

MAYBE the movies Malti had seen helped conjure up the backdrop. There was a dais on which stood a massive round table and a lone leather chair with a narrow wooden beading on the backrest. The teak table was in three segments and right in the centre was a discoloured patch where the servant had once put down a hot iron. From where she stood Malti, of course, could not see the details, but somehow she knew the props had been borrowed from her dining room. Malti almost expected Chachi to be there because she had often sat at that table, reading or knitting, before she took ill.

Malti gazed warily at the wall of mist, banked in the background, which cordoned off a mysterious space where shaming secrets and guilt crouched like small, vicious animals. From the edges of the wall wispy portions smoked out and sidled surreptitiously in all directions, as though to infect others with their touch.

Malti walked hurriedly; for the life of her she couldn't understand how she had wandered into this godforsaken place. She hitched up her *sari* because the ground felt wet and slimy. She looked down, and to her horror discovered she was barefoot. She drew her eyebrows together, almost feeling the skin stretching taut as it bunched above her nose. She tried to remember....she had gone shopping, then turned into the clinic and had a long consultation with Dr Kant, and after that.....yes she had entered Chachi's room and told her everything. But didn't all this occur a long time ago? Three months and four days ago, to be precise. Malti was nonplussed. There was something wrong with the time factor. The present appeared like a collage created from snippets borrowed at random. She looked at the impenetrable white wall ahead, at the detached congealed fluffs, now static and suspended in mid air.

Malti felt tired and depressed. Something seemed to reach up within her

SHORT STORY

Stalking Shadows

by

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and pull her down and down. But why? She couldn't identify the reason, for it scuttled away like a slippery fish in the shallows when you tried to catch it. She shook her head, as though to dislodge the cobwebs which stretched across her mind, while incipient suspicions like ensnared flies struggled to emerge into lucidity.

Malti looked down again. The ground was cut into shallow runnels and a reddish brown mud lay like an oil slick on the surface. She looked over her shoulder. A long line of footprints snaked dangerously over the tacky surface - a big toe curving out, the foot long and slender, the arch deep. She felt nervous. "Now everyone will know I am here", she muttered and then wondered, "Why am I running away? From whom?" She realised she was still holding the doctor's prescription. She tried to coax her mind to point a way out of the labyrinthine pathways amidst which she was stranded.

"Did I run out of the doctor's room or Chachi's? It must have been from the doctor's she decided. She must have gone there to get some medicine for Chachi, who was in great pain.

"Liar, liar, liar!" Malti whirled around. Was it the wind hurling the imprecation? But nothing stirred. Terrified, Malti realised she was whispering the words herself. Then the desolation of the place stiffened her confidence, gave her the gumption to admit that she had never been moved by Chachi's pain, her thin face furrowed by illness, her eyes glazed and tormented and yet always hopeful, even as death stalked her very breath. In fact, her predicted lingering illness had cast a pall on the house with its financial strain, and her tenuous link with life had threatened to shackle them to the thankless task of nursing a patient who would never recover.

Chachi's gnawing pain and growing listlessness had been finally diagnosed.

It was a fatal sickness. "It might be a year or five", Dr Kant had informed them, his tone crisp and antiseptic in the impersonal starkness of his office.

Five years! Imagine looking after a bedridden old woman for five years. Why, it would age Malti. Five year old Chintu would grow up to be ten - always reprimanded, his childish prattle stifled to whispers, his natural exuberance restrained to walking on tiptoe. It might warp her child! And all this for an aunt.

True, Chachi had brought up Sunil. But the surrogate mother had also filled the lacuna in her own childless life. Like a shopkeeper, Malti weighed the favours and consequent obligations, defrayed the expenses, till nothing was owing to Sunil. But Sunil loved Chachi with an intensity which even Malti's cold calculations could not dare challenge.

"Don't tell her. We'll keep her happy", had been Sunil's injunction, and a bristling Malti had deferred argument at the sight of her husband's unhappy face.

Malti looked around. The mist had almost obscured the furniture and was sending out tentacles towards her. Malti stepped back and back. Afraid. Why was it reaching out for her? What had she done? Subconsciously she knew that if the mist even touched her it would sear and she would have to conceal her pain and scars. Suddenly, Malti stumbled on something and, in trying to maintain her balance, the prescription left her fingers and sailed away. She ran after it, hoping it would fall to the ground where the adhesive mud would hold it down. But it moved on and on, as though activated by an inward propulsion. Malti ran after it, heedless of her *sari* edges topping up the dirt to the extent that when she finally stopped, huffing and sweaty under the armpits, the *sari* felt weighted down.

Now the paper was flying towards her, moving bumpily like the paper planes Chintu made. It was close enough for Malti to lunge forward and grasp it, when she stopped. "I don't need the

prescription; Chachi is dead", she told herself. Somehow the last word escaped from within her, was caught in a whirlwind of tormenting memories which hurled it around till it fragmented. "Dead, dead, dead", the word echoed, sounding like Chachi's groans long ago. No, three months and four days, to be precise. And then the doctor's bills had ceased coming; Chachi's room had been turned into Sunil's office.

The end had come swiftly, not after five years, but two weeks after she had disclosed to Chachi the true nature of her illness. Chachi had lived on hope, which can drag one from the edge of an abyss into which its antithesis can push one. Chachi had thought her ailment could be cured, and, pampered by Sunil's doting care, she had carried on in a state of delusion until that day.....

It had been raining for two consecutive days. The rain came in cold shafts, battering the flowers, leaving the trees sodden; it had found vulnerable spots and seeped into the house through walls and roof. Near their house, a drain had got blocked and the muddy rain water had flooded the compound, leaving a thin layer of slippery red brown mud on the lawn. Malti had been busy in the kitchen, stirring *jaman* into milk to set curd for Chachi.

"Malti", Chachi had called out feebly, and Malti had made a wry face, crossed the dining room, parted the curtains and entered Chachi's room. The air was redolent with the stench of prolonged illness, heavily overlaid by that of medicines.

"Open the curtains", Chachi had muttered, wincing, Malti had pushed the brown curtains aside, the rings rattling noisily on the rod.

"Help me to sit up", Chachi had requested, and Malti's patience, always brittle, had snapped. She fell callous, seeing only an old woman whose illness had incarcerated her within the house. Her routine was punctuated by a pill at 6 a.m., a painkiller at 8 a.m, soup at 12 noon,

and it went on and on. She hated doling out verbal or any other placebos, resented the expenditure on medicines and more medicines, grudged the time and affection Sunil expended on her.

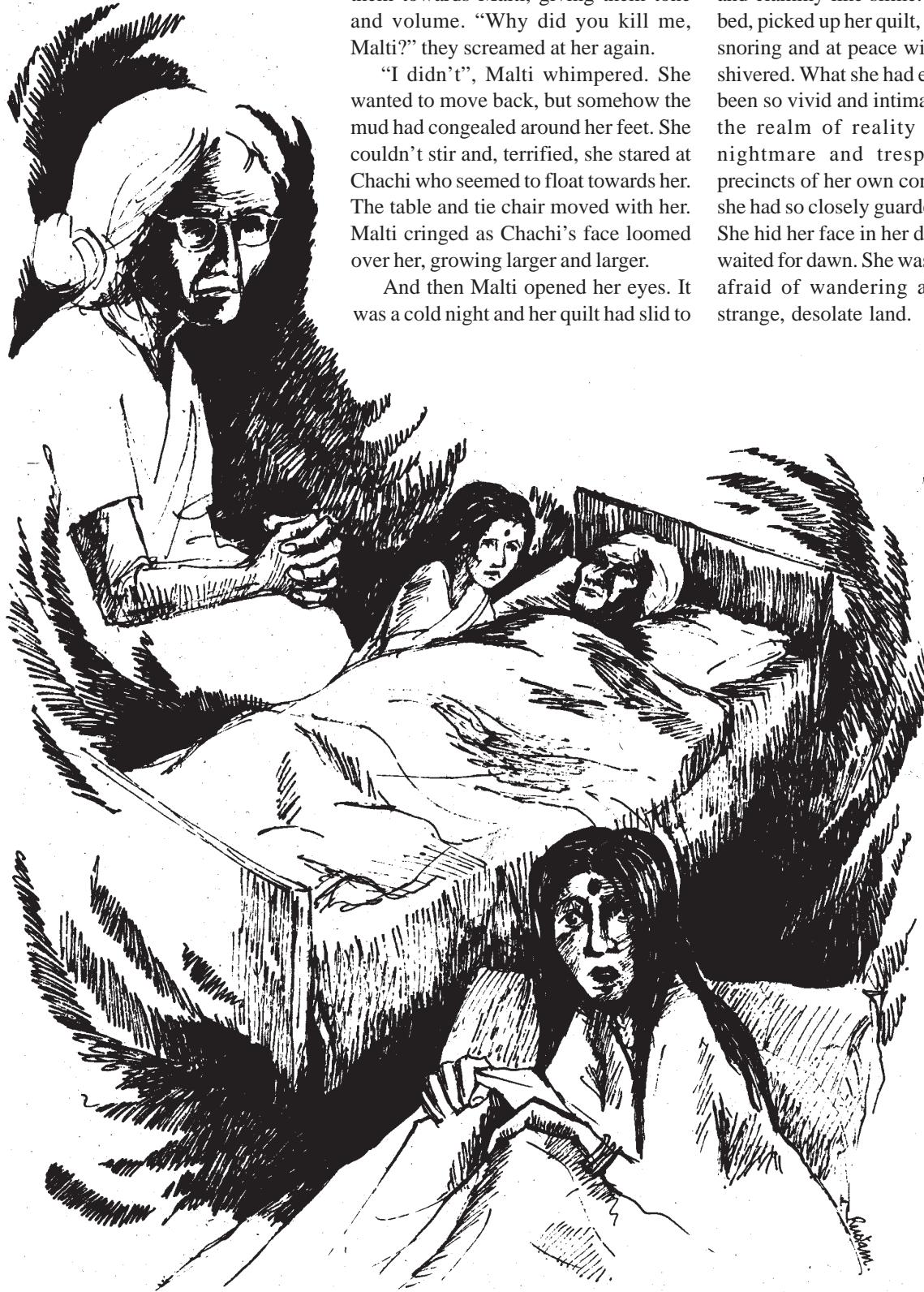
Malti didn't help Chachi; she merely sat down at the foot of the bed, like a predator ready to pounce on its hapless prey. Her voice was soft, almost menacing. "Chachi, the doctor said your illness is fatal. No medicines can save you."

And Malti saw life ebbing away. If she had stretched out her arm she could have caught it and given it back to Chachi. It wasn't too late to retrieve her cruel disclosure with a consolation commencing with a "but." But she remained passive. She let the information percolate, like slow acting poison. She noted dispassionately the shock which made the wasted face more angular, and then the bleakness which subtly altered the contours, softened them until it seemed they would melt and flow out as tears from her eyes. How strange - it actually seemed the light left her eyes; someone, somewhere, had switched off the light. Malti had switched it off deliberately. Chachi could have borne the inevitability of imminent death but she had cringed at the unfeeling sternness on Malti's face.

In two weeks' time Chachi was dead. She seemed to have coaxed her end to speed up the drama.

And now Malti stood in that desolate place. The mist had enveloped her and penetrated her very marrow, chilling her till she felt every bone would collapse with a tiny crack.

"Malti", a familiar voice forced her to look up at the podium, startled. Sitting behind the table was Chachi. How different she looked: her face was luminous, the goldrimmed spectacles sat firmly in place, her thin arms lay flat on the table, hands clasped together as if in prayer, how pale and waxy her skin appeared. She sat motionless, gazing sadly at Malti. Chachi moved her lips,



the mist picked up the words and wafted them towards Malti, giving them tone and volume. "Why did you kill me, Malti?" they screamed at her again.

"I didn't", Malti whimpered. She wanted to move back, but somehow the mud had congealed around her feet. She couldn't stir and, terrified, she stared at Chachi who seemed to float towards her. The table and tie chair moved with her. Malti cringed as Chachi's face loomed over her, growing larger and larger.

And then Malti opened her eyes. It was a cold night and her quilt had slid to

the floor; the uncovered sheet felt cold and clammy like slime. Malti sat up in bed, picked up her quilt, looked at Sunil, snoring and at peace with himself. She shivered. What she had experienced had been so vivid and intimate. She had left the realm of reality as well as of nightmare and trespassed on the precincts of her own conscience, which she had so closely guarded from herself. She hid her face in her drawn knees and waited for dawn. She was afraid to sleep, afraid of wandering again into that strange, desolate land. □