the bunk, saw her come in but said nothing. Dhowli tilted the water pot to see if there was any water. She drank some, closed the door, blew out the lamp, and lay down beside her mother. Tears silently flowed from her eyes, tears of hopeless pain. Her mother listened to her crying; she knew why the tears flowed. Later in the night, she said, "We're going to be driven out of the village. You're young. What'll happen to me? Where shall I go?"

"You'll stay here."

"And you? You'll leave?"

"If I have to."

"Where will you go?"

"To death's door."

"It's not so easy! At nineteen, there are obstacles to death's door."

"Not for me."

"Have you been to Sanichari?"

"No!" Dhowli shouted, "I'll not get rid of the baby."

"Will you then go to the Misra house? Tell them that, because their son is the father, they should help to bring up the child carrying their blood?"

"Who is going to believe me? It would have been different if he were here now, if he came back."

"How? He would have looked after you?"

"He promised to."

"They always say such things. You're not the first Dusad girl who has been used by the Misra menfolk. Have they left untouched any young girl of the Dusads, the Dhobis, the Ganjus of the village?"

"He's not like the others."

"No! He knows very well what is expected of a Brahman's son in this situation. He knows what to do, but he's not doing it."

"He's in love with me."

"In love with you? Is that why he has stayed away in Dhanbad for four months, not even coming to visit his own folks?"

"He doesn't come because he's afraid of his parents."

"You're thinking of love. Here I lost my job of tending their goats. The wolf got one of the kids. They accused me of stealing it."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"They did it to punish you, to show that they're annoyed."

"Throw me out, then."

"I will. Go to sleep now."

"How can you say you'll throw me out? Who do you have but me?"

At this point, mother and daughter started arguing, as they did almost every night these days. This time they were interrupted by the watchman's voice from outside. "Dhowli's mother! All day we hear you shout. Do we have to hear you shout in the night, too? There are other Dusads in the neighborhood. They all know that days are for shouting and nights for sleeping. You're the only one who doesn't respect this simple rule."

"Shut up, and go away. I'll be quiet now."

"What's the problem anyway? Is some coolie trying to get in?"

"It's your home that the coolies try to get in."

"Ram! Ram! Don't even say such a thing!"

The watchman walked away. Mother muttered what was on her mind, "I know the custom here. Everybody is waiting, watching to see if the Misra boy supports you after the baby is born. If he doesn't, they'll come to eat pieces off you."

"It's all your fault. Why did you bring me back to you when my husband died? Why didn't you leave me there, to whatever was to happen?"

"Did they want to keep you? Didn't you insist on coming with me?"

"Because his elder brother would have taken my virtue there."

"And the Misra boy has not here!"

The sarcasm felt like a stab. Dhowli said nothing. Her eyelids were dry inside from crying. She pulled the dry lids down over her tired eyes.

But she could not fall asleep. She had not been able to sleep since the day the Misra boy left, taking the early morning bus, running away like a thief. She knew that she could fall asleep forever with the poison for killing maize insects. But she could not die before seeing that betrayer once more face to face, eye to eye.

Betrayer? No. He left Tahad because his parents made him. They came down so hard on their dearly loved youngest boy; Hanuman Misra of Buru-diha threatened them. He wouldn't have left Dhowli unless he was really scared, he who cried like a baby to Dhowli just talking about the possibility that he might be sent away. It still hurt to remember how he wept.

Her mother wanted her to get the medicine from Sanichari to remove the "thorn" from her womb. How could she think of it as a thorn, when it came from their love? It was not like the children of Jhalo, the Ganju wife, and Kundan, the elder Misra son; it was not one of those products of greed and ruthless power.

Dhowli used to sweep their yard. She never lifted her eyes at the young Brahman she knew was always gazing at her. At noon, while tending the goats in the forest, Dhowli was once bathing in the stream when a small leafy branch fell beside her. She looked up and saw the Misra boy. He had followed her. He did not laugh; he did not leer at her; he did nothing she could be ashamed of. He only asked her why she never even looked at him when he was going out of his mind for her.

"Please, *deota*,\* don't say such things!"

"What *deota*! Don't you know that I'm really your slave?"

"I don't want to hear such things."

Dhowli was afraid and turned to leave. Then he said, "You'll have to hear the truth some time, even if you don't want to now."

The young Misra left her with those words, words that still make the breeze waft in her mind, the leaves rustle, and the stream murmur. She stood there after he left. She lingered on, feeling something like a terrible fear beating in her chest. Fear of the unthinkable. The young Misra was so fair, his hair softly curled, and his face so lovely. Anyone could tell from his looks that he was of noble birth. And what was Dhowli? Only a Dusad girl, a widow, with a life of deprivation as far back as she could remember.

When her father died and there was no other man in the family, Kundan took away the lease of land from her mother. Her mother went to them and promised to pay the rent, whatever rent they wanted; she would have the land tilled by her Dusad kinsmen, for, if they wouldn't lease her the land, the two of them would starve to death. Kundan refused. Dhowli's mother then fell at the feet of Kundan's mother, "Please save me and my daughter from starving."

Kundan's mother pleaded with her son, "As long as her husband was alive, he tilled that land and gave us free labor whenever we wanted. Now that he is dead, we can't let her starve."

"Nothing I can do. I've already leased that plot to Jhuman Dusad."

"Let them tend the goats then and clean our garden and yards. We'll give them some money and millet."

She depended on their pity for the gruel at the end of the day. And a son of theirs had just said those words to her. Why? Dhowli knew that her timid eyes, her slender waist, and her budding breasts were her enemies, only to bring her trouble and ruin her. So, she had always kept herself covered as well as she could with her cheap, short sari, and she never looked up when working in their yard, not even at the loads of fruit ripening on the trees. She picked up only the guavas and the custard apples that birds and bats had partly eaten and dropped underneath. Even those she showed to Kundan's mother for permission before bringing them home.

That day, after she came back from the forest, Dhowli scrubbed their brass plate till it gleamed like gold. When her mother was away, she looked at her face in it. A widow was not supposed to see her face in the mirror any more, nor wear the shellac bangles, the vermilion between the brows, the nickel anklets. She saw that her face was beautiful, but a beautiful face was useless for a widow because she could never marry again. She would never even be invited to sing the song "Sita is on her way to her in-laws' place" at another girl's wedding, nor to paint with colored paste flowers, leaves, and birds on the doors and the walls of any celebrating house. Someone like her had just heard the landlord's young son proclaim love, that he was a slave to her. Fear nestled under her chest like some terrible discomfort.

Dhowli told her mother, "You'll sweep the gardens of the Misras, and I would only tend the goats."

"Why?" "Because, you know, Ma, how the leaves fly when you try to sweep them into a pile. I can't cope with the wind scattering them about."

"Did anyone say anything to you?"

"Who can say what to me, Ma?"

"Don't go far into the forest with the goats. A wolf or a hyena is about."

"Don't worry, Ma. Am I that careless?"

She thought a lot, while tending the goats alone in the woods. She thought about everything she could remember from her childhood—going to the fair, perched on her father's shoulders; spending the day looking at all the shops with their expensive things, and then coming home happy with a paisa worth of sesame candy. Of her marital home, all she remembered were the two rooms, the days of work at the farm of the moneylender to whom they were indebted, and her mother-in-law making the gruel at the end of the day, for the men to eat first before the women ate what was left over.

About her wedding she could not recall much because she must have been very small at the time. She was sent to live with her husband when her body blossomed. Her father had to take a large loan from the Misras for her wedding and sending off, and he had to pay back the loan with his labor until he died. She remembered nothing nice about her husband. He used to beat her. He died of a fever. After he died, her mother-in-law asked her to stay on,

\* Lord; deity.

"You have to work at your mother's place too in order to eat. Do the same here."

Dhowli knew that much: she could spend the rest of her life there, working all day, clad in the widow's borderless sari, coarse and short, working every day from sunrise to sunset either on the creditor's threshing floor or as some farmer's laborer or leveling the layer of brick pieces with a mallet making some road or other, and then falling asleep by the side of her mother-in-law after eating whatever there was to eat. But then her husband's elder brother came there and started eying her. Her mother-in-law then turned against her and Dhowli left. Her only regret was that she had to leave before she could watch the *nautanki* one more time.\* The *nautanki* performers used to come to the village, hired by the moncylander.

After she returned to Tahad, she did not let herself near any Dusad boy. What good could come of it? The same routine of backbreaking work, with kids in your lap, kids following you around, no food, nothing. Dhowli had no desire for that kind of life, the only kind of life for a Dusad girl.

It was so much better to be alone, alone in the woods, with time to think one's own thoughts. She tended the goats, and once in a while she lay down on the end of her sari spread on the forest floor. She was never afraid of the wolf or the hyena. They fear people just as people fear them. The forest felt so peaceful that the constant discomfort and fear she had after hearing the Misra boy speak so strangely to her was slowly going away. She was at peace again.

Then one evening, when coming back from the fair at Jhujhar, she somehow lost the group of women she came with. She knew that the procurers came to the village fairs to catch just such stray girls. So she was walking back as fast as she could. The Misra boy caught up with her.

"Didn't you hear me calling?"

"Why did you call?"

"Don't you know why?"

"No. Please don't say such things to me. I'm a poor Dusad widow, and you are the landlord. Please don't make fun of me."

"But I'm in love with you."

"No, deota. Don't mistake it for love. You are a young Brahman man. You'll marry a bride proper for you. Please stop this."

"But it's you I love. Don't you know what love is?"

"No, I don't. I know that there can be bastards between the landlord and a Ganju or Dusad girl. That happens all the time. But not love."

"But I can't think of anyone but you."

"Please don't play your games with a helpless poor girl."

\* *Nautanki* is a form of vaudeville, with wild and earthy songs and dances, common in north Indian villages.

"I'm not playing games."

"You'll leave after you tire of the game, and what will become of me? Am I to be like Jhalo? No, deota, not that."

"What if I don't let you go?"

"What good is my saying anything? I'll have to accept it. You landlord people, you take whatever pleases you. If you want to take my honor, take it then. Let me be through with it."

"No, no. Don't say that, Dhowli. Forgive me." The Misra boy ran away from her. She came home, totally amazed by his behavior.

Soon after that, when she heard that the Misra boy was not well, that he seemed to have lost interest in life, she was moved and worried. She knew that the Misra boy could have had her any time he wanted. All the Misra men do that, and there is not a thing that the Dhowlis of the world can do to stop it. But why such strange behavior?

She felt overwhelmed. Then the women at the well surrounded her, "Fate is now all smiles on the poor widow!"

"How can fate ever smile on a widow?"

"The landlord's young son is going out of his mind for you!"

"A pack of lies!"

"Everybody knows it's true. The word is around."

"Don't bother me with gossip."

Dhowli left with the water, resolutely denying it, but she was agitated, and she went to the woods with the goats. What would she do now? The whole village was talking about something that had never happened before. Why did the boy lose his mind like that? Now nobody was going to leave her alone.

She avoided going anywhere near the Misra estate. She heard from her mother that the boy was still unwell and they had to call a doctor from Valatod. She wondered if her mother knew what the women at the well knew. She suggested that they go away from the village, to Valatod maybe, and work at road construction, to which her mother just said, "I'm not out of my mind."

Then one day she heard that the Misra boy had recovered, that they were looking for a beautiful bride for him. They hadn't looked particularly for beauty in Kundan's bride; but for this one they were after beauty.

Dhowli had felt relieved, but she had also felt a twinge of pain and simultaneously a joy of victory at the thought that a mere Dusad girl drove a Brahman's son so out of his mind.

Relieved and peaceful again, she went to the woods and had a cooling dip in the stream. Afterward, she dried half of the sari she was wearing by spreading it on a sun-heated stone, and then wrapped it around her upper body. She decided that she would buy another sari next time her mother got paid for their work. It always made her mother angry to see her in a half-wet sari: "Are you a widow or a marketplace whore, that you're showing your body?"

Suddenly, the Misra boy appeared there.

"I don't want to marry a girl of their choice. It's you I want, Dhowli," he told her in earnest.

The forest in the early afternoon is primitive, gentle, and comforting. The Misra boy's voice was imploring, his eyes full of pain and despair. Dhowli was unguarded in mind and body. She gave in.

For two months since that day, she lived as if in a strange dream. The forest was their meeting place, and the time the early afternoon. Both lost caution and sense, one nineteen and the other twenty-three. Every day, Dhowli worried about what was going to happen next.

"You're going to be married off soon."

"With you."

"Don't joke with me, deota."

"I'm not joking. I don't believe in caste. And Tahad is not the only place in the world to live. Besides, our marriage will be all right by the government rules."

"Don't say such things. If you talk defiant, what will Misraji order? They will then drive me away from the village."

"It's not going to be so easy. There are government laws against it."

"The laws are not for people like us."

"You don't know anything."

In the solitude of the forest, the Misra boy was dauntless, telling her of his plans, and his words seemed to mingle with all the myths associated with the old forest, taking on an enchanting and dreamlike quality. The days thus went by. But not for very long. Dhowli found out that she was pregnant. Strangely, the Misra boy was happy about that. He said, "I'm illiterate, just like you. I don't want anything to do with managing all this farmland and orchard and the estate. We'll go to Valatod, and then from there to Dhanbad, and on to Patna. We'll start a shop there and live from it."

But the day Hanuman Misra came to Tahad to settle the matter, the Misra boy could say none of those things to him. Kundan fretted and said that he was going to kill both mother and daughter and dispose of their bodies overnight.

"No, don't do that," Misraji said. "Clean the inside of the house, and the outside will clean itself."

"I want to kill them."

"That's because you're stupid."

"That bitch of her mother said that the wolf took one of the goats. How did she get three goats in her shack? Didn't she have two before?"

"The idiot talks about goats! Your wife has got more sense. I can talk with her, not you. Kill them, but not directly. Starve them. Take away the job. What your silly brother got himself into has affected the prestige of all of us.

We must restore our position first. What does it matter if you have one goat less? Listen to me, the first thing you should do now is move him away from here."

The young Misra said that he would not leave the village.

"If you don't, your dead body will. You've brought shame to our family by your stupidity."

The Misra boy in desperation appealed to his mother, "Ma, please! Dhowli is carrying my baby."

"Nothing unusual about it, my boy," she consoled him. "Men of this family have had children by Dusad and Ganju girls. Kundan has three by Jhalo. It's only the heat of your age, my boy."

"What'll happen to Dhowli then?"

"She'll be punished for daring to do what she did. She'll pay. She and her mother will starve to death."

"But it's not her fault, Mother."

"The fault is always the woman's. She caused trouble in a Brahman landlord's home. That equals a crime."

"Mother, you love me, don't you?"

"You're my youngest child."

"Then touch me and swear. I'll listen to you if you'll see that she doesn't starve. Promise."

"I promise," she said hesitantly.

"Also promise me that nobody humiliates her or throws her out."

"I'll try."

"If you don't keep these words, then you know, Mother, that I can be stubborn. I may not be able to stand up to the big Misra. But if you don't keep the promises, then I'll never come to this village, never marry."

"No, no. I'll feed the Dusad girl; I'll look after her."

Dhowli was aware of what was going on, what was in store for her now. She never even thought of protesting. This was not the first time that a Dusad girl had been used by the Brahman landlord's son. According to the village society, all the blame goes to Dhowli. But, because of the love aspect of this case, she was now an outcaste to her own people, in her own community. She had not encouraged any boy of her own caste. That was no fault. If the Misra boy had taken her by force, then she would not have been faulted either; the Dusad community would not have abandoned her for that. There are quite a few children by Brahman men growing up among the Dusads. Her crime, something nobody was prepared to forgive, was that she gave herself to him of her own accord, out of love. All the Dusad-Ganju boys, the coolies, and the labor contractors were now watching how things would settle. If the Misras would support her and the child with a regular supply of corn or money or a job, then they would leave her alone because they did not

want to annoy the Misras if they wanted to live in their domain. If not, then they would turn her, a widow with no one but an old mother and a baby, into a prostitute for all of them to use.

Dhowli knew what was going through every mind, and she was numb with fear and sorrow. The woods looked horrible to her, the trees looked like ghoulish guards, and even the rocks seemed to be watching her. She waited for him by the stream. Days passed, but he failed to appear there. When Dhowli was about to give up, he came. Dhowli read her death sentence in his grim face. She cried without a word, her face on his chest. He cried too, his face buried in her hair, her hair smelling of the soap and the scented oil he had given her. He had given her two saris too, but Dhowli never wore them because their printed material was forbidden for a widow.

The Misra boy was filled with hopelessness. All he could say was, "Dhowli, why were you born a Dusad?"

"Spare me the endearments! I can't stand them anymore."

"Listen to me. Don't cry yet."

"Don't I have to cry the rest of my life?"

"I have to leave the village now. I agreed to their conditions for now."

"Why did you tell me those words of love?"

"I'm still telling you."

"Why, master? Your Dhowli is dead now. Don't make fun of a corpse."

"Don't be silly. Listen to me." He made Dhowli sit on a rock. He held her face in his hands and lifted it to his. Then he said to her, "I must stay away for a month, and I'll do so quietly. But I told them that I won't be forced into a marriage, and they agreed not to try."

"They will forget that soon."

"No. Listen, I'll be back as soon as the month is over. I'm not sure where they'll send me or what I'll do in this one month. But I'll manage something for us. I'm not educated, and I don't want a salaried job. And I'm not going to ask my brother for a share of the farmland and orchards. I'll start a shop, and I'll use this time to do it. I need some time away from them to do it, you see?"

"What am I to do?"

"You will stay right in the village."

"What shall we live on? Your brother accused my mother of stealing and sacked her."

"My mother has promised me that she'll supply you with food, and here. . .," he took out five ten-rupee notes, put them in one end of Dhowli's sari, tied a knot around it, and tucked it in her waist. "Try to stay calm for one month."

Misrilal took leave of her.

Dhowli came back from the forest and told her mother. The two of them put the money in a little can and buried it under their mud floor.

Two days after he had left, Dhowli's mother went to the Misra matriarch and silently stood before her. Silently she got up, brought a kilo of millet and poured it in the outstretched sari of Dhowli's mother, conspicuously avoiding her touch while doing it. Glumly she asked her to come back after three days. After three days, the quantity of grain was reduced to half a kilo. When she next returned after the specified three days, the lady grimly informed her that after the last time she was there, they couldn't find a brass bowl.

"No, lady. Not me. . ."

"My elder son has asked me not to let you inside the house any more. Next time you should stand at the gate and call someone."

Dhowli's mother had to swallow the accusation because it came from a Brahman lady. Next time she was told at the gate that the lady was away, gone to Burudiha to see Hanuman Misra.

Dhowli's mother came home boiling with anger and beat up Dhowli. Dhowli took the beating quietly. When her mother stopped beating, she brought the cleaver and asked her to use it instead because her old hands tired and ached easily and as it was sharpened recently, she would not have to bother to beat her again. Mother and daughter then held each other and cried. When they were through, crying, her mother asked her to go to Sanichari and get some medicine to get rid of the thorn in her womb.

"I can't do that."

"Listen to me. He is not going to come back for you. He was just in a rebellious mood toward the family. He may have good intentions; maybe he wasn't lying when he promised to come back. But he won't be able to do it."

"Then I'd rather poison myself."

Mother sat down, pondering a few minutes what her daughter had just said; then, sighing, she got up, as if she had just remembered something. "I'm going to the forest contractor; he once asked if I could cook for him."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No. I'll go. I'm past the age to worry about gossip. Even if he doesn't pay money, he'll give me some food. I'll bring it home."

"Go then, before the job is gone."

"And you remember to tend the goats."

This arrangement kept them going a little longer. Dhowli's mother did not find the cook's job, but she was taken as the cook's helper, and she brought home the bread or rice she managed to get.

Their own folks watched how mother and daughter managed to live—what they did and what they didn't do. The coolies working under the forest contractor also watched them. They had cash from their daily wages for lugging lumber. They had refrained from falling on her so far only because they were not sure if she was going to become the favored woman of Kundan's little brother. They had not given up, though, and watched the goings on. They did not mind the wait; the contract for cutting logs and splitting

lumber was to continue for a while, and she was worth waiting for. As a matter of fact, her attraction increased in their minds with the scandal of a Brahman boy falling in love with her.

One month was long over. It was four months now. It had become a ritual with Dhowli to go to the bus stop, stand silently waiting for the bus to come up, and return home disappointed. On this night Dhowli thought of the whole thing, all over again, and then she placed her hand on her abdomen. She felt the baby move a little. Misrilal had said, "If it is a boy, we'll name him Murari." But Misrilal and his words of love now felt like a receding illusion, a fading dream.

## 2

In late autumn Dhowli gives birth to a son. Sanichari delivers the baby. She cuts the umbilical cord with care and remarks that the baby is so fair because it has Dhowli's complexion. Dhowli's mother had asked Sanichari earlier to make sure she would be infertile after this baby. Sanichari gives her the medicine, telling her that it will make her feel better soon.

Afterward she sits down to talk with Dhowli's mother, who is worried that the medicine is going to kill her or make her a permanent invalid. Sanichari assures her with the account of her success with the medicine in the case of Kundan's wife.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Whatever god has willed for us."

"The Misra boy is going to be married soon."

"Quiet. Don't let Dhowli hear of it now."

"What will you do after that?"

"Whatever is in store for us will happen."

"Pebbles will start falling at your door at night."

"I know."

"After getting him married, they're going to make the couple live in Dhanbad. They've set up a cycle store there for him."

"I told Dhowli this was going to happen."

"As I've already told you, if the landlord doesn't undertake to support her and the baby, I'll try and get the forest overseer for her."

"We'll think about that later."

Because of Sanichari's Manthara-like cunning, and because she is indispensable for her knowledge of medicinal herbs and roots, not even the Misras dare to ignore her or snub her. Seeing Dhowli give birth, delivering her baby, has touched something in Sanichari's heart. She starts building support in Dhowli's favor. When she visits the Misra mother to treat her rheumatic pain, Sanichari tells her that she just delivered Dhowli's baby boy.

"So what?" says the lady.

"His face is exactly like your boy's."

"Nobody tells me such a lie."

"Don't be silly. Everybody knows that your boy was in love with Dhowli. Your men sow their seeds in our women. It is common, but how often does it become such a problem that Hanuman Misra himself has to come to solve it?"

"Because you raised the matter, let me ask you for something . . ."

"What is it?"

"Can you remove them from the village?"

"Remove them where?"

"I don't care where. The problem is that the girl my boy is going to be married to is not exactly a little girl, and the family has a lot of prestige. If they come to know of this, it will make them very annoyed."

"If you pay enough, they'll leave the village."

"How much?"

"A thousand rupees."

"Let me talk to my elder son."

"You have ruined your reputation in the village by failing to look after them and feed them. Your husband and your elder son made Ganju women pregnant, but they never failed to support them afterward. You have always been generous. How come you turned away from your usual *Bhagwati* role this time?"

"It's because Dhowli's mother stole the brass jug . . ."

"Stop giving false excuses."

The Misra matriarch has to let Sanichari get away with telling her so many unpleasant words so bluntly only because she is her secret supplier of the medicine for holding onto her old husband, who is addicted to a certain washerwoman. She cuts short the exchange and asks Sanichari's advice about what could be done now.

"Do something. You can help her if you want to."

"Let me talk to my elder son."

Her elder son, Kundan, dismisses her worries. He is not going to let that troublesome girl manipulate them—a baby today, and customers at her home tomorrow. He is going to fix it all. His brother will get married in Dhanbad and stay there. The matriarch is reassured by her manly son, and she promptly forgets the nagging worry.

But the patriarch Hanuman Misra absolutely refuses to solve the problem that way. "The boy will come here with the new bride, as is the custom, and later on they will go together to Dhanbad. Why can't he come to his home, his own village? For fear of a Dusad girl? What can she do?"

Dhowli, like everybody else, hears about the verdict. She stays home with the baby in her lap, trying to think about what they are going to live on. Mother's odd jobs are getting more scarce, uncertain, and now she depends

on her with the baby. They could sell the goats one at a time, but how long would that feed them? What would they do after that?

Misrilal. Just recalling his name makes her mind go limp even now. All those caresses, those sweet words of love were lies? They could not be. There are fantastic associations with the woods and the spring. The ferocious constable Makkhan Singh once saw a fairy bathing in the stream on a moonlit night; he really saw it because he lost his mind from that night. A Ganju girl named Jhulni was in love with her husband's younger brother, and when chastised by the Panchayat, the two of them went into the woods and ate poisonous seeds to die together. Dhowli knew Jhulni and the boy. These were true events—they happened—and yet sound like mythical stories. Their love was true too, and yet it feels so unreal now! In that same forest, beside that stream, a Brahman youth once called a Dusad girl his little bird, his one and only bride-for-ever. Didn't they once lie on the carpet of fallen red flowers and become one body and soul? Once when the Dusad girl got a thorn in her foot, didn't the Brahman youth gently pick it out and kiss the spot of blood under her foot? It is now hard to believe that these things ever happened. They now seem like made up stories. All that seems real is the baby sleeping in her lap and the constant worry about food.

Misrilal has not kept the promise he made her. He can't. There's nothing that Dhowli can say or do about it. What now? When he comes back to the village after his wedding, will he be moved to pity on seeing his boy? Will he give a bit of land to help his child live? The Misra men have done that many times. But Dhowli's mind says, "No, he won't." What will she do then? Will she end up opening her door at night when the pebbles strike? For a few coins from one, some corn or a sari from another? Is that how she must live?

Dhowli's mind says, "No! Never that way!"

Tomorrow, how is she going to go to the well to fetch water? All the girls will be talking about the wedding and the preparations for the groom's party. When a Brahman landlord groom's party comes back after the wedding, even the Dusad girls sing and dance, from a little distance though; and they collect sweets and coins and chickpea flour. Is she going to join them in singing for the reward?

Sanichari, on her way back from the Misra house, after giving the boys' mother a piece of her mind, stops to talk to the fellows in the Dusad neighborhood and tries to put some sense in their heads.

"The poor girl is ruined and unjustly abandoned by the Brahman boy, and even you, her own folks, turn your backs on her. Have you thought about how she is to live?"

"Nobody ruined Dhowli. She fell in love with him. And don't expect us to forget that she turned down the boys from her own caste. So we don't feel involved with her problems; we don't care whether things go well or bad for her. Let her do what she can, however she manages it."

"What choices do you think she has now?"

"Let's see if her Brahman lover supports her and looks after her . . ."

Misrilal does nothing at all. He arrives, all decorated, at the head of the groom's party back from his wedding. Only in Dhowli's home is no lamp lit that evening. All the Dusads, Ganjus, Dhobis, and Tolis get sweets, country liquor, chickpea flour, even new clothes. All agree that such lavish gift giving has never happened at any other wedding in the area.

Dhowli waits by the side of the spring next day. She waits all evening. Misrilal does not come. Coming back from there, Dhowli stops at Sanichari's place and breaks down. Sanichari informs her that Misrilal was angry when he heard that she and her mother had refused the help his mother offered. "Is that what he told you?"

"Yes."

"Then go and ask him to come and see me. Otherwise, I'm going there with the baby to see his bride, even though I know his brother will kill me for it."

Misrilal does come to see her. He has no words; his eyes are confused. Dhowli reads in his face the power her presence still has on his mind. It makes her happy in a way that also makes her suddenly bold enough to speak up.

"Did you tell Sanichari that we refused your mother's handouts?"

"That's what my mother told me."

"I spit on her lies. Your mother gave us two kilos of millet in all, over a period of ten days. After that she called my mother a thief and turned her away."

"I didn't know that."

"Why did you destroy me like this?"

"I loved . . ."

"I spit on your love. If you had raped me, then I would have received a tenth of an acre as compensation. You are not a man. Your brother is. He gave Jhalo babies, but he also gave her a home and a farm of her own. And you? What have you done?"

"What I've done I was forced to do. I did not do it of my own wish."

"So you follow others' wishes in marrying, in starting your shop, and you follow your own wish only when it comes to destroying the poor and helpless. Do you know that because of you even my own people are now against me?"

"I'll give you . . ."

"What? Money? Make sure it's enough to bring up your son."

"I'll send you regularly from my income from the store."

"But your words are all lies, worthless lies."

"For now . . ."

"How much?"

He brings out a hundred rupees. Dhowli takes it, ties it in a knot in her

sari, and goes on, "With a hundred rupees these days one can't live for long even in Tahad. Because you've ruined me anyway, I'll go to Dhanbad and drop your boy on your lap if I don't get a regular supply."

"I have to accept whatever you say."

"You ruined my life, turned it to ashes, and you can't even hear the hard truth? Is it being rich that makes one so tender-skinned?"

Dhowli comes back, still raging inside. She asks her mother to go to Valatod and make arrangements for her to stay with her aunt there. Her mother is struck by her anger, her belligerence. "If I must sell my body, I'll do it there, not here."

"Why? Does it bring more money there?"

"How should I know?"

On the next day Misrilal leaves with his new wife. When they set into the bus and look at the villagers gathered at the bus stop, his brother-in-law points to Dhowli, "Who's that girl?"

"Which one?"

"The one with a baby in her arms."

"Just a Dusad girl."

"I've never seen such a beautiful Dusad girl."

"Maybe. I never noticed her before."

## 3

It turns out that Dhowli's aunt in Valatod does not want her. The sum of hundred rupees that Misrilal gave her is now down to nine. He never sent any message or any more money, although later on other stories came up about the money, that he once sent twenty rupees through the bus driver who kept it himself, and so on. Meanwhile, one of the three goats of Dhowli's mother is stolen, and eventually they have to sell the other two for very little, as is always the case when the seller is so hard pressed.

Dhowli senses that the village, the Misra family, the gang of contract coolies are all watching her with increasing interest, closing in on her. They have been watching her boy grow up on gruel and her old mother spend all day in the forest looking for roots and tubers. They have also seen Sanichari going to their hut once in a while, with roasted corn bundled in the fold of her sari. From this they conclude that the Misra boy has finally washed his hands of Dhowli.

Then one night, a well-aimed clod of earth strikes her door. Dhowli shouts, "Whoever you are, you should know that I keep a knife beside me." Someone outside whistles and walks away.

The tap-tap continues; little clods are thrown at her door in the night. Dhowli keeps silent. If it persists, she shouts, "Go home to your mother and to your sister."

Her mother mutters something about how long she would be able to fend them off.

"As long as I can."

"You may have the strength to keep going, but I don't."

"I don't have any more strength either, Ma."

"What are you going to do then?"

"Shall we go to the city and try to live by begging?"

"You think men will see you as a beggar? They'll be after your body."

"I don't have the looks and the body anymore, mother."

"Then why do the clods keep falling at our door every night?"

"It's because they know how desperate I am with the baby."

"I can't take it any more. If it weren't for you and your baby, I would have moved in with Sanichari long ago."

"I'm going to find some job tomorrow. I'll earn by weeding the fields."

"There are many others weeding fields all day long. How much does it bring them?"

"I'll try for some other work then."

Dhowli goes in the morning to Parashnath's shop and begs him to give her some job, maybe sweeping his shop, to keep her from starving.

Parashnath offers her some millet but says that he would not hire her because he cannot afford to incur the wrath of the older Misra.

Dhowli takes the millet from him and sits under the tree to think how many days they can live on it, even if she makes a thin gruel. Kundan Misra is out to kill her, starve her, as punishment for turning his brother's head.

Dhowli's mother does not say anything about the pathetic amount of millet that she brought home, but when offered the gruel, she puts down her bowl untouched and says, "Why don't you and your boy eat this. I'll go away and find something on my own."

"You don't want it?"

"If you can't find something to keep alive, better kill yourself."

"You're right. I'll kill myself."

Next day she goes to the stream, thinking all the way of drowning herself. Once she is dead, then her own kinspeople will at least look after her mother. And the baby? As long as her mother is able to live, she will try to bring up the baby.

But she does not meet her death. On the way, a man in a printed *lungi* and shirt catches up with her. He is a coolie supervisor and a coolie himself. He grabs her hand, and asks, "Where is your knife?"

Dhowli looks at his eyes. She feels very little fear and says firmly, "Let go of my hand." The man lets go of her hand.

"Are you the one who throws clods at my door in the night?"

The man says yes and gestures to indicate why.

Dhowli thinks for a minute. Then she says, "All right. I'll open the door."

But you must bring money and corn with you. I am not selling on credit."

Dhowli comes back home and asks her mother to take the baby to Sanichari's place to sleep from that night on. To her question, she simply informs her that she is going to open the door when the lump of earth strikes. Seeing that her mother is about to cry, Dhowli impatiently, sternly asks her not to raise a row and to come back home before sunrise.

Then she takes out one of the two printed saris that Misrilal gave her. She borrows some oil from Sanichari to oil her hair; she takes a bath and combs her hair into a plait. She is not sure if there is anything else involved in preparing for the customer of one's body.

When a pebble hits the door, she opens it. The man has brought corn, lentils, salt, and one rupee. Dhowli pays him back, with her body, to the very last penny. As the man takes leave, she reminds him that she will let him in as long as he brings the price. When he asks her not to let anybody else in, she says that whoever will pay can come; her only rule is that she will not sell on credit.

Many are willing to pay; she opens the door to many. Dhowli and her mother start having two full meals a day and wearing saris that are not old rags. After the customer leaves, Dhowli sleeps well, better than she has for a long time. She never knew it would be so easy to sell one's body, without any emotion, for corn and millet and salt. If she had known, they could have had full meals much earlier; the baby could have been better fed and cared for. It now seems to her that she has been very stupid in the past.

Kundan has been watching Dhowli carrying on. He knows that by figuring out the means of survival, Dhowli has defeated his revenge, outwitted his plan to kill them indirectly. The Dusad girl's nonchalance bothers Kundan; her new self-assured attractiveness gnaws at his mind. One day, seeing her draw water from the well with the other women, he asks Sanichari if they are going to drink the water touched by Dhowli. It turns out to be a wrong move, given Sanichari's well-known candor and forthrightness.

"That's none of your business, master. And why should we mind the water she touches? Our people now accept what she has to do."

"Why?"

"Why not? What wrong has she done?"

"She has become a prostitute."

"Your brother forced her to become a prostitute. How would your brother's son have lived if she did not? Everybody seems to be happy now, including your friend and business partner the contractor. His coolies no longer have to stray very far for the fun."

"Better watch what you say when you talk to me."

"I don't have to. Your mother and your wife would have been nowhere but for Sanichari here."

Kundan may make wrong moves, but he knows when to retreat. Every family in the village, rich or poor, needs Sanichari. Nobody can do without her help with the medicinal herbs.

Kundan then takes a trip to Dhanbad to work on his brother.

"Better give her money or land. It's your cowardice that now brings the business of selling flesh to the village, right under our nose."

Misrilal's face becomes ashen. "What do you mean?"

Kundan is wild with joy at having hit the spot. His brother is still in love with the whore, and he has managed to hit him right there. What a coward! No pride in his superiority as a Brahman. A man is not a man unless he behaves like one. In his place, Kundan would not have abandoned his favored kept woman at the order of Hanuman Misra. Kundan must prod his unmanly brother into becoming a man. He must be taught how to keep the untouchables under foot, sometimes acting kindly but always forcefully like a man. Otherwise, it is too large an empire for Kundan to control all by himself—so much farm land and orchards, so many illegitimate children and so many fertile untouchable women, so huge a moneylending business. Kundan must bring his soft, defaulting brother up to manhood, cure his weakness, so that he can help Kundan with the job. He goes for the kill.

"Don't you know? I mean the Dusad girl you fell in love with. I spit on it! She became the mother of a son by making a Brahman fall for her. And now the entrance that was once used by a lion is being used by the pigs and the sewer rats."

"I don't believe you. She can't do it."

"She is doing it. She is making us Brahmans the laughingstock."

"No!"

"Yes. I say yes a hundred times. You're not a man! Just a scared worm! You couldn't stand up to Hanumanji and tell him that you wanted her as your kept woman. I've kept Jhalo. Didn't Hanumanji forbid me to give her a place to live? Did I obey? I spit on your love. Lovelorn for a Dusad girl! A man takes what he wants and keeps things ordered to his wish, everything from his *paijars*\* to the Panchayat. You're no man. You made people spit at the Brahmans."

"I won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes. If it's false, . . ."

Kundan smiles a sly victorious smile and says, "Then you'll kill me? Good! Didn't I get you the license for a gun?"

Soon after that, Misrilal comes to Tahad, tormented by anger and the venom his brother injected in him. Because Dhowli no longer goes to the bus stop, she does not know that he has come.

As soon as the evening sets in, he throws a pebble at her door. It is a

\* Sandals.

changed Dhowli who opens the door—she is wearing a red sari and green bangles, and her oiled hair is in a plait down her back.

She turns pale at first but recovers almost immediately and invites him coldly, "Does the landlord want to come in?"

Misrilal enters without a word. He sees the new lantern, the bed of clean *shataranji*\* and pillows on the bunk, the sack of millet, and the can of oil under the bunk.

"You've become a randi?"

"Yes, I have."

"Why?"

"Because you ran away after having your fun, and your brother took away our food. How else can I live? How can I bring up your son?"

"Why didn't you kill yourself?"

"At first I wanted to do that. Then I thought, why should I die? You'll marry, run your shop, go to the cinema with your wife, and I'll be the one to die? Why?"

"I'll kill you then."

"Go ahead."

"No Brahman's son is to live on the filthy handouts of the untouchables! How dare you! I'll kill you."

"You can't because you're not a man."

"Don't say that, Dhowli. My brother said that. But don't you say I'm not a man. I'll show you that I'm a man and a Brahman."

Within a few days, Misrilal with the help of Kundan and Hanumanji calls the Panchayat. Without asking anyone in the Panchayat, Hanumanji orders that Dhowli must leave the village; she cannot be allowed to do business in the village. She has to go to Ranchi and get herself registered as a prostitute there. If she does not, her hut will be set on fire to kill her along with her mother and her child. As long as the Brahmans live in the village, as long as Shiva and Narain are worshiped in their homes, such impudent sinning is not going to be tolerated in the village.

When Dhowli protests, "Why didn't the Brahman help me with money to bring up his son," Hanuman Misra shouts, "Shut up, whore!" and throws his sandal at her. Misrilal joins in, "Now at last you know that I am a man and a Brahman."

The Dusads, the Ganjus, and the Dhobis at the meeting do not raise any objection. They only ask how Dhowli is going to be able to go to Ranchi. Kundan answers that his contractor is going to take her there. She has to leave the next morning, no later.

Early in the following morning Dhowli, a bundle in her hand, boards the bus with the contractor. She is not crying. Her mother, with the baby in her arms, cries standing beside the bus. The baby holds out his hands to Dhowli. She tells her mother to keep some *gur* for him for the night, to put a bit of it in his mouth if he cries.

Dhowli's mother now sobs aloud. "It would have been less terrible if you stayed with your husband's brother."

A faint smile, perhaps of pity, appears on Dhowli's lips, hearing her mother say that. In that case, she would have been a whore individually, only in her private life. Now she is going to be a whore by occupation. She is going to be one of many whores, a member of a part of society. Isn't the society more powerful than the individual? Those who run the society, the very powerful—by making her a public whore—have made her a part of the society. Her mother is not going to understand this. So she smiles and says, "Don't forget to keep some *gur* by the bed, mother. And keep the lamp lit, so he will not be scared in the dark."

Even the driver of the bus of the Rohatgi company cannot bear to look at Dhowli. He sounds the horn and starts the bus. Dhowli does not look back to see her mother and her child for fear that it will also make her see the brass trident atop the temple of the Misras.

Kundan's contractor cannot look at her when asking her to make herself comfortable because Ranchi is a long way from there.

The bus starts speeding, and her village recedes.

The sun rises, and Dhowli watches the sky, blue as in other days, and the trees, as green as ever. She feels hurt, wounded by nature's indifference to her plight. Tears finally run from her eyes with the pain of this new injury. She never expected that the sky and the greens would be so impervious on the day of turning Dhowli into a public whore. Nothing in nature seems to be at all moved by the monstrosity of what is done to her. Has nature then accepted the disgracing of the Dhowlis as a matter of course? Has nature too gotten used to the Dhowlis being branded as whores and forced to leave home? Or is it that even the earth and the sky and the trees, the nature that was not made by the Misras, have now become their private property?

\* Flatweave cotton rug.