

Govinda came to Calcutta after graduation from high school in Mymensingh. His
5 widowed mother's savings were meager, but his own unwavering determination was
his greatest resource. "I will make money," he vowed, "even if I have to give my
whole life to it." In his terminology, wealth was always referred to as pice. In other
words he had in mind a very concrete image of something that could be seen,
touched, and smelled; he was not greatly fascinated with fame, only with the very
10 ordinary pice, eroded by circulation from market to market, from hand to hand, the
tarnished pice, the pice that smells of copper, the original form of Kuvera, who
assumes the assorted guises of silver, gold, securities, and wills, and keeps men's
minds in a turmoil.

After traveling many tortuous roads and getting muddled repeatedly in the process,
15 Govinda had now arrived upon the solidly paved embankment of his wide and free-
flowing stream of money. He was firmly seated in the manager's chair at the
MacDougal Gunnysack Company. Everyone called him MacDulal.

When Govinda's lawyer-brother, Mukunda, died, he left behind a wife, a four-year-
old son, a house in Calcutta, and some cash savings. In addition to his property there
20 was some debt; therefore, provision for his family's needs depended upon frugality.
Thus his son, Chunilal, was brought up in circumstances that were undistinguished in
comparison with those of the neighbors.

Mukunda's will gave Govinda entire responsibility for this family. Ever since
Chunilal was a baby, Govinda had bestowed spiritual initiation upon his nephew with
25 the sacred words: "Make money."

The main obstacle to the boy's initiation was his mother, Satyabati. She said nothing
outright; her opposition showed in her behavior. Art had always been her hobby.
There was no limit to her enthusiasm for creating all sorts of original and decorative
things from flowers, fruits and leaves, even foodstuffs, from paper and cloth cutouts,
30 from clay and flour, from berry juices and the juices of other fruits, from jaba – and
shiuli -flower stems. This activity brought her considerable grief, because anything
unessential or irrational has the character of flash floods in July: it has considerable
mobility, but in relation to the utilitarian concerns of life it is like a stalled ferry.
Sometimes there were invitations to visit relatives; Satyabati forgot them and spent
35 the time in her bedroom with the door shut, kneading a lump of clay. The relatives
said, "She's terribly stuck-up." There was no satisfactory reply to this. Mukunda had

known, even on the basis of his bookish knowledge, that value judgments can be made about art too. He had been thrilled by the noble connotations of the word “art,” but he could not conceive of its having any connection with the work of his own wife.

5 This man’s nature had been very equable . When his wife squandered time on unessential whims, he had smiled at it with affectionate delight. If anyone in the household made a slighting remark, he had protested immediately. There had been a singular self-contradiction in Mukunda’s makeup; he had been an expert in the practice of law, but it must be conceded that he had had no worldly wisdom with regard to his household affairs. Plenty of money had passed through his hands, but
10 since it had not preoccupied his thoughts, it had left his mind free. Nor could he have tyrannized over his dependents in order to get his own way. His living habits had been very simple; he had never made any unreasonable demands for the attention or services of his relatives.

15 Mukunda had immediately silenced anyone in the household who cast an aspersion upon Satyabati’s disinterest in housework. Now and then, on his way home from court, he would stop at Radhabazar to buy some paints, some colored silk and colored pencils, and stealthily he would go and arrange them on the wooden chest in his wife’s bedroom. Sometimes, picking up one of Satyabati’s drawings, he would say, “Well, this one is certainly very beautiful.”

20 One day he had held up a picture of a man, and since he had it upside down, he had decided that the legs must be a bird’s head. He had said, “Satu, this should be framed—what a marvelous picture of a stork!” Mukunda had gotten a certain delight out of thinking of his wife’s artwork as child’s play, and the wife had taken a similar pleasure in her husband’s judgment of art. Satyabati had known perfectly well that
25 she could not hope for so much patience, so much indulgence, from any other family in Bengal. No other family would have made way so lovingly for her overpowering devotion to art. So, whenever her husband had made extravagant remarks about her painting, Satyabati could scarcely restrain her tears.

30 One day Satyabati lost even this rare good fortune. Before his death her husband had realized one thing quite clearly: the responsibility for his debt-ridden property must be left in the hands of someone astute enough to skillfully steer even a leaky boat to the other shore. This is how Satyabati and her son came to be placed completely under Govinda’s care. From the very first day Govinda made it plain to her that the pice was the first and foremost thing in life. There was such profound degradation in
35 his advice that Satyabati would shrink with shame.

Nevertheless, the worship of money continued in diverse forms in their daily life. If there had been some modesty about it, instead of such constant discussion, it

wouldn't have been so bad. Satyabati knew in her heart that all of this lowered her son's standard of values, but there was nothing to do but endure it. Since those delicate emotions endowed with uncommon dignity are the most vulnerable, they are very easily hurt or ridiculed by rude or insensitive people.

5 The study of art requires all sorts of supplies. Satyabati had received these for so long without even asking that she had felt no reticence with regard to them. Amid the new circumstances in the family she felt terribly ashamed to charge all these unessential items to the housekeeping budget. So she would save money by economizing on her own food and have the supplies purchased and brought in secretly. Whatever work
10 she did was done furtively, behind closed doors. She was not afraid of a scolding, but the stares of insensitive observers embarrassed her.

Now Chuni was the only spectator and critic of her artistic activity. Gradually he became a participant. He began to feel its intoxication. The child's offense could not be concealed, since it overflowed the pages of his notebook onto the walls of the
15 house. There were stains on his face, on his hands, on the cuffs of his shirt. Indra the king of the gods, does not spare even the soul of a little boy in the effort to tempt him away from the worship of money.

On the one hand the restraint increased, on the other hand the mother collaborated in the violations. Occasionally the head of the company would take his office
20 manager, Govinda, along on business trips out of town. Then the mother and son would get together in unrestrained joy. This was the absolute extreme of childishness! They drew pictures of animals that God has yet to create. The likeness of the dog would get mixed up with that of the cat. It was difficult to distinguish between fish and fowl. There was no way to preserve all these creations; their traces
25 had to be thoroughly obliterated before the head of the house returned. Only Brahma, the Creator, and Rudra, the Destroyer, witnessed the creative delight of these two persons; Vishnu, the heavenly Preserver, never arrived.

The compulsion for artistic creation ran strong in Satyabati's family. There was an older nephew, Rangalal, who rose overnight to fame as an artist. That is to say, the
30 connoisseurs of the land roared with laughter at the unorthodoxy of his art. Since their stamp of imagination did not coincide with his, they had a violent scorn for his talent. But curiously enough, his reputation thrived upon disdain and flourished in this atmosphere of opposition and mockery. Those who imitated him most took it upon themselves to prove that the man was a hoax as an artist, that there were
35 obvious defects even in his technique.

This much-maligned artist came to his aunt's home one day, at a time when the office manager was absent. After persistent knocking and shoving at the door he finally got

inside and found that there was nowhere to set foot on the floor. The cat was out of the bag.

5 “It is obvious,” said Rangalal, “that the image of creation has emerged anew from the soul of the artist; this is not random scribbling. He and that god who creates form are the same age. Get out all the drawings and show them to me.”

Where should they get the drawings? That artist who draws pictures all over the sky in myriad colors, in light and shadow, calmly discards his mists and mirages. Their creations had gone the same way. With an oath Rangalal said to his aunt, “From now on, I’ll come and get whatever you make.”

10 There came another day when the office manager had not returned. Since morning the sky had brooded in the shadows of July; it was raining. No one monitored the hands of the clock and no one wanted to know about them. Today Chuni began to draw a picture of a sailing boat while his mother was in the prayer room. The waves of the river looked like a flock of hungry seals just on the point of swallowing the
15 boat. The clouds seemed to cheer them on and float their shawls overhead, but the seals were not conventional seals, and it would be no exaggeration to say of the clouds: “Light and mist merge in the watery waste.” In the interests of truth it must be said that if boats were built like this one, insurance companies would never assume such risks. Thus the painting continued; the sky-artist drew fanciful pictures, and
20 inside the room the wide-eyed boy did the same.

No one realized that the door was open. The office manager appeared. He roared in a thunderous voice, “What’s going on?”

The boy’s heart jumped and his face grew pale. Now Govinda perceived the real reason for Chunilal’s examination errors in historical dates. Meanwhile the crime
25 became all the more evident as Chunilal tried unsuccessfully to hide the drawing under his shirt. As Govinda snatched the picture away, the design he saw on it further astonished him. Errors in historical dates would be preferable to this. He tore the picture to pieces. Chunilal burst out crying.

From the prayer room Satyabati heard the boy’s weeping, and she came running.
30 Both Chunilal and the torn pieces of the picture were on the floor. Govinda went on enumerating the reasons for his nephew’s failure in the history examination and suggesting dire remedies.

Satyabati had never said a word about Govinda’s behavior toward them. She had quietly endured everything, remembering that this was the person on whom her
35 husband had relied. Now her eyes were wet with tears, and shaking with anger, she said hoarsely, “Why did you tear up Chuni’s picture?”

Govinda said, "Doesn't he have to study? What will become of him in the future?"

"Even if he becomes a beggar in the street," answered Satyabati, "he'll be better off in the future. But I hope he'll never be like you. May his pride in his God-given talent be more than your pride in pices . This is my blessing for him, a mother's blessing."

- 5 "I can't neglect my responsibility," said Govinda. "I will not tolerate this. Tomorrow I'll send him to a boarding school; otherwise, you'll ruin him."

The office manager returned to the office. The rain fell in torrents and the streets flowed with water.

Holding her son's hand, Satyabati said, "Let's go, dear."

- 10 Chuni said, "Go where, Mother?"

"Let's get out of this place."

The water was knee-deep at Rangalal's door. Satyabati came in with Chunilal. She said, "My dear boy, you take charge of him. Keep him from the worship of money."