

The Painter

Translation of Rabindranath Tagore's "Chitrakar"

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After graduating from Mymensingh High School, our very own Govinda came to Kolkata. His widowed mother had a little savings, but his main stock was in his own unwavering resolve. He vowed, "I'll dedicate my whole life to making pice." He always referred to wealth as pice, which is to say, he constantly had a tangible object in mind, worthy of sight, touch and smell. He had no fascination for fame as such, but what moved his mind was a paltry pice, a worn-out unclean pice circulating from shop to shop and hand to hand, a copper-smelling pice, the indigenous incarnation of *Kuvera* that, assuming various forms in silver, gold, and paper, have been spinning the human mind.

After travelling many sinuous paths and becoming defiled in the filth of many, Govinda had now reached the paved landing of his majestically flowing money-stream. He was firmly placed as the head clerk of a rich gunnysackmonger, Macdugal. Everyone called him *Macdulal*.

When Govinda's elder brother Mukunda gave up legal practice and breathed his last, he entered the next world leaving behind his bereaving wife, a four-year old son, a house in Kolkata, and some money in savings. But in addition to his assets, he also had some debts; therefore, the sustenance of his family depended on modest spending. For this reason, the circumstances in which his son, Chunilal, was brought up are not as worthy of mention as those of his neighbours.

As per elder brother Mukunda's will, the responsibility of the family, after his demise, fell on Govinda's shoulders. From childhood, Govinda repeatedly prompted his nephew, "Make pice."

The main obstruction to this indoctrination of the boy came from his mother, Satyabati. Not that she said anything openly, but opposition was expressed in her deeds. She had a passion for artistic creation from childhood. In making spectacular but unnecessary things with flowers and fruit leaves, with food items, by slicing paper, piercing cloth, with clay, flour, jumbo juice, berry juice, hibiscus juice, and *sheuli* leaf-stalk juice, her enthusiasms were limitless. She had to endure a lot of suffering, too, because of this. But for that which is illogical and spontaneous, the impetus comes like the flash flood of the monsoon: its flow is rapid but not necessarily effectual in steering the boat of necessity. Such things have also happened from time to time:

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invited to a relative's house, Satyabati forgot all about it and spent the whole day cooped up in her bedroom, kneading a clod of clay. The relatives thought she was too arrogant, and there was no way to placate them. That people could make value judgements in such matters, Mukunda was aware only through his academic knowledge. He was thrilled by the grandeur of the word "art," but he could never think that it had some association with his own wife's handiwork. There was no prickliness in his character. The sight of his wife wasting time whimsically brought a smile to his face, one that was infused with love. If anyone made any insinuations about it, he would immediately protest. Mukunda's nature had a strange contradiction: as a lawyer he was wise, but his acumen in household matters was limited. A lot of money rolled through his hands at work but they never got tangled in his soul. That's why his mind was free, and he could never impose his will on those dependent on him. He lived a simple life and claimed no undue attention or devotion from members of the family. Whenever people made comments about Satyabati's laxity in work, he would instantly silence them. Now and then, while returning from the court, he would buy some paints, coloured silk, and colouring pencils from Radhabazar and put them neatly on the wooden chest in the bedroom without Satyabati's knowledge. On some days he took up a portrait by his wife and said, "Oh, it's so beautiful!" One day he took up what was a portrait of a human being and held it upside-down, and thinking the legs as the head of a bird he exclaimed, "Satu, we have to frame this one; what a superb portrait of a crane!" Equal to the pleasure Mukunda derived from perceiving his wife's interest in art as childish was the pleasure Satyabati derived from her husband's ignorance of art. Satyabati knew for sure in her mind that she could never expect so much patience and indulgence in any other family in Bengal; no other home would allow her irresistible adoration for art to grow with such affection. So whenever her husband made strangely extravagant comments about her paintings she couldn't resist her tears.

One day Satyabati lost the rare fortune that was her husband. Before his death, Mukunda knew one thing for certain: that he had to entrust his debt-ridden estate to a person who had the skill to steer even a leaking boat across a lake. That is how Satyabati and her son ended up in Govinda's hands, and Govinda made it clear from the first day that his foremost and highest consideration was pice. There was something so deeply offensive in Govinda's tenet that Satyabati would recoil in shame.

Yet the dedicated pursuit of money continued in the family in many ways. There would be no harm if this could be carried out with some finesse and without talking about it every so often. Satyabati knew that this preoccupation with money was detrimental to her son's moral growth; however, she had no choice but to suffer it in silence. She was aware that a delicate mind with a profound sense of dignity was the most vulnerable, and for a vulgar person to vex or assail it was easy.

One needs all sorts of accessories to cultivate art. Satyabati hadn't had to agonise about materials thus far; she got them without asking. But now to hand over a list of such inessential items as part of her family's needs shamed her. So she bought those accessories secretly, with money saved from her groceries, and whatever she painted

she did it privately, with the door shut. She did this not from the fear of being censured but from being loath to be exposed to crude eyes. Only Chuni was witness and judge of her paintings. He too gradually developed a fascination for it, which grew into an obsession. This blemish of the boy could not be concealed, as it went beyond the pages of his exercise-book and ended up on the walls. On his hands, face, sleeves, the marks of disgrace were evident. God *Indra* didn't hesitate to instigate the child against the adulation of money. The boy was to suffer much at his uncle's hands.

The more the uncle tried to discipline the child, the more the mother became an accomplice in his misdemeanour. Govinda was occasionally called upon to accompany his boss to an outstation, and mother and son were left in euphoria during this time. The two would indulge in downright childishness; the animals they drew, alas, God hadn't created them yet! Their portrait of a cat looked similar to that of a dog, and the distinctions between fish and birds were hard to trace. There was no way to preserve these fanciful creations as their marks had to be erased before the head of the household returned home. In their work of genius, only *Brahma* and *Rudra* were present; *Vishnu* hadn't emerged in the middle yet.

The artistic genes were dominant in Satyabati's family. As if to prove their talent in art, Rangalal, one of Satyabati's nephews, who was older than her, suddenly became famous. That is, seeing the peculiarity of his work, the country's art critics started an uproar; they became contemptuous of his work because of his radical difference from the mainstream. Ironically, the more they rejected and ridiculed him, the more famous he became; artists who emulated him the most tried the hardest to prove that as a painter he was phoney, and that there was even a clear flaw in his technique. This most vilified painter came to visit his aunt one day in the absence of Govinda. Pushing the door open, the moment he stepped into the house, he saw there was no space on the floor to step on. Immediately he grasped the situation and said to Satyabati, "After many years, I see the work of a genius which has come straight from his soul. It is so flawless. He is as old as the god who creates beauty. Bring out all his works and show me."

But where were they to be found! They have gone to the same place where the universal creator who depicts such beautiful pictures in the sky in variegated colours, shade and light puts away his mysterious-elusive portraits bountifully. Swearing to god, Rangalal said to his aunt, "From now on I'll come and collect whatever you two produce."

It was a rainy day, and the guardian of the house hadn't returned from work yet. The sky was overcast in *Shraban* clouds, and rain was pounding since morning; the sun hadn't kept track of time of the day, nor did it wish to. The little Chuni concentrated on drawing a boat drifting in water. The waves of the river were like a host of *makar*, as if trying to swallow up the boat with a gaping mouth; the floating clouds also seemed to spur them on from above with a fluttering scarf. But these *makars* were no ordinary ones, and to describe the clouds as an orderly assemblage of the five constituent elements of the world wouldn't be an exaggeration. It, however, should be acknowledged for the sake of truth that if such a boat were actually built, no insurance company would be willing to cover it for indemnity! The creation went on;

the lofty painter in the sky did whatever it wished and the boy in the house with his huge open eyes did likewise.

Mother and son had failed to notice that the door was open. Suddenly Govinda walked in and seeing what the boy was doing, yelled out, “What is going on!”

The boy trembled in fear and his face went pale. It became obvious to the uncle why Chunilal was making mistakes with the dates in his history examinations. The boy’s frantic attempt to hide the picture under his shirt made the offence even more glaring. What Govinda saw on snatching the painting from the boy shocked him even more – what exactly was this! Bungling the history dates was better than this. He tore the picture to pieces. Chunilal started howling.

Satyabati usually spent *ekadashi* days in the prayer room. She came out running, hearing the boy’s scream. The torn pieces of the painting were lying scattered on the floor, and Chunilal was bellowing in rage. Govinda was in the meantime trying to comprehend the root causes of Chunilal’s botching of the historical dates, to eradicate them.

Satyabati hadn’t said a word so far about the way Govinda treated them. Her husband had placed trust in him to look after them; remembering that, she endured everything quietly. But that day, with eyes wet and a voice wavering in anger, she asked, “Why did you tear the picture?”

Govinda replied, “He never studies. What will be his future?”

Satyabati remarked, “Even if he becomes a street beggar it wouldn’t matter. May he never become like you. What God has given him will hopefully bring him more honour and glory than the money that you so boast of; that is my prayer for him as his mother.”

“I can’t shirk my responsibility, and I won’t let this happen. I’ll send him to a boarding school tomorrow definitely, otherwise you will ruin him,” Govinda said in fury.

As usual, Govinda went to office the next day. It started to rain most fiercely, flooding the roads with surging water.

Satyabati took the boy by the hand and said, “Come, my son!”

Chuni asked, “Where to, mother?”

“Let’s leave this place.”

There was knee-deep water in front of Rangalal’s house. Satyabati stepped in with Chunilal and said to her nephew, “You take charge of the boy from now on, Rangalal, and save him from the culture vulgar materialism.”