

Storms

(pp. 201-206)

I would have gone back to Morichjhāpi the very next week but was prevented by all the usual procedures and ceremonies that accompany a schoolmaster's retirement. At the end, however, it was all over and I was officially reckoned a man who had reached the completion of his working life.

A few days later Horen knocked on my study door. 'Saar!'

'I've just come from the market at Kumirmari,' he said. 'I met Kusum there and she insisted I bring her here.'

'Here!' I said with a start. 'To Lusibari?'

But why?'

'To meet with Mashima. The Morichjhāpi people want to ask Mashima for help.'

I understood at once: this too was a part of the settlers' efforts to enlist support. Yet I could have told them that in this instance it was unlikely to bear fruit.

'Horen, you should have stopped Kusum from coming,' I said. 'It'll serve no purpose for her to meet with Nilima.'

'I did tell her, Saar. But she insisted.'

'So where is she now?'

'She's downstairs, Saar, waiting to see Mashima. But look who I've brought upstairs.' He stepped aside and I saw now that Fokir had been lurking behind him all this while. 'I've got to go to the market, Saar, so I'll just leave him here

with you.' With that he went bounding down the stairs, leaving me alone with the five-year-old.

As a schoolteacher I was accustomed to dealing with children in the plural. Never having had a child of my own, I was unused to coping with them in the singular. Now, subjected to the scrutiny of a lone pair of wide-open, five-year-old eyes, I forgot everything I had planned to say. In a near panic I led the boy across the roof and pointed to the Raimangal's mohona.

'Look, comrade,' I said. 'Look. Follow your eyes and tell me. What do you see?'

I suppose, he was asking himself what I wanted. After looking this way and that, he said at last, 'I see the bādh, Saar.'

'The bādh? Yes, of course, the bādh.'

This was not the answer I had expected but I fell upon it with inexpressible relief. For the bādh is not just the guarantor of human life on our island; it is also our abacus and archive, our library of stories. So long as I had the bādh in sight, I knew I would not lack for something to say.

'Go on, comrade. Look again; look carefully. Let's see if you can pick out the spots where the embankment has been repaired. For each such repair I'll give you a story.'

Fokir lifted a hand to point. 'What happened there, Saar?'

'Ah, there. That breach happened twenty years ago, and it was neither storm nor flood that caused it. It was made by a man who wanted to settle a score with the family who lived next

door to his. In the depths of the night he made a hole in the dyke, thinking to drown his neighbour's fields. It never entered his mind to think that he was doing just as much harm to himself as to his enemy. That's why neither family lives here any more – for ten years afterwards nothing grew in their fields.'

'And there, Saar? What happened there?'

'That one began simply enough, with an exceptionally high tide, a kotal gon that came spilling over the top. The contract for the repairs was given to a man who was the brother-in-law of the head of the Panchayat. He swore he would fix it so that never again would a drop of water leak through. But they found later that the contractor had put in only half the materials he had been

paid for. The profits had been shared by many different brothers-in-law.'

'And over there, Saar?'

Even storytellers know that discretion is sometimes a wiser course than valour. 'As for that one, comrade, I had better not tell you too much. Do you see the people who live there, in those dwellings that run beside the embankment? It happened once that the people of that para had voted for the wrong party. So when the other party came to power they decided to settle scores. Their way of doing it was to make a hole in the bādh. Of such things, my friend, are politicians made, but let's not dwell on this too much – it may not be good for our health. Look there, instead; follow my finger.'

I pointed him in a direction where a kilometre length of the embankment had been beaten down, in the 1930s, by a storm.

'Imagine, Fokir,' I said. 'Imagine the lives of your ancestors. They were new to this island, freshly arrived in the tide country. After years of struggle they had managed to create the foundations of the bādh; they had even managed to grow a few handfuls of rice and vegetables. After years of living on stilt-raised platforms, they had finally been able to descend to earth and make a few shacks and shanties on level ground. All this by virtue of the bādh. And imagine that fateful night, when the storm struck, at exactly the time that a kotal gon was setting in; imagine how they cowered in their roofless huts and watched the

waters, rising, rising, gnawing at the mud and the sand they had laid down to hold the river off. Imagine what went through their heads as they watched this devouring tide eating its way through the earthworks, stalking them wherever they were. There was not one among them, I will guarantee you, my young friend, who would not rather have stood before a tiger than have looked into the maws of that tide.'

'Were there other storms, Saar?'

'Yes, many. Look there.' I pointed to an indentation in the island's shore, a place that looked as if some giant had bitten off a part of Lusibari's coast.

'Look. That was done by the storm of 1970. It was a bhangon, a breaking: the river tore off a four-acre piece of land and carried it away. In an instant

it was gone – its huts, fields, trees were all devoured.'

'Was that the worst storm of all, Saar?'

'No, comrade, no. The worst storm of all, they say, was long before my time. Long before the settlers first came to this island.'

'When, Saar?'

'It was in 1737. The Emperor Aurangzeb had died some thirty years before and the country was in turmoil. Calcutta was a new place then – the English had seized their opportunity and made it the main port of the east.'

'Go on, Saar.'

'It happened in October – that's always when the worst of them strike, October and November. Before the storm had even made landfall the tide country was hit by a huge wave, a wall of

water twelve metres in height. Can you imagine how high that is, my friend?

It would have drowned everything on your island and on ours too. Even we on this roof would have been under water.'

'No!'

'Yes, comrade, yes. There were people in Calcutta, Englishmen, who took measurements and recorded all the details. The waters rose so high that they killed thousands of animals and carried them upriver and inland. The corpses of tigers and rhinoceroses were found kilometres from the river, in rice-fields and in village ponds. There were fields covered with the feathers of dead birds. And as this monstrous wave was travelling through the tide country, racing towards Calcutta, something else happened – something unimaginable.'

'What, Saar, what?'

'The city was hit by an earthquake.'

'No!'

'Yes, my friend. Yes. That's one of the reasons why this storm became so famous. There are people, scientists, who believe there is a mysterious connection between earthquakes and storms. But this was the first known instance of these two catastrophes happening together.'

'So what happened, Saar?'

'In Kolkata tens of thousands of dwellings fell instantly to the ground – Englishmen's palaces as well as houses and huts. The steeple of the English church toppled over and came crashing down. They say there was not a building in the city left with four walls intact. Bridges were blown away,

wharves were carried off by the surging waters, godowns were emptied of their rice, and gunpowder in the armouries was scattered by the wind. On the river were many ships at anchor, large and small, from many nations. Among them there were two English ships of five hundred tons each. The wind picked them up and carried them over the tops of trees and houses; it threw them down half a kilometre from the river. People saw huge barges fluttering in the air like paper kites. They say that over twenty thousand vessels were lost that day, including boats, barges, dinghies and the like. And even among those that remained, many strange things happened.'

'What, Saar? What?'

'A French ship was driven on shore with some of its cargo intact. The day after the storm, the remaining members of the crew went out into the fields to try to salvage what they could from the wreckage. A crewman was sent down into one of the holds to see what had been spared. After he had been gone a while, his mates shouted to ask him what was taking him so long. There was no answer, so they sent another man. He too fell quickly silent, as did the man who followed him. Now a panic set in and no one else would agree to go until a fire had been lit to see what was going on. When the flame was kindled they saw that the hold was filled with water, and swimming in this tank was an enormous crocodile – it had killed those three men.'

'And this, my friend and comrade, is a true story, recorded in documents stored in the British Museum, the very place where Marx wrote Das Kapital.'

'But, Saar, it couldn't happen again, Saar, could it?'

I could see Fokir was trying to gauge the appetite of our rivers and I would have liked to put his young mind at rest. But I knew also that it would have been wrong to deceive him. 'My friend, not only could it happen again – it will happen again. A storm will come, the waters will rise, and the bādh will succumb, in part or in whole. It is only a matter of time.'

'How do you know, Saar?' he said quietly.

'Look at it, my friend, look at the bādh. See how frail it is, how fragile. Look at

the waters that flow past it and how limitless they are, how patient, how quietly they bide their time. Just to look at it is to know why the waters must prevail, later if not sooner. But if you're not convinced by the evidence of your eyes, then perhaps you will have to use your ears.'

'My ears?'

'Yes. Come with me.'

I led him down the stairs and across the fields. People must have stared to see us, me in my flapping white dhoti with my umbrella unfurled against the sun, and Fokir, in his ragged shorts, racing along at my heels. I went right up to the embankment and put my left ear against the clay. 'Now put your head on the bādh and listen carefully. Tell me what you hear and let's see if you can

guess what it is.'

'I hear a scratching sound, Saar,' he said in a while. 'It's very soft.'

'But what is making this sound?'

He listened a while longer and then his face lit up with a smile. 'Are they crabs, Saar?'

'Yes, Fokir. Not everyone can hear them but you did. Even as we stand here, untold multitudes of crabs are burrowing into our bādh. Now ask yourself: how long can this frail fence last against these monstrous appetites – the crabs and the tides, the winds and the storms? And if it falls, who shall we turn to then, comrade?'

'Who, Saar?'

'Who indeed, Fokir? Neither angels nor men will hear us, and, as for the animals, they won't hear us either.'

‘Why not, Saar?’

‘Because of what the Poet says, Fokir.

Because the animals

“already know by instinct

50 evidenziatori

we’re not comfortably at home

in our translated world”.’

Besieged

(pp. 252-255)

A few days after my trip to Garjontola, Nilima returned from her travels, full of news of the world outside. Almost in passing, she said, 'And as for Morichjhāpi, there are soon going to be developments.'

My ears pricked up. 'What developments?'

'The government is going to take measures. Very strong measures.'

I said nothing, but began to wonder if there was any way I could get word to Kusum, to warn the settlers. As it turned out, no warning was possible.

The very next day the government announced that all movement in and out of Morichjhāpi was banned under the provisions of the Forest Preservation Act. What was more, Section 144, the law used to quell civil disturbances, was imposed on the whole area: this meant it was a criminal offence for five people or more to gather in one place.

As the day wore on, waves of rumours came sweeping down our rivers; it was said that dozens of police boats had encircled the island, tear gas and rubber bullets had been used, the settlers had been forcibly prevented from bringing rice or water to Morichjhāpi, boats had been sunk, people had been killed. The rumours grew more and more disturbing as the day passed; it was as if war

had broken out in the quiet recesses of the tide country.

For Nilima's sake I tried to keep up appearances, to present as normal a front as I could. But I could not sleep that night and by the time morning came, I knew I would make my way to Morichjhāpi in whatever way I could, even at the expense of a confrontation with Nilima. But fortunately that contingency did not arise – not yet, anyway. Early in the morning a group of schoolmasters came to see me; they had heard the same rumours I had, and they too had become concerned. So much so, that they had hired a bhotbhoti to take them to Morichjhāpi to see if any intercession was possible. They asked if I wanted to join them, and I was only too glad to say yes.

We left at about ten in the morning and were in view of our destination within a couple of hours. I should say here that Morichjhāpi is a large island, one of the biggest in the tide country: its coastline is probably almost twenty kilometres in length. When we were within sight of the island, but still a good two or three kilometres away, we saw clouds of smoke rising above it.

Not long afterwards we spotted official motorboats patrolling the rivers. The owner of our bhotbhoti now became quite concerned and we had to plead with him to take us a little closer. He agreed to do so, but only on the condition that we stay close to the near shore, as far as possible from the island. And so we proceeded, hugging this shore,

while all our eyes were turned in the other direction, towards Morichjhāpi.

Soon we drew close to a village. A great number of people had gathered on the shore and they were busily loading a boat – not a bhotbhoti or a sailboat, but a plain country nouko of the kind Horen owned. Even from a distance we could see that the boat was being stocked with a cargo of provisions – sacks of grain, and jerrycans of drinking water. Then a number of people climbed into the boat, mainly men, but also a few women and children; some, no doubt, were day labourers who'd gone to work on some other island and been unable to return home. As for the others, perhaps they were people who had been separated from their families and were trying to get back to their

homes in Morichjhāpi. Whatever their reasons for going, clearly they were pressing enough to make them take the risk of cramming themselves into that frail craft. By the time the boat was pushed into the water there must have been a good two dozen people sitting huddled inside. The boat wobbled as it drifted out into the currents; it was so heavily loaded that it seemed incredible that it would actually stay afloat.

Watching from a distance, we speculated excitedly: these settlers were evidently hoping to slip through the police cordon with some provisions, to bring relief to their fellow islanders. What would the police do? Everyone offered a different theory.

Then, as if to put an end to our speculations, a police speedboat came

roaring down the Bagna River. Moving at great speed, it drew level with the settlers' rowboat and began to circle around it. There was a loudspeaker on the police boat, and even though we were a good distance away, snatches of the policemen's orders reached us across the waters: they were telling the settlers to turn back, to return to the shore they had come from. What was said in answer, we could not hear, but we could tell from the gesticulations of the people on the boat that they were pleading with the policemen to let them proceed.

This had the effect of enraging the policemen who now began to scream into their loudspeaker. Suddenly, like a thunderclap, came the noise of a gunshot, fired into the air.

Surely the settlers would turn back

now? In our hearts we prayed they would. But what happened instead was something unforeseen: the people in the boat began to shout in unison, 'Amra kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed.'

How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. It seemed at that moment, not to be a shout of defiance, but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves, but on behalf of a bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong? And as I listened to the sound of those syllables, it was as if I were hearing the deepest uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides. Who was I? Where did I belong? In Calcutta or in

the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?

Then we heard the settlers shouting a refrain, answering the questions they had themselves posed: 'Morichjhāpi chharbona. We'll not leave Morichjhāpi, do what you may.'

Standing on the deck of the bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave.

I joined my feeble voice to theirs: 'Morichjhāpi chharbona!'

It had not struck me to ask how the policemen, in their motorboat, would interpret these cries. The motorboat, which had been idling for a few minutes, started up its engine. Its bow came around and it began to move away from the settlers. At first it seemed the po-

licemen might have decided to look the other way and let the boat pass.

That their intention was utterly otherwise became clear when the motorboat wheeled around in the water. Picking up speed, it came shooting towards the wobbling nouko with its boatload of passengers and provisions. It hit the boat square in the middle: in front of our eyes the timbers flew apart. Suddenly the water was full of struggling men, women and children.

It occurred to me that Kusum and Fokir might be on that boat. My heart stopped.

On our bhotbhoti, we shouted to the pilot to move closer so that we could be of help. He was hesitant, afraid of the police, but we persuaded him that the police would not harm a group of

schoolmasters, that he had nothing to fear.

We edged closer, moving slowly so as not to hit anyone in the water. Leaning over the side, we extended our hands and pulled in one, two, a dozen people. The water fortunately was not deep, and many were able to wade ashore.

I asked one of the men we had pulled in, 'Do you know Kusum Mandol? Was she on the boat?'

He knew her; he shook his head. She was still on the island, he told me, and I was giddy with relief. Little did I know how things were shaping up there.

Soon the policemen came speeding up to us. 'Who are you people?' they demanded to know. 'What are you doing here?'

They paid no heed to answers; they told us that with Section 144 having been declared, we could be arrested for unlawful assembly.

We were just schoolmasters, most of the men had families, children. We quailed; we went to the shore to drop off the people we had pulled from the water and then we turned back.

My pen is out of ink and I must switch to my pencil stub. Every footstep I hear is a reminder that Kusum and Horen will soon be back, and that Horen will want to leave at once. But I cannot stop. There's too much to tell.

Crimes

(pp. 260-262)

The siege went on for many days and we were powerless to affect the outcome. All we heard were rumours: that despite careful rationing, food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tubewells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out.

‘One of the settlers managed to get through the police cordon by swimming across the Gāral River – an amazing feat in its own right. But not content

with that, the young man had somehow made his way to Calcutta where he talked at length to the newspapers. A furore erupted, citizens’ groups filed petitions, questions were asked in the legislature and finally the High Court ruled that barricading the settlers was illegal; the siege would have to be lifted.

The settlers, it seemed, had won a notable victory. The day after the news reached us, I saw Horen waiting near the bādh. Neither he nor I needed to say anything: I packed my jhola and went down to his boat. We set off.

There was a lightness in our hearts now; we thought we would find the people of Morichjhāpi celebrating, in a spirit of vindication. But such was not the case: on getting there we saw that the siege had taken a terrible toll. And

even though it had been lifted now, the police were not gone; they continued to patrol the island, urging the settlers to abandon their homes.

It was terrible to see Kusum: her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of a drum, and she was too weak to rise from her mat. Fokir, young as he was, appeared to have weathered the siege in better health and it was he who was looking after his mother.

Summing up the situation, I assumed that Kusum had starved herself in order to feed Fokir. But the truth was not quite so simple. For much of the time, Kusum had kept Fokir indoors, fearing to let him out because of the swarming police. But from time to time he had managed to go outside and catch a few crabs and fish. These, at Kusum's

insistence, he had mainly eaten himself, while she had subsisted on a kind of wild green known as jadu-palong. Palatable enough at first, these leaves had proved deadly in the end, for they had caused severe dysentery. That, on top of the lack of proper nutrition, had been terribly debilitating.

Fortunately, we had taken the precaution of buying some essential provisions on the way – rice, daal, oil – and we now occupied ourselves in storing these in Kusum's dwelling. But Kusum would have none of it. She roused herself from her mat, and hefted some of the bags on her shoulders. Fokir and Horen were made to pick up the others.

'Wait,' I said. 'What are you doing? Where are you taking those? They're meant for you.'

'I can't keep them, Saar; we're rationing everything. I have to take them to the leader of my ward.'

Although I could see the point of this, I persuaded her that she did not need to part with every last handful of rice and daal. To put aside a little for herself would not be immoral, given she was a mother with a child to provide for.

As we were measuring out the cupfuls she would keep for herself, she began to cry. The sight of her tears came as a shock to both Horen and me. Kusum had never till now shown any flagging in courage and confidence; to see her break down was unbearably painful. Fokir went to stand behind her, putting an arm around her neck, while Horen sat beside her and patted her shoulder. I alone was frozen, unable to respond ex-

cept in words.

'What is it, Kusum?' I said. 'What are you thinking of?'

'Saar,' she said, wiping her face, 'the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world." Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?

Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things, it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No

one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil.'

Her words, and the sight of her wasted face, affected me so much – useless schoolmaster that I am – that my head reeled and I had lie down on a mat.

A Killing

(pp. 289-295)

The *Megha's* cabins were each outfitted with a raised platform that could be used as a bunk. By piling blankets, pillows and sheets on this ledge, Kanai was able to make himself a bed that was reasonably comfortable, although far from luxurious. He was fast asleep when he was woken by the sound of voices, both near and distant. Reaching for his torch, he shone the beam on his watch and discovered it was 3 a.m. The voices of Horen and his grandson were now clearly audible, on the upper deck,

joined in excited speculation.

Kanai had gone to sleep in a *lungi* and vest, and now, as he pushed his blankets aside, was surprised to find a distinct chill in the air. He decided to wrap a blanket around his shoulders before stepping out of his cabin. Horen and his grandson were close by, leaning on the rails and watching the shore.

‘What’s happened?’ said Kanai.

‘It’s not clear,’ came the answer, ‘but something seems to be going on in the village.’

The flood tide had set in some hours before, and with the boat anchored in midstream there was now close to a kilometre of water between them and the shore. The night was advanced enough for cottony clouds of mist

to have arisen from the water's surface: although much thinner than the dense fog of dawn, it had still obscured the outlines of the shore. Through this shimmering screen, glowing points of orange flame could be seen moving quickly, here and there, as if to suggest that people were running along the shore with burning torches. The villagers' voices could be heard clearly in the distance, despite the mist's muffling effect.

Even Horen and his grandson were at a loss to think of a reason why so many people would bestir themselves so energetically at this time of night.

Kanai felt a touch on his elbow and turned to see Piya standing beside him, rubbing her knuckles in her eyes. 'What's up?'

'We're all wondering.'

'Let's ask Fokir.'

Kanai went to the *bhotbhoti*'s stern, with Piya following close behind, and shone his flashlight into the boat below. Fokir was awake, sitting huddled in the centre of his boat, with a blanket draped around him. He held up an arm to shield his face and Kanai switched off the beam before leaning over to speak to him.

'Does he know what's going on?' Piya inquired.

'No. But he's going to take his boat across, to find out. He says we can go with him if we like.'

'Sure.'

They climbed in, and Horen came to join them, leaving his grandson in charge of the *bhotbhoti*.

It took some fifteen minutes to cross over, and as they approached the shore, it became clear that the commotion had a distinct focus: it seemed a crowd was congregating around exactly that part of the village where Horen's relatives lived. As the shore neared, the voices and shouts rose in volume, until they had fused into a pulsing, angry sound.

The noise inspired a peculiar dread in Kanai, and he said, on an impulse, 'Piya, I don't know if we should go any farther.'

'Why not?'

'Do you know what those voices remind me of?' said Kanai.

'A crowd?'

'A mob is what I would call it – an angry mob.'

'A mob?' said Piya. 'In a small village?'

'I know it's the last thing you'd expect,' said Kanai. 'But if I were just to listen to my ears, I'd say it was a riot and I've been in riots where people were killed. I have a feeling we're heading into something like that.'

Narrowing her eyes, Piya scanned the shimmering mist. 'Let's just take a look.'

Although the tide had peaked some hours before, the water was still high and Fokir had no trouble pushing his boat's prow beyond the river's muddy edge. Ahead lay a slope of damp earth, shaded with mangroves and carpeted with roots and seedlings. Fokir had steered the boat close to the point where the crowd had gathered, and

beyond the shadow of the embankment the mist was lit by the orange glow of the massed torches.

Kanai and Piya were picking their way through the mangroves when Horen waved them to a stop. He took the flashlight out of Kanai's hand and shone it down at his feet. Going over to join him, Kanai and Piya saw that the beam had settled on a mark in the ground. The earth here was neither dry nor wet but pliable, like clay, and it had preserved a stencil-like impression. Neither Kanai nor Piya had any doubt of what it was: the prints were as clearly marked as those of a kitten, daubed on a kitchen floor – only many times larger. The shape was so sharply defined that they could see the very texture of the circular pads

and the marks made by the retracted claws. Then Horen shone the beam ahead, and they saw a trail of similar depressions, leading up towards the embankment from the shore. From the trajectory of the marks, it was easy to plot the animal's path: it had crossed over from the forested bank on the far shore of the river and had touched land at almost the same point as their boat.

Piya said, 'It must have passed within sight of the *Megha*.'

'I suppose so – but since we were all asleep, it was in no danger of being spotted.'

When they neared the crest of the embankment Horen pointed to a large mark in the dust and gestured to indicate that this was the place

from which the animal had surveyed the village and picked out its prey. Then he made a sign to show that it was probably from here that it had sprung to attack. The old man was beside himself with anxiety now and he went running ahead, with Fokir in close pursuit. Piya and Kanai were a few paces to their rear – and on reaching the top of the embankment their progress was brought to an abrupt halt by the spectacle that lay ahead. By the light of the torches they saw that the village was made up of clusters of mud huts, so arranged as to run parallel to the embankment. Directly in front of them, a few hundred metres away, was a small mud-walled structure with a thatched roof. More than a hundred people had

gathered around this little hut. Most of them were men and many were armed with sharpened bamboo poles: these they were plunging into the hut again and again. Their faces were contorted in such a way that they seemed to be in the grip of both extreme fear and uncontrollable rage. Many of the women and children in the crowd were shrieking, *Maar! Maar!* Kill! Kill!

Kanai spotted Horen on the edges of the crowd and he and Piya went to join him. 'Is this where your relatives live?' said Kanai.

'Yes,' said Horen, 'this is their place.'

'What's happened? What's going on?'

'Remember the buffalo giving birth?' Horen said. 'That's what started it. The big cat heard the sound across

the water. That's what brought it here.'

The hut ahead was a livestock pen, said Horen. It belonged to his relatives, who lived in a larger dwelling nearby. A scant half-hour before, the family had been awakened by a crashing sound, followed by frenzied cries from their livestock. They had looked out of a window and hadn't been able to see anything because of the darkness and the mist. But their ears told them all they needed to know: a large and powerful animal had jumped on top of the livestock pen and was trying to claw a hole in the straw roof. A moment later there was a crashing sound to indicate that the predator had succeeded in breaking into the pen.

There were six grown men in the house and they knew they had been presented with an opportunity unlikely ever to be repeated. This tiger was not new to their village; it had killed two people there and had long been preying on its livestock. Now, for the few minutes it was in the pen, it was vulnerable, because to make its escape it would have to leap vertically through the hole in the roof. Even for a tiger, this would not be a simple feat, not with a calf in its jaws.

The family had quickly gathered together a number of fishing nets. Then they had made their way outside and flung the nets over the thatch, piling them on, one on top of the other, and tying them down with heavy nylon crablines. When the tiger tried to

make its jump, it got entangled in the lines and fell back into the pen. It was struggling to free itself, when one of the boys thrust a sharpened bamboo pole through a window and blinded it.

Kanai had been translating continuously as Horen was speaking, but at this point Piya stopped him. In a shaking voice, she said, 'Do you mean to tell me the tiger's still in there?'

'Yes,' said Kanai, 'that's what he says. It's trapped inside and blinded.'

Piya shook her head as if to wake herself from a nightmare: the scene was so incomprehensible and yet so vivid that it was only now she understood that it was the incapacitated animal that was being attacked with the sharpened staves. She was still

absorbing this when the tiger gave voice, for the first time. Instantly, the people around the pen dropped their staves and scattered, shielding their faces as if from the force of a detonation; the sound was so powerful that Piya could feel it through the soles of her bare feet, as it echoed through the ground. For a moment nobody moved, and then, as it became clear the tiger was still trapped and helpless, the men snatched up their staves and attacked with redoubled fury.

Piya clutched Kanai's arm and shouted into his ear, 'We have to do something, Kanai. We can't let this happen.'

'I wish there was something we could do, Piya,' Kanai said. 'But I don't think there is.'

‘But we can try, Kanai,’ she pleaded.
‘Can’t we?’

Then Horen whispered something and Kanai took hold of Piya’s arm and tried to turn her away. ‘Listen, Piya, we should go back now.’

‘Go back? Go back where?’

‘Back to the *Megha*,’ said Kanai.

‘Why?’ said Piya. ‘What’s going to happen?’

‘Piya,’ said Kanai, tugging at her hand. ‘Whatever it is, it’s better you don’t stay here to see this.’

Piya looked into his face, illuminated by the torches. ‘What aren’t you telling me?’ she said. ‘What are they going to do?’

Kanai spat into the dust. ‘Piya, you have to understand – that animal’s been preying on this village for years.

It’s killed two people and any number of cows and goats—’

‘This is an animal, Kanai,’ Piya said. ‘You can’t take revenge on an animal.’

All around them now people were howling, their faces lit by the dancing flames: *Maar! Maar!* Kanai caught hold of her elbow and tried to lead her away. ‘It’s too late now, Piya. We should both go.’

‘Go?’ said Piya. ‘I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to put a stop to this.’

‘Piya,’ said Kanai. ‘You’re dealing with a mob here. They could turn on us too, you know. We’re outsiders.’

‘So you’re just going to stand by and let it happen?’

‘There’s nothing we can do, Piya.’ Kanai was shouting now. ‘Be reasonable. Let’s go.’

‘You can go if you like,’ she said, shaking off his hand. ‘But I’m not going to run off like a coward. If you’re not going to do anything about this, then I will. And Fokir will – I know he will. Where is he?’

Kanai lifted a finger to point. ‘There. Look.’

Rising on tiptoe, Piya saw that Fokir was in the front ranks of the crowd, helping a man sharpen a bamboo pole. Elbowing Kanai aside, she plunged into the throng and fought her way through to Fokir. There was a sudden surge of people around them and she was pushed up against the man who was standing next to Fokir. Now, at close quarters, she saw in the dancing light of the flame, that the man’s spear-point was stained

with blood and that there were bits of black and gold fur stuck between the splinters. It was as if she could see the animal cowering inside the pen, recoiling from the bamboo spears, licking the wounds that had been gouged into its flesh. Reaching for the spear, she snatched it from the man’s hands and placed her foot on it, breaking it in two.

For a moment the man was too surprised to respond. Then he began to shout at the top of his voice, shaking his fist in Piya’s face. In a minute, he was joined by some half-dozen others – young men, with shawls wrapped around their heads, shouting words she could not understand. She felt a hand closing on her elbow and looked around to find Fokir standing

behind her. At the sight of him, her heart lifted and she was assailed by both hope and a sense of relief: she was certain he would know what to do, that he would find a way to put a stop to what was going on. But instead of coming to her aid, he put his arm around her, pinning her to his chest. He carried her away, retreating through the crowd as she kicked his knees and clawed at his hands. Then she saw a knot of flame arcing over the crowd and falling on the thatch: almost at once, branches of flame sprouted from the roof of the pen. There was another roar and this was matched a moment later by the voices of the crowd, screaming in a kind of maddened bloodlust, *Maar! Maar!* The flames leapt up and people began

to stoke them with sticks and straw. Piya began to scream as she tried to throw off Fokir's grip. 'Let me go! Let me go!'

But instead of unloosing her, he turned her around, pinned her to his body and half-dragged and half-carried her to the embankment. In the light of the leaping flames she saw that Kanai and Horen were already standing there. They gathered around her and led her down the embankment towards the boat.

Stumbling down the bank, she managed to control herself to the point where she was able to say, in an icy voice, 'Fokir! Let me go. Kanai, tell him to let me go.'

Fokir loosened his grip, but gingerly, and as she stepped away from him,

he made a motion as if to prevent her from running back towards the village.

She could hear the flames crackling in the distance and she smelled the reek of burning fur and flesh. Then Fokir said something to her directly, in her ear, and she turned to Kanai: ‘What was that? What did he say?’

‘Fokir says, you shouldn’t be so upset.’

‘How can I not be upset? That’s the

most horrifying thing I’ve ever seen – a tiger set on fire.’

‘He says, when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die.’

She turned on Fokir, covering her ears with both hands. ‘Stop it. I don’t want to hear any more of this. Let’s just go.’

Interrogations

(pp. 296-302)

Daylight was breaking when they stepped back on the *Megha*, and Horen lost no time in drawing the anchor and starting the engine. It was best to get away quickly, he said; there was bound to be trouble once the news of the killing reached the Forest Department. In the past, similar incidents had led to riots, shootings and large-scale arrests.

As the *bhotbhoti* was making its turn, Kanai headed towards his cabin, to change, while Piya went, as if by habit, to her usual place at the head

of the upper deck. Kanai assumed she would be back 'on effort' in a matter of minutes. But when he came out again she was sitting slumped on the deck, leaning listlessly against a rail, and he knew from her posture that she had been crying.

He went to sit beside her. 'Look, Piya,' he said, 'don't torment yourself with this. There's nothing we could have done.'

'We could have tried.'

'It would have made no difference.'

'I guess.' She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. 'Anyway, Kanai,' she said, 'I feel I owe you an apology.'

'For what you said back there?' Kanai smiled. 'That's all right – you had every right to be upset.'

She shook her head. 'No – it's not just that.'

'Then?'

'Do you remember what you were telling me yesterday?' she said. 'Fact is, you were right and I was wrong.'

'I'm not sure what you're talking about.'

'You know,' said Piya. 'What you said about there being nothing in common between—?'

'You and Fokir?'

'Yes,' said Piya. 'You were right. I was just being stupid. I guess it took something like this for me to get it straight.'

Kanai choked back the first triumphant comment that came to his mind, and said instead, in as neutral a voice as he could muster, 'And how

did this revelation come to be granted to you?'

'By what just happened,' said Piya. 'I couldn't believe Fokir's response.'

'But what did you expect, Piya?' Kanai said. 'Did you think he was some kind of grass-roots ecologist? He's not. He's a fisherman – he kills animals for a living.'

'I understand that,' said Piya. 'I'm not blaming him; I know this is what he grew up with. It's just, I thought somehow he'd be different.'

Kanai placed a sympathetic hand on her knee. 'Let's not dwell on this,' he said. 'After all, you have a lot of work to do.'

She raised her head and forced a smile.

The *Megha* had been under way for about an hour when a grey motorboat roared past it. Piya was in the bow with her binoculars and Kanai was sitting in the shade. They moved to the gunwale to watch as the boat sped downriver and they saw it was filled with khaki-uniformed forest guards. It seemed to be heading in the direction of the village they had left.

Horen came to join them and said something that made Kanai laugh. 'According to Horen,' Kanai explained to Piya, 'if you're caught between a pirate and a forester, you should always give yourself up to the pirate. You'll be safer.'

Piya nodded wryly, recalling her own experience with the forest guard. 'What do you think they're going to

do to that village?' she said.

Kanai shrugged. 'There'll be arrests, fines, beatings. Who knows what else?'

Another hour went by and then, while crossing a mohona, they spotted a small flotilla of grey motorboats. These were heading in the same direction as the motorboat they had passed earlier.

'Wow!' said Piya. 'Looks like they mean business.'

'I'm sure they do.'

Suddenly one of the motorboats parted company with the others and swung around. As it picked up speed it became clear that it had set its course to intercept the *Megha*. On catching sight of it Horen thrust his

head out of the wheelhouse and spoke urgently to Kanai.

‘Piya, you’ve got to go to your cabin,’ said Kanai. ‘Horen says there’ll be trouble if they find you on the boat. It’s something to do with your being a foreigner and not having the right kind of permit.’

‘OK.’ Piya carried her backpack to her cabin and pulled the door shut. She lay down on her bunk and listened to the sound of the motorboat’s engine as it grew gradually louder. When it was cut off, she knew the boat had pulled up alongside. She heard people conversing in Bengali, politely at first and then with increasing acrimony: Kanai’s voice was counterpointed against a number of others.

A good hour passed. Arguments

went back and forth and voices rose and fell. Piya was glad she had a bottle of water with her, for the cabin grew steadily hotter as the day advanced.

At length the voices died down and the motorboat pulled away. A knock sounded on Piya’s door just as the *Megha*’s engine was coming alive again. She was relieved to find Kanai standing outside.

‘What was all *that* about?’ she said.

Kanai made a face. ‘Apparently they’d heard a foreigner was at the village yesterday when the tiger was killed. They’re very exercised about it.’

‘Why?’

‘They said it’s a security risk for a foreigner to be wandering about so close to the border, without a guard.

But my feeling is that they just don't want the news to get out.'

'About the killing?'

'Yes,' Kanai nodded. 'It makes them look bad. Anyway, it seems they know you're at large in these parts and now they're on the lookout. They kept asking if we'd seen you.'

'What did you say?'

Kanai smiled. 'Horen and I adopted a policy of unyielding denial. It seemed to be working until they spotted Fokir. One of the guards recognized him and said you were last seen on his boat.'

'Oh my God!' said Piya. 'Was it a kind of weasel-looking guy?'

'Yes,' said Kanai. 'That's the one. I don't know what he told the others, but they were all set to drag Fokir off

to jail. Fortunately I was able to persuade them to change their minds.'

'And how did you do that?'

Kanai's voice became very dry. 'Shall we say I mentioned the names of a few friends and parted with a few notes?'

She guessed his ironic tone was intended to downplay the seriousness of the situation and she was suddenly grateful for his calm, urbane presence. What would have happened if he hadn't been there? She knew that in all likelihood she would have ended up on one of those official motorboats.

She put a hand on Kanai's arm.

'Thank you. I appreciate it. I really do. And I'm sure Fokir does too.'

Kanai acknowledged this by dipping his head ironically. 'Always glad to oblige.' In a graver tone of voice, he added, 'However, I do have to say, Piya, you really should think seriously of turning back. If they find you, there could be trouble. You could end up in jail and there's not much I or anyone else could do. The proximity of the border changes everything.'

Piya looked into the distance as she considered this. She thought of Blyth and Roxburgh and the naturalists who had crossed these waters a hundred years before and found them teeming with cetaceans. She thought of all the years in between when, for one reason or another, no one had paid any heed to these creatures and so no one had known of their decima-

tion. It had fallen to her to be the first to carry back a report of the current situation and she knew she could not turn back from the responsibility.

'I can't return right now, Kanai,' she said. 'It's hard to explain to you how important my work is. If I leave, who knows how long it'll be before another cetologist can come here? I've got to stay as long as I possibly can.'

Kanai frowned. 'And what if they take you off to jail?'

Piya shrugged. 'How long could they keep me, anyway? And when they let me out, the material will still be in my head.'

At midday, with the sun blazing overhead, Piya took a break and came to sit beside Kanai in the shade of the

awning. There was a troubled look in her eyes that prompted Kanai to say, 'Are you still thinking about the forest guards?'

This seemed to startle her. 'Oh, no. Not that.'

'Then?'

She tipped her head back to drink from her water bottle. 'The village,' she said, wiping her mouth. 'Last night: I still can't get it out of my head. I keep seeing it, again and again – the people, the flames. It was like something from some other time – before recorded history. I feel like I'll never be able to get my mind around the—'

Kanai prompted her as she faltered. 'The horror?'

'The horror. Yes. I wonder if I'll ever

be able to forget it.'

'Probably not.'

'But for Fokir and Horen and the others – it was just a part of everyday life, wasn't it?'

'I imagine they've learned to take it in their stride, Piya. They've had to.'

'That's what haunts me,' said Piya. 'In a way that makes them a part of the horror too, doesn't it?'

Kanai snapped shut the notebook: 'To be fair to Fokir and Horen, I don't think it's quite that simple, Piya. I mean, aren't we a part of the horror as well? You and me and people like us?'

Piya ran a hand through her hair. 'I don't see how.'

'That tiger had killed two people, Piya,' Kanai said. 'And that was just in one village. It happens every week

that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too – that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?

'But Kanai,' Piya retorted, 'everywhere in the world dozens of people are killed every day – on roads, in cars, in traffic. Why is this any worse?'

'Because we're complicit in this, Piya, that's why.'

Piya dissociated herself with a

shake of the head 'I don't see how I'm complicit.'

'Because it was people like you,' said Kanai, 'who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who're dying – after all, they are the poorest of the poor. But just ask yourself whether this would be allowed to happen anywhere else? There are more tigers living in America, in captivity, than there are in all of India – what do you think would happen if they started killing human beings?'

‘But Kanai,’ said Piya, ‘there’s a big difference between preserving a species in captivity and keeping it in its habitat.’

‘And what is that difference exactly?’

‘The difference, Kanai,’ Piya said slowly and emphatically, ‘is that it was what was *intended* – not by you or me, but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive. Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What’ll be left then? Aren’t we alone enough in the universe? And do you think it’ll stop at that? Once we decide we can kill off other species, it’ll be people next – just the kind of people you’re thinking of, people who’re poor and unnoticed.’

‘That’s all very well for you to say, Piya – but it’s not you who’s paying the price in lost lives.’

Piya challenged him. ‘Do you think I wouldn’t pay the price if I thought it necessary?’

‘You mean you’d be willing to die?’ Kanai scoffed. ‘Come on, Piya.’

‘I’m telling you the truth, Kanai,’ Piya said quietly. ‘If I thought giving up my life might make the rivers safe again for the Irrawaddy dolphin, the answer is yes, I would. But the trouble is that my life, your life, a thousand lives would make no difference.’

‘It’s easy to say these things—’

‘Easy?’ There was a parched weariness in Piya’s voice now. ‘Kanai, tell me, do you see anything easy about what I do? Look at me: I have no

home, no money and no prospects. My friends are thousands of kilometres away and I get to see them maybe once a year, if I'm lucky. And that's the least of it. On top of that is the knowledge that what I'm doing is more or less futile.'

She looked up and he saw that there were tears in her eyes. 'There's nothing easy about this, Kanai,' she said. 'You have to take that back.'

He swallowed the quick retort that had come to his lips. Instead, he reached for her hand and placed it

between his own. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have said that. I take it back.'

She snatched her hand away and rose to her feet. 'I'd better get back to work.'

As she returned to her place, he called out, 'You're a brave woman. Do you know that?'

She shrugged this off, in embarrassment. 'I'm just doing my job.'

Going Ashore

(pp. 377-381)

The tide should have been at a low ebb when the boat reached Garjontola, but because of the wind the level of the water was higher than Piya had ever seen it before. The gale was blowing so hard that it seemed to be holding the surface of the river at an incline: it was as if the water had been mounded into a sloping ramp that reached well past the island's banks. Fokir was able to take the boat over the barrier of mangrove roots, right into a thicket of tree trunks. Piya noticed that he had not steered the boat

to his usual Garjontola landing place; rather, he had taken it towards the most elevated point on the island, a headland that jutted into the river.

When the bow was just short of the tree trunks, Fokir vaulted over the gunwale to pull the boat deeper into the island. He put himself at the front end, where it was easier to manoeuvre. Piya went to the rear, so she could put her whole weight behind the stern. Between the two of them they were able to push the boat into a position where it was lodged between the trunks of several trees. Then Fokir jumped in again and removed the cover from the boat's rear hold. Piya climbed in too, to look over his shoulder, and saw that the hold and its contents had survived

the battering of the wind. Along with Fokir's stove and utensils, there were some nutrition bars and a couple of bottles of water rolling around inside. She stuffed the bars into the pocket of her jeans and handed Fokir one of the bottles of water. Although her throat was parched, she was careful to sip very sparingly from her bottle: there was no telling how long it might have to last.

Then Fokir took out the old sari he had once given Piya to use as a pillow. Sheltering the fabric with his body, he twisted it into a rope and gestured to Piya to tie it around her waist. She could not see the point of this but did it anyway. While she was doing this, Fokir reached into the hold again and took out the coiled line that he used

for catching crabs. He handed Piya the nylon roll and motioned to her to handle it carefully, because of the sharp edges of the bits of tile and bait that were attached to it. After they had stepped off the boat, he showed her how to pay out the line, while keeping the coils sheltered from the wind with her chest. He upturned the boat and ran the line through its timbers and around the trunks of the surrounding trees. Piya's job, she quickly realized, was only to see that the line stayed taut as it was paid out: any slack was instantly picked up by the wind, which threatened to turn the weights and the bait into vibrating projectiles.

In a few minutes, the line became a densely spun web, anchoring the boat

to the forest. Yet, despite the care he had taken, Fokir had not been able to keep the line's attachments out of his way. By the time he was done, his face and chest were crosshatched with nicks and cuts.

Now, he took hold of Piya's arm and led her deeper into the island, crouching low against the wind. They came to a tree that was, for a mangrove, unusually tall and thick-trunked. Fokir gestured to her to climb up and he followed at her heels as she pulled herself into the branches. When they were about three metres off the ground, he chose a sturdy branch and motioned to her to sit astride it, facing the trunk. Then he seated himself behind her, like a pillion rider on a motorcycle, and made a sign

to ask her for the rolled-up sari tied around her waist. She saw now what it was for – he was going to use it to tie them both to the tree trunk. She gave him one end of the fabric and helped him pass it around the trunk. After another turn, the sari was all paid out and Fokir tied its ends into a tight knot.

Powerful as it already was, the gale had been picking up strength all along. At a certain point its noise had reached such a volume that its very quality had undergone a change. It sounded no longer like the wind but like some other element – the usual blowing, sighing and rustling had turned into a deep, ear-splitting rumble, as if the earth itself had begun to move. The air was now filled with

what seemed to be a fog of flying debris – leaves, twigs, branches, dust and water. This dense concentration of flying objects further reduced the visibility in what was already a gathering darkness. The light was as dim as it might be at the approach of night, but Piya's watch told her it was just one in the afternoon. It was difficult to imagine that the wind could grow any stronger or more violent, yet Piya knew it would.

In his bare feet, with his body and clothes caked in mud, Kanai scrambled over the embankment and crouched low beneath it, to shelter himself from the wind. Drenched as he was, he became aware that the wind had grown colder as it picked

up strength; he wrapped his arms around his chest and looked up, shivering, at the sky.

Although it had lost all trace of blue, the sky was not uniformly dark: the clouds above were a multiplicity of shades, ranging from an ashen grey to a leaden blue-black. There seemed to be many distinct layers of cloud, each distinguished by a minute difference of shading, each travelling on its own trajectory. It was as though the sky had become a dark-tinted mirror for the waters of the tide country, with their myriad cross-cutting currents, eddies and whirlpools, all with their slight but still discernible distinctions of colouring.

The casuarina trees that lined the embankment were now bent almost

double in the wind and the fronds of the surrounding coconut palms had been twisted into flame-shaped knots. As a result, Kanai was able to look much further into the interior of the island than he might have in other circumstances. The hospital, being one of Lusibari's tallest structures, was easy to spot.

He started towards the hospital at a run but after a few steps was forced to slow down because the path was slippery and his bare feet kept sliding on the mud. For much of the distance he saw no one about – many of the islanders seemed to have abandoned their dwellings, while others had fortified themselves behind closed doors. But once the compound's gate came into view, Kanai saw that

streams of people were heading there, in order to take shelter inside the hospital – it was easy to see why, for there was something immensely reassuring about the building's squat solidity. Mostly these people were on foot, but a number were seated on cycle-vans, principally the elderly and the very young. Kanai joined the throng, and on stepping into the building's portico, he saw that a full-scale evacuation was under way.

Teams of nurses and other volunteers were at work, guiding patients down corridors and helping them climb the stairs that led to the fortified cyclone shelter on the upper floor.

At the far end of the ground-floor veranda stood the diminutive figure of a small boy. Winding his way

through the crowd, Kanai went up to him. 'Tutul?'

The boy didn't recognize him and made no answer, so Kanai squatted on his heels and said, 'Tutul, where's your mother?'

Tutul nodded at one of the wards, and just as Kanai was rising to go towards it Moyna came hurrying out, dressed in her white nurse's uniform. She stared at his wet *lungi* and mud-caked shirt: it was clear she hadn't recognized him.

'Moyna,' said Kanai. 'It's me, Kanai.'

She clapped a hand over her mouth as she took this in. 'But what happened to you, Kanai-babu?'

'Never mind that, Moyna,' he said. 'Listen. I have to tell you something —'

She cut him short. 'And where are *they* – my husband and the American?'

'That's what I was about to tell you, Moyna,' he said. 'They're at Garjontola – we had to leave them there.'

'You left them behind?' Her eyes flared in angry indignation. 'With the cyclone coming – you left them in the jungle?'

'It wasn't my decision, Moyna,' Kanai said. 'It was Horen who decided. He said there was nothing else to be done.'

'Oh?' The mention of Horen seemed to calm her a little. 'But what will they do out there, with no shelter, nothing?'

'They'll be all right, Moyna,' Kanai said. 'Fokir will know what to do,

don't worry. Others have survived storms on that island, his grandfather included.'

Moyna nodded, in resignation.

'There's nothing to be done now. All we can do is pray.'

'Horen wanted me to tell you he's going to go back for them as soon as the storm blows over. I'll be going too – he's going to come here to pick me up.'

'Tell him I want to come too,' said

Moyna, taking hold of Tutul's hand.

'Be sure to tell him.'

'I will,' said Kanai with a glance in the direction of the Guest House.

'And now I'd better go and see how Mashima is.'

'Take her upstairs to the Guest House,' Moyna said. 'I've closed the shutters. You'll be fine up there.'

The Wave

(pp. 382-390)

The minutes crept by and the objects flying through the air grew steadily larger. Where first there had been only twigs, leaves and branches, there were now whirling coconut palms and spinning tree trunks. Piya knew that the gale had reached full force when she saw something that looked like a whole island hanging suspended above their heads: it was a large clump of mangroves, held together by the trees' intertwined roots. Then Fokir's hand tightened on her shoulder and she caught a glimpse

of a shack spinning above them. She recognized it immediately: it was the shrine he had taken her to, in the interior of Garjontola. All at once the bamboo casing splintered and the images inside went hurtling off with the wind.

The stronger the gale blew, the more closely her body became attuned to the buffers between which she was sandwiched: the tree in front and Fokir behind. The branch they were sitting on was positioned so that it was on the sheltered side of the tree, pointing away from the wind. This meant that Piya and Fokir, sitting astride the branch, were facing in the direction of the wind, taking advantage of the 'shadow' created by the tree's trunk. But for this lucky

circumstance, Piya knew, they would have been pulverized by the objects the gale was hurling at them. She felt it in her bones every time a branch broke off or a flying object struck the tree; at times the wood would creak and shudder under the force of these collisions and the roll of fabric around her waist would bite into her skin. Without the sari they would long since have been swept off the branch.

Sitting behind her, Fokir had his fingers knotted around her stomach. His face rested on the back of her neck and she could feel his stubble on her skin. Soon her lungs adapted to the rhythm of his diaphragm as it pumped in and out of the declivity of her lower back. Everywhere their bodies met, their skin was joined by a

thin membrane of sweat.

Then the noise of the storm deepened and another roar made itself heard over the rumbling din of the gale, a noise like that of a cascading waterfall. Stealing a glance through her fingers, Piya glimpsed something that looked like a wall, hurtling towards them, from downriver. It was as if a city block had suddenly begun to move: the river was like pavement lying at its feet, while its crest reared high above, dwarfing the tallest trees. It was a tidal wave, sweeping in from the sea; everything in its path disappeared as it came thundering towards them. Piya's mind went blank as disbelief yielded to recognition. Up to this point there had been no time for terror, no time to absorb the re-

ality of the storm and to think about anything other than staying alive. But now it was as if death had announced its approach and there was nothing to do but to wait for its arrival. Her fingers went numb in fear, and she would have lost her hold on the tree, if Fokir hadn't taken her hands in his own and held them fast against the trunk. Piya felt his chest expand as he gulped in a deep draught of air, and she did the same, swallowing as deep a breath as she could manage.

And then it was as if a dam had broken over their heads. The weight of the rushing water bent the tree trunk almost double. Encircled in Fokir's arms, Piya felt herself being tipped over and then upended as the branch met the ground. All the while,

the water raged around them, circling furiously, pulling at their bodies as if it were trying to dismember them. The tree strained at its roots and it seemed that at any moment it would be torn from the earth and added to the storm of turbulence following the wave.

Piya knew, from the pressure in her lungs, that the water above them was at least three metres deep. The sari that had seemed like a godsend before, now became an anchor tethering them to the riverbed. Pulling her hands away from Fokir's grip, she began to tear at the knot so that they would be able to break free and rise to the surface. But instead of coming to her aid, Fokir took hold of her fingers and ripped them from the knot. His

whole weight was on her now, and he seemed to be fighting to keep her where she was. But she could not stop struggling – it was impossible to hold still when the air was almost gone from her lungs.

And then, even as she was struggling to slip out of Fokir's imprisoning grip, she felt the pressure of the water diminishing. The crest of the wave had moved on and the tree had begun to straighten itself. She opened her eyes and saw that there was light above, faint but discernible: it came closer and closer and suddenly, just as her lungs were about to burst, the tree snapped almost upright and their heads were above water. The crest of the wave having passed on, the trough had caught up, forcing the

water to subside a little: it fell not to its earlier level, but to a point just below their feet.

Rain was arrowing down from the sky as Kanai slipped out of the hospital and began to run towards the Guest House. The drops felt more like pellets than rain: they had the bite of liquid metal and each created a small crater in the mud.

There were no lights in Nilima's window, but this did not surprise Kanai. The Trust's generator had not been turned on all day, and to light a lantern was probably not worth the trouble because of the draughts and the wind.

He hammered on her door.
'Mashima! Are you there?' A minute

passed and he beat his fist on the door again: 'Mashima! It's me, Kanai.' He heard her fumbling with the latch and shouted. 'Be careful!'

The warning made no difference. The moment the latch came undone, the door was snatched out of her hand and slammed back against the wall. A stack of files fell off a shelf and a storm of paper went circling around the room. Nilima staggered back, shaking a wrenched wrist, and Kanai hurried to shut the door. Putting an arm around her, he led her to her bed.

'Does it hurt? How bad is it?'

'It'll be all right,' she said, putting her hands together on her lap. 'I'm so glad to see you, Kanai – I was getting very worried about you.'

'But why are you still down here?'

Kanai said urgently. 'You should be upstairs, in the Guest House.'

'Why there?'

'The river's bound to flood,' said Kanai. 'And you don't want to be trapped in here when it does. If the water gets high enough it'll be in here too.' He glanced around the room, assessing its contents. 'Let's spend a few minutes putting together your most essential things. Some we'll take upstairs with us; the rest we'll pile up on your bed. It's high enough that they'll be safe.'

Nilima pulled out a couple of suitcases and, working together, they quickly filled one with files and papers. Into the other went some clothes and such food as Nilima had

at hand in her small kitchen – a little rice, daal, sugar, oil and tea.

‘Now wrap some towels around yourself,’ Kanai said. ‘It’s raining so hard we’ll be soaked before we can get around the house, to the stairs.’

When Nilima was ready, he put the suitcases outside and let her through the door. The colour of the sky was even darker now and the lashing rain had churned the earth into mud.

Kanai pulled the door shut and locked it; then, with the suitcases in his hands and Nilima holding on to his elbow, he led her around to the stairs.

They were drenched by the time they reached the shelter of the stairwell, but the extra layers of covering had kept Nilima dry underneath. Unwinding the towels, she wrung

them out before following Kanai up the stairs. Once they stepped into the Guest House, the storm seemed suddenly to recede. With the shutters securely fastened, the wind could be heard but not felt: it was strangely pleasurable to be able to listen to it from within the safety of four solid walls.

Kanai put the suitcases down and reached for one of Nilima’s wrung-out towels. After drying his hair, he pulled off his mud-soaked shirt and wrapped the towel around his shoulders. Nilima, meanwhile, had seated herself at the dining table.

‘Kanai,’ she said, ‘where are the others? Piya? Fokir?’

‘We couldn’t find Piya or Fokir,’ Kanai said grimly. ‘We had to leave them

behind. We waited as long as we possibly could, and then Horen said we had to go. We're going to return tomorrow, to look for them.'

'So they're going to be outside?' Nilima said. 'During the storm?'

Kanai nodded. 'Yes. There was nothing to be done.'

'Let's hope—' Nilima didn't finish her sentence and Kanai cut in.

'And I have some other bad news.'

'What?'

'The notebook.'

'What about it?' she said, sitting up in alarm.

Kanai went around the table and sat beside her. 'I had it with me till this morning,' he said. 'I was bringing it back here but I slipped in the water, and it was swept out of my hands.'

Her mouth shaped itself into a horrified circle as she took this in.

'You can't imagine how I feel,' he said. 'I would have done anything to save it.'

She nodded, collecting herself. 'I know. Don't blame yourself,' she said softly. 'But tell me, Kanai, did you read it?'

'Yes.' He nodded.

She looked closely at him. 'And what was it about?'

'Many different things,' he said. 'History, poetry, geology – many things. But mainly it was about Morichjhāpi. He wrote all of it in the course of one day and the better part of a night. He must have finished writing just hours before the assault started.'

'So it doesn't describe the attack?'

‘No,’ said Kanai. ‘By that time he’d given it to Horen, who had left Morichjhāpi earlier that day, with Fokir. It was a lucky thing: that’s how it survived.’

‘What I don’t understand,’ Nilima said, ‘is how it got into his study.’

‘It’s a strange story,’ Kanai said. ‘Horen wrapped it up very carefully in plastic with the intention of sending it to me. But it got lost, then it was found again recently. Horen gave it to Moyna, who slipped it into the study.’

Nilima fell silent as she thought about this. ‘Tell me, Kanai,’ she said, ‘did Nirmal say why he didn’t leave the notebook to me?’

‘Not in so many words,’ Kanai said. ‘But I suppose he felt you wouldn’t be very sympathetic.’

‘Sympathetic?’ Rising angrily to her feet, Nilima began to pace the room. ‘Kanai, it’s not that I wasn’t sympathetic. It’s just that my sympathies had a narrower focus. I am not capable of dealing with the whole world’s problems. For me the challenge of making a few little things a little better in one small place is enough. That place for me is Lusibari. I’ve given it everything I can, and yes, after all these years, it has amounted to something. It’s helped people; it’s made a few people’s lives a little better. But that was never enough for Nirmal. For him it had to be all or nothing, and of course that’s what he ended up with – nothing.’

‘Except for the notebook,’ Kanai corrected her. ‘He did write that.’

‘And that’s gone too now,’ said Nilima.

‘No,’ said Kanai. ‘Not in its entirety. A lot of it is in my head, you know. I’m going to try to put it back together.’

Nilima put her hands on the back of his chair and looked into his eyes. ‘And after you’ve put together his notebook, Kanai,’ she said quietly, ‘will you put my side of it together too?’

Kanai could not fathom her meaning. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Kanai, the dreamers have everyone to speak for them,’ she said. ‘But those who’re patient, those who try to be strong, who try to build things – no one ever sees any poetry in that, do they?’

He was moved by the directness

of her appeal. ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I see it in you—’ Suddenly the dining table began to rattle and he was cut short. Somewhere in the distance was a rushing sound, powerful enough to make itself heard above the gale.

Kanai went to the shutters and put his eye to a chink between the slats of wood. ‘It’s the tidal surge,’ he said to Nilima. ‘It’s coming down the channel.’

A wall of water was shooting towards them. On its side, where it was cut off by the embankment, a huge plume of spray was shooting into the air. The island was filling with water, like a saucer tipped on its side, as the wave encircled it. Kanai and Nilima watched aghast as the water rose and kept rising, up the flight of stairs that

led into Nilima's flat, stopping just short of the door.

'It'll take a long time to get the water out of the soil again, won't it?' Kanai said.

'Yes, but people's lives matter more.' Nilima had inclined her head to catch a glimpse of the hospital. A row of people could be seen, on the second floor, braving the wind in order to look at the floodwaters.

'Just think of all the people who've been saved by that cyclone shelter,' Nilima said. 'And it was Nirmal who convinced us to build it. If it weren't for his peculiar interest in geology meteorology we would never have thought of it.'

'Really?'

'Yes,' said Nilima. 'Making us build

it was probably the most important thing he did in his whole life. You can see the proof of that today. But if you'd told him that, he'd have laughed. He'd have said, "It's just social service – not revolution."'

The diminution of the noise was the first indication of the eye's arrival. The sound didn't stop; it just pulled back a little, and as it retreated the wind slowed down and seemed almost to die. Piya opened her eyes and was amazed by what she saw. A full moon hung above them atop what seemed to be a whirling stovepipe that reached far into the heavens. The light of the moon, shining through this spinning tube, illuminated the still centre of the storm.

Stretching away from them, in every direction, as far as Piya's eye could reach, was a heaving carpet of leaves. Almost nothing was visible of the water's surface; the usual ripples, eddies and currents had disappeared under this layer of green. As for the island itself, it was entirely submerged, and its shape could be deduced only from the few thickets of trees whose uppermost reaches were still visible above water. These trees had a skeletal, forlorn look; few had any branches remaining and there was scarcely one that still had a leaf attached. Many had been snapped in half and reduced to shattered stumps.

A white cloud floated down from the sky and settled on the remnants of the drowned forest. It was a flock

of white birds, and they were so exhausted as to be oblivious of Piya and Fokir. Piya loosened the knot in the sari and pushed back from the tree to stretch her aching limbs. One of the birds was so close she was able to pick it up in her hands: it was trembling and she could feel the fluttering of its heart. Evidently the birds had been trying to stay within the storm's eye. How far had they flown? Piya could not imagine. Releasing the bird, she rested her back against the tree.

Fokir, she noticed, was already standing, balancing on the branch and stretching his legs. She had the impression that he was looking around urgently, searching for another branch to move to. But there was nothing in sight: their tree had

lost all its limbs except the one they were sitting on.

Fokir lowered himself to a crouch and touched her knee, making a small, barely perceptible gesture. She saw that he was pointing into the distance to another thicket of trees. Following his finger, she saw a tiger pulling itself out of the water and into a tree on the far side of the island. It seemed to have been following the storm's eye, like the birds, resting whenever it could. It became aware of their presence at exactly the same moment they spotted it; although it was several hundred metres away, she could tell that it was an immense animal, so large it seemed incredible that the tree could sustain its weight. Without blinking, the tiger watched

them for several minutes; during this time it made no movement other than to twitch its tail. She could imagine that if she had been able to put a hand on its coat, she would have been able to feel the pounding of its heart.

The tiger seemed to sense the storm's return, for it glanced over its shoulder before slipping off the branch. They saw its head bobbing in the water for a few minutes and then the moonlight dimmed and the roar of the wind filled their heads again.

Piya swung her legs on the branch and turned quickly to resume her position. When she was facing the tree, they looped the sari around the trunk and Fokir tied it into a knot. They had barely had time to get back in place

when the storm was upon them. Again the air was full of hurtling projectiles.

But something had changed and it took Piya a moment to register the difference. The wind was now coming at them from the opposite direction. Where she had had the tree trunk to shelter her before, now there was only Fokir's body. Was this why he had been looking for a branch on another tree? Had he known, right from the start that his own body would have to become her shield when the eye had passed? She tried to break free from his grasp, tried to pull him around so that for once, she

could be the one who was sheltering him. But his body was unyielding and she could not break free from it, especially now that it had the wind's weight behind it. Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one.

The Day After

(pp. 391-393)

Even though it was moving very slowly, the *Megha* had covered two-thirds of the distance to Garjontola when a boat appeared in the distance – the first to be seen in hours.

It was a bright, crisp day, cool but windless. Although the level of the water had been declining steadily since the passage of the storm, the mangroves were still mostly submerged. The water's surface was covered in an undulating carpet of green, while the forest – or what little could be seen of it – was completely

denuded of leaves, stripped down to trunks and stalks. With the drowning of the landscape the channels' shores had disappeared, making navigation doubly difficult. As a result, since its departure from Lusibari at dawn, the *Megha's* speed had rarely risen above a crawl.

Horen was the first to recognize the craft in the distance. With its hood gone, its appearance was so changed that neither Kanai nor Moyna had thought to associate it with Fokir's boat. But Horen had built the boat with his own hands, and it had been with him for many years before he passed it on: he knew it at once. 'That's Fokir's boat,' he said. 'I'm sure of it. The storm's ripped off the hood, but the boat is the same.'

‘Who’s in it?’ Kanai asked, but this elicited no response from Horen.

Kanai and Moyna went to stand in the *Megha’s* bow. The water seemed to congeal as the two crafts inched towards each other. In a while Kanai realized that there was only one person on the boat: it was impossible to tell who it was, man or woman, for the figure was caked from head to toe in mud. Moyna’s hands, like his own, were fastened on the gunwale, and he saw that her knuckles had paled, just like his own. Even though they were right next to each other, a chasm seemed to open between them as they peered into the distance at the boat, trying to guess whom it was carrying towards them.

‘It’s her,’ Moyna said at last, in a

whisper that rose quickly to a cry. ‘I can see. He’s not there.’ Balling her hands into fists, she began to pound the marital bangles on her head. One of them broke, drawing blood from her temple.

Kanai snatched at her wrists, to keep her from hurting herself. ‘Moyna, wait!’ he said. ‘Wait and see ...’

She froze and again they stared across the water, as if hypnotized by the approaching boat.

‘He’s not there! He’s gone.’ Moyna’s legs folded under her and she dropped to the deck. There was an outbreak of pandemonium as Horen came running out of the wheelhouse, shouting to Nogen to cut the engine. Between the two of them, Horen and

Kanai carried Moyna into one of the cabins and laid her on a bunk.

By the time Kanai stepped out on deck again, Piya had drawn alongside the *Megha*. She was standing unsteadily upright, clutching the GPS monitor that she had been using to find her way. Kanai went to the stern and held his hand out to her. Neither of them said a word, but her face crumpled as she stepped onto the *Megha*. It seemed that she was going to fall, so Kanai opened his arms and she stumbled against him, resting her head on his chest. Kanai said softly, 'Fokir?'

Her voice was almost inaudible: 'He didn't make it.'

It had happened in the last hour of the storm, she said. He'd been hit by

something very big and very heavy, an uprooted stump; it had hit him so hard that she too had been crushed against the trunk of the tree they were sitting on. The sari had kept them attached to the trunk even as he was dying. His mouth was close enough to her ear so that she'd been able to hear him. He'd said Moyna's name and Tutul's before the breath faded on his lips. She'd left his body on the tree, tied to the trunk with Moyna's sari, to keep it safe from animals. They would have to go back to Garjontola to cut it down.

They brought the body to Lusibari, on the *Megha*, and the cremation was held the same evening.

There had been very few casualties on the island: the early warning had allowed those who would have been most at risk to take shelter in the hospital. As a result, the news of Fokir's death spread quickly and a great number attended the cremation.

Through that night and the following days, Piya stayed by Moyna's side, in her room, where many mourners had gathered. One of the women fetched water so she could clean up and another lent her a sari and helped her put it on. Mats had been set out on the floor for the mourners, and when Piya seated herself on one, Tutul appeared beside her. He placed a couple of bananas on her lap and sat with her, holding her hand, patient and unmoving. She put her

arm around him and held him close, so close that she could feel his heart beating against her ribs. She remembered then the impact of the hurtling stump that had crashed into Fokir's unprotected back; she remembered the weight of his chin as it pressed into her shoulder; she remembered how close his lips had been to her ears, so close that it was from their movement, rather than from the sounds he uttered, that she had understood he was saying the names of his wife and his son.

She recalled the promises she had made to him in the silence of her heart, and how, in those last moments, with the wind and the rain still raging around them, she had been unable to do anything for him

other than to hold a bottle of water to his lips. She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved – and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words.

Home: An Epilogue

(pp. 394-400)

Nilima was sitting at her desk, a month after the cyclone, when a nurse came running over from the hospital to tell her that she'd seen 'Piya-didi' stepping off the Basonti ferry: she was now heading towards the Trust's compound.

Nilima was unable to disguise her astonishment. 'Piya? The scientist?' she said. 'Are you sure about that?'

'Yes, Mashima, it's her. No doubt about it.'

Nilima sank back in her chair as she tried to absorb this.

A fortnight had passed since she'd said goodbye to Piya and the truth was that she had not expected ever to see her again. The girl had stayed in Lusibari for a while after the cyclone and during that time, she'd become a strangely unnerving presence in the Guest House, a kind of human wraith, inward, uncommunicative, leaden-faced. On her own, Nilima would not have known how to deal with her, but fortunately Piya had formed a friendship with Moyna during that time. Nilima had encountered them several times, in and around the Guest House, sitting silently next to each other. On occasion, Nilima had even mistaken the one for the other. Having lost her own clothes, Piya had perforce taken to wearing saris –

colourful reds, yellows and greens – for Moyna had given her those of her own clothes that she herself would no longer wear. What was more, Moyna had also cut off her hair, in keeping with the custom, so it was now as short as Piya's. But this was where the resemblance ended: as far as demeanour and expression were concerned, the contrast between the two women could not have been greater. Moyna's grief was all-too-plainly visible in the redness of her eyes, while Piya's face was stonily expressionless, as if to suggest that she had retreated deep within herself.

'Piya's in shock,' Kanai had said to Nilima one day, shortly before his own departure. 'It's hardly surprising. Can you imagine what it was like for

her to sit through the last hours of the storm, sheltered by Fokir's lifeless body? Leave aside the horror of the memory – imagine the guilt, the responsibility.'

'I understand all that, Kanai,' Nilima had said. 'But that's why I think it would be easier for her to recover if she was in some familiar place. Don't you think it's time for her to go back to America now? Or else, couldn't she go to her relatives in Kolkata?'

'I suggested that to her,' Kanai had replied. 'I even offered to arrange for a ticket to the U.S. But I don't think she heard me, really. What's uppermost in her mind right now, I suspect, is the question of her obligation to Moyna and Tutul. She needs to be

left alone for a bit, to think things through.'

Nilima's response had been tinged with apprehension. 'So you're just going to go off and leave her here? For me to deal with?'

'I don't think she'll be any trouble to you,' Kanai had said. 'In fact, I'm sure she won't be. She just needs some time to pull herself together. To have me here will be no help – exactly the opposite, I suspect.'

Nilima had not raised any further objections to his departure. 'Of course, Kanai, I know how busy you are ...'

Kanai had put his arm around her shoulder and given her a hug. 'Don't worry,' he'd said. 'It'll be all right. I'll be back soon. You'll see.'

She'd received this with a non-committal shrug. 'You know you're always welcome here.'

Kanai had left the next day – a week after the cyclone – and some days later Piya had come down to tell Nilima that she was leaving too.

'Yes, my dear, of course. I understand.' Nilima had made an effort to keep her voice level so as not to betray her relief. She'd been wondering, for the past couple of days, whether Piya's presence in Lusibari might lead to trouble with the authorities. Did she have a visa? Did she have the right permit? Nilima didn't know and didn't like to ask. 'You've been through a lot,' Nilima had said, warmly. 'You must give yourself time to recover.'

‘I’ll be back soon, though,’ Piya had said, and Nilima had replied, with hearty goodwill, ‘Yes, my dear, of course you will.’

But Piya’s valediction was not an unfamiliar one; Nilima had heard the same words often before, on the lips of many, well-meaning foreign visitors. None of them had ever been seen or heard from again, so it was not without reason that Nilima had assumed that the same would be true of Piya. But now here she was, just as she had said.

The knock sounded before Nilima had had the time to properly prepare herself. She could think of nothing to say except: ‘Piya! You’re back.’

‘Yes,’ said Piya, matter-of-factly. ‘Did

you think I wouldn’t be?’

This was, of course, exactly what Nilima had thought, so she was quick to change the subject: ‘So tell me then, Piya, where did you go off to?’ The girl had bought herself some new clothes, she noticed: Piya was dressed, as before, in a white shirt and cotton pants.

‘I went to Kolkata,’ Piya said. ‘I stayed with my aunt and spent a lot of time on the Internet. You’ll be glad to know there was a terrific response.’

‘Response? To what?’

‘I sent out some letters explaining what happened during the cyclone and how Fokir had died. Some of my friends and colleagues took up the cause and circulated a chain letter to raise money for Moyna and Tutul.

The response was better than we'd expected. The money's not as much as I'd have liked, but it's something: it'll buy them a house of their own and maybe even provide a college education for Tutul.'

'Oh?' said Nilima, sitting up. 'I'm glad to hear that, very glad indeed. I'm sure Moyna will be too.'

'But that's not all,' said Piya.

'Really?' Nilima raised her eyebrows. 'What else have you been up to?'

'I wrote up a report,' said Piya, 'on my dolphin sightings in this area. It was very impressionistic, of course, since I'd lost all my data, but it sparked a lot of interest. I've had several offers of funding from conservation and environmental groups. But I didn't want to go ahead without talking to

you first.'

'Me?' cried Nilima. 'What do I know about such matters?'

'You know a lot about the people who live here,' Piya said. 'And for myself, I don't want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here, I'd want it to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so the local fishermen would be involved. And the Trust would benefit too. We'd share the funding.'

At the mention of funding, Nilima, ever-pragmatic, began to pay closer attention. 'Well, it's certainly worth a thought,' she said, biting her lip. 'But have you considered the practical

aspect of this? For instance, where would you live?’

Piya nodded. ‘I have an idea for that too,’ she said. ‘I want to run it by you, to see what you think.’

‘Go on.’

‘I thought, if you were agreeable, that maybe I’d rent the upper floor of this house from you – the Guest House, in other words. I could really set myself up there, with computers and a small office. I’d need an office to keep track of the funds.’

Nilima smiled indulgently. Having had long experience in administration, she could tell that Piya had no idea of what she was getting into. ‘But, Piya,’ she said gently, ‘to start something on that scale, you’d need a staff, you’d need people to help. You

can’t do it on your own.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Piya said. ‘I’ve thought about that too. My idea was that Moyna would manage that end of things – part-time of course, when she’s not on duty at the hospital. It would give her an additional source of income, and I’m sure she’d be able to handle the work. And it would be good for me too. She could maybe teach me some Bangla in exchange for some English.’

Nilima twisted her hands together, frowning, trying to anticipate every possible objection to Piya’s plan. ‘But, Piya, what about permits and visas and so on? You’re a foreigner, remember? I don’t know if it’ll be legally possible for you to stay here for an extended period of time.’

This, too, Piya took in her stride. 'I spoke to my uncle about that,' she said. 'He told me I'm eligible for a card that would allow me to stay on indefinitely – something about being a person of Indian origin. And as for the permits to do research, he said that if the Badabon Trust was willing to sponsor my work, he'd take care of the rest. He knows of some environmental groups in New Delhi that will intervene with the government.'

'My goodness! You really have thought of everything.' Nilima gave a bark of laughter. 'I suppose you even have a name for this project of yours?' Nilima had meant this ironically, but when Piya gravely cleared her throat, she realized that the matter was no joke for the girl. 'So you do have a

name? Already?'

'I was thinking,' Piya said, 'that we might name it after Fokir, since his data are going to be crucial to the project.'

'His data?' Nilima raised her eyebrows. 'But I thought you'd lost all your data in the storm?'

Piya's eyes brightened. 'Not all of it,' she said. 'I still have this.' She took her hand-held monitor out of her pocket and showed it to Nilima. 'See, this is connected to the satellites of the Global Positioning System. On the day of the storm, it was in my pocket. It was the only piece of equipment that survived.' At the touch of a button the screen flickered on. Piya tapped a key to access the memory. 'All the routes that Fokir showed me

are stored here. Look.’ She pointed to a sinuous zig-zag line that had appeared on the screen. ‘That was the route we took on the day before the storm. Fokir took the boat into every little creek and gully where he’d ever seen a dolphin. That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge. It’s going to be the foundation of my own project. That’s why I think it should be named after him.’

‘My goodness!’ said Nilima. Her eyes strayed to the fragment of sky that was visible through the nearest window. ‘So you mean to say it’s all preserved up there?’

‘Yes. Exactly.’

Nilima fell silent as she pondered the mystery of Fokir and his boat, writing a log of their journeys and

locking it away in the stars. Presently she reached for Piya’s arm and gave it a squeeze. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘It would be good to have a memorial for Fokir, on earth as well as in the heavens. But as for the details, you’ll have to give me a little time to think it through.’ She sighed and rose to her feet. ‘Right now, my dear, what I need most is a cup of tea. Would you like one too?’

‘Yes, I would,’ said Piya. ‘Thank you.’

Nilima went into her kitchen and filled a kettle with water from a filter. She was pumping her kerosene stove when Piya put her head around the door.

‘And what about Kanai?’ said Piya. ‘Have you had any news from him?’

Nilima put a match to the stove and replaced the grille. 'Yes, I have,' she said. 'I got a letter from him just the other day.'

'And how is he?' said Piya.

Nilima laughed as she placed the kettle on the stove. 'Oh, my dear!' she said. 'He's been almost as busy as you.'

'Is that so? What's he been doing?'

'Let me see,' said Nilima, reaching for a teapot. 'Where shall I begin? The most important thing is that he's restructured his company so that he can take some time off. He wants to live in Kolkata for a while.'

'Really?' said Piya. 'And what's he going to do there?'

'I'm not quite sure,' Nilima said as she spooned some long-hoarded Darjeeling tea leaves into the pot. 'He told

me he was going to write the story of Nirmal's notebook – how it came into his hands, what was in it, and how it was lost. But what he means by that you can ask him yourself. He'll be here in a day or two.'

'That soon?'

Nilima nodded. The kettle's cover had begun to rattle now, so she took it off the stove. Pouring a stream of boiling water into the teapot, she said, 'And I hope you won't mind if Kanai stays upstairs while he's here – in the Guest House?'

Piya smiled. 'No,' she said. 'Not at all. In fact it'll be good to have him home.'

Piya's choice of words surprised Nilima so much that she dropped the spoon that she was using to stir the tea leaves. 'Did I hear you right?' she

said, directing a startled glance at Piya. 'Did you say "home"?'

Piya had said the word without thinking, but now, as she reflected on it, furrows appeared on her forehead.

'You know, Nilima,' she said at last, 'for me, home is where the Orcaella are, so there's no reason why this

couldn't be it.'

Nilima's eyes opened wide and she burst into laughter. 'See, Piya,' she said. 'That's the difference between us. For me, home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea.'