

## **Venus in my Garret**

By Shahana Chaudhury (India)

George Skinner Lane in Central Kolkata is a narrow one, flanked on both sides by crumbling Victorian buildings that house people, shops, small printing presses and the odd ghost.

The lane meanders past pavements crowded with widows, dogs and tea vendors before turning abruptly to the left and halting subserviently in front of a huge iron gate. Beyond this gate lies the elusive world of Bholanath Sen, erstwhile judge of Kolkata High Court, inheritor of the famous Sen fortune, and my maternal grandfather.

A man I have never met in my thirty years.

A gravelled path beyond the gate leads to the sprawling mansion in the distance. Mango and Guava trees abound. There's an ornate marble fountain just outside the portico. To the far left is the garage, three stately forms lie covered by tarpaulins.

We artists cannot live like Him, in gilded cages, my father would say laughingly to his friends. We thrive where life pulsates.

So this was where He stayed, the man whose only child, the beautiful and immensely talented Ira Sen, earned his wrath when she married Ram Dasgupta a struggling painter with communist leanings.

Bholanath Sen never made his peace with his equally wilful daughter who stayed in a garret with her husband and child trading her professorship for a teacher's job lest a frail ego crumble. The room was forever filled with artists whose creativity was fuelled by my mother's meagre salary and my father's idealism.

The gates are locked. I wonder how to enter. An urchin, points to a thick rope hanging by the gate and yanks it with all his might. I can hear bells toll in the distance.

It reminds me of that Sunday morning when the persistent ringing of bell woke us up. Shambhu kaka, came rushing in to announce that, a Frenchman had chanced upon one of my father's paintings, Venus in my Garret, at the book fair and bought it for a colossal sum. The stall owner said the buyer wanted to remain anonymous.

I have hazy recollections of the painting. I do not know if it was good or bad. I think it showed a woman of pleasing proportions, sitting on her haunches, washing a pile of dirty dishes. What I know for certain is that my mother was the woman in that painting and I did not like to see her clean up after my father's friends.

Thanks to the Frenchman's somewhat puzzling purchase, my father became saleable. The classes paid to buy him and he generously shifted his stand to accommodate them. As for my mother, she simply went back to her books and professorship, keeping out of arts way.

A woman emerges from the mansion and strides purposefully towards me. She is an elderly lady, probably His Housekeeper and Secretary all rolled in one.

"Now that Ira has passed away, Mr Sen doesn't want this in the house." She hands me a packet through the gaps in the iron gates and strides back.

I open the polythene bag, a carelessly folded material lies inside. I don't have to unfold it to know what it is. Then, instinctively, I look up. A frail stranger on the second storey is looking at me. He shuts the window slowly.

I look away. The urchin is still there, looking interested. I give him the packet, he grabs it and vanishes around the bend. I look back a final time and walk away from the world of Bholanath Sen. A world that I now know, I was always a part of.