

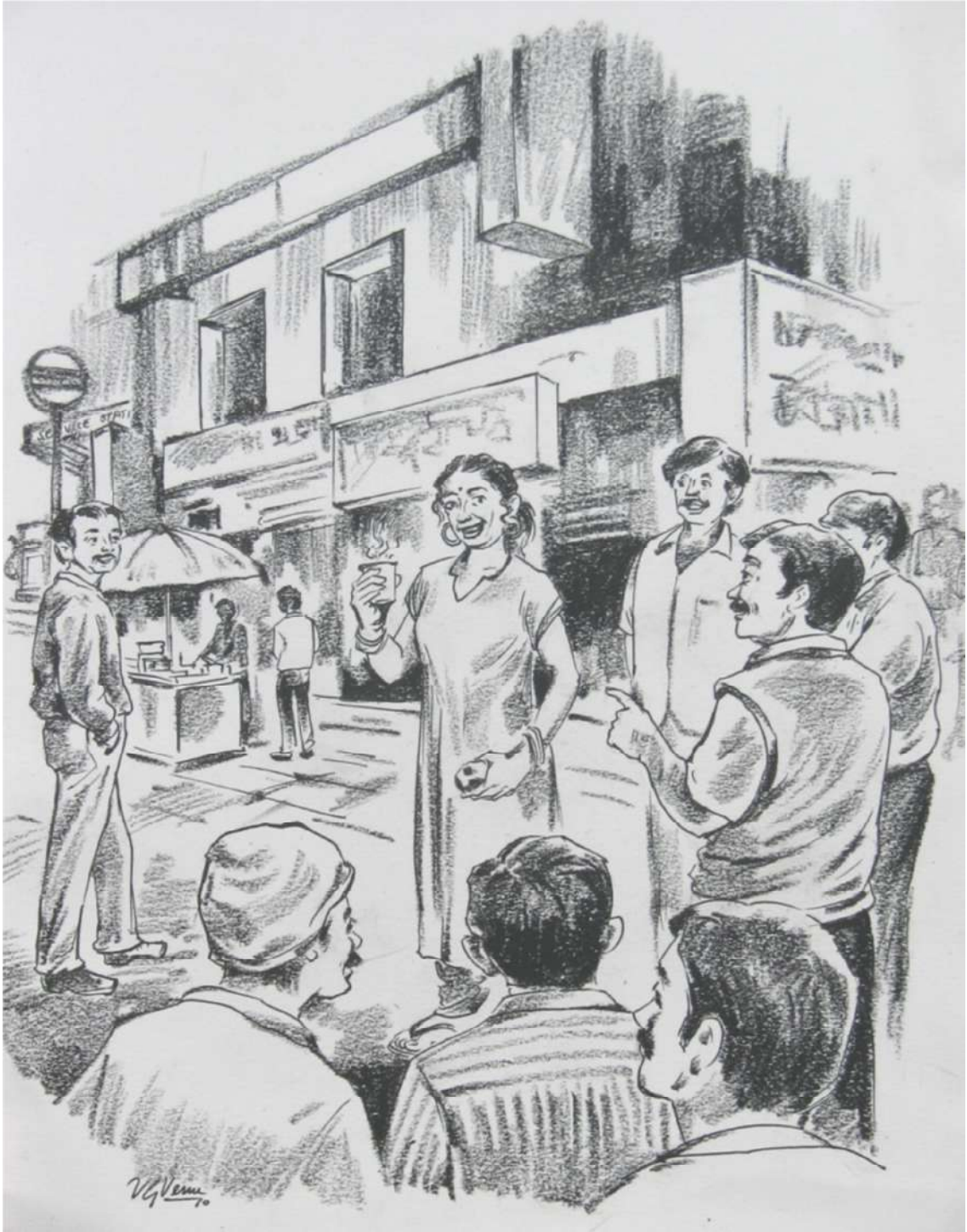


Hidden *in* Full View

Stories From Ashadeep

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Anjali

There is a length of G S road, the main thoroughfare which sweeps through Guwahati, which is especially chaotic. Hotels, fuel stations, shops and offices crowd its edges; traffic is always in frenzy; fumes and dust choke jostling pedestrians; and scattered like putrid organic eruptions are mounds of refuse, the inescapable by-product of an imploding human habitation.

In the midst of all this is a pretty, curly haired girl in a skirt who sports a bright smile. A worn airbag hangs from her shoulder, and she is eating rice and vegetables out of a plastic bag someone's thrown into one of the rubbish heaps.

Mukul's a regular user of the road and she catches his eye. He begins to look out for her every time he's passing by and over an unaccountably swift stretch of four years, she becomes a familiar feature of the streetscape. But he's now seeing a marked deterioration in her appearance: her clothes are ragged, her skin blotchy, the bag's gone. Sometimes she's half-dressed.



The girl's situation is of special concern to Mukul. All these years, Anjana and he have given themselves to the care of the mentally ill, setting up Ashadeep, a first-of-its-kind day care centre for the afflicted, on its heels a half-way home for women and, inspired by both, a widespread outreach initiative.

Mukul's repeated encounters – at road's width distance – with the street girl force a new issue on him: the existence of an aberrant mentally-distressed lot, street pariahs so much an everyday sight they are paid little or no attention even as they're denied access to any sort of care or remedy, as if an absence of kith and kin is reason enough to abandon them to their fate.

But something fresh is brewing in Ashadeep.. random reflections – the solitary bag girl picking through the city's waste..... realising she's but one of many in similar straits.....frantic families searching with sinking hope for their missing girls.....the right to care for those hopelessly lost to it – meet, mesh and evolve into a Brave New Plan.



Which, very simply, is to pick the bag girl up, have her brought across to Ashadeep, treat her and try restoring her to a normal life – and perhaps reuniting her with her family, if indeed there *is* one somewhere.

In preparation, the district administration is briefed and an official consent to the plan obtained. So is a thumbs-up from Ashadeep psychiatrist Dr. Thakuria, whose role in post-rescue exertions will be crucial. Shortcomings are anticipated, chewed over. Meanwhile, Ashadeep attendants ready the centre and themselves for the event.

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When the Ashadeep foursome – Anjana, Uttam, Chandana and Sita – reach the girl's turf, she is squatting in front of an hotel, eating as usual out of a plastic bag. They call out to her several times but get no response. A local helpfully advises them to save their breath, for she's dumb. The inspired plan has hit its first hurdle and no one quite knows what to do. Worse, a curious crowd is beginning to collect.

Chandana has an idea. She buys a packet of *saada* (chewing tobacco) from a nearby stall and offers it to the girl, who accepts it wordlessly, eats some of it and goes back to her previous state of indifference.

Nerves have afflicted the team, which decides some form of official reinforcement is called for and two women constables from the Paltanbazar police station join the effort. Not a huge help. One is petrified she may be violently attacked, the other flatly refuses to go anywhere near the derelict on purely olfactory grounds. The cause of all the complications, meanwhile, sits unhelpfully on her patch of pavement taking no notice.

Anjana decides this is enough. Buoyed by the token presence of the policewomen, she and the others catch hold of the girl. There is mild resistance, but they manage to manoeuvre her into their van.

The crowd has grown considerably.

Someone there is curious. "What'll they do with her?"

His neighbour knows it all. "Oh, they'll take her away and steal her kidneys or something. Happens all the time, these days."

Of course, no one steps up to stop this happening. The crowd's interest is strictly academic.

The four team members, two constables and the girl are now squashed inside the small van. The air is close, and the rich aroma emanating from the centre of attention provokes the violent upheaval of one official stomach, adding sharply to the atmosphere.

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The van arrives at the Ashadeep centre in Panjabari without further mishap. The excitement is palpable; this after all is a “first case.” But the staff is used to dealing with the not-so-usual; she’s won over with tea and biscuits, which she happily wolfs down, and does not shy away when led to the bath. On the contrary, she vigorously enjoys the soap and water certainly experienced after ages, agrees readily to a hair trim and is given the usual treatment for sores and lice.

There are gasps of surprise when she’s done: clean and attractive in a new dress, the change is astonishing. Her name’s now known: Anjali. So are her bathroom habits, totally indiscriminate, for which she’ll have to share a room with a supervisor until clean habits are ingrained.

The next stage of Anjali’s rehabilitation involves the psychiatrist. With no clinical or family history to work with, Dr. Thakuria must rely solely on observation and experience to pin down his patient’s affliction. His conclusion is psychosis, with mild retardation, and medication is begun immediately. Anjali in the meantime has gone through a complete medical examination, and HIV and pregnancy tests have proved negative.

She has little to volunteer. Asked where her home is, she replies “Bora Service Station,” which is where she’d been picked up. Patient querying over several weeks yields but scraps of information. Language is a barrier for she has a curious dialect, all but unintelligible. What she does manage to convey is that she’d worked in Ashram, Delhi, till a *bhaiyya* (brother) brought her to Guwahati, but beyond that she remembers nothing. The implication is murky; was she a victim of trafficking, sold to someone, abandoned? No answers.

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A year goes past, and another. Through this period, Anjali goes soberly about her counselling sessions, check-ups and the odd job or errand she’s assigned as part of therapy.

Then one day the unexpected occurs. She offhandedly mentions a place, Rourkela. The location suggests a dialect. An Oriya-speaking person is brought in to converse with her and to the delight of all, Anjali’s response is spontaneous and

enthusiastic. Though a great deal of what she says is garbled there is clear mention of a “sector 19,” something to work on.

But painstaking enquiries draw a disappointing blank. Ashadeep connects with people in Rourkela who do find the sector, but it’s a sprawling mass of humanity and the searchers know too little to trace Anjali’s kin, even after she’d said her father was a rickshaw puller and mother a domestic help.

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She’s reticent, but in satisfactory control of herself and her doctors recommend the move from transit-care to rehabilitation, where virtually-recovered residents find their feet while readjusting to regular life. Here no one is confined; while attendants keep track of movement, and certain ground rules prevail, the women come and go as they need to.

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Anjali’s always been more or less consistent, so there is concern one day when she disappears.

Supervisor Uttam is worried and curious at the same time about Anjali’s out-of-character vanishing act. When she’s not shown up for hours together, a feeling takes him to her old haunt, Bora Service Station. And indeed she’s there, wearing her best clothes and a huge smile, holding court in the midst of an admiring throng marvelling at her mysterious transformation. The word spreads, and more people from adjoining workplaces join the mêlée.

“You’re back!”

“Where’ve you been all this time?”

“Who took you away?”

“Looking nice, aren’t you!”

“Saw you on TV!....programme about a place called *Ashadeep*. Is that where you are?”

“Ah, you’ve gone places now, you’re famous!”

Steaming cup of tea in one hand, an apple in the other, the lady is positively glowing.

Observing Anjali’s spontaneous fan club while exchanging a word or two with its convivial members, Uttam comes to understand why this corner of G S

road is a place of such belonging for her. Won over in time by her bright and amiable nature, the local populace had been unusually good to Anjali in her scavenging days, plying her regularly with food and other treats. She's been genuinely missed.

When it's time to leave, the entire population of the FCI, a government office, comes out and gives her a rousing send-off. Curiously, after the event, she never returns to her old "home". An acknowledgement, perhaps, that that stage of her life is irrevocably over.

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Anjali, hard-working and dependable, is cook in the Ashadeep kitchen and supplements her income with part-time housework for neighbouring families. Transformed, she exhibits impressive poise, pays for her own needs, has a decent bit put by in the bank, owns a silver set she's bought for herself and, every now and then, enjoys a stroll down to the big mall for an ice cream or coffee.

She's an eager participant in rehab operations, going along on rescues much like her own, helping calm and clean the women brought in. She never fails to report a wandering destitute woman.

The search for her family continues. A passing proposal to move her to a centre closer to her probable home in Orissa is vetoed; the unknowns are too many to be chanced. And yet, in the right circumstances, the move might be the only reliable way to trace her home. The decision hangs, but sooner or later must be taken.

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Festivities!

Mukul and Anjana are celebrating the wedding of their elder daughter. All through, Anjali is among the relations and companions who traditionally sit by the bride.

The occasion winds to an end. Mukul sends for the bill, tots it up and finds it Rs. 5,000 short. He sends it back for correction.

The manager calls to explain. "For many years," he says, "we've seen that lady among the beggars who are fed off leftovers during weddings. We were quite fond of her, and then she just vanished one day. You can imagine our surprise when she suddenly reappeared, that too right next to the bride, all decked up like

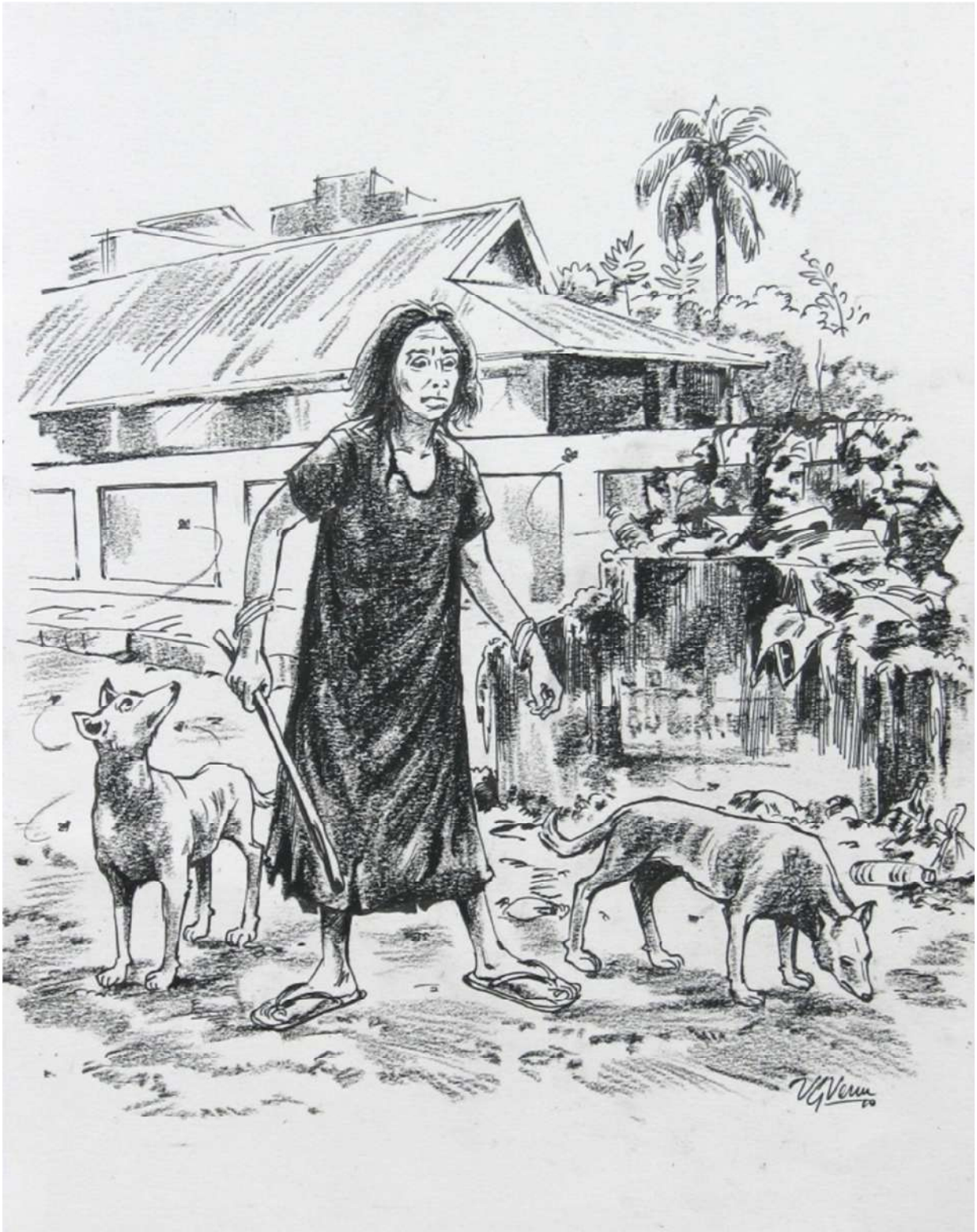
everyone else! That's why the discount.....we were amazed at the change, and still find it hard to believe!"

Mukul is touched. He cannot think of a better testimony to Anjali's reclaimed personality and Ashadeep's new mission, born of a chance sighting in a busy city street.

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Scores of street rescues have followed hers, but it will always be charming Anjali who was the first inspiration, the true motivator, of it all. The hope remains that, one day, she will be welcomed back into the family she's lost in circumstances unknown.

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Bhabani

Bhabani's story goes back to the early days of the Ashadeep street rescue mission.

She is Ashadeep's second or third such "case." She comes into the public eye, as it were, when she chooses as her turf Guwahati's historic precinct of Panbazar, graced since 1901 by the venerable Cotton College and several city landmarks of other eras.

She is a figure to behold: flowing dark robes cover her neck to foot while one hand grips a stout staff; loping alongside are her devoted mascots, a pair of mangy strays. Not, perhaps, an addition to quite enhance the area's pristine image.

Mukul has elected to lead the operation, which immediately – and rather fortunately, as it turns out later – becomes a public spectacle with a swelling horde following the action. The crowd has its first taste of entertainment when the robed figure lets fly at Mukul as soon as he's within stick range, necessitating a hasty tactical retreat by the intrepid rescuer.

The crowd expresses its wholehearted appreciation of the first act with much clapping and whistling. Comments fly, some mocking, some indignant. The protector of her realm, though, is imperiously indifferent to the chaos she's helped create.

The second attempt is better organised and Mukul, with the other members of the rescue team, manage to propel Bhabani towards the waiting van amid a flurry of blows, frenzied barks and lusty audience participation. The following morning Mukul's adventure is front page news. Calls for interviews flood Ashadeep, TV flashes add visual drama and, all together, the rescue-rehabilitation campaign gains exposure of a scale it could never have hoped to buy.



In the van Bhabani is surprisingly subdued, and gives her name when asked for it. In the transit care centre she agrees without fuss to a bath and change of clothes, and while she's being cleaned up, attendants find in her robes coins worth a few hundred rupees packed tightly into matchboxes, over a hundred metal spoons and forks and a bunch of faded railway tickets. About her stash she says, "I have to collect money to go back to my village."

“Where is your village?”

“Don’t know.”

“What’s the name of your village?”

“*Betia.*”

That is all she has to say.

With information so sparse, the counsellors know that finding a “Betia” somewhere, anywhere, in the nation would be well nigh impossible.

But what happens next, when she’s given something to eat, truly takes her attendants aback. As soon as she sees the food, Bhabani breaks out in a hysterical rant and rushes into the open shouting, “*Munna, come here! Come here at once!*” For some days this continues to happen: the mere sight of food triggers this extraordinary reaction.

Concerted efforts by doctors and counsellors succeed in calming her considerably. To everyone’s relief, she begins to feed herself. She says she once had two sons, which gives rise to the hope her memory’s resurrecting itself, but the hope of progress ends there. Then she causes an even greater alarm one day by running to the centre’s gates screaming, “*They’ve killed them! My sons! They’ve killed them with their blades!*”

She says nothing more of this, and no one knows whether it was all a nightmarish delusion or a true and chilling incident in her past.

She’s calm but unresponsive throughout treatment. There are just two things in which she shows an interest: draping her sari over the head in the conservative manner, and sleeping on the floor of a thatched hut out in the yard, insisting she’s more at home there than in the centre’s main building.

Her past is still a complete blank, and any notion of taking her home seems fated to remain just that, a notion.

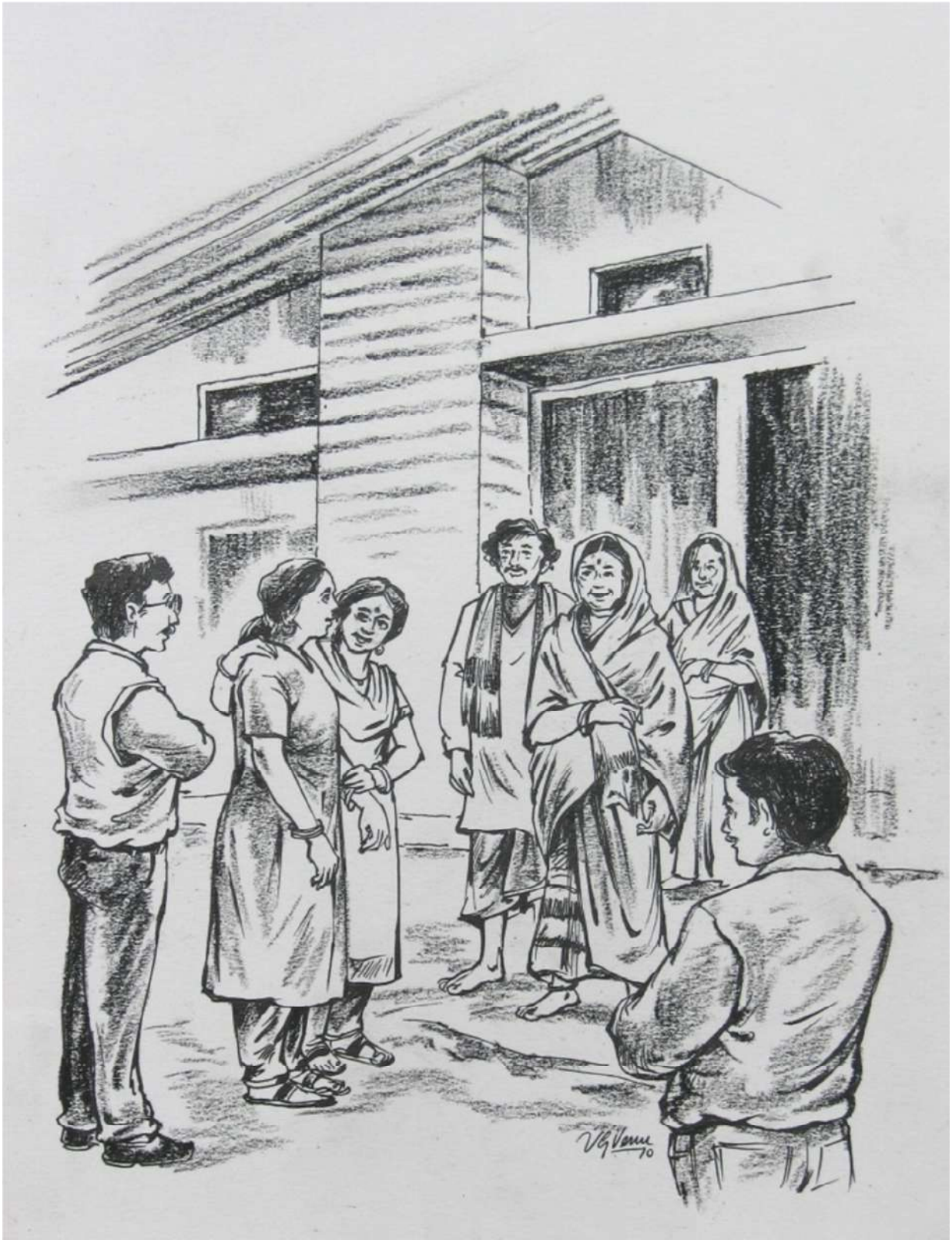
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Five languid years have gone by since Bhabani’s entered Ashadeep. Her mind is fragile though not completely detached from reality, but her disability is so severe that she’s unlikely to ever achieve any level at all of self-reliance, a rare occurrence in Ashadeep.

She appears to be at peace with herself, happy with simple chores such as digging the garden and ferrying things from one place to another. But short of a miracle there is little to be done for her beyond ensuring constant care.

Still, as her attendants say, there's hope. There's always hope. One never knows.

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Jironi

After another crowded day in Ashadeep, Mukul and Anjana sit back to catch up with local events on television. A news flash grabs their attention: it features an apparently deranged young woman clad in nothing but a flimsy *gamosa* (cloth) loose somewhere in the city, lost to the world, ignorant of her star billing in the day's round-up as a camera tracks every step of her careless saunter down a road.

A few days later GOLD, a well known organisation which works with trafficking, is in touch with Anjana. A homeless woman has been delivered to them by the police and there is little doubt she's mentally disturbed; perhaps Ashadeep would be better qualified to deal with her. Anjana tells them to bring her over.

A group of residents had made an indignant complaint to the police: a half-crazed, half-dressed woman given to bursts of delirious song and dance had usurped their respectable Noonmati pavement and showed no sign of leaving. Worse, unknown men had begun to loiter and the outraged complainants were sure some of them had been taking her away for the night, a *most* unsavoury state of affairs, so would the police please do something. What they'd done was pick her up and pack her off to GOLD.

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She bursts in giving Mukul and Anjana a start: it's the girl in the news clip, and she's in a state of wild abandon.

Ashadeep has not had many arrivals in a comparable mood, but the procedures drilled into its attendants prove effective as she's calmed just enough to go through a bath, change and quick medical examination.

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Jironi is a delicately featured, attractive girl. The story she relates later to her counsellor isn't new but is nonetheless heart-rending: she had run away from her home in Sivasagar, upper Assam with a Nagaon boy, who'd lured her to the big-city glitter of Guwahati by promising to marry her. Instead, she says, the beau had sold her.....but beyond this her account is vague and never clear, even afterwards.

The doctors know from the start that this one's unlikely to be a cut and dried case, and Jironi is in Ashadeep for an extended period before she begins to get better. Till then she's frequently disturbed, singing, cavorting, oblivious to

everything; but the psychiatric evaluation states her disorder is a mental illness, not retardation, and the distinction allows her a more than fair chance of recovery. The doctors and attendants persist, and Jironi pushes on till the worst is over and she's very nearly normal.

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Shyamjit meanwhile has been despatched to Sivasagar to dig into her background. What she's said of her family bears out: they are well thought of, educated and own a decent home. Soon after the reconnaissance the doctors decide Jironi can go home. The day she leaves there are tears, for her innocent nature has won every heart in Ashadeep.

The parents are a mixture of relief and confusion when an Ashadeep group suddenly turns up with their missing daughter. Apart from a mild admonishment, they do not outwardly show any anger or resentment towards what she'd done.

Shyamjit takes them aside and clears up Ashadeep's role in her resurrection, after which they hear the story behind the story.

Jironi, most unwillingly, had married at her parents' insistence, and the event had plunged her into a life of misery. The husband would tie her up, beat her and ill-treat her in other ways. The escorts surmise she may have had some sort of a problem already and perhaps the man had known no better way to manage it. He'd finally given up, brought her back to her parents' and left her there. Soon after that she eloped with the Nagaon conman, an episode of which her family knows nothing except that she'd gone off without explanation.

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Her parents and three sisters do understand that there is little for which she's to be blamed, but they are worried sick about the social stigma they are likely to suffer once news of her troubled past is out. They know about the television story, which has made things infinitely worse: the harm that fleeting byte of sensation has done to the family's psyche is deep and grievous.

Jironi continues to live with her parents. She's unmoved by the suggestion of going back to her husband. Her old supervisors in Ashadeep try and keep up with how she is, and so far reports say she's doing all right. Her future is in their hands no longer, but everyone in Ashadeep who remembers her prays she'll stay well always.

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Kunti Devi

Early one Sunday morning a gentleman calls from Chandmari, one of Guwahati's better known neighbourhoods.

An elderly woman, in her mid-sixties perhaps, has spent the night in the veranda of a school building and has laid out a profusion of rags, like lines of washing, on the fences of the school and adjacent homes. She refuses to remove them just as she refuses to move, and the neighbourhood is at its wits' end what to do.

Ashadeep sends out Mridula and Shyamjit to persuade the woman to come to the centre, but when they try she's resolute. She will not move. The two, though, have learned a trick or two in the course of other missions, and she's promised a generous supply of water and detergent for her "washing" if she'd come along. At first she wavers; then her fetish overcomes her reluctance and she collects her scraps, ready to go.

The preliminary procedure of giving her a bath and a quick examination cause a terrible shock to the Ashadeep staff. She's obviously very ill and disoriented, but her true condition is far, far worse: her uterus hangs raw and exposed, and she shows signs of extreme physical abuse. Very strangely, she appears to feel no pain and begs instead for ten paise to buy sweets. Perhaps what's happened to her is so traumatic that her senses have withdrawn into some inaccessible corner of her mind.

Then Kunti Devi has a recollection, and the Ashadeep supervisors receive another jolt. A group of *naatis* (grandsons), she says, had taken her from where they found her to a secluded place and raped her repeatedly. That accomplished, they inflicted a final punishment on her: they'd viciously imitated the act with a length of bamboo before abandoning her to her fate.

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This is a dire emergency, and requires immediate medical attention.

As soon as Kunti Devi's trauma is described to them, benefactors step forward without hesitation. *Seppa Gives*, a society founded by the alumni of St.

Edmund's school, offers the expenses, eminent consultant Dr. Alaka Goswami her expertise, and the International hospital, one of the city's finest, its facilities. Very soon, Kunti Devi is wheeled into an operation theatre. The procedure is successful: providence has intervened to save her life.

Kunti Devi is blissfully unaware she's just been through life-saving surgery. She'll eat anything that is offered, seems to feel no pain or discomfort. The recovery period has its moment: Ashadeep attendants are keeping vigil night and day, but she gives them the slip during a bathroom visit and disappears. There's a frantic search and then relief: she's in the ground floor, where she has cornered a bewildered stranger with the demand of two rupees for tea!



The little that is established of her history is gleaned from disconnected and often meaningless snatches of conversation.

Her home, she says, is in Bonda, on the outskirts of Guwahati. A sister is mentioned. Uttam goes out, locates her and tells her of what's happened, but not the rape, not immediately. She's willing to talk, not always the case in such circumstances, and fills a few of the gaps in Kunti Devi's story.

She, her husband and son had been dirt poor, scratching a living out of the small piece of land they shared with the sister. The husband died, of causes unknown. She and her son had gone on with their lives the best they could till illness claimed the son's life, too. Kunti Devi then suffered a change which was deep and disturbing. She stopped working and began to take less and less care of her home and herself, frequently going off somewhere, returning when it suited her, soon beyond anyone's control. The sister had tried to care for her, but had finally given up in frustration.

"We're so poor," she laments, "that even one extra mouth is not possible for us to feed."

The sister's children had meanwhile grown and married, adding to her responsibilities. By then, like her once neat bamboo hut, Kunti Devi had fallen apart. She'd left the house and drifted about aimlessly till she had that corner of Chandmari so perfect for hanging out her rags. And then the brutal assault on her had taken place.

Uttam tells the sister about Kunti Devi's surgery, but she shows little sympathy. No one from the family ever visits Kunti Devi; they've discarded her.

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Treatment for Kunti Devi's psychosis is trying, and it's after a hard struggle that a faint stirring is apparent in her vacant mind, something of a triumph. But then she's alive; had circumstances not brought her help in time, it's unlikely she would have survived.

There is little option but to keep Kunti Devi on in Ashadeep, even if she hankers now and then for the sister who'll not have her. In the calm of the centre, her personality undergoes a pleasant transformation: she's now an endearing old *aiita* (granny), the mother hen of the establishment, part indulgent, part worried, always amiable. As *aiitas* tend to, she corners "daughter" Anjana whenever she can and subjects her to a litany of trivial complaints; the daughter is unfailingly attentive, granny gets a patient hearing, and all considered seems quite happy with her lot.

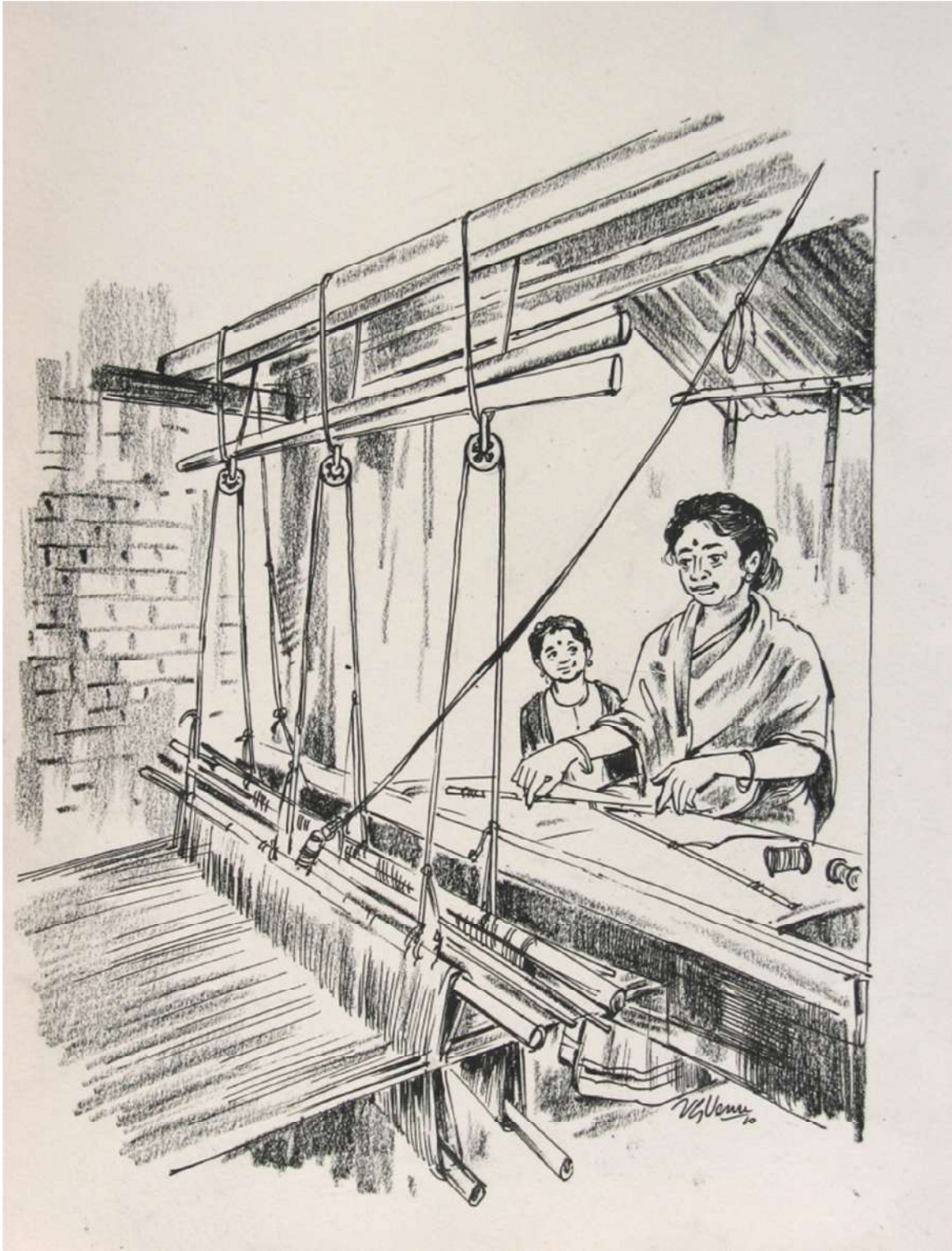
In time she's comfortable with day-to-day life in the centre. Communication improves a notch, but her bathroom training woefully not at all and that old wash-and-dry urge still pops up from time to time.

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Its three years after the surgery. There is nothing to take Kunti Devi elsewhere, she has nowhere to go. She finds strenuous work tedious but is willing to make herself as useful as she can. Her supervisors have made the happy discovery she can knit, and after a trial or two she starts making small rugs which find good use in the centre. She also picks the grit out of rice and *daal* for the kitchen people and is occupied with other small chores given her. If there's anything else in her mind, regret, yearning, a memory, no sign of it is evident.

Here she is as complete a person as she'll ever be, with something of her own to contribute. Her transfiguration from shambling wreck to smiling *daadi* has beaten the odds. The irate Sunday caller has undoubtedly achieved more than he intended: apart from getting rid of her for good, that call's given Kunti Devi back her life.

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As with many of its rescue missions, this one is set in motion by a call from a stranger who's heard something somewhere about Ashadeep.

It's a young lawyer who's near the law courts in Guwahati's Dighalipukhuri area, and she reports a girl lying virtually naked right there in the street. Passers-by are stopping to gawk. She says she wished she could cover the girl but hasn't the means to do so, or the courage to move any closer.

This is on a day when no member of Ashadeep's rescue team is in, and two irregulars bravely volunteer: one is Chandana the systems lady, whose job is as removed from street operations as a job could be; the other is Atiko, a Japanese volunteer on a three month stint with Ashadeep and still new to her work. They grab some sheets and clothes and move.

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Uttam is driving, and parks the van halfway up the pleasant tree-lined avenue. A strange sight greets Chandana and Atiko when they've pushed through the jabbering crowd on the opposite kerb. The object of their mission is sprawled across the pavement on her back, bare legs pushed up against the steel fence of the adjoining lake. All she has on is a loose and filthy shirt which has fallen open. She is singing with some fervour, pausing to refresh her throat every now and then by spitting and since she's face up, gravity has made a matted mess of her already tangled hair. The rest of her is caked with grime. A mass of flies buzzing incessantly over her completes the dismal picture.

Atiko does not wait. She kneels and quickly buttons up the shirt as best she can. Chandana is gagging, but manages to come round and lend a hand. When they talk to the girl she motions she is willing to go with them, but she's too weak to lift herself. They hold her arms, help her to her feet and walk her unsteadily towards the van.

As Uttam drives them out, she's slumped in the rear with a sheet thrown over her. They've gone barely fifty yards when she snaps up, strikes an absurdly theatrical pose and erupts into a loud, non-stop babble. The Ashadeep crew is too stunned to react.

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In the transit-care centre, she submits without protest to a bath and the usual check-ups. Supervisors try and determine whether she's suffering some form of psychosis, evident signs of which would be abnormal or erratic sleep, food and bathroom habits; if so, they will first work at getting a certain degree of regularity back into her life.

And it's just as they had suspected: she relieves herself when and where it suits her and is stubbornly resistant to any form of routine. Attendants embark on the long and tedious process of making her learn everyday things all over again.

The first specialist she encounters is Dr. Thakuria, seasoned Ashadeep psychiatrist. He observes her closely, studies staff reports on her behaviour and arrives at a conclusion: her problem is schizophrenia. Medication is prescribed.

The other doctors find a lot to concern them; lengthy exposure has caused a rash of ailments, among them stomach, skin and chest infections. They also know that in a condition detached from reality she would have been helpless against exploitation, and her medical evaluation is thorough and complete. But there's nothing to alarm them, no pregnancy or HIV.

Counselling begins, its tone relaxed, intended to draw her out. As if viewed through a dissipating mist, an image, hazy and then gaining shape, forms of her as a real person with claim to a name, home and family.

She's Jinu, and she's from a small rural community in Mirza, thirty or so kilometres outside the city. Fishing is her family's means of survival; her brother brings in the catch, the mother sells it in a local *baat* (market).

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A visitor to the centre gets word to Jinu's mother about her daughter's whereabouts and she, with her son and young granddaughter, come to Ashadeep and meet Jinu's counsellor. The counsellor advises them not to see her right away; Jinu needs to be more collected and aware before she faces the family.

The girl is Jinu's daughter. A few days later, her supervisor casually mentions the family's visit. And brings up the daughter. "Now you haven't said anything about your daughter, have you? She's such a sweet and pretty thing, we all liked her very much." Jinu's reaction is less than ecstatic; she asks briefly after the girl and leaves it at that. So does the supervisor, for the time being.

When Jinu is better, can manage small chores and is introduced to other activity, it's obvious she prefers work which is creative. She's said they have a loom at home, so she's put to weaving and it's an inspired choice: deft-fingered and imaginative, this is something at which she excels and her supervisors work with her to hone her skills. Therapeutic reasons aside, she will soon need a trade or craft to live by and for her, weaving would be a suitable occupation.

It's still a long haul before she is pronounced ready to return to her family. She's been prepared as well as possible for a domestic situation not completely known to her supervisors, which is not unusual. The daughter, for instance: during counselling, Jinu's never mentioned her, or a husband.



When Naba and Pranita bring Jinu back, her little girl comes out to greet them with a smile. The mother and brother are at home and welcome the escorts into their simple hut. The mother tells them this is the third time someone's had to bring her home; the first was when she'd gone off and come back carrying a baby, born at home, father unknown. The girl.

Jinu's family has accepted what's happened to her in an open, matter-of-fact way and this applies to the child as well, who Pranita and Naba can see is treated just as any loved niece or granddaughter would be.

With the mother Pranita and Naba discuss Jinu's illness, the treatment she's been through, the importance of her medicines and ways in which the family could keep an eye on her to help pre-empt a relapse.

Jinu has made it clear she has little enthusiasm for her mother's fish stall. But there's the loom, and Ashadeep offers her the raw material if she would agree to weave regularly. She does, and it's a mutually satisfactory deal: the articles she produces sparkle with originality and Ashadeep is more than pleased to buy back everything she makes, which is sold in the centre with other things crafted by its residents.



For over five years, neat and petite Jinu has not exhibited the slightest cause for worry. The income from the loom has made her a significant contributor to her household's welfare and her reintegration is as satisfactory as it could be.

Jinu's family, poverty stricken and deprived of education, is not merely close but blessed with an unusual equanimity. Its sensible, down to earth attitude toward

the unfamiliar problems she'd brought home over the years, and its patience with Ashadeep's effort to resolve them, have handed her back something she had lost: a normal life. Her wellbeing carries no absolute guarantee, but as things are Jinu is occupied, responsible and best of all, home.

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Menoka

On day one, a patrol from the Geetanagar police *thaana* (station) finds her loitering in Guwahati's swank Zoo-Narengi Road. She is hostile, disorderly and unmindful to the point she's nearly knocked over by a passing car. Oddly, she is clean and well turned out. The perturbed policemen take her to the station and find themselves in a quandary: they cannot lock her up, they cannot let her go and they've nowhere to take her – except Ashadeep.

Day two finds a most distraught husband seeking his wife with mounting desperation, until someone in the road tells him she might be the one taken away by the police the day before.

And on the third day the husband appears in Ashadeep, and is hugely relieved when he's told she is safe. He wants to take her home, but then he finds her ranting and raving and is completely unnerved. An Ashadeep supervisor takes him aside and talks to him at length about his wife's peculiar problem; this is his first counselling session, though he doesn't quite realise it's so.



Menoka and he were married not long ago, he says. They'd been content, but a month into wedded bliss she had developed alarming tendencies such as wandering off and sinking into strange and sometimes belligerent moods.

Making ends meet selling knick-knacks out of a *thela* (cart) is struggle enough, he mourns, and now this distressing situation which he can neither comprehend nor control. To top it all, an indignant landlord has demanded they move out. Impossible circumstances; he's desperate for a solution, anything.

He'd taken Menoka back to her family in Hojai, he continues, but they'd flatly refused to have anything more to do with her. He suspects his in-laws had known all along of her illness, and had conveniently rid themselves of an unwanted problem by dumping her on him. The counsellor notes he puts no blame on his wife for their miseries.

Once he has unburdened himself, the counsellor explains what Ashadeep could do to help. There are other women with similar problems, the man hears,

some being treated, a good many recovered and gone. This is more than he'd expected. "I know now," he says fervently, "that it's God who's brought us here to be saved."



Menoka's "moods" are diagnosed as manic depression and she's soon in the regular medication-counselling cycle of treatment, during which the husband's visits are unfailingly regular. Everyone in the centre is touched by his devotion: calm when she's at her worst, and in her better moments there beside her to take her hand and talk to her soothingly.

Counselling by psychiatrist Dr. Thakuria involves both wife and husband; the man must learn to gauge her moods, see to her medication and manage abnormal situations should they recur. Eventually Menoka is allowed home, but it's not the end of her story. Her devil rears up again and her husband has to bring her back. She is readmitted, the exacting treatment repeated. As before, the husband is by her side all through her second stint in Ashadeep.



In due course she's sufficiently stable to go home again. Follow-up visits continue and medication is reviewed from time to time. Then the husband comes one day to Ashadeep with the news she's pregnant. He's besieged with thought: would the condition affect her mind? Should she continue with psychiatric medicine? Would she accept motherhood? And finally the real concern: will their baby be "normal"?

The counsellor takes pains to assure him the baby's likelihood of inheriting its mother's illness is infinitesimal: the statistics – a tiny one to two percent affected – show it's so. Doctors would look into the medical aspect. But concerning motherhood there could be no prediction, though continued counselling should help.

Altogether, Menoka's stability has taken Ashadeep three and a half years of persistence to achieve. Her husband has been a constant support and never turned on her blaming and accusing, which in like cases has been known to happen.

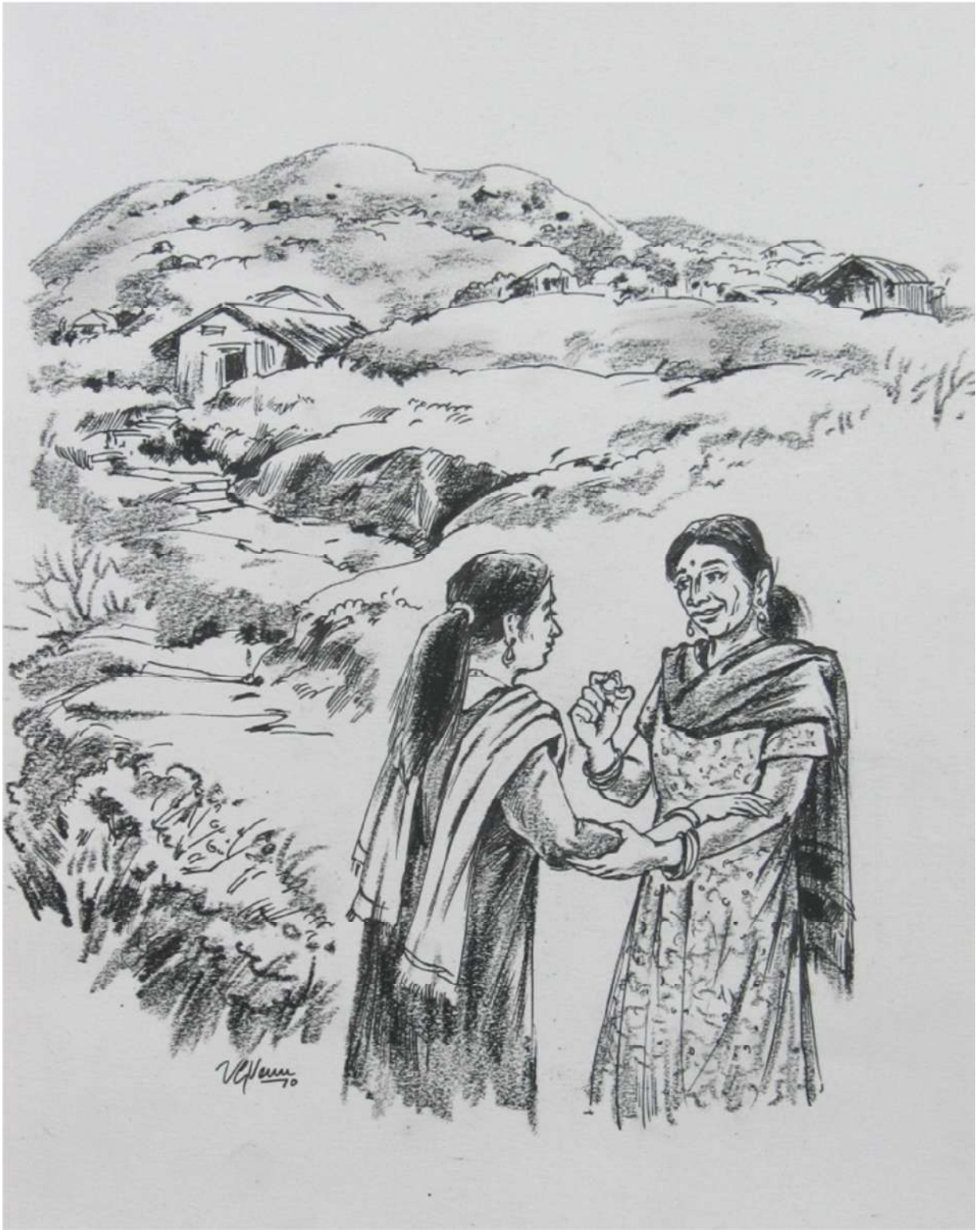


Today, things are looking up. Reviews and remedy continue. Menoka's given birth to a bonny boy, who her mother-in-law helps look after. Her attitude towards the baby had at first been distant, but her husband now reports a tentative

awakening of motherly instincts. Her counsellor sees no reason why this should not bloom with time into a more complete love.

Menoka could have been found in rags, abandoned, prowling the city garbage dumps or worse; instead she's home with her family, secure and looked after. And, without question, it has been her unlettered husband's determination to stand by her, to understand and keep faith that has pulled her back from the very brink of hopelessness.

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Minotee

Regular as clockwork, the distinctive figure in a flowing skirt and floppy hat starts out in the morning from the Panjabari hills and follows the road into the heart of the city. From there she takes the main street up to the state capital, where she parks herself for the day in a patchy meadow off what is known as the “last gate” point. And when evening falls, she rises and makes her quiet way back along exactly the same route.

She is a steady, unhurried walker. Tied to her waist are two bags stuffed with plastic fibre pulled out of cement sacks, and this she knits with a pair of bamboo splinters held in deftly moving hands. More tightly packed bags hang about her body.

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Anjana has received several calls about the knitting lady. In fact, Uttam and she have cruised the roads a couple of times scouting but have failed to spot her. Then out one day on some other errand, they see her ahead and Uttam pulls up close.

Anjana leans out and hails her. She takes no notice.

Anjana calls out again. “Hey, will you come with us?”

Pause.

“Where?” She’s walking, Uttam rolling along to keep up.

“A good place. A nice house, where you’ll get new clothes and good things to eat.”

She halts and is still for a moment, considering the offer. Done, the face under the hat breaks out in a smile.

“Will you give me tea?”

“Of course!”

She nods.

Anjana steps out and leads gently her to the van. On the way she introduces herself: she is Minotee.



When she's taken inside for a bath at the Ashadeep transit-care centre, attendants discover she is swathed in layer upon layer of clothing: they just keep coming off. *Draupadi*, says a wag. And something stranger underneath: several discarded bicycle tyre inners are wound tightly around her midriff and thighs. "Have pains here," she explains. "These help."

Her mobile assets add up to five bags full. Neatly knitted, they contain bottles, empty cigarette packs and matchboxes, pieces of wood, metal and other odds and ends, stuffed to bursting. The bags are so well made that Anjana later has them put away as a memento of the early Minotee years.



Initially it's not at all apparent she has a mental disorder. Asked why she's out in that manner day after day, Minotee replies she always has an awful headache in the mornings and her only relief from it is to go out - and keep going. Early exchanges of conversation with her counsellor are quite ordinary; but after a while these are interspersed with passages of increasing incoherence and, when she's hit full stride, song. So there *are* signs of a problem, notes the counsellor.

"Where is your home?"

"Dhubri," she says, and launches into a sunny depiction of domestic bliss: fishing, pastures, community *pujas*, family and companions, on of which later turned out to be recollections of happy years spent growing up in her mother's house. As counselling continues, it is obvious she's been evading or suppressing all talk of the later events in her life, mainly her marriage and its aftermath, though she has mentioned in passing a husband up somewhere in the Panjabari hills.

Once Dr. Thakuria, the key psychiatrist in Ashadeep, lets his conclusions be known, Minotee's illness is treated. She responds unexpectedly well and with regular medication and counselling, the clarity of her thought and speech improve rapidly. But there's always a pall of gloom which hangs over her, like some deep and sad secret.



Everything is fine, progressing, till one morning when Minotee goes missing. There is a commotion and every nook in the centre is searched, but she

cannot be found. Mukul, beset with worry, hurriedly drives out looking for her. To his relief he spies her a short way down the road, but contrary to what he expects, she's walking smartly *towards* Ashadeep. He slows and waits for her to come nearer. When she's at the car and sees it's him she climbs in, unruffled.

"I was feeling sad," she explains without a hint of contrition, "and I *had* to come out, like in the old days." She'd slipped out when the gateman was busy elsewhere in the yard. "But as I was walking away, I thought, what if they start worrying about where I am.....you, Anjana, Mamoni, Sita, Sukhi.....you *were* worried, weren't you? Anyway, I asked myself, could you really do this to them? No, I couldn't. So I turned back. And there you were in your car." Through with what she has to say, she sits back comfortably.

For Mukul the episode is a definite step forward in Minotee's rehabilitation: her new assertiveness, with the acknowledgement that people do care about her and her genuine reciprocation of their concern, could very well help dispel her sense of loneliness and rejection.

Back in the centre Minotee is hugged and kissed and smothered by her companions and soaks every bit of it in with undisguised delight.

"Why'd you take off like that?"

"Where'd you go?"

"We've been looking *everywhere!*"

"You should've *told* us!"

"Ah, you're back!"

And so on.

Minotee cannot but know that she has her Ashadeep companions' unconditional affection and it's not surprising when, soon after her little adventure, the counsellors say she is ready to go home.



Minotee and her escort are on a track that winds through the hills on the city's outskirts. They're climbing the last rise to her husband's hut when a flustered young lady rushes down to intercept them. When she's a few feet away, she stops and stares open-mouthed at Minotee. This is Minotee's college-going daughter, and it is evident the transformation in her mother's appearance has taken her by

surprise. But when she recovers she begs her mother, “Please, please don’t go any further. Father’s married again, and it’s taken us a lot of effort to get things back to normal. You’ll only upset everything if they find you here.”

To Minotee, this is a terrible and unexpected blow. She’s silent for a long moment, then gathers herself and quietly tells her daughter not to worry, she’d turn around right there.

As Minotee and her escort walk away she’s silent and withdrawn, devastated by what she’s convinced is her daughter’s rejection of her. At last she says her old mother, too, lives somewhere there and that is where she will go. They trudge up and down the paths until they find her, a frail lady in a tiny patch, her hut small and mean. Minotee stays back.



Within a few weeks she’s in Ashadeep again. She cannot survive up there, she says, her mother has so little as it is, so could she stay and work in the centre for some money? It would help her care for the old lady, too. Her offer is accepted.

So Minotee’s back in Ashadeep, now with the management. She’s assigned the kitchen and throws herself into her work. Her labours and mind grow surer by the day and it isn’t long before her diligence is rewarded with a promotion to joint cook, a position that entitles her to a decent raise.



Her life has changed. Minotee cannot sit idle for a minute, is busy all day: feeding the Ashadeep establishment is no small task. It’s good for her mother as well, whom she visits every month to see to things and ensure she has money for her needs.

Minotee asks Anjana, who’s going to Kolkata, to buy her a pair of gold earrings which she pays for in advance. Soon after that she places an order for a traditional silk dress, a *muga mekbela* set; all agree her choice is in very good taste. Then finally, one day, she asks Pranita if she’d go along with her to see her daughter. Pranita agrees, thinking it better Minotee’s not left to do this on her own.

Like before, mother and daughter meet on the path to the house. Before the girl can utter a word, Minotee gently touches her arm and tells her, “You *are* my daughter, don’t forget, and the chance to see you is the biggest joy in my life. I don’t know what you really think of me.....a mother, a monster.....but for me, girl,

you'll forever be my own, my precious child." Minotee fishes out a fine gold ring. "Here, this is for you, to remember I'm always with you. I'm very proud you're in college, and I'll help you all I can in whatever you want to do." And with that, Minotee turns and walks away.

She's built the bridge to her estranged daughter's heart. The girl begins to drop by occasionally to look her up, visits taken advantage of by Ashadeep counsellors to unobtrusively help the reunion along.

And just when everything's going smoothly, Minotee's orderly existence hits a bump.

An unanticipated relapse catches everyone unawares, and she's unheedingly adamant about walking out to go and live with her daughter. As soon as the girl comes to know she rushes over to reason with Minotee.

The daughter proves to be mature beyond her years, and deals with the situation firmly. She explains to her mother that she's still a student, dependent on her father, and with Minotee either dysfunctional or absent all these years, it's her stepmother who's brought her up with great care and affection. She, therefore, *will not allow* Minotee to force her way back into her home and upset its harmony. *But*, she promises Minotee, the day she graduates and gets a job she'll come back for her and look after her for the rest of her days.

The storm blows over. Soothed by her daughter's words, Minotee is back at her job, busy and efficient as ever.

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Minotee's still with Ashadeep. She's on "maintenance" medicine, keenly aware of what's good for her and what is not. She excels at her job, which she's held for four years without mishap, and continues to hold her position as the number one workaholic in Ashadeep.

And yes, she knits. A whole range of useful stuff, coveted by all. As to those stuffed bags of old, she's firmly discarded them along with the troubles which had tormented her for years before she and Ashadeep had the good fortune to find each other.

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Firoza

Rituparna Mazumdar, accomplished sportsperson of national stature, is waiting in Guwahati's Rajgarh road when her eye catches a movement in the smouldering heap of rubbish in a nearby municipal dump. She moves closer to investigate and is stunned by what she sees: within the enclosure, and virtually indistinguishable from its contents, lies a frail figure in rags and it appears to be partly on fire, too.

Rituparna tries to rouse the figure with shouts but gets nowhere. She's wondering what she should do when it strikes her that Ashadeep may be able to help, so she calls Mukul. He despatches a rescue team; the crumpled woman is extracted from her fiery bed, wrapped in a rug and spirited away to the transit care centre where a medical team is waiting.



The rescued woman is obviously in a deeply psychotic state. If she wasn't, she would have been screaming in agony. In her case, the usual sequence of examinations is reversed: Dr. Brahma, the GP, and his team tend to her first and once they have seen to her immediate medical needs, the psychiatric evaluation takes place.

The woman's name is Firoza, and the healing of her mind and body takes a full five months. She says she's from Mariani in upper Assam, a claim given credence by her soft, lilting speech. At the end of the period, when doctors and counsellors have agreed she's ready, Firoza is taken home by Savio and Pranita. It's a weary journey by bus, auto-rickshaw and finally on foot before they are there, a squalid slum on a far edge of the town.

Her *jethai* (aunt) is overjoyed when she sees her missing niece at the door. Firoza's husband is at work. In minutes, the Ashadeep duo is surrounded and thanked and blessed by a swarm of neighbourhood ladies and Firoza, too, is welcomed with great affection.

The husband works in a garage and the poor man, says the *jethai*, has problems of his own for he is deaf and suffers a severe speech impediment. Hard at work all day, he has no idea of how his wife had disappeared or where she'd gone.

The situation is not an unfamiliar one to the Ashadeep people. The family may not necessarily lack concern for one of its own who is mentally unwell; but with doctors and medicine either unavailable or simply unaffordable and round-the-clock surveillance an impossibility, an unnoticed disappearance of the affected, followed by a chance hop into a train or bus, is almost inevitable. The unaware wanderer could in this way be transported virtually anywhere, just like Firoza's unknowing three hundred mile haul from Mariani to Rituparna's neighbourhood.

The poor husband, continues the *jethai*, has been looking all over for her. He's a good and caring man, she insists, ready to do anything to make her well again.

A month's stock of medicines are left with Firoza and after making sure she and others at home have understood their instructions, Pranita and Savio take their leave.



The alarm sounds a week later, when someone calls to say something's wrong with Firoza and that she's been refusing food and medicine. She wants nothing except to return to Ashadeep.

After the call there is no further news, but two months later she's back and this time her husband is with her. Using a combination of sounds and gestures, he makes the counsellor understand that Firoza and he are ready to stay for any length of time as long as she gets well.

With the husband's help, supervisors succeed in unravelling some more of Firoza's half-known history. She'd first exhibited abnormal symptoms about seven years earlier. More recently, having been in a road accident, she'd been treated in the Dibrugarh medical college, though it's not clear whether for psychosis or injury, or both. She vanished from her hospital bed one day and had remained untraced, until her extraction from that smoking garbage pile in far-off Guwahati. Firoza is also a mother of three, which has never been revealed in her counselling sessions.



The doctors recommend another full term in Ashadeep and the husband says he'll stay, too. A skilled vehicle painter, he intends to find a job in a city workshop and is unaffected when he's told he cannot stay in the centre: the railway platform, he asserts, would do him fine. He lands a job, works all day and visits his wife every other evening to keep up with how she's doing.

After three months, the husband abruptly announces he's taking Firoza back. He insists that being so much better already, she'd do all right at home and promises to take good care of her, make sure of her medication and so forth. The doctors demur, but in the end the decision is his to make and the two leave.



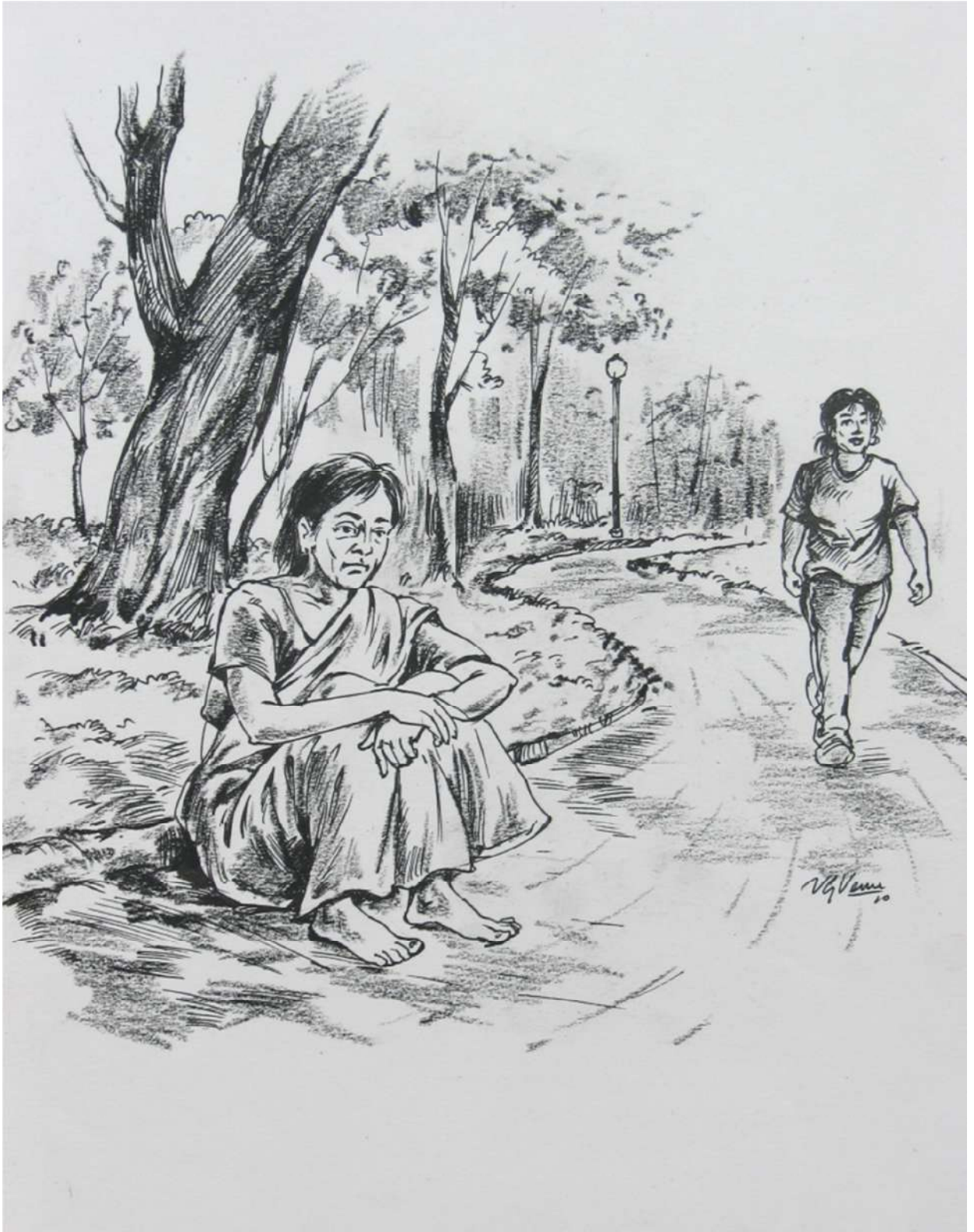
This time Firoza's family keeps in touch. They call Ashadeep every month to talk to her supervisors and take care to send for medicines before they run out.

Everything's seemingly in control when Firoza suffers a severe relapse and the husband lets Ashadeep know that he's bringing her back. They have a troublesome journey by train and when they pull into Guwahati, the husband decides to walk down to the nearby Ashadeep outdoor clinic rather than make for the more distant main centre.

Firoza, meanwhile, has been working herself into a heightened state of agitation. The husband is fearful, and grips her hard as firmly as he can as they push and shove along the crowded pavements. They are at the clinic at last, and about to step inside when Firoza breaks free of her husband's hold with a fierce jerk and is gone. She's swallowed in an instant by the teeming swarm. The husband tries to follow but cannot see her anywhere. Shouting in alarm, he tears up and down the road hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Others see his plight and join the search, but Firoza has disappeared completely.

Defeated and blaming himself bitterly, he comes to Ashadeep in tears. Everyone in the centre waits for news, some trace, but there is none for days, then weeks and finally months. Firoza has not been found till this day.

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Kanchan

Her name till the very end remains unknown. In Ashadeep much importance is attached to a resident's name – her primary identity – and particularly so in the case of the abandoned or homeless. So she is given one: Kanchan.

The story opens with Taibun Nessa, popular sportsperson, out one morning on his usual walk in Guwahati's railway estate. He comes upon a woman sitting silently by the path, as if lost. She does not react to anything he says, so he indicates with signs that she should come along with him. She nods, rises to her feet, and obediently follows him home. As soon as they are in the house, Nessa calls Ashadeep.

He figures he needs to keep his guest occupied till the rescuers arrive, and after some thought offers her a comb and some oil. It's the perfect ploy.

Pranita and Uttam find the woman hunched in a corner of Nessa's veranda, stroking her matted tresses with a wide smile on her face. They try on her every dialect they know but fail to elicit a response. Uttam is convinced she's a deaf-mute and if not then incapable of simple understanding, but when he gestures towards his van she gets up and into it without hesitation. Strange!

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Kanchan's mind is impenetrable. She does not speak, asks for nothing, reacts to little and appears unable to read or write. Supervisors put in a heroic effort but fail to find a clue to her identity or origin. But once she's settled in, something about her mute vacuousness compels everyone in Ashadeep to make her existence as pleasant as possible: companions take turns to massage her back, guide her to meals and lend a hand with anything she cannot manage on her own, which is more or less everything. The only constant in her rambling existence seems to be the Cheshire smile which never leaves her face.

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Kanchan is suddenly very ill. It gets worse, and she's hospitalised and treated for a kidney dysfunction. Lying in her cot she grins all day, pleased to have around her familiar faces from Ashadeep. But as the gloom of evening deepens she withdraws into herself until she is morose and still, but again with morning, and

the sight of a known face or two, her animation reappears. The nurses say she's content so long as she has her friends around for company.

She stays unwell for many weeks. The attendants and doctors do what they can but the fateful day dawns when neither she, nor they, can fight the disease any longer and Kanchan quietly passes on. She's laid in a hut in the yard, and preparations for her last rites begin.

She's prone on a mat, face up, neatly criss-crossed with strings of flowers. Hours after dark, fellow resident Nalini slips in to pay her a visit. She first tries to rouse Kanchan, but her efforts are rudely ignored. Itching to do something nice for her unresponsive friend, she decides to effect a general rearrangement and twists Kanchan's head about till it's achieved a position more in consonance with her aesthetic sensibilities. Satisfied with her handiwork, she goes back to bed.

In the morning a shrill scream brings everyone rushing to the hut. Naba's peeped in to discover a grotesquely contorted Kanchan amid crushed and scattered flowers, and struck by the terrifying thought of her restive spirit thrashing about in the middle of the night, suffered a considerable jolt.

Later Pranita, who has known Kanchan from her first day in Ashadeep, swears she had experienced a strange phenomenon that night. Away in distant Cachar, she insists she'd woken up abruptly at night and sensed a strange presence in the pitch black room and the eerie sensation had persisted till dawn. She'd come to know of Kanchan's demise much later in the day.

Uttam and Pranita, the Ashadeep persons who'd been closest to Kanchan, are deeply saddened by her passing, and Uttam willingly assumes the responsibility of arranging her funeral.

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In the cremation ground, a touching gesture takes Uttam by surprise. Members of the clan which supervises the pyres come to him, and say they'd known Kanchan well in her street-life days; she'd been a harmless woman who'd faced her vicissitudes with unflinching good cheer and in remembrance, they had decided to take upon themselves the cost and conduct of her cremation.

A man piling up scantlings glances at Uttam. "Bodies of unknowns like her are usually stuffed in sacks and tossed into the river," he comments, pointing at the Brahmaputra swirling past the edge of the ground. "But we're proud to do this for her because she was a good and simple soul, even if she wasn't all there." The

Ashadeep contingent finds solace in the simple dignity thus bestowed on Kanchan's final passage into the beyond.



And this is how Kanchan, unknown, unknowing and unknowable, lived out the last of her days among friends who cared for her and mourned her when she left. Like Uttam and Pranita, one cannot help but wonder about who she was, where she'd come from, who or what had brought her here and if there's still someone somewhere who misses her, hoping against hope she might just turn up one day. But these are things we're not likely to ever know.....

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Kaushalya

One evening Mukul receives a telephone call from Dhing, a small town about a three-hour drive from Guwahati.

“Sir”, says the urgent voice of a young man, “We have a lady here lying on the road, looks as if she’s about to give birth. We’ve been trying hard to get her into a hospital but we’ve had no luck. She’s been moaning and screaming for hours. Calling you is our last resort – sir, what should we do?” He and his friends belong to a local youth club.

Dhing does have a small government medical centre, but the doctors there have told the boys the place is not adequately equipped to deal with the situation. In any case, the woman would not be admitted in the absence of a guardian or family, effectively shutting off that option.

Mukul suggests the lads corner the senior health officials in Dhing, cite certain clauses of the National Mental Health Programme and demand the immediate services of a psychiatrist and gynaecologist. Otherwise they’d have to take her to a hospital in Nagaon or Guwahati and that would require the services of an ambulance and nurses, an unaffordable proposition.

The club-boys act on Mukul’s first piece of advice, adding some punch by using the influence of a National Human Rights Commission official they happen to know, and things begin to move.

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With the police and health officials in a more agreeable frame of mind, the woman is quickly taken to the civil hospital in Nagaon where she delivers a stillborn baby, a boy.

Fate pitches in. By coincidence, the doctor on duty is Anjana’s brother; clinical observations have convinced him his patient needs immediate psychiatric care and he arranges to have her transferred to Ashadeep as soon as she can travel safely.

Admitted into transit care, she goes through the routine medical and psychiatric processes and after six weeks is stable enough to be sent on to rehabilitation.

Given the distraught and dishevelled state in which rescuees commonly arrive in Ashadeep, attendants had been surprised to find her in fair health in spite of her recent trauma; and she's unusually finicky about turning out properly, wearing her sari in the correct traditional manner. There is, as a result, much curiosity about her background and how she'd got into her present situation.

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Everything about her is an unknown, for not a sound has escaped her lips since she's got here. Her counsellor, however, keeps at it and then in one session she blurts out a word.

Temple.

The counsellor's elated; perhaps this is the long awaited breakthrough.

"What kind of temple?"

"Big temple."

"Good. Where is this big temple?"

"Raihalla."

"And where is Raihalla?"

"Temple. The *big* temple."

This goes round in circles till the counsellor is dizzy, but then she's begun to talk. The session remains stuck in that groove till, without warning, she throws in another word. *Bilaspur.*

The Ashadeep people discuss the possibilities. They know of two Bilaspurs, one in the country's northern hills and the other in the central plains, and the two are a great distance apart. Her dialect could place her in either....or perhaps neither, if there's another one elsewhere! But Anjana's instincts say it's the plains, and the plains it is. They settle for Bilaspur in Chattisgarh state.

No further information is to be had.

Over the weeks there's a marked change in her: she's livelier, zestful and shows a keen interest in housework. After some thought a part-time job is arranged for her in the school down the road, St. Stephen's, where the good Jacob Lais has been a consistent benefactor to Ashadeep residents on the mend. She works with a steady, contained enthusiasm and in good time is fit to be taken home, provided of course the home is found.

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Tracing the woman's family will be a long shot, but this is where chances need to be taken and she, Shyamjit, Pranita and Shyamanta board a train to Chattisgarh. Tucked away with her things is the Rs. 4000 she's saved at work. They disembark in Bilaspur, ask around and find a bus bound for Raihalla: for a propitious start, there *is* a Raihalla, not very far away. But they've barely started, when she begins to look perplexed and then becomes completely jittery. As her self-possession evaporates, so does the euphoria of her companions.

Fortune gives the quest a helpful nudge.

The elderly rural gentleman seated next to Shyamjit taps him on the shoulder and asks, "Who's this lady with you? I....I'm sure I know her." He does not wait for a reply and leans forward to talk to her.

"Aren't you *Kaushalya*? From Hardi village?"

The escorts hold their breath. She's vacant for a moment, and then slowly nods *yes*. The Ashadeep trio's relief is audible over the grinding clatter of the bus.

And more luck. When they briefly explain their circumstances to Kaushalya's brother-in-law-of-sorts, he tells them they are headed in the wrong direction, and when they stop to change buses he gets off too, saying he'd be happy go along as their guide.

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Hardi is a compact settlement, and reckoned by the motorcycles reclining in yards and TV aerials bristling on roofs, a thriving one. They halt at a door and uncle announces their arrival with a series of thumps and a bellow, which causes a commotion as people pour out and crowd the newcomers. The Ashadeep team soon faces a barrage of questions.

"How did you find her?"

"Are you *sarkari* (government) people?"

“How’s *mamaji* (uncle) with you?”

“Where was she all this time?”

A voice over the others. “*Where* did you find her?”

“Assam,” replies Shyamanta.

Kaushalya’s people look at each other blankly. Assam?

In the midst of this Kaushalya’s husband strides in. He has one anxious question.

“*Where’s my daughter?*”

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There’s a terrible twist in Kaushalya’s story. The Ashadeep group is stunned to hear that when she’d left, she had in tow a four year old daughter. Kaushalya has no recollection of where or when, in her random semi-real wanderings, she and the little one were separated. The father looks crushed, and turns to her again. “And the child you were carrying?”

The husband, they find, had married again after Kaushalya’s disappearance hoping to be blessed with a son, a wish yet unfulfilled. Shyamjit relates to him the sad story of Kaushalya’s stillborn child. For the moment he decides not to reveal it was a boy.

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It’s not in the best of circumstances, but Kaushalya’s return seems to be received quite kindly by her husband’s family. Pranita, Shyamjit and Shyamanta are ready to leave having settled their side of things, but the villagers will not hear of it. While rooms for the guests are being spruced up, there is a grand public reception at which the three are felicitated with garlands strung with banknotes, tactfully declined.

A community feast is announced for the evening. Shyamjit is made to patiently relate Kaushalya’s story several times over; everybody wants to hear every little detail of her sojourn in “Assam.” Kaushalya, meanwhile, has melted into the household as if she’d never left. Her travelling companions, amazed at her instant re-assimilation, do not see her till the next day.

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In the morning the team's departure is held up once more by the ceremonious arrival of two hallowed personages, the village *purohit* (priest) and the honourable local MLA. The former performs a befittingly elaborate *puja* and the latter, deeply impressed with what he's learned of Ashadeep, invites them to join him in conference. Village folk sitting and listening say they'd like to start something similar in the village, and Shyamjit promises help and guidance.

The guests are requested to let the *pradhan* (headman) know if anyone missing from the village ever turns up again in Assam, when the local folk would help find their homes and families. The hon. MLA makes a declaration: henceforth in the village, two days in each month would be dedicated to the care of the mentally ill. This is greeted with much applause.

Kaushalya sits through the proceedings smiling placidly. She's back where she belongs.

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Akoni

If you were to stroll into the Ashadeep *Navachetna* centre, chances are you'd cross paths with a slim, fair woman with dark hair trimmed above the shoulders. Her walk would be deliberate, her face calm with a trace of pride, and a bright *sahwar* suit might be her one concession to frivolity. Were you to exchange a word she'd be polite and contained.

Her tale is remarkable, even among the many remarkable tales that have come out of Ashadeep's efforts to enable her, and others like her, to emerge into relative normalcy from a subhuman existence not of their making.



It begins when Pranita, in response to an urgent call, finds a fierce, dirt-streaked woman holding her own before the glitzy shops lining an upmarket stretch of Guwahati's G S road. She's in a tattered smock, sports a crash helmet taken off a nearby huddle of motorcycles and is brandishing a stout stick to warn off the circle of bystanders jeering at the incongruous spectacle.

Half hidden by the grime is an impressive dignity: Pranita can see this one has a presence. An old Ashadeep hand, she walks unhurriedly up to the woman, speaks to her in normal conversational tones and just as she had expected, faces no resistance when she deliberately removes the helmet, throws away the stick and invites the woman into her van. And before the onlookers realise what's happened, Pranita and her newly acquired guest are on their way to the Ashadeep transit-care home.



She says she's Akoni. The process of rehabilitation begins: clean up, fresh clothes and physical and psychiatric evaluations, followed by the finely balanced combination of medicine and counselling which hopefully will lead her back to regular, day-to-day life. Progress is gradual. In time a good part of her memory is back and she knows from where she's come, far off Tinkhong in upper Assam.

The interaction-remedy drill continues till she is qualified to be on her own, that is, clearly aware of her need for medication to maintain the stability regained after months of painstaking care. Even better, she's firmly confident she can lead an Ashadeep team all the way back to her village.

So what happens one afternoon is Akoni, and her escorts Shyamjit and Pranita, find themselves on the edge of her hamlet after a gruelling two-day journey. Not once has she faltered on the way.

They are walking past a little stall when she stops and asks Pranita for money and with it buys tea, sugar and biscuits. "I'm about to enter my house with guests," she explains, "and how can a guest leave without being offered at least some tea?"

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Soon more of Akoni's past is revealed. There's a daughter at home, for some reason never spoken of earlier, and her story is a sad one. Given away early in marriage, the young girl had been treated miserably, the final act of cruelty a pot of boiling oil thrown in her face by a crazed mother-in-law. Tortured, rejected and horribly disfigured, the girl had fled back to her mother's.

Over the tea and biscuits so thoughtfully provided by Akoni, Pranita and Shyamjit give instructions to the daughter and close neighbours about Akoni's medicines, of which she's given a substantial supply. Pranita then assembles the village people for a talk on mental illness. This is standard Ashadeep procedure: instilling awareness might foster a finer understanding if they ever again have to deal with a situation similar to Akoni's, perhaps even save a life.

There is something else the daughter has said which is of interest to the guests. In proof of her uncanny insight, Akoni had become aware quite early of the problem with her mind, and had decided to do something about it on her own. Making the half day's journey to the medical college hospital in Dibrugarh town she, quite remarkably, had sought the help of the resident psychiatrist. It was on the last of two or three such visits that she'd gone wayward, ending up stalking an alien kerbside hundreds of miles from home and with no idea of how she'd got there.

Now Shyamjit and Pranita decide they are done and leave the village.

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After a period Shyamjit gets a call from Akoni: she's run out of medicines but has been trying to get some from Dibrugarh. An interlude, and another call. No medicines. She can feel the black mood now, looming close. And after that, silence.

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Days go by without news of her.

Ashadeep people Moushumi, Rita and Swapna are half-way through the hour's drive back to base from Jagiroad. They slow down at a junction to ease through a jumble of auto-rickshaws, when an upsetting sight presents itself: a gang of auto-drivers has cornered a dishevelled woman and are needling her, while she's lunging back in fury with a thick wooden staff. The men mockingly evade her thrusts while they poke fun at her, hugely entertained by the novel sport.

“That's *Akoni*?”

Moushumi makes the driver stop and calls frantically out to Akoni as she wrenches open her door.

The instant she hears Moushumi's voice, Akoni's aggression vanishes. The transformation is so sudden, so surprising, that her tormentors' heckling drops to a baffled murmur. A delighted smile fills Akoni's face as she lets go of her stick, runs to the car and climbs in. As they drive away she tells her friends she's been struggling for days to reach Ashadeep. She recalls nothing except blurred snatches of her tortuous four hundred kilometre passage from the village to that auto-stop. When she got there, something inside her snapped; and all she was aware of after that was battling to keep despair and the menacing strangers at bay, until salvation mercifully arrived in the form of Moushumi's yell.

In Ashadeep Akoni's treatment resumes without hitch or hindrance.

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Akoni today earns her keep helping out in Ashadeep, and works in nearby homes and St. Stephen's school for extra wages. At work she's consistent and reliable. “Work+income” is the penultimate and critical stage of rehabilitation in the Ashadeep scheme of things, founded on the contention that it is self-dependence that will enable a recovered resident to go home with head held high. In fact Akoni's savings, in rural terms, are already impressive; the centre may for the moment be her refuge, but sooner or later, when she feels she's ready, she'll be homeward bound.

And when it happens, the fortuitous combination of her single-mindedness and her benefactors' care will hopefully have ensured she will never again be a ragged object of taunt in an unknown street, lost, threatened and alone.

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Rupohi

This one is as much Komola's as Rupohi's, a classic story of an unconditional friendship prevailing over indomitable odds.

Rupohi is from Kokrajhar, lower Assam, and her name is apt for she is strikingly beautiful. In her early teens she's placed as a maid with an elderly couple in the town of Tezpur. Her employers are respectable educators but Rupohi is no beneficiary of their supposed erudition: mistreated, denied all entreaties to let her return to her family, she attempts to escape despair by setting herself aflame with kerosene.

She suffers forty percent burns but survives. Fearing repercussion, the enlightened couple now lose no time in whisking her back to her mother's.



She's a revolting sight. Her chin is fused to her chest, her upper body is scarred, her hands are grisly webs. The trauma extends to her mind as well: she screams out helplessly in the middle of the night; and marches along the village lanes when everyone's asleep, brandishing a *trishul* (trident).

Rupohi's mother is not at all pleased with the situation and nor is her brother. Mired in poverty, they have no money for doctors or medicines and little inclination to care for her anyway.

This is when Komola, Rupohi's neighbour and closest childhood companion, comes to the rescue. She brings Rupohi food and medicine, and faithfully nurses her back to as complete a recovery that is possible in the circumstances. Rupohi's plight affects her friend deeply; not long after, Komola takes a year-long course in human rights in the hope it'll help her find justice for her unfortunate friend.



Rupohi's injuries have made physical labour painful and difficult for her. She's surviving on the edge with odd jobs and chores. This is when a Nepalese family in the village offers to employ her, but on conditions nothing less than

bizarre: the man's wife is barren; he offers to take Rupohi in provided she's willing to give him children, but forego any claim on them when born.

So it comes to be.

A year after her pact of desperation Rupohi gives birth to a daughter, and soon after to another. The man keeps her on. She is *didi* (elder sister) and nanny to the two little girls and in spite of her deformities, the girls adore her.

Four years go by in this manner. The children have reached a manageable age, so the man rewards Rupohi for her services by beating her up and throwing her out of his house.

Rupohi's back with her mother. She tries to settle down and reconcile herself to a life without her daughters, but the emotional tug is too powerful for her to resist and she goes back to them. Once again, she's thrashed and ejected. This happens several times over, but on the last occasion her younger daughter clings to her crying and will not let go. Rupohi puts up a spirited fight and succeeds in bringing the child home with her.

The enraged father comes and confronts her. There is a scene. Unable to ignore the situation any longer, the village council addresses the issue.

Komola recounts what takes place at the hearing: Rupohi argues and pleads while the father of her children cites the "conditions" she had agreed to at the very beginning. In the end the council takes the easy way out, cites her penury and rules the man has the better claim on the child. The shrieking girl, however, holds on to her real mother so fiercely they cannot be separated. The hapless village council then reverses its earlier decision and allows Rupohi to keep the child. But the sad truth is that the care of the child thrusts another crushing responsibility on the already overburdened Rupohi, and she makes things worse by plunging into depression.

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Komola, at an NGOs' meet in Shillong, hears about Ashadeep. It's a thin sliver of hope but she decides to take her friend there.

Rupohi, in view of her situation, is accepted in Ashadeep but there's a problem: the child cannot stay here. Nor is she welcome at her grandmother's, so a place is found for her in an establishment of repute where she will be educated and cared for till she is grown.

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Rupohi does not require protracted treatment and is soon secure and occupied in Ashadeep. Plastic surgery sponsored by the Rotary club greatly improves her condition, freeing her neck and fingers, enabling her to work comfortably again. The responsibilities she's given - weaving, managing the kitchen, housekeeping and cooking - nets her a fair income out of which she supports her mother, the one for whom she'd till recently been a disposable non-asset. She's suffered the occasional mild relapse, but vigilant attendants have made sure treatment is prompt and she's otherwise been steady.

She's won back her composure together with self-esteem and social position, neatly demonstrated whenever she's home: the village folk respect the fact she never arrives without money of her own and now look up to her, giving credence to the Ashadeep stipulation that residents must learn to support themselves as soon as they are able, for in the absence of self-dependence, rehabilitation would in all likelihood be fragile and incomplete.

Her child, now eight or so, is doing well where she is.

Trapped in an existence of unbearable drudgery, Rupohi had nearly succeeded in taking her own life when barely thirteen. She had survived, only to be trapped in a second living hell. But all through her travails she'd had with her the faithful Komola, who had steadfastly refused to back off from the challenge of making her dear friend a complete person again.

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Reboti

Mukul's shuffling papers on his desk one evening when the 'phone trills.

It's Reboti, one-time Ashadeep resident, and she's sounding jittery. She's out of medicines, she says, and the local shops have none. But her uncle has planned to be in Guwahati the following week, so could Ashadeep please help?

"Have you been unwell?" Mukul asks.

"No."

"Are you working?"

"Oh, yes."

"Good. Ask your uncle to drop by."



Reboti's story begins with a call from the Udalbakhra police station, in a far corner of the city. They've found a girl drifting alone in the streets, says an officer, and there's a problem for they have no facility to hold a lone girl in the precincts, nor a vehicle by which she could be taken elsewhere. They are hoping Ashadeep would not only oblige, but have her picked up as well.

Two attendants are sent out in a van to collect her.

She's in her late teens and barely clothed. The policemen haven't learned a thing which could explain her abnormal situation, no names, no place.

It's not long before the transit-centre attendants discover she is the toughest customer they have ever handled. Or *tried* to handle. They can only gape as she builds up a rage of volcanic intensity, hitting a peak so violent that even the seasoned handlers steer clear of her.

To wind her down to a state in which she can be properly examined and treated is clearly going to be impossible. The doctors confer and see no way but to have her moved her to the government mental institution in Tezpur. The four-hour journey promises to be a task, but a few old hands, using various wiles and manoeuvres, manage to drive her across and she's admitted into the facility.

Reboti spends ten weeks in Tezpur, at the end of which the therapists have contained the worst of her aggression. Ashadeep can now claim her back and get on with the real job: rehabilitation.

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All she knows is her name and that she's from Khoirabari, a rural district some distance from Guwahati. A cycle of treatment helps her recall a little more about herself: she had lost both parents early and consequently come to the city to live with a *mama* (uncle), and no sooner than she'd done so, the attacks on her mind had begun. The counsellor can guess the rest of a familiar pattern – the loss of reality, a distracted walk out of the house and then the straying, lost and vulnerable. It is Reboti's good fortune that the worst that had happened to her was to be picked up by a police patrol.

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Once the psychiatric diagnosis is conclusive and the medical check-ups done with, the treatment, in which counselling plays a vital part, begins. She recovers quickly. In a few months she's retrieved the better part of her memory, and soon afterwards she's ready to go home. When her counsellor broaches the subject, Reboti thinks it over and says she has another uncle in her parents' village in Khoirabari, and that is where she'd prefer to go.

Supervisor Layan's village is half-way to hers and it is decided that he and two Ashadeep ladies will accompany Reboti to her uncle's. The journey would take two days, with Layan's as the perfect stopover.

The group leaves Ashadeep and on the second day, as planned, walks into Reboti's village. Minutes later, Layan finds himself narrating Reboti's recent history to a kindly and rather surprised uncle, who, when he's heard Layan through, tells his niece she's most welcome to stay.

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Settled with her new family, Reboti's first and very sensible act is to resume her studies by enrolling in the village school. She stays in touch with her Ashadeep counsellor, discussing her feelings and what she's been doing. Her medicines are usually available at an Ashadeep camp in the not-too-distant town of Mangaldai. If not her uncle procures them from a local shop, and on a couple of occasions has obligingly journeyed all the way to Ashadeep for replenishment.

Reboti's calls are not restricted to pleas for help. She never forgets to invite Mukul and Anjana to family celebrations and chattily keeps them up to date on

local events. One-time residents who care to stay in touch are a prized lot in Ashadeep, and Reboti is an especially cherished one in that group. Counsellors could not have asked for better: Reboti's adhered faithfully to the parting advice of her doctors, and in this compliance they've found a constant reassurance of her wellbeing.



In a moment of respite Mukul calls Reboti's neighbour and they talk about her.

“Does she work at all?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Like what?”

“She helps in the fields, takes tea and food out to the others.”

“And at home?”

“Weaving, daily household things.”

That's that. Reboti's fine.



In a subsequent review of events, Mukul concludes the most remarkable aspect of in Reboti's story is the hindrance-free return she's made to her tradition-bound tribal community.

Having come back a “normal” person following treatment, she's been accepted warmly and completely in the village; yet, conversely, had she appeared in mentally abandoned state, the same society might have lost little time in ridding itself of her, believing she had been taken by evil spirits, transmuted, and remained a person no longer. It's a paradoxical blessing that her illness had manifested itself in the sprawling indifference of the city and not the comfortable intimacy of the village.

There had been a reassignment of priorities in her rehabilitation, too. Given the support and inclusiveness so strongly inherent in her society, Reboti's counsellors had not insisted she learn a skill or trade – typing, for instance - which would have helped her survive later on her own. Concerns about survival had been laid firmly to rest the moment it was clear she would regain her natural place in her community.

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Four years have gone by without incident. Reboti is where she belongs, living a full life, taking good care of herself. At times she tends to fret a bit over herself, seeking reassurance now and then from her erstwhile supervisors, but she also knows that should her old problem ever recur Ashadeep would be glad to come round and help her through it all over again.

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Dhan Mai

If there's ever been a case in Ashadeep of success roaring ahead of expectation, it's surely the one of Dhan Mai.

She's brought in kicking and screaming by the police, thin as a stick and unkempt to the extreme.

When attendants succeed in quietening her somewhat she's taken through the clean-up and physical-psychiatric evaluations, and in the process drives Ashadeep attendants up the most formidable wall they have ever faced. After she's allotted her room she is uncommonly restive, suffers wildly erratic sleep patterns and is altogether unpredictable: she's up in the dead of night to light imaginary *sakees* (oil lamps), switch on the water pump, tear down curtains and repeatedly shed one dress for another; and, to fill the lonely nights, burst now and then into full-throated song.

Between fits of hyperactivity she's sullen and morose.



A long battle of perseverance is in store for the doctors and supervisors, but at last medication and counselling begin to take effect and she wrests back enough self-control and awareness to be considered stable.

She needs to be usefully occupied. Attendants have noticed that she like to collect twigs and leaves and cleverly fashion them into all sorts of receptacles. Perhaps this had once been her livelihood and egged on by her supervisors, she devotes herself to the pastime. Activity gives her an appetite and she begins to eat: her near complete indifference to food, till now, has been a thrice-daily trial for everyone.

Her memory is back and in good working order. She remembers her village in Sarupathar, upper Assam, and says she'd had a few problems there, one of them the compulsion to drift about and find herself in unfamiliar surroundings, far from home. The last of those had taken her a good bit further, in fact half-way across the state from Sarupathar to Guwahati of which, not surprisingly, she has no recollection.

There is a dogged determination about her that seems to urge on her healing, and it's just a matter of months before the doctors certify that she can leave. Her treatment in Ashadeep is complete.



Shyamjit, Pranita and Paran are deputed to see Dhan Mai home, and they haven't an inkling of what awaits them. A tiresome journey by train deposits them before dawn in the little town of Sarupathar. This is a restive interstate zone and the escorts are edgy. Peering around in the semi-darkness they spot a jeep-like *Trekker*, and a deal is struck with its driver to take them into the countryside where Dhan Mai says her village is.

After they have travelled for a while Dhan Mai's directions become hazy and this does little for her companions' anxiety. But she's also been going on about a *bordenta* (elder uncle), the *gaonbura* (headman) of her community, and this is the only clue they possess which could lead them to their destination.

Her companions look for someone in the road to ask directions of and at last they come upon some people, one of whom happens to know Lilamai's uncle. "Follow the river," he directs, so the travellers bump and grind along a pitted track till they roll into a collection of thatched huts which they fervently hope is Dhan Mai's village.



They've found it, and a beaming Dhan Mai points out her uncle's house. Aroused by her shouts the alarmed occupants, uncle at the head, open the door and let them in. Curious neighbours, alerted by voices and the growl of the *Trekker*, converge on the house. Once the initial surprise is over the *gaonbura* gets down to the formal business. He asks after the escorts' antecedents and is curious to know about Dhan Mai's connection with them. Shyamjit produces documents and explains.

Satisfied with what he's seen and heard, the *gaonbura* sends for Dhan Mai's husband. He comes, by his side the new wife he's acquired after Dhan Mai's disappearance and on their heels a surprise: Dhan Mai's children, daughter, sixteen, and son, eighteen. She has said nothing of them in Ashadeep, but her escorts know journeys home have a way of throwing up the unexpected, either contradictory to what counsellors have been led to believe, or things never suspected.



Dhan Mai's inopportune return has visibly upset the husband. He flatly refuses to have anything more to do with her, and when his stand is challenged by his legitimate spouse, fights back saying he now has a new wife, they are happy, and Dhan Mai has no right to hold herself up as a paragon of virtue given all her roving and suspicious disappearances.

The *gaonbura* says well, now she's back, *someone's* got to take her in.

And the arguments fly back and forth, Dhan Mai's uncle trying to reason, the husband obdurate in his refusal. The children are silent. Pranita finally stands and says, "Well, since you people can't come to terms we'll take her back to the Sarupathar police station, and leave her there. Let them handle it." And to her colleagues, "We don't have much time, so let's go."

The Pranita-induced twist in events halts the wrangling, and as the Ashadeep group makes a show of leaving Paran turns and faces Dhan Mai's children. "So whose children *are* you? Is *she*," pointing at Dhan Mai, "your mother, or *isn't* she?"

The retort has its effect: son and daughter rush to the mother's side and declare through tears that *they* will care for her if no one else will.

Later in the morning the *gaonbura* summons the village *panchayat* (council). After much deliberation, the *panchayat* rules that Dhan Mai's day-to-day needs would henceforth be met by the husband and confers on her and the children a joint title deed for their share of the family land. The Ashadeep team is relieved: the three should now be secure, their entitlement safe.

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The escorts are ready to leave, but before doing so Pranita gathers the villagers for her usual talk on mental illness in the hope that awareness would breed understanding, which in turn could build support for those striving to embrace a normal life again, like Dhan Mai.

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Five months later Dhan Mai is back in Guwahati, as a visitor. She calls Ashadeep from the bus stand, asks for a car to be sent round and is duly obliged.

She's come laden with gifts: sweets, coconuts, fruit and various other treats. She is on vacation, she explains, and what better destination than this? Her reception is suitably regal.

They are chatting together when Anjana asks Dhan Mai if she'd like to work with Ashadeep. She readily agrees. She stays on for a period, earns some wages and goes back home. This becomes her routine: Dhan Mai arrives carrying an armful of goodies, calls up chauffeured conveyance, does a stint in the centre and goes home with the money she's made. Meanwhile in the village she has entered the financial business: her idle funds are available to the needy (for a reasonable consideration) and her capital is building up nicely.

As time goes by her involvement with Ashadeep deepens. Dhan Mai is a person of strong instincts and great managerial ability; she scouts around in remote villages, sniffs out victims of mental illness and campaigns hard to have them brought to Ashadeep; in the centre she plays a pivotal role in rescue missions, instructs the uninitiated, guides the weak and, given half a chance, directs entire operations.

On one occasion, she tracks down a woman who's in an abnormally agitated condition. With her usual presence of mind she has brought along her own medicines; she calls and consults the Ashadeep doctor so that she can give the woman a dose just enough to ensure a trouble-free journey to Guwahati, with herself as escort.

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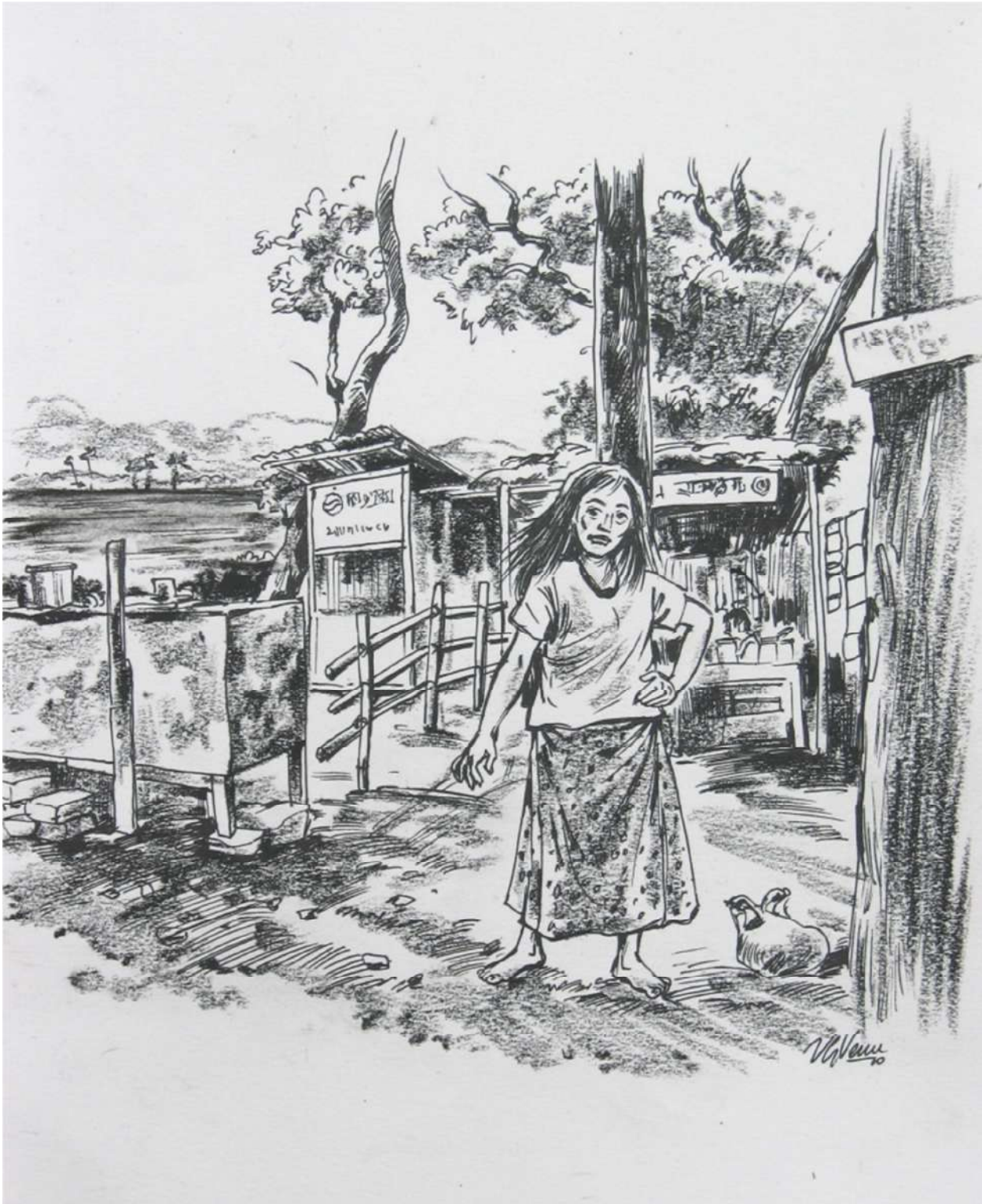
Not too long ago, Ashadeep receives a call from the redoubtable Dhan Mai. She's off to Nepal, she announces, to look up a bunch of relations she's dug up there, so they would have to do without her for a while.

Oh, and another thing: she has this new patient who she's about to despatch with an escort to Ashadeep. She's most regretful her busy schedule would not allow her to come herself, but would Ashadeep kindly do the needful and give the patient the best possible care? "Don't forget," she reminds her Ashadeep contact, "that she's one of *mine!*"

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Every attempt in Ashadeep to reintegrate homeless mentally-distressed women has not been an unqualified success. But where Dhan Mai is concerned, it certainly has.

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Odds & Ends

Gulenu

Chandana of Ashadeep has a new car and is still learning to handle it. So one day, when she needs to go to the airport, she takes along her instructor and converts the errand into an extra driving lesson.

On the way back they stop at a roadside *dhaba* (cafe) for tea. As they enter Chandana's attention is drawn to a rather unconventional entertainer in their midst, a dishevelled woman squatting in a corner and holding a paper cone into which she is singing with furrowed concentration.

The lad who takes their order tells them the *dhaba* owner's been trying all morning to get the woman to take her act elsewhere, obviously with no success.

Chandana walks up and asks her if she would like some tea.

"*Paratha*," she responds matter-of-factly. "I'm hungry."

The order is placed. When it arrives the crooner ignores it.

Chandana tries again. "I've another idea. Will you come with me? I'll give you a ride in my nice new car."

She says yes, she will, and is gathering herself to leave when, as often happens, there's an observer who harbours deep suspicions about Chandana's motives and sternly demands to know where she thinks she's taking the girl. Chandana explains the Ashadeep street rescue mission and gives all kinds of references, but is still made to produce proof of identity before the man's convinced of her intentions.

Her guest climbs feet and all into the car's squeaky clean rear seat which, with the help of her sandals, is soon streaked with mud. Her repertoire is clearly not exhausted: as they move, she leans forward till her head is between Chandana's and the instructor's, and in turn whispers a torrent of nonsense into their ears. This unrelenting back and forth carries on for a while.

Chandana, navigating rather nervously and cursing her spirit of altruism, sneaks a peek into her rear view mirror. Feral eyes in it catch hers and the rest of the visage goes instantly into a series of extraordinary contortions. Chandana's driving skills are now being tested to the limit and it's some relief for her when, after forty minutes of non-stop entertainment, they roll through the gates of Ashadeep.

In time, Gulenu the performer is herself again. Her village is not far from Guwahati, and when Shyamjit takes her home there is a sensation for she's been presumed dead for years. Children tumble out of the village school and form a raucous procession behind Gulenu and Shyamjit. The schoolmaster declares a holiday. And soon the entire village erupts into a spontaneous celebration: Gulenu, miraculously, is back.

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Nalini

At first sight she looks as untameable as the mighty river behind her.

Planted in the sand flaunting a red blouse and spotted skirt, dark hair flying in the wind, and strong features lit by a pair of burning eyes she's every inch the free-spirited gypsy woman of old adventure tales.

She condescends to accompanying the pick-up team from the Brahmaputra's city-side bank to the transit-care centre, where she takes up residence, goes through the full treatment and ultimately gets well. But while all this is going on she takes everyone through a cross-country spin the likes of which they've never experienced.

In the first conversation with a counsellor, she declares she's come all the way from a village in far away Pakistan.

A few sessions later, the interviewer finds her residence has slipped across the border and found refuge in Punjab.

Somewhere around this time Nalini develops quite an indiscriminate craving for food, helping herself to poultry feed, the odd snail and whatever's visible in the vegetable patch, which together seems to propel her travel bug inexorably towards the rising sun.

In subsequent confabs, her domicile first takes a longish hop from Punjab to Delhi (Nai Sarak to be precise), from there makes a truly impressive leap to

Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, shoots onward in a graceful arc to Guwahati, and having got here, plants itself in the zonal estate of the North East Frontier Railway.

Long-suffering Uttam is squeezed into a rickshaw beside Nalini as they rattle up and down every lane and track in the railway neighbourhood hunting for her “home.” Nalini’s yelling directions with great aplomb, but by an inexplicable phenomenon her abode invariably keeps moving just beyond the next corner. When some of the stretches start looking overly familiar, a weary Uttam decides he’s had enough and calls it a day. It’s back to Ashadeep for the two.

An eminently sensible decision, for it takes four and a half years of ceaseless detecting to locate her village. It’s plonked solidly in the very centre of the nation where it’s been placidly waiting all this time to be found: Itarsi, Madhya Pradesh.

The Nalini who reappears in her village is the person she truly is: sociable, gracious – and a sparse and discerning eater. Her escorts are told the family’s been looking for her for eight anxiety-ridden years.



Meera

At the time she’s picked up and transported to Ashadeep she is a mental and physical wreck.

Few in the centre believe she will survive the battering she’s received from disease and injury, but the literally never-say-die Ashadeep GP, Dr. Brahma, and his team use every medical device at their disposal to fight back and not succumb to added setbacks, one of which is paralysis of the face. After days of sustained care she emerges debilitated but unquestionably alive. With her body on the mend psychiatric treatment is introduced, and in a few months she’s in a reasonably stable state of mind.

There *is* a problem but it’s one of communication. No one can follow a word she utters and vice versa. On a thought Mukul consults his acquaintance Miles in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. “Let me talk to her,” says Miles, and it’s a long and involved conversation. Gujarati it is.

On the basis of what Meera’s told him Miles makes the dusty hundred and fifty kilometre journey to her village and finds her husband, who in minutes is buried in an emotional *tête-à-tête* with his long lost wife.

He calls her nearly every day, impatient to know when she’s coming home.

Joseph and Rubi of Ashadeep take Meera back via Milesh in a heat-scorched Ahmedabad. Her home is a wretched hovel with an unusual distinction: within is prominently displayed a large framed portrait of Meera wreathed in flowers and an *in memoriam* printed across its bottom: *Swargyasi Meera Ben Iswar Bhai Wagri*.

Years before the village river had caused a terrible flood, after which Meera was nowhere to be found. Everyone assumed that she, victim of a mental malady, had been washed away. It's little wonder that her providential reappearance in the village is something of an event.

Meera's family gathers around her. Of her four children, two are married and gone. A twenty year old and she warmly recognise each other. But when her girl, just eight, comes near Meera, she disdainfully waves her away; the poor girl had been just six months old when her mother disappeared. Rubi's heart melts seeing the girl's plight. She hopes time will bring them together.

But there's a strange aftermath to her return. Two months and two weeks later, Meera's husband calls Mukul to let him know she has passed on. It's as if she had clung to her existence for one purpose – to die at home.



Homecoming

June, 2010.

A mystery of years solves itself in days, with the wholly unanticipated result that Anjali – inspirational flag-bearer of the rescue-rehabilitation campaign – is home again after twenty lost years.

The Ashadeep think-tank's been brooding for ages over whether or not to send Anjali to Rourkela, the locale linked, if tenuously, with her unknown past. In the end all it takes is a word with Father Lucas, who has a word with the Missionaries of Charity in Rourkela. They are most helpful and say they'd be happy to have Anjali while the search for her family is on.

It's a harrowing thirty-seven hour journey for Joseph, Pranita Rabha (on her first such trip) and Anjali before they alight from a train in Rourkela and Joseph, seeing they have a whole afternoon ahead with little to do, decides they should look around a bit first.

“Sector 19” and a *rickshawala* father are the only other clues Ashadeep's had all these years to Anjali's origins, which till now have led nowhere. Joseph leads his

party to the sector anyway, finds some rickshaw-pullers and asks them about the father. They point at a group of men bunched around a card game. “Try those oldies,” they say. “They might know.”

Joseph cuts into the game and is part way through Anjali’s story when one of the “oldies” fixes Anjali with a stare, exclaiming, “Where on earth have *you* been all this time?”

He tells them Anjali’s people had moved ten years earlier to block C in sector 6, and hails an auto-rickshaw to transport them there.

In sector 6 they are clueless and it’s pouring. Joseph talks to two men sheltering in a shop-front and discovers the family’s shifted again, to a Kalinganagar. The men, who share kinship with Anjali’s family, disappear into a jumble of shacks and emerge with a boy to go along with the searchers. They are at their destination in less than an hour.

A portly man appears at the door. Anjali and he gape at each other blankly. The man’s wife comes out, gasps “*Anjali!*” and whirls on her husband. “What’s the matter, don’t you recognise your own *sister?*”

His jaw drops.

Anjali has mischief in her eyes. “You’ve gone *so* fat, brother, how was I to know it’s *you?*” The brother’s boyhood memories have failed him but his sharp wife’s caught Anjali’s resemblance to an old photograph, which incidentally is all she’s ever seen of her sister-in-law.

When the rapture of reunion has subsided, Anjali’s brother recounts what had happened years before. Anjali, then barely fourteen, had been taken to Delhi by a neighbouring woman to work as a maid. The woman reappeared a year later without Anjali and spouting a disjointed and unnerving tale: the girl had run away.....she’d been sick, had left on her own.....oh, she had surely died somewhere. The furious brother had assaulted the woman and as a consequence had had a run in with the police.

They’d never got to the bottom of it, and that is all the family has known of Anjali’s fate for two inconsolable decades.

The brother tells Anjali their parents have moved elsewhere, promising to take her across in a day or two.

After five years with Ashadeep, a cascade of unforeseen events has served to bring Anjali home. What she needs now is a fresh start, with the help of her folks and the tidy sum she's put by working in Ashadeep.

She calls Anjana and Mukul when she is at her parents'. She's good; and it's good to be home.

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Talepiece

In its very first year, the rescue campaign sees forty-three homeless mentally ill women off the streets of Guwahati into transit care.

The early years are a maelstrom of events, crowded with operations, stratagem, therapy, remedy, counsel and searches, and excursions both pleasant and strange. Then, as pre- and post-rescue methods gain from experience, numbers fall, facilities gear up and the support – official and otherwise – swells, things become easier.

2010: two hundred and forty one of the two hundred and eighty four street women who've come so far into Ashadeep are back with their families, some in states as far flung as Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Chattisgarh and Gujarat.

Every rescue has come with its own surprises; each one is a moving story in its own right. And the mission goes on.

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