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The Goddess of Perilous Passage (Chapter One of a novel in progress)

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Abstract
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MEIRA CHAND

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(Chapter One of a novel in progress)

CALCUTTA 1756

The evening was already upon Calcutta, light sucked from the sky at an alarming rate. The first bats left their trees and flitted about in a purposeless way. Moths blundered into candles. In the fading wastes above the town the Pole Star hung, gripped invisibly by God’s fingers, incandescent with strange light. A full moon appeared beside it. In the house there was bustle and a heightened sense of expectation not normally to be found.

Rigid upon a stool Sati Edwards twisted glass bangles upon her wrist and smoothed down her muslin skirt. Before her a servant sat cross-legged upon the floor, buffing up some bits of silver. A pile of candles were stacked upon a table, before which argued two more servants. The new bearer, a Moslem, refused to touch the candles, saying they were made of pig fat. The chief steward, who had worked for a time in the house, protested that the candles were made from the fat of an enormous fish, especially imported from France. He rapped the box importantly, with its yellowing picture of a whale.

Sati sensed her stepfather observing her as he stood beside the window. His grey eyes resembled the monsoon sky and had the effect of a downpour upon her, shutting her into herself. It was not hard to guess his thoughts as his gaze strayed from her to the table. He was trying to assess how many should be burned to create the right atmosphere for the séance. Too many would generate a climate of fear that might drive the curious away. Fabian Demonteguy was normally frugal with the use of the spermaceti since they were not only more expensive than local wax candles, but must be ordered from France a year in advance of his needs. Tonight he would not spare their use, nor tolerate her reluctance to be a part of his plans. She must perform as instructed. The candlelight grew steadily stronger as darkness settled outside. Sati heard her stepfather clear his throat and turn back to the room.

‘The Governor’s wife will be coming,’ Demonteguy reminded his wife.

Rita Demonteguy examined her appearance in a tarnished mirror, her face held close to the glass. The red brass of henna, lit by the candlelight, flamed within her hair. Ignoring Demonteguy’s advice she refused to dress or powder it in the White Town fashion. If he ever returned with her to France, she knew he feared her creating a stir. At times she caught his eyes upon her, as if already scenes entered his mind that made him shudder with distaste. In retaliation she shook back her fiery hair.
'Nobody thinking well of that Mrs Drake,' Rita announced, still observing herself in the blotched mirror. The blemish in the glass disturbed her, moving over her like a disease. However hard she exhorted the servants to polish the stains remained, untouchable. Behind her reflection floated the image of her daughter, a further blight upon her satisfaction. The girl’s eyes followed her every move.

‘Emily Drake is a lonely woman. Such women seek their own affirmation. But is our Governor regarded with any more respect?’ Demonteguy asked, then ordered more candles to be lit. The argument at the table now appeared to be settled. The head steward handled the candles and the bearer carried a taper which he lit from a candle the head steward held in order to light further candles.

Sati avoided her mother’s gaze in the mirror. The sight of her here in the Frenchman’s house, and the nature of the glances that passed between them filled her with confusion. She turned on the stool, shrinking from Rita’s appraisal. A pink ribbon tied up her hair; tight European clothes constricted all movement. Beneath her dress a bodice and skirt, set with bamboo, were hooped about her like a cage. Her pulse seemed to slow, her breath became shallow and her spirit fled deep into hiding. She stared at the room before her and felt only further constriction.

She hated her stepfather’s house in White Town, filled with useless objects. Mirrors reflected everywhere, filling the house with inaccessible worlds. They deceived through vanity and drew the unwary; they caught and closed away in darkness the secrets of her soul. Their pools of sinister light threw her own ghost before her. Danger was also beneath the chandelier from which crystallised shards appeared forever about to fall. The silk covered chairs of fashionable design Fabian Demonteguy had brought from France but the marble-topped console and the inlaid commode had been supervised to his taste in the local bazaar. The house was a neat one storied affair with a veranda and a small garden. Besides furniture strange flowers had also been imported from France. These now grew in a sickly fashion, cajoled from an alien soil. Sati remembered her grandmother’s hut in Black Town about which vegetation thrust unasked from the fertile earth. She turned to gaze out of the window, spuming the vase of ephemeral flowers before her. Across the fading shapes of White Town she could see the river and Fort William.

The garrison had been built in those days when a fort was worth more than an ambassador. Although it no longer rose threateningly, with the dusk it regained some menace. The town was preparing for the night but whatever the nature of White Town’s preliminaries, it was the bustle of Black Town that came Sati’s way. Her stepfather’s home, in an unfashionable area of Calcutta, was situated near Black Town’s perimeter; the smell of dung fires, frying spices and effluent assailed it. Clanking pans, crying babies, women’s voices and the howl of a dog echoed against the sky. Besides the odours of Black Town the reek of the Salt Lakes drifted into the room. Newcomers, not yet acclimatised to the stench of Calcutta, constantly retched. Women sickened politely behind
posies of jasmine, their stomachs turned inside out. The open drains and noxious mud flats, mixed with the rot of dead fish tossed up each day on the tide, did not disturb Sati Edwards. Nor did it disturb her stepfather. Fabian Demonteguy was not a man of the East India Company, which was lit from within by its own fierce light. He was an interloper, who must forage about as best he could for his own illumination. Calcutta treated his breed with distaste.

Demonteguy turned to assess the room and was forced at last to observe his stepdaughter. The girl was from his wife’s brief marriage to an English sea captain fifteen years before. Demonteguy frowned as he stared at Sati. If he could have arranged the evening without her he would have done so but, she was the pivot upon which it must turn.

‘Tonight you appear most acceptable,’ Demonteguy complimented begrudgingly. He stared at Sati intently, wondering as always why the girl could not have inherited her mother’s light, honeyed skin. Instead, perversely, she reflected upon him all of Black Town’s intensity.

‘You will perform as instructed,’ he ordered, suddenly fearing she might yet slip from his grasp. She gave him the feeling she might have that ability. The girl looked up and for a moment he met her amber eyes, disconcerting in their clarity. Those feline eyes and wild tortoiseshell hair, burnished and streaked as if it held part of the sun, was all she had inherited from her English father.

‘Good money has been spent on that dress,’ he reminded her, assessing the silk he himself had chosen and seen cut by a tailor from France. The raggedy salwar kameez Sati had arrived in from Black Town he had, without delay, ordered thrown away. Besides Sati’s new dress Rita had also required a suitable outfit. He had purchased a waistcoat for himself as well; the occasion seemed to demand it. Already, a considerable sum had been spent on the evening.

Sati cringed before Demonteguy’s scrutiny. The cage of bamboo beneath her dress held her now like a vice. Its wooden pinchers squeezed from her the last shreds of identity. She had seen nothing wrong with her Indian clothes and protested their aggressive disposal. Her grandmother had opened the old trunk that stood in her hut, for she knew the importance of the White Town visit. She rarely lifted the lid of the heavy chest filled with the bric-a-brac of her life. From its depths she pulled out an ancient outfit, worn long before in her Murshidabad days. The soft silk and tarnished embroidery, smelling of damp and incarceration, slipped easily over Sati. For a moment her grandmother’s eyes had filled with tears. The dress had been given her by the Raja in whose zenana she had lived. Sati knew she did not cry for the Raja but only for the years she had lost. The silk flowed like water over her body and swung about her as Sati turned. She seemed to grow tall with the splendour.

Yet, on her arrival in White Town, her mother had announced that Mr Demonteguy was disturbed by her appearance. A dress of European design, more suitable to life in the settlement, had already been bought for her. Rita’s hands were hard and her breath sour as she ripped the old clothes off her daughter. The soft Murshidabad silk was rolled into a ball and carried away by a servant. Sati cried out and received a smart slap from Rita. She thrashed about
in her mother’s arms but the clothes were already gone. As she watched a door shut firmly behind them. It was as if her own skin were being discarded, like the gauzy peelings of a snake, swept up with the dust and leaves. Except that she was left skinless, unable to make the passage from one body to another. Before her mother she fell suddenly silent and stepped into the strange European clothes that were offered, which were then lashed tightly about her. At last she turned to the mirror. It showed her only a distant figure she did not recognise. A crack seemed to open within her dividing her soul along a fine line. A sense of desolation had filled her then and remained with her still. She appeared neither one thing nor the other, neither Indian nor European, but something on her own.

Now, upon the stool in Demonteguy’s home she heard her mother speaking.

‘People avoid Mrs Drake. They only accept official invitations, other times they turn their backs upon her. They say also she is _country born_. In Surat or Bombay.’ Rita Demonteguy stepped away from the mirror, picking up the conversation. She tossed it lightly, like a ball, to shatter Mrs Drake. For a moment she saw no paradox in assuming White Town scorn.

‘It is one thing to be _country born_ another to marry a brother-in-law. _That_ is no better than incest.’ Demonteguy gave a laugh. ‘It is said Mrs Drake’s father settled a good sum upon each of his daughters. Drake will have got the lot, first from one sister and then from the other. It shows the character of the man. No morals to hinder his greed.’

‘Nothing is wrong with being born in India instead of Europe. Who can help where they are born?’ Rita’s voice grated with annoyance as she came up against hard facts. A battle that day with her mother, surrounded by Black Town’s pigs, chickens and hawkers of fruit and vegetables, unsettled for a moment the future that seemed so certain in her new husband’s home.

She had gone with Demonteguy to collect Sati from Black Town and found her attired in Jaya Kapur’s old clothes. Rita’s terse comments had angered old Jaya and she had refused to let the girl go. She had clung to Sati, battling desperately for her granddaughter upon her own Black Town doorstep. Sati was tugged back and forth between the two women. Jaya Kapur screeched abuse at her daughter, Rita Demonteguy let loose unrepeatable words at her mother. Demonteguy waited some distance away, fanning himself with a handkerchief. At intervals he pressed the square of scented linen firmly to his nose. Sati’s cries and the shrill determination of both women had gathered a crowd who all attempted loud and active intervention. A pig interrupted its rooting to watch, chickens stopped pecking, the vegetable vendor lowered his basket of wares. Demonteguy, in embarrassment, had removed his two palanquins to the seclusion of some coconut palms beside a filthy pond. Women, washing clothes in the muddy water, raised their heads and stared. The reality of absorbing his new wife’s origins caused Demonteguy to sweat profusely. He had never visited his mother-in-law’s thatched hut, never heard from his wife the vulgar guttural notes she now tossed about in abandonment, never entered the labyrinthine depths of Black Town before. The accumulation of all these harsh facts made him feel quite faint. Two mangy pariah dogs started to copulate before him, oblivious to the scene, uttering high cries of ecstasy. He watched them in
distracted interest. Nubile in his home, wanton in his bed, his wife blinded him to everything about herself but the ripe willingness of her body.

Eventually, the screeching subsided; some settlement seemed to be made. Accompanied by the curious crowd Rita and her mother then turned to approach Demonteguy. To his horror, her hand still locked in her granddaughter's, Jaya had climbed into his palanquin. The squash was so great and the odour of his mother-in-law so intense, that he was forced to vacate his own conveyance to walk behind the runners, leaving the palanquins to the three women. He had crossed the Maratha Ditch back into White Town with inexplicable relief.

'And why is to marry a dead sister's husband not a proper thing to do? This I do not understand. Mrs Drake is lucky the Governor married her. It must have been a charitable act. Just look at her; so dried up. No bosom, no backside. No nothing,' Rita announced turning back to the mirror. 'In India such a marriage is not a bad thing to do.'

'We are not talking about Black Town customs. Now you are part of White Town,' Demonteguy snapped, watching as the last candles were lit.

Sati listened in surprise. A distant cousin of her grandmother's had married three sisters of the same family one after another as they died, the first in childbirth, the second from cholera. The third and present wife was still alive. But, said her grandmother, should misfortune overtake her also, there was still a fourth unwedded sister who was already nearly twelve. There had been only praise from old Jaya for the dutiful response of this man to the plight of his wife's unmarried sisters. He had demanded successively less for each new dowry and most important, said her grandmother, the women were wed and not left, a shameful weight, upon their father's hands. Sati frowned in confusion. *No bosom, no backside, no nothing.* The image of a paper cut-out came into her mind.

Before the glass Rita Demonteguy adjusted the gems at her neck. Her breasts and hips, proportioned like a Hindu statue, were laced into a dress Demonteguy had ordered from a French tailor recently arrived in the settlement. Diamonds circled her in cold fire and flashed upon her fingers. In the freckled mirror her dark eyes, ever mysterious to Demonteguy, were hard when meeting those of her daughter. Sati looked away. Tonight in this room she knew she must climb the steep, slippery slope of approval. The only comfort was that her grandmother had accompanied her into White Town. Jaya Kapur sat hidden on the back veranda with orders not to intrude. Sati was comforted by the movement of a curtain and a sudden glimpse of her grandmother. The old woman pulled an encouraging face then let the curtain fall.

Straight-backed chairs had been set in a semi-circle about an armchair. Already, to Sati, the waiting seats filled the room with expectation. Perhaps nothing would happen. Perhaps the spirits that came to her would refuse to appear at such a debased summoning. For that was what this séance was, debased. These depressing thoughts were furthered by Demonteguy. He paced about considering the placement of the chairs and the number of candles to be lit. His profession was opportunity, and this had now spread to include herself.
‘Do not be nervous. I have shown you how to do it,’ Demonteguy turned to Sati. He bent and took her hand. She looked down at the bony, red knuckles gripping her flesh and immediately drew back.

‘The room looks well enough,’ Rita admonished, breasts spilling over her dress like a plate of blancmange. She clung to her husband’s arm, laughing up into his face, anxious to erase the afternoon’s unpleasantness in Black Town. He patted her hand absentmindedly, his attention upon the event ahead, but then found a moment to feast his sight upon the succulence trembling so near him. His eyes in the candlelight were bright as a rat’s behind his long nose. He exchanged a lecherous glance with his wife; she giggled and looked away. Demonteguy returned to arrangements.

‘Everything is in the details. Word flies around quickly here in Calcutta. Failure with our first enterprise could end a profitable game.’ He assessed the room, anticipation upon his loose lips. ‘A séance does not demand too much illumination. We do not need so many candles.’

‘Snuff some out before we start. How will guests enter the house in darkness?’ Rita admonished.

‘The effect of a sudden darkening of the room will be most dramatic.’ Satisfaction spread over Demonteguy’s face as he pictured such a moment.

A bangle snapped between Sati’s fingers, collapsing in fragments in her lap. She stared at the bits of broken glass and the bead of blood on her wrist. Perhaps this was an omen; perhaps she too would crack in the midst of one of her attacks. This was the word used by Demonteguy to describe the sudden melting of her mind, for the entry into her of personalities who juggled for room to be heard.

In the beginning these presences had been vague, refusing to clearly reveal themselves. Then Durga had appeared. Sati had only to turn her head to see Durga watching from the shadows of foliage or the rafters of a room. She sensed her moving on the edge of time, drifting always near her. Whenever Durga came to claim her a wildness burned up her spine pulling her into a darkness from which she remembered nothing. Her stepfather’s use of the word attack implied some violence but there was nothing of that in what happened to her. Only the opening of a door and the entering of immensity. Upon her return to mundane life her soul seemed to cling to her body by no more than a fragile thread. If it snapped she knew she might float off into a limitless world and never return to reality. Like the strands of a cobweb blown free on the wind. A gust of fear passed through her.

With an effort she returned her attention to the empty chairs before her. Their shapely guilt legs resembled Demonteguy’s shin of silken hose. Excitement continued to spark between her mother and her stepfather. Their voices were high with tension as they moved about the room in a ballet of anxiety. Yet more candles were lit and then snuffed out, a pillow was placed upon the armchair where Sati was to sit. A small table with three upturned coloured glasses stood before the chair.

On his last visit to France Fabian Demonteguy had attended a séance in Paris and wished the performance in his home to correspond to that event. He had
produced three tumblers of blue, red and yellow glass and spent much time instructing Sati. People were to ask her questions, she was to tell what she saw in the glasses. In the blue glass for example, she might see the sky, a journey upon the sea or a catastrophe upon the horizon. Blue was easy to remember; sea, sky or the occult clouds ofmystery. The red glass could show blood, disease, a fiery accident, but mostly blood. There was no problem with the amount of gore, Demonteguy advised. People liked blood, became riveted to it, and would always come back for more. The yellow glass could represent anything she wished according to the question. A woman in a yellow dress, a golden bird, the pussy juices of an ailment etc. She must let her mind play upon the questions, let her imagination soar. If something real entered her mind, so much the better. If not she must invent it.

Demonteguy had sat himself down before the three glasses to guide her in the matter. They had acted out the séance many times. Under his tutelage her prophecies, in desperation, spiralled to baroque proportions. All the while she had been conscious of Durga beside her, full of sarcastic snarl. Yet, in spite of seeing her in the midst of more than one attack, Demonteguy refused to realise her visitor was real and would not be contained in a few coloured glasses. Afterwards, he told her, there would be a collection of money. People would give according to their fear or satisfaction. If they felt neither emotion, nothing would persuade them to open their purse strings.

Already, there were sounds of arrival before the house. The night vibrated beyond the door, like a scuffling animal preparing to break in. Strange voices instructed palanquin bearers and made inquiries of the chowkidar. Disembodied sounds floated to Sati. Then, footsteps and the sudden appearance of a strange face cracking open her world.

Although, in the end, the crowd was not large the room seemed unbearably full. Breath, voices, heat and candle flames beat their separate wings about her. Sati’s head began to hurt. Demonteguy greeted his guests with fawning smiles. His paunch fell forward against his waistcoat buttons each time he affected a bow. Beside her husband Rita went stiffly through the motions of welcome, as instructed by Demonteguy, concentrating on her part. If she failed to maintain the proper White Town demeanour things would go hard for her. Already, she refused to dress her sumptuous hair, but shook it free as if she were a nautch girl. For this concession there was a price to pay. In the silence of the night Demonteguy would remember the eyes of other men upon her and demand an unusual selection of conjugal rights.

All this was unknown to Sati. She only saw her mother and Demonteguy make extravagant welcome at the door. Wine was passed around, the glasses shaking on a tray held by an ancient bearer. Candles blazed upon cut glass, wine cradled like blood in the bowls. She drew back in her chair. A play was enacted before her. There was much strutting and nodding and the clear stream of talk. There were the long, colourful tails of parrot-coloured skirts, the matted fuzz of wigs and the loop of powdered curls. The unfamiliar European faces, chiselled as marble, whiskered like cats, raw-skinned or slack as cloth, seemed all to be
made of the same floury dough she had once seen a baker kneading. These people were like the almonds her grandmother soaked and divested of their tough brown skins, to lay naked upon a plate.

Gradually, the room filled up. The great skirts of the women billowed over stiff hoops. Some rearrangement of chairs was needed to allow them space to sit. The candlelight flickered upon lace ruffles, the silver buttons of a waistcoat, the moist and expectant eyes. It nested in the hollows of bones, changing shapes, contorting features. People spoke in low voices, as if there had been a death. Women exchanged words behind their fans, eyes resting upon her, blowing Sati backwards down a tunnel to view her from a distance. She touched the gold amulet at her neck threaded upon a black string. Her stepfather had urged her to change it for a string of pearls but she had refused. For once her mother had supported her, knowing the importance of the object. Within its tiny case, rolled up tight, was an invocation to the Goddess.

One by one the White Town people seated themselves before her. How would she see into their ferenghi souls? These people by their absence of colour appeared as disembodied as a company of ghosts. She thought of Pagal, the albino, made freakish in Black Town by his alabaster skin. He hid from the sun as did these people. His pink rabbity eyes, bleached lashes and hair were also to be found upon the ferenghi. Would they claim the albino as their own if he went to live with them? It seemed suddenly confusing. The dark mass of Black Town rose up in her mind then as powerfully embodied, anchored by their colour to the warm, dung-smelling earth.

To calm herself Sati thought of her grandmother banished by Demonteguy to the back veranda. She imagined her sitting in a soft heap, the tire of her midriff bulging out between her breasts and hips like the stuffing from a patty. She saw as well her thin plait of hair gleaming in the candlelight, its grey beginnings and hennaed end saturated with musty oil. Each night Sati was required to oil it, each night she slept beside her grandmother lulled to sleep by the greasy aroma. There was no way to connect old Jaya Kapur to this room. Sati wished to run to her, to return to the safety of the thatched hut that until now they had shared. She touched the talisman at her neck again and knew The Goddess would keep her safe. On the veranda, her grandmother must also be turning her prayer beads, imploring the divinity's protection.

Sati was suddenly conscious that attention had flicked away from her. There was a disturbance in the room, like a breeze across a field of wheat. A rustle of comments too low to unravel greeted the arrival of the Governor's wife. Emily Drake nodded to people and received a stiff return. There appeared a separateness about her in the crowded room. Her unpowdered hair, drawn back into untidy loops, was pinned about her crown. The décolletage so favoured by Rita Demonteguy was not for the Emily Drake. She wore a modest, lace edged neckerchief, crossed over at the waist. Her thin face had the worn and polished look of stones from the river distressed by strong currents. She settled nervously on a chair beside Lady Russell and stared at Sati who returned her gaze.
Thoughts tumbled about in Emily Drake’s head. Already, she knew she should not have come, especially so soon after her confinement. At this time a woman did not cavort about town alone, certainly not at night and for so dubious a reason. Already, she was fodder for tomorrow’s gossip. It was always a mistake to follow an impulse. There was hardly an occasion she could remember when good had come of such behaviour. And yet, a compulsion beyond the normal had driven her to this room. She thought of her child asleep in his cradle and knew she was here for his safety. She had waited until her husband set out on his evening walk. He had announced he would leave the precincts of Fort William to visit Chief Magistrate Holwell. Immediately, upon his departure she had summoned the palanquin bearers. As Fort William drew distant behind her she noticed the swollen moon. As she stared up into the sky that great bowl of feminine light had given her the strength to follow her impulse, irrational as it seemed. Her heart had been in a flutter. But for what she wondered now? A half-caste girl from Black Town? She stared in surprise at Sati. The reality of the situation broke suddenly open, like a pod of ripe peas, before her.

She had expected somebody older. What could this shrinking, sallow-skinned child impart of importance? It was madness to have come. Perhaps her mind was beginning to shred like worn linen, dissolving before the disparagement of the town. There was not a moment in the day when she was impervious to Calcutta’s taunts and disregard. She knew now this girl would offer nothing. She met Sati’s amber eyes and held them for a moment. To her surprise something stilled within her, as if a secret passed between them. There appeared to be a heightening in the room. Her breath seemed to die in her throat. Emily Drake turned in agitation to Lady Russell, but she chewed on some aniseed to sweeten her breath. She sought the eye of Mr Dumbleton, but he scratched his head beneath his wig. The candles flickered no more than before. Nothing appeared to have changed. Yet something had moved within Emily Drake. She no longer knew why she had come, what rare urgency had impelled her. If she could she would have departed. The wing of a passing moth brushed her face, the air stirred strangely about her.

Sati’s pulse beat faster, she gripped the frame of the stool in fear, for the performance was now upon her. She must blow soul into the faces of her audience, she prayed for Durga to come. Without Durga nothing was possible. Already the room had quietened, every eye was now settled upon her. Rita took her arm, her fingers hard in warning and pushed Sati down into the armchair. The three coloured glasses stood waiting before her. Already moths had flown in and clustered about the candle flames. The beating shadows of their wings stretched upon the walls. Suddenly, upon orders from Demonteguy, the servants extinguished most of the candles. Night fell dramatically upon the assembled crowd; a smell of burnt wicks filled the air.

Now that the room was almost dark Sati saw that some fireflies had settled upon a wall. They glowed before her in three points of light above the head of the Governor’s wife. Below, in the dimness Mrs Drake stared, her face drawn
into shadowy valleys, the ridge of her nose and the plateau of her cheeks caught in a cross of light. Her eyes had a glassy appearance, anxious and severe.

Sati bent forward, covering her face with her hands. If she cut away the world before her some strange force propelled her inwards. The momentum increased until she arrived before an inner door. There she floated into endlessness, suspended in a timeless world. There she was both found and lost. And it was there that Durga waited.

Slowly then, she raised her head from her hands and leaned back in the chair. She was no longer part of the room. All she saw now were the fireflies, their fluorescence brightening then dimming, as if they breathed in unison with her, fuelled by her own throbbing pulse. And Durga had come after all, to guide her from one realm to another. Durga, the bloody-minded, fierce as a warrior, ready for battle, full of fierce mettle. Her predatory force filled the room. She stamped her foot and her wildness was a dance Sati must follow. Durga knew what to do, what must be said, where the dance would lead. Sati gave a sigh of relief and relinquished herself. All tension ebbed away. Durga settled into her veins, deep as instinct, liquid as knowledge dredged up from forgotten lives. Immediately, her breath became shallow and her eyes stared fixedly, as if caught unawares by death. A murmur spread around the room at this strange transformation. Rita and Demonteguy exchanged a look of satisfaction.

‘She is ready.’ Demonteguy whispered. He turned his head towards his audience to invite a first query through the glasses. Before he could speak a loud voice rang out.

‘Emily. Emily.’ The spirit sailed right through Sati, leaping from her body. It spewed out of her as uncontrollably as a stream of projectile vomit. Durga had allowed it to manifest, knowing the needs of the moment. The figure circled the room as Sati watched sleepily and then took a clearer shape. It made its way without hesitation towards the Governor’s wife.

‘Ah! It is for her you come then?’ Durga growled at the strange spirit and the reverberations trembled through Sati’s veins. Durga was fitted tight inside her, filling her fingers, expanding her belly, seeping through her veins.

‘Emily,’ the figure repeated, continuing to speak through Durga although it stood behind Mrs Drake’s chair. It flexed up and down upon its toes, impatiently, like a dancer.

Emily Drake was split open by terror. She looked around for the invisible presence. About her there was only the night and the flicker of countless shadows. A whimper of fear curled from her. She had entered a world between worlds and its lush, wild shape closed around her.

‘Give her your name then,’ Durga ordered the spirit, enjoying the shock of the audience at her own obnoxious presence. A hoarse, pulpy sound always emerged from Durga, unlike Sati’s hesitant tone. The voice of an old singer prostitute, worn bare by shameless projection.

‘I am Jane. Her sister, Jane.’ The spirit laughed in a knowing way. She floated up to the ceiling and settled near the fireflies. The insects grew larger until their pulsating light lit up the room, lending their energy to Sati, keeping her alive while Durga was manifest.
'What does she want?' Emily Drake half-rose from her chair and then sank back again. She glared into the night at the invisible presence, twisting this way and that on her chair.

Tension filled the room. People sat forward upon their seats, faces contorted in fear. Durga threw back her head and laughed. The sound stirred the air about the spirit, who became even more excited.

'Thief.' Jane screamed, long hair swirling about in a gleaming membrane. She settled again near the fireflies, shifting angrily above Emily's head.

'I have taken enough of such accusations.' Emily Drake struggled up again from her chair, looking around defiantly. Jane took no notice but continued to wheel about, hair swimming freely around her.

'Why have you come to torture me? Leave me my child, that is all I ask. You took the first; it was him you wanted. Is that not enough?' Emily's voice soared upon shredded notes. She refused to relinquish another child to her sister's ghost. She did not care now who knew of her fear.

'Who is to judge what is enough?' Jane inquired.

Durga pumped out a hoarse laugh, her eyes brighter than the fireflies. She liked the spirits she summoned up to enjoy themselves on their brief visits to this tangible world.

'Leave me in peace.' Emily's voice tumbled from its brief peak, splintering as it fell. She stood up as if she would leave Demonteguy's house. The room seemed stalked by unseen predators; the air was sharp as glass. Beside her Lady Russell took her hand and pulled her down again.

Rita and Fabian Demonteguy exchanged looks of alarm. Sati was not meant to act in this manner. Whose was this deep, authoritative voice, so adept at abstract thought?

'I told her exactly what to do,' Demonteguy hissed into Rita's ear, anger making him splutter. 'Your mother has put her up to this nonsense. It's her usual Black Town hokum pokum.'

'What about the glasses?' Rita whispered, seeking some way to control the situation. She shivered in terror. Things seemed to slither about the room. Dark, formless apparitions waited to attach themselves to her. Demonteguy stepped forward determinedly.

'What about the glasses?' he whispered, bending over Sati.

'What about the glasses?' Durga answered sweeping them from the table with a single crashing stroke. Glass splintered and skidded beneath the chairs. Women lifted their skirts and drew back with choked cries. Men allowed themselves small guttural sounds of fear. Durga lifted an arm and at her summons a bat flew into the room. It soared up to hit the ceiling, then dived to the candle with a vicious squeak, wings beating like flaps of pewter. Its shadow swelled over the walls. A servant rushed forward with a broom to chase away the creature. In the chair Sati stirred and Durga's laughter immediately faded.

Half hidden behind a curtain, old Jaya Kapur watched the scene, soft flesh plaited tight in horror. This was not Sati. The voice did not belong to her granddaughter. She could not speak in this deep tone, did not know such
complicated thoughts, such difficult mocking words. She spoke like the ferenghi themselves. There was another creature inside her, a ferenghi devil. As soon as this terrible evening was over she would go again to the temple, Jaya decided. She turned her prayer beads faster, muttering in a desperate whisper an invocation to the Goddess.

It had been clear to Jaya for some time, since the moment these strange manifestations had begun to appear several years before, that her granddaughter was possessed. She had gone immediately then to a priest at the Kali Mandhir and he had taken money to exorcise the demon. Eventually, after some sessions with a brushwood whip, through which Sati screamed in a hair-raising way, he declared the devil gone. Now, Jaya saw that her instincts were right, priest or not, the man was not to be trusted in any matter. And neither was Demonteguy. He had stirred up that creature once more in Sati. Rita should never have married him. He would destroy them all. She must talk the whole thing over with her cousin, Govindram.

She stared from the veranda at the full, ripe moon. In the month no day was more auspicious than this particular day. The full cup of the moon held a confusion of seed that would sow itself as it wished. Man could resort to nothing but prayer. Jaya gave a sigh. The future swell heavily before her as she turned her prayer beads. Yet she knew that when the Goddess gave trouble she also gave strength to bear the trial. In this thought Jaya trusted. She had not been failed in the past.