**I Will Be Famous One Day**

**By Panchali Maitra**

***To my parents, husband and daughter for their love and support***

Once upon a time in a small Indian village, in the foothills of the Himalayas,

 there lived a little girl, Durga. Her father, Ravi, was a carpenter who toiled hard

 the whole day to earn a living for his family. Her mother, Champa, worked as a

 domestic help in a nearby house in the village. Her parents had little time to

 spend at home with her and not much money to buy her the comforts of a

 luxurious life. In their daily struggle for survival their only ray of hope was a

 dream they had nurtured in their hearts which kept them going……they wanted

 to see their Durga grow up to be a doctor and serve the poor people of their

 village who had no money to go to the city hospital for treatment.

But nine year old Durga however had no such dream …….All she loved to do the

 whole day was play with her tiny chicks in the warm sun, chase the bunny

rabbits to their holes and catch the colourful butterflies in their little rose

 garden.

 On hot sunny afternoons Durga loved to perch on a shadowy, copper-toned

 branch of the guava tree in front of their cottage and watch the squawking

 parrots that visited the tree to quench their thirst from an earthen bowl of

 water which Champa hung from a higher branch. She would rest in the cool

 shade of the tall tree and fill her soul with the sweet fragrance of the colourful

 blossoms in her little garden.

With the onset of monsoon, when the sky would be shrouded by dark

 clouds, when the cool, soothing, relentless showers would inundate the

 meadows and fields, Durga would run to their village playground and dance in

 the rain, soaking her mind and soul with the soft refreshing raindrops.

On foggy winter mornings, sometimes she would sit on the rocks by the

 sparkling stream that flowed alongside their cottage and gaze at the snowy

 mountains behind. She would wonder what she would find there if she ever

 reached the top of those frosty peaks! Would she die of cold? Or would she

 meet the snow monster about whom she had heard from Hari babu?

 Yes, Hari babu, the old village priest, was the only companion this little girl had.

 It was Hari babu who never failed to notice the sparkle in her eyes when she

 brimmed with questions about the lofty mountains, flowing rivers, colourful

 flowers and sinister stories about the ghosts that haunted the village. He

 answered her every question patiently and told her age old stories about the

 Speaking tree, the Brahmrakshas and the chirping birds that lived on the peepal

 tree.

Like the other children of the village Durga studied at the village primary school.

 But going to school was the last thing in the world she enjoyed. She couldn’t

 understand why every morning she had to stay confined in a classroom for

 hours and listen to the lectures of Dinesh Sir who didn’t even know the stories

 about the Sun, the Moon and the fairies who lived in the Blue Mountains far away.

While Dinesh Sir taught the English alphabets to the class, Durga looked out of

 the window and curiously watched the squirrels squeaking and playing in the

garden, the crow feeding her babies in her nest in the banyan tree.

Sometimes Dinesh Sir punished Durga for not paying attention in class and sent

 her out of the classroom. But Durga was only too happy to leave the class. She

 stood at a corner outside the classroom and tried to imitate the crawling

 insects that climbed up the wall. All the teachers at school knew about her

 nature but they found Durga too innocent to be scolded.

 One day, when Dinesh Sir was teaching spellings on the black board, Durga

quietly slipped out of the classroom, tip toed to the backyard of the school,

 jumped over the fence and ran till she reached the temple.

Hari babu was in the garden plucking flowers to offer to Lord Krishna. Durga ran

 to him and hugged him. Hari babu was surprised to see her. He asked her why

 she wasn’t at school.

 With a naughty smile Durga admitted how she had fled from school.

 Hari babu was very upset after hearing everything but he tried to hide his

 concern from the innocent little girl. With a gentle smile he asked Durga to take

 a mat and sit in the temple yard. He sat beside her, patted her affectionately

 and asked her why she didn’t like to go to school.

 Durga gazed unseeingly at the green meadows that stretched beyond the

 temple where the cows were grazing. She miserably confessed how suffocated

 she felt sitting for long hours in a small, cluttered room. Moreover she didn’t

 understand anything which Dinesh Sir taught to the class.

 Hari babu sighed. He took a long breath and explained to Durga lovingly that if

 she did not study she would never be able to grow up to be an accomplished

young lady. She would not be able to earn good money and everyone would

 tease her for being an illiterate girl. She would not be able to make her parents

 happy and give them a comfortable, prosperous life. They were working very

 hard to help her become a doctor. Their dreams would be shattered if they

 came to know the truth.

Durga listened to Hari babu quietly. Then she got up, wiped her tears and

 walked slowly towards her home. With a heavy heart Hari babu followed her till

 she reached home. As Durga entered her house Hari babu turned back and was

 about to return when he met Ravi.

Ravi was returning home to take some tools which he had forgotten. He was

 surprised to see Hari babu there and looked at him anxiously. Hari babu told

him that he had something to discuss with him. So both of them walked to the

 stream and sat on a rock.

Hari babu told Ravi what Durga had done. He told Ravi that Durga was a very

sensitive and innocent child. So she should be handled very delicately. Any kind

 of harsh treatment could adversely affect her.

At first Ravi was saddened on hearing what Durga had done. Calm consideration

however helped him realise that she was not at fault in any way. In her

innocence she was being herself-a child who only knew how to enjoy the joys of

the world. She was too young to realise the necessity of education. She was a

 blooming flower, unfolding its colourful petals, spreading its fragrance for the

world to rejoice in its beauty. It was his duty as a father to explain to her that

 she would never be able to survive in this world without education.

Next morning, when Ravi was setting out for work he took Durga along with him

and walked with her up to her school. As he held Durga’s hand and walked

down the narrow path through the bamboo grove, he explained to Durga how

hard he worked every day to pay for her school fees, buy books, uniform and

shoes for her. He showed Durga his chapped, cracked hands which had turned

 red due to continuous work. Then as they reached the school gate he looked at

 Durga with eyes full of hope, put his hands on her little shoulders and told her

 that he would gladly face all hardship in life with a brave heart and toil even

 harder if only she would promise him that she would grow up and become a

 doctor one day and fulfil his dream. With an overwhelmed heart and tearful

eyes Ravi narrated to Durga how helplessly he had watched his parents die

 without treatment in front of his eyes when he was just twelve years old.

A sudden outbreak of cholera in their village had orphaned Ravi even before he

could realize how much his parents meant to him. There was no proper hospital

in the village and the few doctors who belonged to the village preferred to

practise in the city where they could earn more. Alone in this world after his

parents’ death, Ravi had to leave school as there was no body to pay the fees for his school.

 Then one day, as Ravi was wandering aimlessly on the railway platform, a kind

old man, who lived in the same village came to his rescue. He knew everything

 about Ravi. He said that since he had no children, his wife and he had decided

 to adopt Ravi.

Thus a new life started for Ravi with new hopes, new dreams to pursue. He

started going to school again.

 The old man was a carpenter. He had his own little shop where he worked all

 day. His wife was educated. She taught few poor children of the village.

Whatever they earned together was sufficient for living a simple life if not a

 luxurious one. They loved Ravi a lot and provided him with all the comforts

possible for them. Ravi was quite happy. In the morning he used to go to school.

 In the afternoon he used to spend time in his adopted father’s shop. He

watched keenly how his father worked skilfully with the saw, hammer and chisel and made beautiful furniture.

But his happiness was not to last for long. One stormy night, when the entire

village was sleeping peacefully under the cover of darkness, Ravi’s father left the

 world forever leaving Ravi to shoulder the burden of his mother and himself.

Ravi broke down and cried helplessly. He didn’t know what to do. Then as he

 came back to his senses he decided that he would give up studies and run his

 father’s shop. By that time he had mastered the art of carpentry. So he stepped

 into his father’s shoes and started to work in his shop with skill and ardour no less than his father.

Days went by. As Ravi grew up, her mother gradually took to bed becoming a

victim to stomach cancer. But Ravi couldn’t afford the expensive treatment for

 her. He tried his best to gather some funds for her treatment, but it was not

enough for such a critical case. One morning she passed away leaving Ravi alone

 once again in this world.

Ravi married one of his childhood friends, Champa, who lived in the same village

and settled down with her. After two years Ravi and Champa were blessed with

 a daughter. When Ravi saw her daughter’s angelic face for the first time he

 cried out of joy. At that very moment he decided that he would bring up his

 daughter in such a way that she would never have to depend on others and she

 would utilize her knowledge to serve the society. He named her daughter

Durga, after the Goddess of strength and courage.

Durga listened open mouthed to her father’s story. Then as Ravi waved to her

and left for work, Durga walked to her classroom quietly. The whole day she

 didn’t talk to anyone. She didn’t even eat or play with her friends during lunch

break. The whole day Durga sat in a corner and looked at the clear blue sky out

 of the window. She watched the V formation of the birds in the sky and

 wondered where they were flying to? Were they going to their school? Or were

 they crossing the hills and valleys and oceans to reach the far off lands about

whom no one knew!

When the last bell rang, all the children rushed out of their classrooms laughing,

 shouting and talking to each other. Some children ran to the park to play on the

 swings and rides. Durga walked slowly towards her home. Her friends were

surprised to see their jovial friend in a gloomy, pensive mood. But they thought

 it better to leave her alone.

In the evening when Ravi and Champa returned from work they found Durga

sitting alone in a dark room. Champa switched on the light. Durga didn’t notice

her. She was looking out of the window, lost in her own world, fiddling with a

broken doll. Champa was very tired. She also had a lot of work to do. So she

 didn’t disturb Durga and went to the kitchen.

That evening, Durga seemed very subdued. She didn’t talk much. She quietly

completed her homework, had dinner and went to her room which was on their

 roof. She lay down on the floor, hugged her soft pillow. All of a sudden life

seemed to have changed. Hari uncle, who was always with her, was not happy

for what she had done. Her father was leaving no stone unturned to make ends

 meet. Although her mother didn’t say much about her expectations but Durga

 knew that in her heart there was a yearning to see her daughter as an educated

 woman since she herself didn’t get the opportunity to go to school.

 But what could she do! She dreaded going to school, she didn’t enjoy reading,

she didn’t want to learn the spellings, the tables, the sentences. How could she

 fulfil the dreams of so many people! Durga felt like she was lost in a dark forest.

 She couldn’t find her way to her little cosy shelter. She hid her face in her pillow

 and wept bitterly.

The clock struck one. Everything around was dark and gloomy. In the depth of

silence she could hear her heart beat. What should she do? Should she listen to

her heart or should she listen to her mind. Her mind was telling her to cage

herself and immerse her spirit in her books to make others happy. But her heart

 was telling her to fly away and enjoy the beauty of the world, to set herself free

from the burden of expectations of other people and reach the unreachable.

Soft, silvery moonlight entered her room through the window. An owl was

 screeching on the guava tree. The sweet smell of jasmine was intoxicating the

 air. Durga stood up and wiped her tears. She knew what to do.

She brought her school bag. Took out the books from it and hid them under the

 bed. Then she put few clothes in the bag, filled her water bottle and packed

 some biscuits in her tiffin box. Durga climbed down the stairs and went to her

 parents’ room. Durga looked at her parents who were in deep sleep. For a

 moment she hesitated. Then she took her bag, opened the door and left home.

Durga walked down the deserted street on the moonlit night. She didn’t know

 where to go, she didn’t know what life had in store for her. All that she knew

 was that she wanted to escape from the pressure of the great expectations of

 the society which was killing her childhood. She walked away from her near

 ones towards an unknown destination. Suddenly few dogs broke the silence of

 the night and barked loudly. Durga trembled in fear. But she didn’t stop. Her

 determination was stronger than her fear of the dark, lonely night. She walked

 alone holding her only belonging tightly, embracing the night. The tall trees far

 away looked like horrifying giants beckoning her to join their feast. The cold

 wind sent a shiver through her spine and she stumbled …. But she stood up and

 carried on. Suddenly Durga saw a faint light far away. Gradually the light grew

 brighter and she could hear the whistle of a train. Durga didn’t waste a moment

 to decide that she would board the train. She ran as fast as her little feet could

 take her. She reached the platform just in time to jump on the step of the last

 compartment before it left the station. Durga held on to the handle and gasped

 for breath. Then as the train gained speed, Durga carefully stepped on to the

 platform and relinquished the handle. She could hardly walk anymore. She felt

 a tingling pain down the legs. Her head was reeling. Somehow she caught hold

 of the head rest of a seat and fell down.

 The first light of the morning sun fell on her eyes. Champa blinked and sat up

 on her bed. She looked at the clock. It was already six o’ clock. If she did not

wake up Durga she would be late for school. Rubbing her eyes Champa went to

 Durga’s room. But she was surprised to find the room empty. Durga must have

 gone to the garden to feed the pigeons, she thought. She hurried down the

stairs and ran to the garden to rebuke Durga for wasting time unnecessarily. But

 no! Durga was not there! Champa looked for her everywhere but she was

nowhere to be found. Champa went to the roof again to find out if Durga was

 hiding under the bed to avoid going to school. She peeped under the bed and

 was shocked to find Durga’s books strewn on the floor. Champa screamed out

 of fear. What could have happened to her little girl!

 Ravi was getting ready to go for work. He heard Champa screaming and rushed

up the stairs anxiously. Champa was hugging Durga’s pillow and weeping. Ravi

was bewildered. He couldn’t understand what the matter was. He urged

Champa to tell him what had happened. Champa lifted her tearful eyes, looked

 at Ravi and told him in a trembling voice that she could not find Durga

anywhere. She had searched every nook and corner of the house. But Durga

was not to be found.

Ravi stood dumb struck. He couldn’t understand what to say, what to do. He

was sweating profusely. He tried hard to keep himself calm. Then slowly he

gathered courage and ran down the stairs. He went out to the street to search

 for Durga. He asked everyone whom he met on the way whether they had seen

 Durga but nobody could tell him anything. He felt utterly helpless.

Then all of a sudden his face lightened up. He ran as fast as he could towards

 the village temple. He met Hari babu on the way. With hopeful eyes he asked

him where Durga was. The old man could not understand what Ravi was trying

 to say. He blankly stared at him. Realizing that there was no hope Ravi, broke

into tears and fell on his knees. In a choking voice he told Hari babu that they

could not find Durga anywhere.

 The lonely, old man whose sole friend on this earth was the ever-smiling little

 girl couldn’t believe his ears. He felt as if his life had come to an end. Tears

rolled down his wrinkled cheeks. He put his trembling hand on Ravi’s shoulder

and tried to say something but could not speak. His lips moved slightly. Ravi

looked at him. He feared the worst. Without a second thought Ravi lifted him up

 in his arms and rushed to his room which was behind the temple. He laid him

on his bed and sprinkled some water on his face. Hari babu was sweating. Ravi

 soaked a towel in cold water and wiped his hands and face. He touched Hari

babu’s forehead. He promised him that he would search every corner of the

earth and bring back his dear little Durga. He had faith in the power of God. He

was sure that nothing bad could ever happen to Durga. Hari babu smiled faintly

and nodded his head. Ravi asked him to try to sleep and left the room hurriedly

 hiding his tears.

 As Ravi came out on the road he saw a group of people coming towards him. By

 that time most of the villagers had come to know that Durga was missing. They

 asked Ravi not to worry and assured him that they would find Durga by any

mean. Few people ran towards the bamboo grove while few decided to search

near the railway tracks. Some women of the village thought they should go to

the primary school and enquire after Durga. Ravi felt too tired and stressed to

think of anything. He staggered home fearing what Champa was doing alone.

Durga opened her eyes. Morning rays glowed through the window. She looked

 at the ceiling. It was not her own little room on the roof of their house. Then

 where was she sleeping? Suddenly like a flash of lightning, the incidents of the

 night before struck her. She sat up and looked around. No one else was there

 inside the compartment. Durga felt a little dizzy. She tried to stand up but her

 legs were shaking. Faltering and staggering she walked towards the door.

 Durga looked out .The train seemed to be standing in a car shed. She grasped

 the iron handle and very carefully got down.

 Durga walked slowly along the railway track. She was very thirsty. A little far

 from the car shed she saw few huts. A herd of goats was grazing in a field.

 Some ducks were swimming in a pond. Durga’s eyes lit up. Someone would be

 surely kind enough to give her some food and water. The shadow of the green

 trees danced on the sparkling pond. The mustard fields behind swayed in the

 breeze. Durga sat on the steps by the pond and washed her face with the cool,

 refreshing water. She joined her hands, filled as much water as she could and

 drank till she quenched her thirst. She felt better.

 Durga looked at the huts. She saw a little girl playing with a lamb in front of one

 of them. The girl was curiously staring at her. Durga went up to her and asked

 her if she could get her some food to eat. The child seemed to hesitate at first.

 Then she held Durga’s hand and took her inside her house. Her mother was

 cooking in one corner of the small room. A bed was placed neatly near the

 window. Some toys were lying on the floor. Few pictures of Gods and

 Goddesses hung from the wall.

The child ran to her mother and put her arms around her neck. She whispered

 something into her ears. The lady turned her head and looked at Durga. She

 asked her to come and sit beside her.

Durga went and sat near her. Then the lady asked her what her name was,

 where she lived, and how she had come there.

 Durga was about to tell her all of the truth but she stopped herself. She feared

 that if she confessed to everything they might take her to the police and then

 back to her parents.

 So she thought for a moment and then said that she had gone to a fair in their

 village with her parents. It was very crowded. Suddenly a bomb exploded.

 Everyone started running in panic. In the midst of such confusion she got

 separated from her parents. She looked for them everywhere but could not

 find them. Then she started walking along the railway track till she reached

 their village. She was very hungry and tired as she didn’t eat anything since the

 night before.

 The lady felt very sad on hearing her story. She kissed Durga affectionately and

 assured her that they would surely find her parents and take her back to her

 home. Till then she could stay with them.

 Durga took a sigh of relief. But she felt guilty for lying. The lady brought her a

 bowl of puffed rice and some hot milk. She told Durga that she could call her

 Asha mashi. Durga happily had the food. Then she went out to play in the

 fields.

Champa was sitting on the grass in front of their cottage. Her eyes were red and swollen. Her tears had dried up. She had no clue about what could have happened to her little one. Horrifying thoughts and haunting visions troubled her mind. Her heart craved to get a glimpse of her child who was the reason for her existence. Where is my child? Who has kidnapped her? Why? Where is she? How is she?

The hills and mountains around echoed her questions but they remained unanswered and faded away in the distant lands. Champa could not think any more. She was terribly exhausted and felt devastated. She closed her eyes and prayed to the Almighty to bestow his blessings upon her daughter and save her from any imminent danger.

 Hearing loud footsteps she looked around. Seeing Ravi approach her eyes brightened up with hope. She ran to him and asked him where Durga was.

 Ravi didn’t know what to say. In order to calm her down, he told her that all the villagers were searching for Durga everywhere. They would soon arrive with some good news.

 Champa sighed in despair. Then something struck her. She looked into Ravi’s eyes and asked him anxiously whether he had scolded Durga the day before for any reason. Ravi tried to recollect what had happened the day before. No such incident had occurred. But yes…… He remembered! He had shared with Durga his own life story. He had also told her how keenly he wanted her to become a doctor. Was that the reason for her disappearance? Did she feel so much pressurised by what he had told her that she decided to take such terrible step? Was Ravi himself responsible for what her daughter had done? He felt ruined. How could he be so selfish so as to impose his own will on her daughter! Why did he fail to understand the psychology of a child who wanted to enjoy the freedom of childhood and not bear the burden of others’ wishes!

Ravi groaned in pain. He cursed himself for being so cruel to his own daughter.

 Champa felt something was wrong. She asked Ravi why he was behaving in such an unusual manner. In a shaking voice Ravi disclosed to her everything that had happened the day before.

 Champa realised what had made Durga flee home. It was parental pressure. She knew that she also was as much to be blamed as Ravi. She used to scold Durga for wasting her time playing with her chicks and rabbits. She always warned her that if she failed in class she would drive her out of their home and Durga would have to spend the rest of her life with the wild animals in the jungle.

Ravi and Champa cried helplessly. They knew that God would never forgive them for causing pain to an innocent child. But how could they get back their dear daughter? Where was she? How was she? Was she alive or……….the terrible thought itself sent a shiver through their spines. They held each other and cried in fear and pain.

The little girl, Minu, was very happy to have Durga as their guest. She took Durga along with her and went to the mango grove where her friends were waiting for her.

The mango grove was cool and shady. The hot sun rays sometimes peeped through the branches but could not reach the ground. As the trees swayed in the breeze, ripe, juicy mangoes fell on the ground. All the children crowded under the trees to gather the yellow pulpy mangoes. Then they sat under the canopy and enjoyed the sweet, juicy fruits. They licked their fingers with immense pleasure as the sugary juice trickled down. After they had had enough, they jumped into the shallow pond to enjoy a cool refreshing bath.

 Durga didn’t know how to swim. So she sat on the grass and watched the children gleefully play in the water.

The children were enjoying the cool bath under the hot sun when Asha mashi came to call them.

Lunch was ready. So Asha mashi asked Durga and Minu to come home. Minu came out of the pond and ran to her mother. Water dripped down her wet clothes. Asha mashi lifted her up, kissed her on her forehead and walked home. Durga followed them.

 As they walked through the mustard fields, Durga stared sadly at Asha mashi and Minu. Somewhere in her heart she missed her mother. She remembered her mother also used to cuddle her as soon as she returned from work in the evening……

 The children were served steamed rice and vegetable curry. They were relishing the tasty meal when Minu’s father, Bipul, returned home for lunch.

Seeing her father, Minu jumped up in joy and ran to him. Bipul hugged her lovingly and asked her whether she had had her food.

 Minu’s eyes sparkled with happiness. She pointed at Durga and narrated to her father the story of their new guest.

Durga was watching keenly the beautiful bonding between Minu and her father. Seeing them, she remembered how her father used to make her sit on his lap and feed her from his plate.

Just then Asha mashi entered the room. Minu’s plate was lying on the floor. Minu was sitting on her father’s lap and babbling continuously. Asha mashi took the plate, sat beside Minu and started feeding her. Minu put her arms around her mother’s neck and fiddled with her sari.

 Tears rolled down Durga’s cheeks. Seeing the love and intimacy between Minu and her parents, Durga remembered the happy days she had spent with her parents. Those sunny mornings… when she and her father fed the pigeons in the terrace, when her father bought candies for her and stealthily put them into her pocket so that her mother couldn’t see them………Those happy evenings when her mother returned home from work with clay toys and wind chimes for her from the fair.

Durga finished her food and quietly spread the mat allotted for her beside the window. She lay down on the mat and looked out of the window.

Few drooping branches of the old banyan tree made their way through the window into the room. A crow was feeding its babies in its nest on the top most branch of the tree.

 Even birds nurtured the feelings of love and care for their babies! Durga wondered.

The silence of the scorching afternoon seemed to convey a message to her….no one in this world can love you as much as your parents do.

Durga yearned to go back to her parents…. to her sweet little home where she found all the love and comfort of the world.

But she dared not tell the truth to Asha mashi because she was sure that they would take her to the police station where she would be jailed and beaten up for running away from home.

 Hearing a scream Durga was startled and sat up. It was Minu. She was crying loudly. Her wrist was bleeding profusely. Asha mashi rushed out of the kitchen to see what had happened. Seeing Minu in such a terrible state she nearly fainted. Durga ran to Minu to see how she had injured her wrist. A razor blade was lying on the floor. They realized what had happened.

 Asha mashi asked Durga to call Bipul uncle who was digging the soil in the kitchen garden in the backyard. But before Durga could call him he rushed into the room hearing Minu scream. Asha mashi told him anxiously what Minu had done. Bipul uncle tore a strap from his turban and tied it around Minu’s wound. Then without wasting a minute he carried Minu in his arms and rushed to the nearby clinic in the village. Durga and Asha mashi also followed them.

But on reaching the clinic they found it locked. Minu was crying in pain. Bipul uncle stopped a rickshaw-van which was passing by. All of them got onto it and they hurried to the Municipality Hospital.

But to their great despair, as they reached the hospital they were informed that the doctor was not available at that moment.

 Minu was almost fainting as she had lost a lot of blood. Bipul uncle and Asha mashi cried helplessly. They pleaded to the nurses to help their child. But no one was ready to treat Minu without the consent of the doctor.

Just then a tall young man, with a brief case in his hand, stepped in. Seeing the commotion, he approached them and asked what the matter was. Bipul uncle crying profusely, told him that no one was there to save her daughter who was collapsing. The young gentleman looked at Minu and immediately ordered a stretcher to be brought. Minu was laid on the stretcher and rushed to the operation theatre. The gentleman put on a green coat and hurried to the O.T.

Bipul uncle asked the nurses who that gentleman was who had come to help them like the messenger of God.

They told him that he was a renowned surgeon, Dr Mehta, who had been newly transferred to the Municipality Hospital. It was his first day in their hospital.

 Bipul uncle was told to wait outside with his family till they informed him about Minu’s condition.

Asha mashi was inconsolable. She cried her heart out and prayed to God to save her dear daughter. Bipul uncle sat on the steps with his face covered with his hands. He was speechless.

Durga stood at a distance and watched them. She wept silently. She couldn’t understand why everything was going wrong. Was it true what her mother used to say-“God gets angry if you hurt your parents and punishes you?” Was it because of her fault that Minu, Asha mashi and Bipul uncle were suffering? Then how were her ma and papa? Were they alright or …….

 Durga fell on her knees and cried loudly. She joined her hands, looked up at the sky and prayed to the almighty to save little Minu. She prayed to God to forgive her for all her wrong doings and spare her innocent friend. She prayed for the safety of her parents.

Just then, a nurse approached Bipul uncle and informed him that Dr Mehta was waiting for him in his chamber. Bipul uncle rushed to his chamber anxiously. Asha mashi and Durga ran behind him.

Dr Mehta smiled and asked them to come inside. He looked calm and serene. He looked at Bipul uncle and said that there was no need to worry. Minu was absolutely out of danger. She needed blood due to excessive blood loss. Since they could not arrange for blood that would match Minu’s blood group in such a short time, Doctor Mehta himself had given his blood to Minu as his own blood group matched that of the little child. Minu had been given an injection. She was sleeping. Very soon she would recuperate and would be able to go back home.

Bipul uncle and Asha mashi fell on his feet and wept. They couldn’t find words to express their thanks and gratitude for him. They felt that God had come to their rescue in the disguise of a human being.

Durga stood at a corner, struck with wonder. She stared at Dr Mehta with profound admiration and reverence. She saw before her the divine being who had given a new life to Minu.

Durga realized that in the face of danger, when we lose all our hope for survival, God makes us feel his presence through his messengers in the disguise of doctors.

Perhaps doctors are the noblest human beings in this world who dedicate their lives to the service of mankind.

The rays of the setting sun lit up Durga’s soul. She decided at once that she would grow up and become a doctor. She would serve the poor, rural people like Bipul uncle and Asha mashi, who were down trodden and denied all the facilities of medical treatment which wealthy urban people enjoyed.

Dusk fell at the horizon. The sky turned to a bright purple hue. Few tiny, silvery stars appeared in the sky.

A nurse informed Bipul uncle that they could meet Minu.

Minu was lying in the bed. Her wound had been dressed and bandaged. She looked pale and tired.

Dr Mehta said that she was fine and they could take her home.

Bipul uncle arranged for a rickshaw-van. He carried Minu in his arms and all of them sat in the vehicle. Dr Mehta was standing near the gate.

Minu smiled and waved at him, as a gesture of gratitude for saving her life.

Dr Mehta smiled and told Minu not to play with sharp things any more.

They rode along the muddy, winding path through the village.

 When they reached home it was quite dark. Asha mashi prepared some rice and curry quickly for dinner.

After dinner Asha mashi made the bed for Minu. She gave her medicine and asked her to go to sleep as she needed rest to get well soon.

Minu was too tired and sick to talk. She had her medicine and quietly went to sleep.

Durga sat on her mat and looked out of the window.

Dark clouds had engulfed the sky. Cold wind blew through the whispering trees. Any moment it would rain.

 Durga felt a bit frightened. How were ma and papa? What were they doing?

She remembered- how once on a stormy night her father had returned from the city with new clothes and toys for her. She was waiting anxiously at the door for her father when he came from behind and lifted her up. Durga didn’t know that he had already reached home.

Durga yearned to go back to her parents, to her own little home. She wanted to go back to her school. She had promised herself that she would go to school regularly and study properly. She would have to become a doctor like Dr Mehta.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She covered her face and wept.

Asha mashi was cleaning up the kitchen after dinner. Hearing her sob she came running to her. She understood Durga was missing her parents. She felt sorry for the child. She sat beside her and consoled her that very soon they would find her parents and take her back home.

As Asha mashi spoke, Durga leaned on her shoulder and cried loudly. She confessed to her everything. She said that she had lied to her. She had actually run away from home because she did not want to go to school. But she had realised her mistake-She had committed a crime by causing pain to her parents who loved her most in this world. Moreover she had realized that it was very important to be educated to earn respect in this society.

Asha mashi stood dumb struck. She didn’t know how to react, what to say.

Then slowly she caught hold of the situation……….. She realized that what Durga had done was a part of growing up. A thought had come to her mind and she had acted impulsively, very appropriate for a child. But as she faced reality, the hardships of life, she had understood her mistake. She had grown matured. Life had educated her.

 Perhaps someday Minu might also take a wrong step in her life’s journey!

 After all, we all make mistakes and learn from them.

Asha mashi rubbed Durga’s tears with her sari. Then she explained to her that every human being at some time in his life takes a wrong decision. But the most important lesson is to learn from that mistake. God never tells us what is right and what is wrong. He only shows us the right path and the wrong path. It is us, ourselves, who learn to choose the right path through the experiences in life.

Durga was surprized to see Asha mashi not scold her. Instead she accepted what she had done in a positive way and was glad that she had realized her mistake.

Durga felt relieved. Her soul had been freed of a sense of guilt.

 Asha mashi told her that the next morning they would take her back home to her parents. Her village, Bilaspur, was only two miles away from their village. Her parents must be extremely worried and distressed.

Durga hugged Asha mashi and told her that she had seen the reflection of her mother in her. She would never forget her, Bipul uncle and Minu in her life.

 Asha mashi kissed her and said she too would never forget her. She was like her elder daughter.

 Rain drizzled on the corrugated roof. Durga went to sleep with a peaceful mind.

 Golden rays of the morning sun peeped in through the window. Durga sprang up on her bed. Finally she would return home….. Her happiness knew no bounds!

Bipul uncle was sitting in the veranda with a cup of tea. Minu was in deep sleep. Durga got up, went out and sat in a corner in the veranda. Bipul uncle looked at her and smiled.

Durga understood from his look that Asha mashi had already told him everything about her.

Durga dropped her eyes. Bipul uncle understood Durga was feeling shy.

He asked Durga to get ready as quickly as she could. They should set out before the sun grew hotter.

Durga went inside to look for Asha mashi. She was in the kitchen, boiling milk for the children. Durga took a stool and sat beside her. She watched Asha mashi as she poured some hot milk into two steel glasses.

Hearing the tingling of a bangle, Durga turned back. Minu had woken up. She was trying to get down from the bed.

Durga ran to her to help her to get down. She smiled at Minu and asked her how she was feeling.

Minu said she was much better. She had no pain in her wrist. She was absolutely fit to go to play in the mango grove. Durga laughed.

Hearing the children talking Asha mashi came in with two glasses of milk. She gave one glass to Durga and one to Minu. As the children drank the milk Asha mashi asked Minu whether she had a good sleep. Minu said that she had had a sound sleep and she was feeling absolutely okay. In fact she was planning to show Durga the grape vine at the other end of the village.

Asha mashi scolded Minu and said that she could not step out of the house since she had not totally recovered yet.

Minu was not at all happy to hear this. She pestered her mother to allow her to go to play with Durga.

Asha mashi had no other choice but to disclose to Minu that Durga was leaving them. She was going back to her parents.

Minu looked at Durga with bewilderment. She could not understand how overnight Durga had decided to go back home. With tearful eyes she pleaded Durga to stay with them. They would play together, eat together and sleep together.

Durga felt sorry for Minu. She had stayed with them for only a couple of hours but she felt as if she had known them for years.

Durga held Minu’s hand and assured her that she would come back to them whenever they remembered her. She had found a sweet little sister in her. But she would have to return since her parents must be extremely worried about her.

Minu was reluctant to let her go but didn’t utter another word.

Bipul uncle came in to see if Durga was ready. He asked Durga to hurry up. Durga washed her face, combed her hair. Asha mashi packed for them some puffed rice and coconut sweets.

Durga touched Asha mashi’s feet as a mark of respect for her. She told her that her short stay with them had actually enlightened her, showed her the right path to follow in life.

Asha mashi said that it was Destiny that had brought her there. From that day she would know that she had another daughter who lived in the next village. They hugged each other.

Bipul uncle told Durga that they were already late. Durga rubbed her tears and came out with him.

Minu and Asha mashi stood at the gate. They waved her good bye.

Durga looked at them. She turned back to hide her tears.

Durga started her journey back home with Bipul uncle.

They walked to the railway station. Bipul uncle bought two tickets and boarded the train which was waiting at the platform.

Durga sat by the window. Bipul uncle sat beside her.

Durga remembered the scary night when she had boarded a train alone to reach some unknown destination. What a fool she was!

The train started with a screeching sound. Slowly it gathered speed and left the platform. Durga looked out of the window. The village that had sheltered her in her bad time seemed to move far away from her. The mustard fields, the coconut trees, the ponds, the mango grove where she had played with Minu….. All moved further and further away. What remained in Durga’s heart was a bouquet of sweet memories and a belief that far away, in that beautiful village lived three beautiful people who cared for her and loved her.

Durga was feeling hungry. She took out the box of sweets and puffed rice from her bag that Asha mashi had packed for them. She opened the box and offered it to Bipul uncle. They relished the snacks together as the train sped towards their destination.

Bipul uncle asked Durga if she would be able to show him the way to her house from the railway station. Durga laughed at his query and said that she knew every corner of her village and she would be very happy to show him their village temple, the bamboo grove where she played with her friends, the primary school where she studied. She would love to introduce him to her best friend, Hari uncle, who was the priest of their temple.

Two hours passed. Durga was enjoying the beauty of the green landscape that they were crossing. Suddenly behind the rice fields she saw the dome of their village temple. Durga realised that she had almost reached her village, Bilaspur. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. Durga picked her bag and was ready to alight.

The train slowed down. The whistle blew loudly. Within a few minutes the train entered the platform with a rumbling sound and halted.

Durga and Bipul uncle hurried to the gate. There was a great confusion. Some people were trying to get down while some people were trying to board the train. They started pushing each other. Durga was suffocating. She cried out of fear. Bipul uncle held her hand tightly. He caught hold of the iron handle at the gate and stepped down to the platform with Durga very carefully.

Durga jumped in joy. Bipul uncle was sweating. He looked at the innocent child laughing and babbling to herself. He looked up at the sky and thanked God for giving him the opportunity for uniting a lost child with her parents.

They came out of the station and took to the winding path through the meadows.

Durga looked around. The same fields, the same tall trees, who had been witness to her lone journey on that dark cold night. Nothing but she herself had changed. Now she knew where to go, what to do.

 They reached the vegetable market. The sun was too hot. Bipul uncle was very tired and thirsty. They sat under a tin shade. A vendor was selling coconuts. Bipul uncle asked for two coconuts. The vendor cut the top of two green coconuts, put straws inside and served them. Bipul uncle and Durga drank the sweet refreshing water. They felt rejuvenated. After resting for some time they started walking again. They reached the primary school. Durga pointed proudly at her school and told Bipul uncle that it was the place where she was studying to become a doctor.

They walked on. As they reached the temple gate Durga ran towards it. But the gate was locked. Durga called Hari uncle loudly. But no one answered. Hari uncle must be resting in his room, she thought.

They moved on. At last Durga could see her small cottage half hidden by overgrown bushes. There was a small crowd of people in front of the gate. But she could not see her ma and papa. With frayed nerves and frenzied steps she walked towards her home…… her sweet little home. As she came near the gate she saw her mother sitting on a stone vacantly staring at the horizon. Her father was discussing something with some villagers. He looked extremely tired and troubled.

Maaaa……. Papaaaa……. She cried out.

Everybody startled and looked at the direction from which they heard the voice.

Champa stood up. She trembled. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Ravi held her tightly. They couldn’t move, couldn’t walk, and couldn’t run.

 Durga ran to her parents. She hugged them and cried and cried and cried…..

 Champa and Ravi hugged her, kissed her and cried with her. They had no words to say, no complaints, no repentance.

Bipul uncle stood at a distance and watched this reunion. He couldn’t hold his tears.

Ravi and Champa sat on the step outside their cottage with Durga.

Champa asked her where did she go, how did she come back. Durga said that it was a long story… suddenly she remembered Bipul uncle. He was standing outside the gate. She felt ashamed of her behaviour for forgetting him. She ran to him, held his hand and brought him inside.

She told her parents that he was the person who had sheltered her and had brought her back home safely. She told her parents about Asha mashi and Minu also.

Ravi and Champa didn’t know any word to thank him. They joined their hands and looked at him with gratitude.

They told him that he would have to stay with them for a day and give them an opportunity to serve him.

Bipul uncle said that he would have loved to stay but his wife and daughter were alone at home. Moreover his daughter was not well. So he would leave after having lunch with them.

Just then Durga remembered her best friend. She asked her father how was Hari uncle.

Ravi and Champa looked at each other. Their faces turned pale. Durga understood they were trying to hide something from her. She pleaded them to tell her what the matter was.

 Champa pulled Durga near her and calmed her down. Then with a heavy heart and a shaking voice she told her- Hari uncle had joined the glittering stars in the sky.

Durga stood shocked and baffled. “Then how will he know that I will become a doctor?” She uttered.

Ravi and Champa felt confused. They could not understand what Durga said.

Durga ran out of her house, opened the gate and ran towards the temple. Her mother, father and Bipul uncle ran after her. They pleaded her to stop.

Durga ran as fast as she could. She reached the temple, jumped over the fence and went inside. Everything was calm and quiet. The potted plants in the garden had dried up. The cuckoo bird that lived on the mango tree had stopped singing…… perhaps mourning the death of its master. She looked at the room behind the temple where Hari uncle had lived. The room was empty.

 Durga sat down in front of the idol of Lord Krishna. She couldn’t hold her tears anymore. She cried and prayed to God to forgive her for what she had done. She knew that it was for her mistake that Hari uncle had left the world forever.

Durga looked up at the clear blue sky. The sun would set after some time. The sky would be littered with tiny silvery stars.

 Who knows which star would be the soul of Hari uncle!

 But when those shining dots would illuminate the melancholy hills and valleys, she would look at the twinkling stars in the sky and say…..” Hari uncle, I will never again hurt my parents, I will study hard and become a doctor one day. I will serve the poor people and wipe their tears…. I will be famous one day.”