

## The Tide Country

(pp. 3-8)

Kanai spotted her the moment he stepped onto the crowded platform: he was deceived neither by her close-cropped black hair, nor by her clothes, which were those of a teenage boy – loose cotton pants and an oversized white shirt. Winding unerringly through the snack-vendors and tea-sellers who were hawking their wares on the station’s platform, his eyes settled on her slim, shapely figure. Her face was long and narrow, with an elegance of line markedly at odds with the severity of her haircut. There was

no *bindi* on her forehead and her arms were free of bangles and bracelets, but on one of her ears was a silver stud, glinting brightly against the sun-deepened darkness of her skin.

Kanai liked to think that he had the true connoisseur’s ability to both praise and appraise women, and he was intrigued by the way she held herself, by the unaccustomed delineation of her stance. It occurred to him suddenly that perhaps, despite her silver ear-stud and the tint of her skin, she was not Indian, except by descent. And the moment the thought occurred to him, he was convinced of it: she was a foreigner; it was stamped in her posture, in the way she stood, balancing on her heels like a flyweight boxer, with her feet

planted apart. Among a crowd of college girls on Kolkata's Park Street she might not have looked entirely out of place, but here, against the sooty backdrop of the commuter station at Dhakuria, the neatly composed androgyny of her appearance seemed out of place, almost exotic.

Why would a foreigner, a young woman, be standing in a south Kolkata commuter station, waiting for the train to Canning? It was true of course that this line was the only rail connection to the Sundarbans. But so far as he knew it was never used by tourists – the few who travelled in that direction usually went by boat, hiring steamers or launches on Kolkata's riverfront. The train was mainly used by people who did *daily-*

*passengeri*, coming in from outlying villages to work in the city.

He saw her turning to ask something of a bystander and was seized by an urge to listen in. Language was both his livelihood and his addiction and he was often preyed upon by a near-irresistible compulsion to eavesdrop on conversations in public places.

Pushing his way through the crowd he arrived within earshot just in time to hear her finish a sentence that ended with the words 'train to Canning?' One of the onlookers began to explain, gesticulating with an up-raised arm. But the explanation was in Bengali and it was lost on her. She stopped the man with a raised hand and said, in apology, that she knew no Bengali: *ami Bangla jani na*. He could

tell from the awkwardness of her pronunciation that this was literally true: like strangers everywhere, she had learnt just enough of the language to be able to provide due warning of her incomprehension.

Kanai was the one other ‘outsider’ on the platform and he quickly attracted his own share of attention. He was of medium height and at the age of forty-two his hair, which was still thick, had begun to show a few streaks of grey at the temples. In the tilt of his head, as in the width of his stance, there was a quiet certainty, an indication of a well-grounded belief in his ability to prevail, in most circumstances. Although his face was otherwise unlined, his eyes had fine wrinkles fanning out from

their edges – but these grooves, by heightening the mobility of his face, emphasized more his youth than his age. Although he was once slight of build, his waist had thickened over the years but he still carried himself lightly, and with an alertness bred of the traveller’s instinct for inhabiting the moment.

It so happened that Kanai was carrying a wheeled airline bag with a telescoping handle. To the vendors and travelling salesmen who plied their wares on the Canning line, this piece of luggage was just one of the many details of Kanai’s appearance – along with his sunglasses, corduroy trousers and suede shoes – that suggested middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence. As a result

he was besieged by hawkers, urchins and bands of youths who were raising funds for a varied assortment of causes: it was only when the green-and-yellow electric train finally pulled in that he was able to shake off this importuning entourage.

While climbing in, he noticed that the foreign girl was not without some experience in travel: she hefted her two huge backpacks herself, brushing aside the half-dozen porters who were hovering around her. There was a strength in her limbs that belied her diminutive size and wispy build; she swung the backpacks into the compartment with practised ease and pushed her way through a crowd of milling passengers. Briefly he wondered whether he ought to tell her

that there was a special compartment for women. But she was swept inside and he lost sight of her.

Then the whistle blew and Kanai breasted the crowd himself. On stepping in he glimpsed a seat and quickly lowered himself into it. He had been planning to do some reading on this trip and in trying to get his papers out of his suitcase it struck him that the seat he had found was not altogether satisfactory. There was not enough light to read by and to his right there was a woman with a wailing baby: he knew it would be hard to concentrate if he had to fend off a pair of tiny flying fists. It occurred to him, on reflection, that the seat on his left was preferable to his own, being right beside the window – the only



problem was that it was occupied by a man immersed in a Bengali newspaper. Kanai took a moment to size up the newspaper reader and saw that he was an elderly and somewhat subdued-looking person, someone who might well be open to a bit of persuasion.

‘*Aré moshai*, can I just say a word?’ Kanai smiled as he bore down on his neighbour with the full force of his persuasiveness. ‘If it isn’t all that important to you, would you mind changing places with me? I have a lot of work to do and the light is better by the window.’

The newspaper reader goggled in astonishment and for a moment it seemed he might even protest or resist. But on taking in Kanai’s clothes

and all the other details of his appearance, he underwent a change of mind: this was clearly someone with a long reach, someone who might be on familiar terms with policemen, politicians and others of importance. Why court trouble? He gave in gracefully and made way for Kanai to sit beside the window.

Kanai was pleased to have achieved his end without a fuss. Nodding his thanks to the newspaper reader, he resolved to buy him a cup of tea when a *cha’ala* next appeared at the window. Then he reached into the outer flap of his suitcase and pulled out a few sheets of paper covered in closely written Bengali script. He smoothed the pages over his knees and began to read.

‘In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga’s descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river’s journey – and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva’s matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted

tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands.

‘Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. But that is what it is: an archipelago, stretching for almost three hundred kilometres, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh.

‘The islands are the trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the *āchol* that follows her, half-wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands,

these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sand-bars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. These islands are the rivers' restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift. The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. Some of these channels are mighty waterways, so wide across that one shore is invisible from the other; others

are no more than two or three kilometres long and only a few hundred metres across. Yet, each of these channels is a 'river' in its own right, each possessed of its own strangely evocative name. When these channels meet, it is often in clusters of four, five or even six: at these confluences, the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon. In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a *mohona* – an oddly seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement.

'There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river

from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.

‘When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles.

There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.

‘There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is

known as “the Sundarban”, which means, “the beautiful forest”.

There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove – the *sundari* tree, *Heriteria minor*. But the word’s origin is no easier to account for than is its present prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide – *bhati*. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as *bhatir desh* – the tide country – except that *bhati* is not just the “tide” but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the *bhata*. This is a land half-submerged at

high tide: it is only in *falling* that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name “tide country” is not just right but necessary. For as with Rilke’s catkins hanging from the hazel and the spring rain upon the dark earth, when we behold the lowering tide

‘we, who have always thought of  
joy  
as rising ... feel the emotion  
that almost amazes us  
when a happy thing falls.’

## Lusibari

(pp. 36-40)

The tide was running low when the Trust's launch brought Kanai and Nilima to Lusibari and this seemed to augment the height of the tall embankment that ringed the island: from the water nothing could be seen of what lay on the far side. But on climbing the earthworks Kanai found himself looking down on Lusibari village and suddenly it was as if his memory had rolled out a map so that the whole island lay spread out before his eyes.

Lusibari was about two kilometres

long from end to end, and was shaped somewhat like a conch shell. It was the most southerly of the inhabited islands of the tide country – in the fifty kilometres of mangrove that separated it from the open sea, there was no other settlement to be found. Although there were many other islands nearby, Lusibari was cut off from these by four encircling rivers. Of these rivers two were of medium size, while the third was so modest as almost to melt into the mud at low tide. But the pointed end of the island – the narrowest spiral of the conch – jutted into a river that was one of the mightiest in the tide country, the Raimangal.

Seen from Lusibari at high tide, the Raimangal did not look like a river at

all: it looked more like a limb of the sea, a bay perhaps, or a very wide estuary. Five other channels flowed into the river here, forming an immense mohona. At low tide, the mouths of the other rivers were clearly visible in the distance – gigantic portals piercing the ring of green galleries that encircled the mohona. But Kanai knew that once the tide turned everything would disappear: the rising waters of the mohona would swallow up the jungle as well as the rivers and their openings. If it were not for the tips of a few *kewra* trees you would think you were gazing at a body of water that reached beyond the horizon. Depending on the level of the tide, he remembered, the view was either exhilarating or terrifying. At low tide,

when the embankment, or *bādh*, was riding high on the water, Lusibari looked like some gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings. Only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the level of the water. At such times the unsinkable ship of a few hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment and go circling down into the depths.

From the narrow end of the island a mudbank extended a long way into the water. This spit was like a terrestrial windsock, changing direction with the prevailing currents. But just as a windsock can generally be counted on to remain attached to its mast, the mudbank too was doggedly



tenacious in keeping a hold upon the island. It formed a natural pier and that was where ferries and boats usually unloaded their passengers. There were no docks or jetties on Lusibari, for the currents and tides that flowed around it were too powerful to permit the construction of permanent structures.

The island's main village – also known as Lusibari – was situated close to the base of the mudspit, in the lee of the embankment. A newcomer, looking down at Lusibari from the crest of the *bādh*, would see a village that seemed at first glance no different from thousands of others in Bengal: a tightly packed settlement of palm-thatched huts and bamboo-walled stalls and shacks. But a closer

examination would reveal a different and far from commonplace design.

At the centre of the village was a *maidan*, an open space not quite geometrical enough to be termed a square. At one end of this ragged-edged maidan was a marketplace, a jumble of stalls that lay unused through most of the week, coming alive only on Saturday, which was the market day. At the other end of the maidan, dominating the village, stood a school. This was the building that was chiefly responsible for endowing the village with an element of visual surprise. Although not large, it loomed like a cathedral over the shacks, huts and shanties that surrounded it. Outlined in brick, over the keystone of the main entrance

were the school's name and the date of its completion: 'Sir Daniel Hamilton High School 1938'. The façade consisted of a long shaded veranda, equipped with fluted columns, neoclassical pediments, vaguely Saracenic arches and other such elements of the schoolhouse architecture of its time. The rooms were large and airy, with tall shuttered windows.

Not far from the school lay a compound cut off from public view by a screen of trees. The house that occupied the centre of this compound was much smaller and less visible than the school. Yet its appearance was, if anything, even more arresting. Built entirely of wood, it stood on a two-metre-tall trestle of stilts, as if to

suggest it belonged more in the Himalayas than in the tide country. The roof was a steeply pitched wooden pyramid, sitting upon a grid of symmetrical lines: stilts and columns, windows and balustrades. Rows of French windows were set into the walls and their floor-to-ceiling shutters opened into a shaded veranda that ran all the way around the house. In front there was a lily-covered pond, skirted by a pathway of mossy bricks.

In 1970, Kanai recalled, this compound had seemed lonely and secluded. Although it was situated in the centre of the settlement there were few other dwellings nearby. It was as though some lingering attitude of deference or respect had prompted the islanders to keep their

distance from that wooden house. But that had changed now. It was clear at a glance that the area was among the most heavily trafficked in the whole island. Clusters of huts, houses, stalls, sweetshops and the like had grown up around the compound. The lanes that snaked around its perimeter echoed to the sound of *filmi* music and the air was heavy with the smell of freshly fried *jilipis*.

Kanai glanced over his shoulder and saw that Nilima was busy discussing Trust business with a couple of office-holders of the Women's Union. Slipping away, he pushed open the compound's gate and went hurrying up the mossy pathway that led up to the house. To his surprise, none of the noise and bustle of the village seemed

to filter into the compound and for a moment he felt as though he were stepping through a warp in time. The house seemed at once very old and very new. The wood, discoloured by the sun and rain, had acquired a silvery patina, like certain kinds of bark; it reflected the light in such a way as to appear almost translucent, like a skin of mirrored metal. It seemed now to be almost blue in colour, reflecting the tint of the sky.

On reaching the stilts, Kanai stopped to peer at the dappled underside of the house – the geometric pattern of shadows was exactly as he remembered. He went up the steps and was starting towards the front door when he heard his uncle's voice, echoing back from the past.

‘You can’t go in that way,’ Nirmal was saying. ‘Don’t you remember? The key to the front door was lost years ago. We’ll have to go all the way around.’

Retracing the steps of that earlier visit, Kanai went down the veranda, around the corner of the balcony and along the next wing until he came to a small door at the rear of the house. The door opened at a touch and, on stepping in, the first object to meet his eyes was an old-fashioned porcelain toilet with a wooden seat. Next to it was an enormous cast-iron bathtub with clawed feet and a curling rim. A showerhead curled over it, like a flower drooping on a wilted stem.

The fittings seemed somewhat more rusty since he had first seen them,

but they were otherwise unchanged. Kanai remembered how eagerly, as a boy, he’d taken them in. Since coming to Lusibari he’d had to bathe in a pond, just as Nirmal and Nilima did – he’d longed to step under that shower.

‘This is a *shahebi choubachcha*, a white man’s tank,’ Nirmal had said, pointing to the bathtub. ‘*Shahebs* use them to bathe in.’

Kanai remembered that he had been struck by the aptness of the description while also being offended at being spoken to as if he were a yokel who’d never seen such things. ‘I know what that is,’ he had said. ‘It’s a bathtub.’

A door led out from the bathroom, into the interior of the house. Push-

ing it open, Kanai found himself in a cavernous, wood-panelled room. Clouds of dust hung, as if frozen, in the angled shafts of light admitted by the louvred shutters. A huge iron bedstead stood marooned in the middle of the floor, like the remains of a drowned atoll. On the walls there were fading portraits in heavy frames; the pictures were of *mem-sahibs* in long dresses and men in knee-length breeches.

Kanai came to a stop in front of a portrait of a young woman in a lacy dress, sitting on a grassy moor dotted with yellow wildflowers. In the background were steep slopes covered with purple gorse and mountains flecked with snow. A grimy copper plate beneath the picture said, 'Lucy

McKay Hamilton, Isle of Arran.'

'Who was she?' Kanai could hear his voice echoing back from the past.

'Who was this Lucy Hamilton?'

'She's the woman from whom this island takes its name.'

'Did she live here? In this house?'

'No. She was on her way here, from the far end of Europe, when her ship capsized. She never got to see the house but because it had been built for her, people used to call it *Lusi'rbari*. Then this was shortened to Lusibari and that was how the island took this name. But even though this house was the original Lusibari, people stopped calling it that. Now everyone speaks of it as the "Hamilton House".'

'Why?'

‘Because it was built by Sir Daniel MacKinnon Hamilton, Lucy’s uncle. Haven’t you seen his name on the school?’

‘And who was he?’

‘You really want to know?’

‘Yes.’

‘All right, then. Listen.’ The knob-knuckled finger rose to point to the heavens. ‘Now that you’ve asked you’ll have to listen. And pay attention, for all of this is true.’

## Morichjhāpi

(pp. 116-122)

Sunlight, streaming in through an uncurtained window, woke Kanai shortly after dawn. A little later, having washed and changed, he went downstairs and tapped on Nilima's door.

The voice that answered was uncharacteristically tremulous: 'Ke?'

'It's me – Kanai.'

'Come in. The door's open.'

Kanai entered to find a bleary-eyed Nilima sitting propped up in bed, with a bank of pillows behind her and a large quilt piled over her legs. There

was a cup of tea on the bedside table, and next to it, a saucer filled with Marie biscuits. No clothes or personal effects were anywhere to be seen while books and files lay stacked everywhere – under the bed, on the floor and even in the swell of the mosquito net. The room was sparsely utilitarian in appearance, with very few furnishings other than file cabinets and bookcases. But for the presence of a large four-poster bed, it would have been easy to mistake it for an extension of the Trust's offices.

'You're not looking well,' said Kanai. 'Has a doctor been sent for?'

Nilima blew her nose into a handkerchief. 'It's just a cold,' she said. 'Why do I need a doctor to tell me that?'



‘You shouldn’t have come to Canning yesterday,’ said Kanai. ‘It was too much for you. You should take better care of your health.’

Nilima brushed this off with a flick of her hand. ‘Enough about me,’ she said. ‘Sit down over here and tell me how you’ve been faring. Did you sleep well last night?’

‘Well enough.’

‘And the packet?’ she cried eagerly. ‘Did you find it?’

‘Yes. It was exactly where you said it would be.’

‘So then, *bal to ré*, tell me,’ said Nilima, ‘were they poems or stories?’

Kanai could tell, from the expectant tone of her voice, that she had already begun to believe that her husband’s literary reputation would be posthu-

mously restored by the contents of the packet she had found. It pained him to disappoint her and he tried to let her down as gently as he could. ‘Actually, it’s not what I’d expected,’ he said. ‘I thought I’d find poems, essays, stories. But what I found instead was some kind of journal or diary. It was written in an exercise book – just a common *khata*, like schoolchildren use.’

‘Oh?’ Nilima’s eyes dimmed and she breathed a sigh of dejection. ‘And when was it written? Does it say?’

‘Yes,’ said Kanai. ‘It was written in 1979.’

‘1979?’ Nilima was quiet for a moment as she thought this over. ‘But that was the year of his death. He died

in July. Are you sure it was written in that year?’

‘Yes,’ said Kanai. ‘Why should that surprise you?’

‘I’ll tell you why,’ she said. ‘Because that was the one year of his life when he did no writing at all. He had retired as headmaster of the Lusibari school the year before and it was a difficult time for him. The school had been his whole life for almost three decades – ever since we came to Lusibari. His behaviour became erratic at this time. As you know, he had a history of mental instability, so it was very worrying for me. He used to disappear for days and afterwards he wouldn’t be able to recall where he had been. He was all in an uproar that year. He was in no state to do any writing.’

‘Maybe he had a brief period of lucidity,’ Kanai said. ‘I have the impression the entire notebook was written over one or two days.’

‘And do you know the dates?’ said Nilima, watching him closely.

‘Yes,’ said Kanai. ‘He started writing it on the morning of 15 May 1979. In a place called Morichjhāpi.’

‘Morichjhāpi!’ There was a sudden intake of breath as Nilima said the word.

‘Yes,’ said Kanai. ‘Tell me what happened there.’

Morichjhāpi, said Nilima, was a tide country island, a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat. It fell within a part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation, but unlike many such islands it was relatively

easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhāpi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built *bādh*s and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learnt that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after Partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes.

‘Most of them were Dalits, as we say now,’ said Nilima. ‘Harijans, as we used to say then.’

But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhāpi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India. In the years after Partition the authorities had removed the refugees to a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of kilometres from Bengal.

‘They called it “resettlement”,’ said Nilima, ‘but people say it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. The refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down.’

The soil was rocky and the environment was nothing like they had ever known. They could not speak the languages of that area and the local people treated them as intruders, attacking them with bows, arrows and other weapons. For many years they put up with these conditions. Then in 1978 some of them organized themselves and broke out of the camp. By train and on foot they moved eastwards in the hope of settling in the Sundarbans. Morichjhāpi was the place they decided on.

Earlier that year a Left Front ministry had taken power in West Bengal and the refugees may have assumed that they would not face much opposition from the state government. But this was a miscalculation: the author-

ities had declared that Morichjhāpi was a protected forest reserve and they had proved unbending in their determination to evict the settlers. Over a period of about a year there had been a series of confrontations between the settlers and government forces.

‘And the final clash,’ Nilima said, ‘if I recall correctly, was in mid-May of that year, 1979.’

‘So do you think Nirmal was there at the time?’ Kanai stopped to consider another possibility. ‘Or was it perhaps just a fantasy?’

‘I don’t know, Kanai,’ Nilima said, looking down at her hands. ‘I really don’t know. He became a stranger to me that year. He wouldn’t talk to me.’

He would hide things. It was as if I had become his enemy.'

Kanai could see that Nilima was close to tears and his heart went out to her. 'It must have been very hard for you.'

'It was,' she said. 'I could see that he had developed some kind of obsession with Morichjhāpi and I was very uneasy about it. I knew there was going to be trouble and I just wanted to keep him from harm.'

Kanai scratched his head. 'I still don't understand. Why did this cause have so much appeal for him?'

Nilima's answer was slow in coming. 'You have to remember, Kanai,' she said at length, 'that as a young man Nirmal was in love with the idea of revolution. Men like that, even when

they turn their backs on their party and their comrades, can never let go of the idea: it's the secret god that rules their hearts. It is what makes them come alive; they revel in the danger, the exquisite pain. It is to them what childbirth is to a woman, or war to a mercenary.'

'But these settlers weren't revolutionaries, were they?'

'No,' said Nilima. 'Not at all. Their aims were quite straightforward. They just wanted a little land to settle on. But for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end. That was enough. This was the closest Nirmal would ever come to a revolutionary moment. He desperately wanted to be a part of it.'

Perhaps it was his way of delaying the recognition of his age.'

Kanai was hard put to reconcile the gentle, *dhoti-clad* man of his memories with this image of a revolutionary. 'Did you try to reason with him?'

'Yes, of course,' Nilima said. 'But he would say, "You've joined the rulers; you've begun to think like them.

That's what comes of doing the sort of 'social work' you've been doing all these years. You've lost sight of the important things." She shut her eyes as she recalled the contempt with which her own husband had dismissed her life's work. She turned her head to brush away the tears.

'We were like two ghosts living in the same house. At the end he seemed to want only to hurt me. Just think

about it, Kanai – why else would he have insisted on leaving this notebook to you and not to me?'

'I don't know what to say.' Kanai had assumed that Nirmal had wanted him to have the notebook because he, Kanai, represented a slender connection to the ears of an unheeding world. He had not for a moment considered the possibility that Nirmal had intended to wound Nilima. The idea shocked him. He had always known Nirmal to be eccentric but he had never thought him to be capable of malice or cruelty, especially to his own wife. Like everyone who knew them he had always assumed that Nilima and Nirmal were content in their marriage, that theirs was a happy, if unlikely, pairing. He realized

now that it was only because Nirmal never left Lusibari that they had been able to sustain this illusion.

Thinking of what Nilima had been through all these years, an unfamiliar lump arose in Kanai's throat. 'Look,' he said, rising to his feet. 'I'll give you that notebook right now. You can keep it or throw it away – do whatever you like. I don't want to have anything more to do with it.'

'No, Kanai!' cried Nilima. 'Sit down.' Reaching for his hand, she pulled him back into his chair. 'Kanai, listen to me: I always did my best to do my duty by Nirmal. It's very important to me that his last wishes are not dishonoured. I don't know why he wanted you to have the book; I don't know what's in it – but that's how it

must be.'

Kanai went to sit beside her on the bed. He had been uneasy about broaching the subject of Kusum, but he could see no way around it. 'Tell me,' he said gently, 'do you think Kusum might have had something to do with it?'

She flinched at the sound of the name. 'There were rumours, Kanai. Yes, I won't deny it.'

'But how did Kusum end up at Morichjhāpi?'

'I don't know how it happened. But somehow she did.'

'And did you ever see her while she was there?' Kanai said.

Nilima nodded. 'Yes. Just once. She came to see me, in this very room.'



She was working at her desk, said Nilima, one morning in 1978, when a nurse came to tell her she had a visitor, someone who claimed to know her. Nilima asked what her name was, but the nurse didn't know. 'All right,' said Nilima. 'Bring her here.' A few minutes later the door opened to admit a young woman and a child, a boy of four or five. The woman looked to be in her early twenties but she was dressed in a white sari and there were no bangles on her wrists and no vermilion in her hair: elsewhere, Nilima would have known immediately she was a widow, but in Lusibari she could not be sure.

There was something familiar about the woman – not so much her face as the look in her eye – but Nilima could

not remember her name. When the visitor bowed to touch her feet, she said, 'Tell me now, who are you?'

'Mashima,' came the answer, 'my name is Kusum. Don't you remember me?'

'Kusum!' Almost at once Nilima began to scold her. 'Why didn't you send news, Kusum? Where have you been? Didn't you know we were looking for you?'

Kusum's answer was to laugh.

'Mashima, there was too much to tell. More than I could put into a letter.'

When she stood up Nilima saw that Kusum had grown into a sturdy, bright-eyed young woman. 'And who is this boy, Kusum?'

'That's my son,' she answered. 'His name is Fokir – Fokirchand Mandol.'

‘And his father?’

‘His father died, Mashima. I’m all he has now.’

Nilima was glad to see that premature widowhood had not robbed Kusum of her ready laugh. ‘Tell me, Kusum. What brings you here?’

It was then that Kusum revealed that she was living in Morichjhāpi: she had come to Lusibari in the hope of persuading Nilima to send medical help for the settlers.

Nilima was immediately on her guard. She told her that she would have liked to help, but it was impossible. The government had made it known that it would stop at nothing to evict the settlers: anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble. Nilima had the hospital

and the Women’s Union to think of: she could not afford to alienate the government. She had to consider the greater good.

After half an hour Kusum left and Nilima never saw her again.

‘So what happened after that?’ Kanai said. ‘Where did she go?’

‘She didn’t go anywhere, Kanai. She was killed.’

‘Killed?’ said Kanai. ‘How? What happened?’

‘She died in the massacre, Kanai,’ Nilima said. ‘The massacre at Morichjhāpi.’

She covered her face with her hands. ‘I’m tired now. I think I’d better rest for a while.’

## Listening

(pp. 157-159)

The dolphins' quiet, regular breathing had lulled Piya into a doze from which she was woken by a sound that seemed to come booming out of a dream. By the time she opened her eyes and sat up, the forest was quiet again and the echoes had already faded. The river was lapping gently at the boat's hull and the stars above had become faint pinpricks of light, their glow dimmed by the brightness of the moon.

Then the boat began to rock and she knew that Fokir was awake too.

Raising her head, she saw that he had seated himself in the centre of the boat, with his blanket draped shawl-like around his shoulders. Now she roused herself and made her way like a crab along the boat, seating herself beside him. 'What was it?' She mimed the question with raised eyebrows and a turn of her hand. He gave her a smile but made no direct answer, only pointing vaguely across the water. Then, resting his chin on his knees, he fixed his eyes on the island they had visited earlier, visible now as a faint silver filigree across the water.

For a while they sat listening companionably to the Orcaella as they circled around the boat. Then she heard him humming a tune, deep in his throat, so she laughed and said, 'Sing.

Louder. Sing.' She had to exhort him a few more times and then he did sing out loud, but keeping his voice low. The melody was very different from that of the day before, alternately lively and pensive, but it mirrored her mood and she felt a sense of perfect contentment as she sat there listening to his voice, against the percussive counterpoint of the dolphins' breathing. What greater happiness could there be than this: to be on the water with someone you trusted, at this magical hour, listening to the serene sound of these animals?

They sat a while in silence and presently she sensed that despite the direction of his gaze, he was not really watching the far shore. Was he perhaps half-asleep, she wondered, as

people sometimes are even when they seem to be awake? Or was he just lost in thought, with his mind racing to retrieve some almost-forgotten shard of recollection from his past?

What did he see when he looked back? She pictured a hut like those she had seen on the fringes of Canning, with mud walls and straw thatch and shutters of plaited bamboo. His father was a fisherman like him, with long stringy limbs and a face imprinted by the sun and wind, and his mother was a sturdy but tired woman, worn to the bone by the daily labour of carrying baskets full of fish and crabs to the market. There were many children, many playmates for little Fokir, and although they were poor their lives did not lack for

warmth or companionship: it was a family like those she had heard her father talk about, in which want and deprivation made people pull together all the more tightly.

Had he seen his wife's face before the wedding? Her own parents, she remembered, had actually been allowed to meet and talk to each other, although there had been many relatives present – but of course they were city people, middle class and educated. A meeting between the unwed would surely not be allowed in the village Fokir lived in? The couple would have first set eyes on each other when they were seated at the sacred fire and even then the girl would not have looked up: she would have kept her eyes downcast until it was night and

they were lying beside each other in the mud-walled room of their hut. Only then would she allow herself to look at this boy who was her man and thank her fate for giving her a husband who was young, with fine, clean limbs and wide, deep eyes, someone who could almost have been the dark god of her prayers and dreams.

She decided to get up and go back to the bed she had made for herself in the bow of the boat. She flipped over and lay on her stomach, turning her attention back to the dolphins. They were still in the pool, even though the tide was now in full flood: evidently this meant they preferred not to hunt by night. It remained to be seen whether they would leave the pool when the tide rose again the next day.

She imagined the animals circling drowsily, listening to echoes pinging through the water, painting pictures in three dimensions – images that only they could decode. The thought of experiencing your surroundings in that way never failed to fascinate her: the idea that to ‘see’ was also to ‘speak’ to others of your kind, where simply to exist was to communicate.

In contrast, there was the immeasurable distance that separated her from Fokir. What was he thinking about as he stared at the moonlit river? The forest, the crabs? Whatever it was, she would never know: not just because they had no language

in common but because that was how it was with human beings, who came equipped, as a species, with the means of shutting each other out. The two of them, Fokir and herself, they could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other: and wasn’t it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins’ echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that  
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fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being.



## Blown Ashore

(pp. 160-165)

*And so to Kumirmari. That day, I heard for the first time of the events unfolding at Morichjhāpi. The islands were close by, and in the school I was visiting there were many teachers who had witnessed the progress of the exodus: they had seen tens of thousands of settlers making their way to the island, in boats, dinghies and bhotbhotis. Many of their own people had gone off to join the movement, drawn by the prospect of free land. But even as they marvelled at the refugees' boldness, there were those who predicted trouble: the island*

*belonged to the Forest Department and the government would not allow the squatters to remain.*

*I thought no more of it; it was no business of mine.*

*At midday there was a meal and shortly afterwards Horen and I set off to return to Lusibari. We were on the river, heading home, when the wind suddenly started up. Within moments it was on us – it attacked with that peculiar, wilful malevolence that causes people to think of these storms as something other than wholly natural. The river had been calm minutes before, but now we found ourselves picked up and shaken by huge waves. Before, Horen had been sweating to make the boat move – now we were being swept along against our will.*



*'Are we going to be finished off this time?' I said.*

*'No, Saar,' he said. 'I've lived through much worse than this.'*

*'When?'*

*'In 1970, Saar, during the Agun-mukha cyclone. If you had seen that, this would not seem like a storm at all. But that's too long a story to tell to you now. What's important for us at this minute is to go ashore.' He pointed to his right.*

*'Morichjhāpi, Saar. We can take shelter there until the storm subsides.'*

*There was nothing more to be said. With the wind behind us we were driven quickly to the shore. I helped Horen push his boat up the bank and after he had secured it, he said, 'Saar, we have to take shelter, under a roof.'*

*'But where can we go, Horen?'*

*'Over there, Saar. I see a dwelling.'*

*Without another question I set off after him, running through the pounding rain. With water streaming down my glasses, it was all I could do to keep my eyes on Horen's back.*

*Soon we were at the door of a small shack – of the usual kind, made with bamboo and palm-leaf thatch. At the door, Horen shouted, 'Eijé – ké achhish? Who's there?'*

*The door sprang open and I stepped in. I was standing there, blinking, wiping the rain from my glasses, when I heard someone say, 'Saar? Is that you?'*

*I looked down and saw a young woman kneeling in front of me, touching my feet. That I could not identify her was no more a surprise than that*

*she should know me: if you have been in one place long enough, as a school-teacher, then this happens with almost everyone you meet. Your pupils grow up and your memory fails to grow with them. Their new faces do not match the old.*

*‘Saar,’ she said, ‘it’s Kusum.’*

*Of all the people I might have expected to meet in that place, she was surely the last. ‘Impossible.’*

*Now that my glasses were dry I noticed there was a small child hiding behind her. ‘And who is that?’ I said.*

*‘That’s my son, Fokir.’*

*I reached out to pat his head but he darted away.*

*‘He’s very shy,’ said Kusum with a laugh.*

*I noticed now that Horen had not*

*entered the dwelling and I realized that this was probably as a show of respect to me. I was both pleased and annoyed. Who, after all, is so egalitarian as not to value the respect of another human being? Yet, it seemed strange that he did not know of my aversion to servility.*

*I put my head around the door and saw him outside, waiting patiently in the pouring rain. ‘What’s the matter with you, Horen?’ I said. ‘Come inside. This is no time to be standing on ceremony.’*

*So Horen came in and there ensued a silence of the kind that often descends when people meet after a long time.*

*‘You?’ said Kusum at last, and Horen answered with one of his customary mumbles. Then she pushed the boy forward and said, ‘Here is Fokir, my son.’*

*Horen ran his hand through the boy's hair and said, 'Besh! Good.'*

*'And what about your family?' she said. 'Your children must be quite grown now.'*

*'My youngest is five,' said Horen, 'and the oldest is fourteen.'*

*She smiled, as if to tease him: 'Almost of an age to be married, then?'*

*'No,' said Horen, with sudden vehemence. 'I would not do to him what was done to me.'*

*I recount this only as an example of the way in which, even in extraordinary circumstances, people will often speak of the most inconsequential things.*

*'Look at you,' I said. 'It's Kusum who's been away for all these years – and here we are talking about Horen and his children.'*

*There was a mat on the floor and I sat down. I asked where she had been and how she had ended up in Morichjhāpi.*

*'What can I tell you, Saar?' she said. 'It would take too long to tell.'*

*The wind was howling outside and the rain was still pouring down. 'There's nothing else to do now, anyway,' I said. 'So I'm ready to hear whatever you have to say.'*

*She laughed. 'All right, Saar. How can I say no to you? I'll tell you how it happened.'*

*I remember that her voice changed as she was recounting her story; it assumed new rhythms and distinctive cadences. Is it merely a trick of memory? It doesn't matter: her words have come flooding back to me in a torrent. My pen*

*will have to race to keep up: she is the muse and I am just a scribe.*

*‘Where was my mother? I only knew what I’d heard – from Lusibari I went as if to the dark: she had been taken, they said, to a town called Dhanbad. I asked a few questions and found out where to go; switching from this train to that, I made my way there.*

*‘At the station it struck me: what would I do now? It was a mining town, the air was filled with smoke; the people were strangers, I’d never known their like; their words were like iron, they rang when they spoke; when their gaze turned on you, their eyes smouldered like coal. I was on my own, a girl dressed in a torn frock; I’d had no fear till then – now my courage ran dry.*

*‘But I was fortunate, although I didn’t*

*know, a blessed power was watching: she showed me where to go. There was a man at the station, selling ghugni. I spoke to him and found he was from the tide country! His house was in Basonti, his name was Rajen; his people were poor and he had left home as a boy. He had been lamed in Calcutta by a speeding bus; started selling food, in stations and on trains. Chance had brought him to Dhanbad, there he’d found a shack; it was in a bosti, right beside the railtrack. When he heard why I was there, he said he would help – but in the meanwhile, what would I do with myself? “Come with me,” he said. “You will be fine in my shack. Like you, I’m on my own. There’ll be room for us both.” I followed him there, along the gravelled railtrack. I was fearful when I*

*entered: would I be safe? All night I lay awake and listened to the trains.*

*‘Many days passed and he gave me no cause for shame; he was a good, kind man: how many such are there? It’s true that some said, “Look who’s with Rajen the lame” – I let them say what they wanted. What did I care?*

*‘It was Rajen who brought me word of my mother; she was working in a place where truck-drivers came, to sleep on charpais and buy women for the night. I went there with Rajen and in secret we met: I fell upon Ma, but couldn’t bring myself to speak. For so long I’d been waiting, but now my heart broke: her body was wasted, her face thin and drawn. “Don’t look, Kusum,” she said. “Don’t touch me with your eyes; think of me as I was, before your father died. I*

*blame that Dilip; he’s more demon than man. He said he’d find me work, and look where he brought me: to eat leaves at home, would have been a better fate. He sold me, that danob, to others of his kind. This is no place for you, Kusum. You must go back. But stay a few days; come and see me once more.”*

*‘We went home that night, and came back a week later. Then Rajen said something that stopped our very breath: “Let Kusum marry me; let her be my wife. She’ll be with me forever; I’ll give her my life.” At last I saw Ma smile: what better news could there be? “Fortunate Kusum, you’ve been blessed by Bon Bibi.” “You’ll come too,” said Rajen. “Ma, we’ll steal you away. This is no place for you; you’ll die if you stay.” We went back together, to Rajen’s*

*little shack; in Ma's presence we were married, Rajen and I. Who could have known then that this would be Ma's bidai? To see me was her release; three months later she died. That was her fate – nothing could be done; if she had lived but two years, she would have seen Fokir, our son.*

*'Many months passed and we spoke of coming back here: that place was not home; there was nothing for us there. Walking on iron, we longed for the touch of mud; encircled by rails, we dreamed of the Raimangal in flood. We dreamed of storm-tossed islands, straining at their anchors, and of the rivers that bound them in golden fetters. We thought of high tide, and the mohonas mounting, of islands submerged, like underwater clouds. By*

*night we remembered, we talked and we dreamed – by day coal and metal were the stuff of our lives.*

*'Four years went by and then that life came to an end: a train began to move, with Rajen still unpaid. As the engine picked up speed, he ran to keep up, then his bad leg crumpled and he made a misstep: he was pulled from the platform, thrown before the wheels. What can I say? He was taken before his time. He kept his word to me: he gave me his whole life. Never had I thought he would leave me like that, but at least I had Fokir, my son, was his gift. Once again I thought of making my way back home; but now, with a child, I hadn't the courage on my own. Whom would I go to there? Whom would I ask for help? What if I couldn't make do and it came*

*to the worst? What if I had to fall begging, at Dilip's feet?*

*'Maybe Bon Bibi was keeping watch over me, for one night I heard tell of a great march to the east. They passed us next day – like ghosts, covered in dust, strung out in a line, shuffling beside the railtracks. They had children on their shoulders, bundles on their backs. Where were they heading? From what city had they come? They were not from those parts; they were strangers to us. I saw someone stumble, a woman as old as Ma. I took her back home with the help of some others. I gave them food and water; I saw they needed rest. "Stay, sit, raho behtho," I said. "Get back your strength." Did you notice the words? See: I'd spoken in Hindi, but it was in Bangla they spoke back to me.*

*I was amazed: the very same words, the same tongue! "Who are you?" I said. "Tell me, where are you headed?" "Listen, sister, we'll tell you. This is the story.*

*"Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila: we're tide country people, from the Sundarbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us, to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold; they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle*



*there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. Our fathers had once answered Hamilton's call: they had wrested the estate from the sway of the tides. What they'd done for another, couldn't we do for ourselves? There are many such islands in the bhatir desh. We sent some people ahead, and they found the right place; it's a large empty island called Morichjhāpi. For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. But the police fell on us the moment we moved. They swarmed on the trains, they put blocks on the road – but we still would not go back; we began to walk."*

*'I listened to them talk, and hope blossomed in my heart; these were my people, how could I stand apart? We shared the same tongue, we were joined in our*

*bones; the dreams they had dreamt were no different from my own. They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to full flood. If we stayed on in Dhanbad, what would our future be? A lifetime of toil, in a city of rust? I gathered our things, put clothes on Fokir's back; with Rajen in our hearts, we stepped away from the shack.*

*'And there you have it, Saar. I have told you the story. That's how Fokir and I came to Morichjhāpi.'*

*And so we fell silent, each of us alone with our thoughts, Kusum and Fokir, Horen and I. In my mind's eye I saw them walking, these thousands of people, who wanted nothing more than to plunge their hands once again in our soft, yielding tide country mud. I saw*



*them coming, young and old, quick and  
halt, with their lives bundled on their  
heads, and knew it was of them the Poet  
had spoken when he said:*

*'Each slow turn of the world car-*  
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*ries such disinherited*  
-----  
*ones to whom neither the past nor*  
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*the future belongs.'*  
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## Dreams

(pp. 170-173)

*With the storm raging outside, there was no question of trying to get back to Lusibari that night.*

*‘Saar,’ Horen said at last, with a sigh, ‘I think we’ll have to sleep here, on Kusum’s floor, tonight.’*

*‘It’s for you to judge, Horen,’ I said. ‘I’ll do what you say.’*

*Later, Kusum boiled some rice and cooked a few small fish, a handful of little tangra-machh that Fokir had caught. After we had eaten, Kusum laid out mats for Horen and me at one end of the room, while she went with Fokir*

*to sleep in the far corner. Late at night, when the storm had died down, I heard the door open and knew that Horen had gone to see to the safety of his boat. I fell into a fitful, feverish sleep, stirring and tossing.*

*‘Saar.’ I heard Kusum’s voice, although I couldn’t see her face in the dark. ‘Are you all right?’*

*‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’m fine. Why do you ask?’*

*‘Because you cried out in your sleep.’*

*I felt her hand stroking my forehead, and tears came to my eyes. ‘Just an old man’s night-time fears,’ I said at last.*

*‘But I’m fine now. Go back to your son. Go back to sleep.’*

*I rose in the morning to find, as so often after a storm, that there was not a cloud in the sky. The island and river were bathed in brilliant sunshine. I*

*stepped away from Kusum's dwelling and saw others nearby. I walked a little farther and saw still more dwellings, scattered over cleared fields. These were huts, shacks and shanties built with the usual materials of the tide country – mud, thatch and bamboo – yet a pattern was evident here: these dwellings had not been laid out at random.*

*What had I expected? A mere jumble, perhaps, untidy heaps of people, piled high upon each other? That is, after all, what the word 'rifugi' has come to mean. But what I saw was quite different from the picture in my mind's eye. Paths had been laid; the bādh – that guarantor of island life – had been augmented; little plots of land had been enclosed with fences; fishing nets had been hung up to dry. There were men*

*and women sitting outside their huts, repairing their nets and stringing their crab lines with bits of bait and bone.*

*Such industry! Such diligence! Yet it was only a few weeks since they had come.*

*Taking in these sights, I felt the onrush of a strange, heady excitement: suddenly it dawned on me that I was watching the birth of something new, something hitherto unseen. This, I thought, is what Daniel Hamilton must have felt when he stood upon the deck of his launch and watched the mangroves being shorn from the islands. But between what was happening at Morichjhāpi and what Hamilton had done there was one vital aspect of difference: this was not one man's vision. This dream had been dreamt by*

*the very people who were trying to make it real.*

*I could walk no more. I stood transfixed on the still-wet pathway, leaning on my umbrella while the wind snatched at my crumpled dhoti. I felt something changing within me: how astonishing it was that I, an ageing, bookish schoolmaster, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without!*

*I felt all of existence swelling in my veins. Letting my umbrella drop, I flung back my head to open myself to the wind and the sun. It was as though in the course of one night I had cast away the emptiness I had so long held in my arms.*

*In great excitement, I went back to*

*Kusum's door.*

*'What's the matter, Saar?' she said in alarm. 'Why are your clothes muddy, your face red? Where have you left your umbrella?'*

*'Never mind all that,' I said, impatiently. 'Tell me, who is in charge? Is there a committee? Are there leaders?'*

*'Yes, of course. Why?'*

*'I want to meet with them.'*

*'Why, Saar?'*

*'Because I want to have some part in what is happening here. I want to be of help.'*

*'Saar, if that's what you want, who am I to say no?'*

*The island, she said, had been divided into wards. People in charge of each of these wards took decisions and helped organize every essential activity.*

*'Take me to the head of your ward,' I said, and she led me to a door a short distance away.*

*The leader of the ward was a sharp, energetic man, no dreamer, and not someone to put up with trespasses on his time: in his demeanour I glimpsed the euphoric reticence of someone who knows that success is within reach. Of course he was busy, but when he heard I was a headmaster – although soon to be retired – he took the time to show me around. We walked along the newly cleared paths and he pointed out all that had been done in the weeks since they had first arrived. I was amazed, not just by what they had built but the care they had invested in creating organizations, institutions. They had set up their own government and*

*taken a census – there were some thirty thousand people on the island already and there was space for many more.*

*The island had been divided into five zones and each family of settlers had been given five acres of land. Yet, they had also recognized, shrewdly enough, that their enterprise could not succeed if they didn't have the support of their neighbours on the surrounding islands. With this in mind they had reserved one quarter of the island for people from other parts of the tide country. Hundreds of families had come flocking in.*

*At the end of the brief tour, I clasped my guide's hand: 'Destiny is on your side, comrade.'*

*He smiled and said, 'But still, we cannot succeed without help.'*

*It was clear at once that he was thinking of all the ways in which I might be of use to him. This impressed me. It was a good sign, I thought, that he was applying his mind in this practical way.*

*'I want to be of help,' I said. 'Tell me what I can do.'*

*'That depends,' he said. 'What's most important to us at this time is to mobilize public opinion, to bring pressure on the government, to get them to leave us alone. They're putting it out that we're destroying this place; they want people to think we're gangsters who've occupied this place by force. We need to let people know what we're doing and why we're here. We have to tell the world about all we've done and all we've achieved. Can you help us with this? Do you have contacts with the press in*

*Calcutta?'*

*I didn't begrudge him his attitude; it seemed to me he was right to take this approach. 'There was a time once', I said regretfully, 'when I knew people in the press. But no more.'*

*'Then do you know anyone with power? Policemen? Forest Rangers? Politicians?'*

*'No,' I said. 'No one.'*

*'Then what can you do for us?' he said, growing peevish. 'Of what use could you be?'*

*What use indeed, was I? There are people in this world who are truly useful, who lead useful lives: Nilima for instance. But a schoolteacher such as me?*

*'There's only one thing I know to do,' I said. 'And that is to teach.'*

*‘Teach?’ I could see he was struggling to suppress a smile. ‘What could you teach here?’*

*‘I could teach your children about this place that you’ve come to: the tide country. I have time – I am soon to retire.’*

*He lost interest in me. ‘Our children here have no time to waste,’ he said.*

*‘Most of them have to help their families find food to eat.’ Then, after a little more thought, he added, ‘However, if you can find pupils who’re willing, then why should I prevent you? It’s up to you: teach all you want.’*

*I went back to Kusum triumphantly and told her what had transpired. In evident alarm, she said, ‘But whom will you teach, Saar?’*

*‘Why?’ I said. ‘There’s your son, Fokir. There must be others like him. Mustn’t there?’ A look of reluctance had come into her face, so I added, almost pleading: ‘It wouldn’t be every day. Maybe just for a little while, each week. I’ll come over from Lusibari.’*

*‘But, Saar,’ she said, ‘Fokir can’t write nor read, and that’s true of many of these children. What will you teach them?’*

*I hadn’t given this matter any thought, but the answer came to me at once. I said, ‘Kusum, I’ll teach them to dream.’*