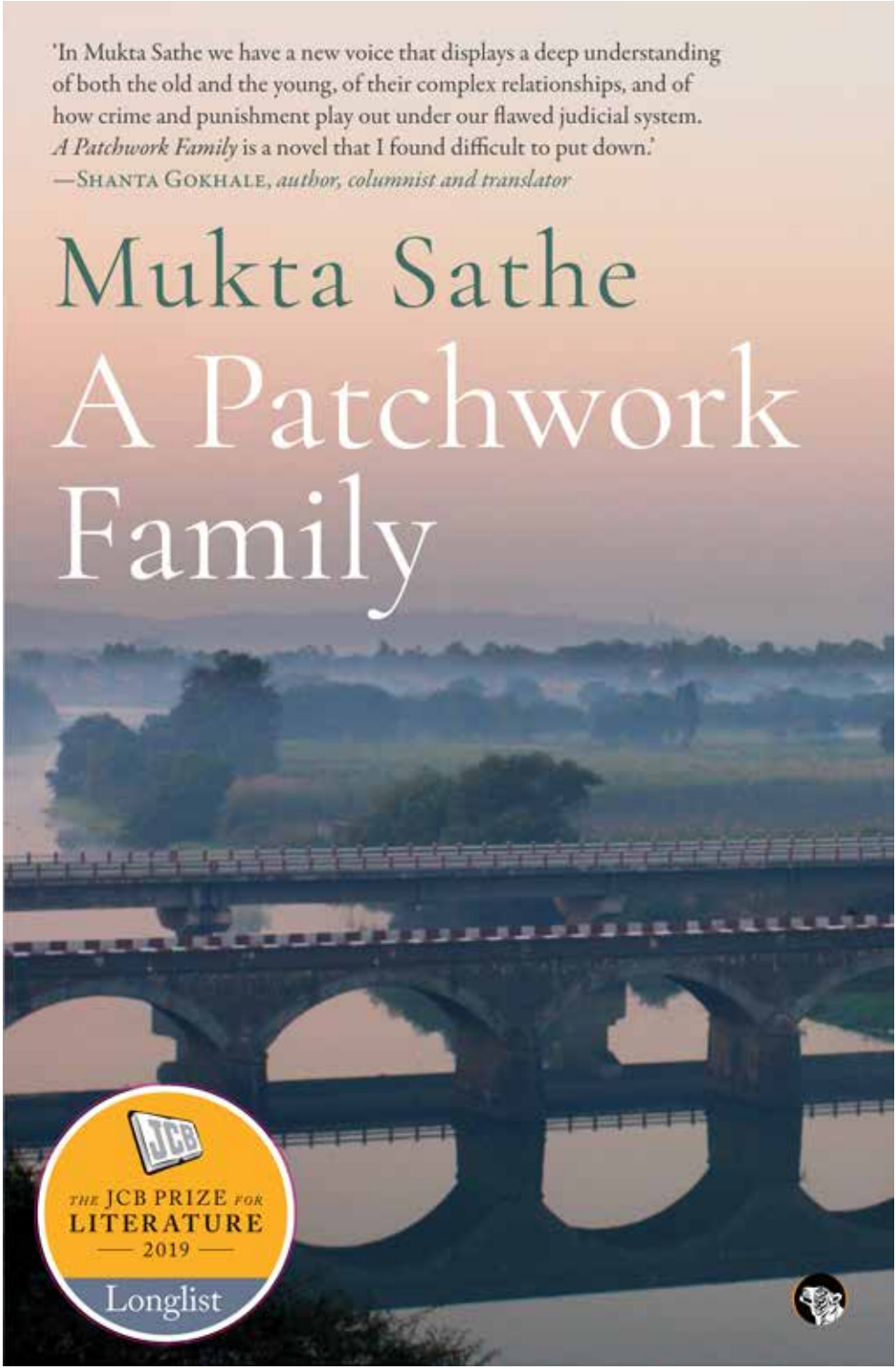
'In Mukta Sathe we have a new voice that displays a deep understanding of both the old and the young, of their complex relationships, and of how crime and punishment play out under our flawed judicial system. *A Patchwork Family* is a novel that I found difficult to put down.'
—SHANTA GOKHALE, *author, columnist and translator*

Mukta Sathe

A Patchwork Family



A Patchwork Family

by Mukta Sathe

THE JCB PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE
2019

An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

AJOBA

She has just called to tell me she is in a taxi on her way to Pune, where I live, from Mumbai, which is now her home. She will reach in four-and-a-half hours, hopefully. If she reaches any sooner it will mean that she—or rather, the taxi driver—has been driving far too fast on the ghats. But maybe that really does not hold true now. An eighty-five-year-old man like me, who has driven an Ambassador all my life, may consider that the right amount of time, but today the cars are much better and the roads are much better too. And this generation is different. They want everything quicker. They are in a hurry and they don't want to wait. They're running, always. So if my friend comes earlier, I must not get angry at her. I call her my friend, but she is my granddaughter's age. Her grandfather was my dearest friend, and she has always called me Ajoba as well. If I call her my friend now, it's because she has been forced to grow up so much in the last couple of years that it is impossible for me to look at her as a child. And it is also true that she is twenty-nine years old. Not really a child at all. I live alone in my house in Pune. My wife passed away a little less than ten years ago, from cancer. My two sons live in the US with their families. When they came back to say their final goodbyes to their mother, my sons asked me to move to the US with them. But I declined their offer. I've spent my entire life here and, at seventy-five, I was fit enough to live alone. They were

worried at first and used to call me every day, speak with me for hours. They still call me once a week and come to meet me every year with my grandchildren and daughters-in-law.

At the age of seventy-five it was easy enough for me to live alone. But now, ten years have passed and it's not that easy. But it's even more difficult for me to go to America now. And even if I went, what would I do there? So, when my friend invited me to come and live with her in Mumbai, I accepted the offer at once. She lives alone in a two-bedroom flat in Navi Mumbai which she bought recently, and commutes for three hours every day, using a local train to go to her office. She works in a law firm as a lawyer. Even now that I am going to live with her, I don't think I'll see her much. I guess I'll 'meet' her only on Sundays. That's sad, but not unheard of in modern households. However, an old man like me, living with a young woman, without any blood relationship or romantic relationship between us—that's not common. At least, I have never heard of an arrangement like this. But seeing that both of us don't have any real family left, I think that this patchwork family might work. We will have to make do with it anyway. She had come last Sunday, too, to transfer some of my possessions to her house. I have put all my books, my clothes, a few ornaments and, most importantly, photographs into cardboard boxes. My pillows, bed sheets, utensils and other small items are also all packed and ready to be moved. My bigger furniture, including my TV, will stay here. But I have taken my transistor, tape recorder and cassettes. When she saw my old and battered tape recorder, she gave me an understanding smile and at that moment I knew that I had become very old indeed.

I am renting out my flat and have already signed an agreement with the tenants. She looked into all the legal aspects. She was also very quick to remind me that I had never quite approved of her entering a profession which I found both despicable and intimidating.

Last Sunday, she took away most of the boxes and now she is coming to fetch me! The month of May is half over and it is comforting to know that I will have enough time to shift and to settle down in Mumbai before the onset of the monsoons in June. It rains very heavily in Mumbai every year, but this time, because of climate change, scientists are predicting an 'unpredictable' change in weather. Let's see how much rain we are to receive in 2014. It took me more than two months to pack all my boxes. First, I had to go and buy the boxes. Getting out of the house requires lot of planning and energy at my age. And then, I had to go to the shop three times, because the tradition in our city prevents our shopkeepers from giving us everything that we want in one visit. Thus, after a week, I had finally assembled all that I required. Then began the tedious process of packing. I had to empty all my cupboards and classify all my possessions. In the process, I managed to clear most of my house of the dust that had settled, layer upon layer, on all the surfaces, a chore which my housekeeper had most conveniently omitted to perform. Then I had to decide what to keep and what to throw away, a process even more painful than dusting, for, at my age, one wants to cling on to every photo, every shirt, every newspaper clipping and indeed, every memory. In the end, I discovered that I had decided to keep most of my things. But I gave away my typewriter. I had hardly ever used it. There are many things which I had acquired with great enthusiasm, either because

they were new scientific inventions in those times, or because I had seen them in movies (the typewriter belonging to the latter category). I had hardly ever used them. These included a vacuum cleaner (which is not of much use in Pune), an electronic razor (which I never used as I found the whole idea absurd) and most recently, an electronic cigarette (even though I do not smoke and seventy-five was a bit too old to begin). I had given away all the other things some time after my wife's death, but the typewriter had remained. My wife had loved it, and I had kept it to honour her memory. She liked typing on it and she liked polishing it even more. When my eldest son first went to the US, she had typed a letter on it and posted it to him. I can still remember the look of delight on her face when she finally posted that letter. My son still has it. He brought it with him last year when he came to visit me. My grandchildren did not believe me when I told them that I still possess a typewriter. When they met me after their long journey from New Jersey to Pune, even before drinking water, the first thing they asked me was to verify their father's statement about the typewriter. When I assured them that I really had one, they demanded that I should produce it. The look on their faces when they saw the old neglected typewriter was very similar to the one on my wife's when she'd sent that letter. They found it 'very cool'. They cleaned it, polished it and played with it. They considered it an antique, to be kept in a museum. I sold it as trash.
After deciding what to throw away and what to keep, I sorted the remainder into groups and started to fill up the boxes and label them. I had left some clothes out; everything else in went into the boxes. Then she came last Sunday and took away as many boxes as she could fit into

the taxi. Only two boxes remain, which she will take today, along with me. I shouldn't have sold that typewriter. It would have just required one more box. Anyway, she will come today and the process that started three months ago, of me moving into her house, will end. But it is still a long time till I can actually rest. That will only happen after the two months which I have given myself to unpack. She will not understand this. She did not understand why it took me so long to pack in the first place. When she had shifted to Mumbai three years ago, she had hardly taken two days to pack. But she had even fewer possessions than I do and more importantly, a far, far fitter body. The pain begins with the right big toe, and then my right leg begins to shake, violently. In a few hours the pain spreads upwards, up to my right hip and the right side of my waist. It's like a blade of ice cutting through all my muscles at the same time. I take painkillers. Sometimes they help, sometimes they don't. At my age, even medicines seem to have a mind of their own and their decisions are usually unfavourable to me. Then the back pain begins near the middle of my spine and all I can do is lie down. I keep flipping from side to side when my body hurts from being in one position for too long, and when I get too tired to do even that, I just lie in one position muttering under my breath, cursing the pain and pleading with it, all at once. Then I get too tired to do that as well. But I pull through every time. I don't know how, but I do. So when it took me three months to pack I did not find it alarming. I had done things very quickly, I thought. Lifting things up made my back worse for some days, but my mood was much better. I had something to look forward to. Something much more interesting than the daily serials

which I watch on TV or the cricket matches or even the football World Cup, which is going to be held in Brazil this year. From tomorrow, I will not have anything to look forward to. But settling in will take some time…Even though she shouldn't take less than four and a half hours to reach, I cannot help glancing at my watch every couple of minutes. I am worried that the driver will drive too fast, but at the same time I also know that I will be worried if she is late. But now I am going to live with her. What if she gets late coming home one day? I will call her then. Better still, I will ask her to install that software on her mobile through which I will be able to track her. But will she accept this request, or will she get angry if I ask her to install it? I don't know. I will ask her anyway. I am too old to take this tension now. I think she will understand why I get so worried and she will forgive me. You would understand the extent of my apprehension only if you knew the past. How this patchwork family came into being is a long story. And that is what I am going to tell you here. When she invited me to come and live with her, I was quite surprised. But I was in need of other humans to talk to, in need of a family—and thus, I accepted immediately. Today, when I leave this house, I know that I'll probably never come back. Travelling is not very easy at my age. But I have no regrets. I already consider her my family. And I need her because of my age. A comforting voice. Someone who will notice if I die. Till last Sunday I failed to understand why she would want me to live with her. She rings me up regularly, but can come to meet me only once in six months. When I opened the door and received her last Sunday, she greeted me with her customary smile and 'Hi Ajoba'. A flood of memories came to

my heart. It gave me such happiness. But that happiness lasted only a few minutes. I looked at her this time and I actually saw her. She has changed. I compared the woman she is to the child that I had once been acquainted with. The smile on her face didn't suit her. Her eyes have changed too. As a child, her eyes used to be vibrant, but today, that enthusiasm has been replaced by determination. Already, at the age of twenty-nine, she is determined. And I understood why she called me—because she needs me, too. I need somebody younger and she needs somebody older. We both need a family. And I am as close to a family as she can get. Of course, she can marry and have children. But she no longer has her 'family of birth'. Inviting me to live with her is as close as she can come to that. Leo Tolstoy writes in Anna Karenina: 'All happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' True, very true. The history of how her family was destroyed is very traumatic. And the reasons that can lead to the destruction of a family can be even more varied. Even when most of the members of the family are still alive. But they, her relatives, have ceased to be a family. Nor are they a part of any new family. They are just individuals. So we both try to build a patchwork family. I still remember a Sunday nine years ago. It was a hot summer morning, somewhere in the middle of April 2005. I was sitting in my dear friend Shridhar's house, reading a newspaper and relaxing under the fan. This had become my routine on Sundays, ever since I had lost my wife about six months earlier. Shridhar Natu and I had been friends from childhood and he, too, had lost his wife a year before. Spending time together provided some comfort. On weekdays, we used to meet in a small park

at seven every morning. Near the centre of the city and very close to both our houses, it was the ideal place for a morning walk together. We used to walk for about half an hour and then sit and chat. And we used to have so many things to tell each other. Then, almost every day, he would come over to my house for breakfast. I had employed a cook and we could eat in peace. It was better, he said, than having breakfast at his own house where all the other members of the family rushed around. His family accepted this routine, which was altered only on Sundays. On Sunday everybody had their weekly day off, and they convinced him that it was much better to have me over for breakfast instead. His family had accepted my presence very cordially. Most of them had known me for their entire lives. The term 'family friend' is under threat today, but it is the truest description of my relationship with them. By their friendly acceptance of what could have been viewed as a rather unwelcome intrusion into their private time together as a family, they ensured that I did not feel lonely. They gracefully offered me a distraction from my pain, ignoring the inconvenience that it cost them.

Thus, that Sunday, I was sitting in a chair in my friend's living room. The building was built on a slope so that one side was closer to the ground. The house being on the first floor, Shridhar's children and grandchildren often considered it more practical to enter from the balconies attached to all three bedrooms and the living room, to the utter dismay of their parents. They were so close to the ground that it was easy for a young child to climb in or go out.

To the left of the door was what can be called the dining area. There was no wall or partition between the two rooms. A wooden dining

table, encircled by six wooden chairs was placed in this space. Behind the dining area was the kitchen, again, with no walls or partitions. The three parts were one L-shaped room with no barriers to vision or sound between them.

Luckily for us, the living-room balcony faced west, protecting us from the scorching heat of the April morning sun. From where I was sitting, I could see the balcony on my right as well as what was going on in the dining area and the kitchen on my left. My friend was sitting in his armchair with his back to the balcony. This was his fixed spot. If anyone else sat on his armchair he disliked it immensely, but he did not make that person get up. He merely muttered under his breath till the person got up of his or her own accord. And then he used to always say that he had not made anyone get up! He was a true democrat, he often claimed. 'How can I not be? I heard Pandit Nehru's "Tryst with Destiny" speech at midnight on the fifteenth of August, 1947,' he would say with an expression of great pride, either innocently failing to acknowledge or deliberately choosing to ignore the looks of exasperation on the faces of all others present. He also, unfortunately, never failed to mention that he had volunteered to join the Quit India movement. But he selectively omitted that he had not actually participated in the movement because he'd been considered too young. But that day, nobody else was occupying his seat and we were thus saved the entire drama. When I looked at him, I remembered my childhood, a great portion of which I had spent in his company. He had changed physically of course, but was fundamentally still very much the same. I like to remember him as the skinny boy in an off-white shirt and brown shorts who would race me to

school barefoot. But he had also aged like me. At seventy-five he still had remarkably thick hair. His hair, like him, had a mind of its own and refused to take the shape he wanted. Despite a wide range of hair oils and much coaxing, his hair simply pointed up at the sky, towards the God in whom he firmly believed. His dark-brown eyes could be seen from behind the round spectacles which he perched on his long and slightly crooked nose. He was reading a Marathi newspaper intently, leaning forward with his brow furrowed in concentration. The fingers of his left hand would be placed momentarily on his Adam's apple and then moved up through his grey beard, up to his chin. He had a habit of repeating this action when he was upset, which I found most irritating.
'Bloody Pakis,' he said.
The reasons why those two words may be muttered by a middle-class, urban, Brahmin Indian are so numerous that it was impossible for me to guess what he'd read about. Varied as the reasons may be, each is adequate to enrage people like him to an alarming degree. Even losing a cricket match is considered an occasion for mourning. So I did not inquire. Then, after a couple of moments, he turned to the sports page and relaxed, as did I.
'Doctor, do you want tea?' he asked. I assented and he got up to make it himself. He could not cook, but he loved to make tea for others. He also liked asking them if they had liked the tea. One day, some weeks after this Sunday morning, I would tell him that tea is only tea. Thereafter he would stop offering to make it for me. But that day he offered me the tea, and, at the same time also continued another very irritating habit of his—that of calling me 'Doctor'. He knew my first name very well.

Indeed, we had grown up in the same chawl and, as I have mentioned, had been very good friends from childhood. He was a general surgeon; I a dentist. He thought that he therefore had the right to make fun of me and my pleasure in being called 'Doctor' by my patients. But I chose to ignore him, believing that he would weary of the joke, and resume calling me by my first name (my 'maiden name', my wife used to call it, implying that I had married my profession). But being an excellent example of Puneri stubbornness, he never gave up this habit.

His family consisted of his son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. I distinctly remember his son, Partha, being born, especially as my second son was born only a few months afterwards. I also remember that his wife had confided in me before her delivery, that as she unfortunately had only two daughters, she was praying this time she would have a son. She admitted to me rather shyly that she wanted her son to look like her husband, but to have a personality like mine. I had been glad to know that she held me in such high esteem, but I would have been happier if this regard had been extended to her daughters as well. His wife's wish was fulfilled and their third child was a boy. But Partha left his mother's wishes unfulfilled: I have not met a person more different from me. He is an engineer and at that time—nine years ago—worked in a German multinational company in Pune. His elder sisters, Sunita and Asha, lived with their families in Mumbai, as they do still. A few minutes after Shridhar returned with two mugs of steaming hot tea—impossible to drink in the heat—and made himself comfortable in his armchair, Partha came out from his bedroom and sat down. He was speaking rather animatedly on his cell phone with someone from

his team in the office. After a few minutes, he started pacing up and down the room, apparently exasperated about something. He was frowning, his thick black eyebrows touching each other and giving him the expression of an angry cat. A graying tom cat, for at that time Partha was about fifty years old. He stopped pacing and started telling the person what was to be done, in brief, clipped sentences. After he had finished, he switched off the phone and went into the kitchen to drink a glass of water. In the kitchen, his wife Anita was starting to cook breakfast and lunch. She was five years younger than her husband, a slim, health-conscious woman with long, wavy hair which she tied up loosely. That day, she was wearing an apron over her sari, and had a tired look on her long oval face, her eyes looking smaller than ever as she frowned. The cook had not come and Anita's weekend was ruined. She had taught science in a school earlier, but had stopped after the birth of her first child, Janaki. When her younger child, Rahul, grew up a little, she resumed teaching, but instead of joining a school, she preferred to take tuitions in her home. Her classes for ninth- and tenth-standard students had become popular over the years, so it was only on Sundays that she had any time to rest. But today, when she wanted her the most, the cook had not come. Thus, after waiting till ten o'clock, Anita resigned herself to the cook's absence, and started cooking herself. I have never had to cook myself. When I was young, my mother cooked for me, and when I grew older, my wife cooked. After my wife's death, I employed a cook. If my cook doesn't show up, there's always Domino's pizza! But I have always liked the sound of masala being added to boiling oil. I think if I had told Anita this at the

time, she would have wanted to hit me! He who doesn't have to work has the leisure to find music in kitchen noises.

In the meantime, my friend's grandson, Rahul, came out of his room facing the kitchen. He wanted breakfast. His mother told him to sit with us in the living room while she was making it. At that time, he was fifteen years old and had just appeared for his tenth-standard Board examinations. He was eagerly awaiting the results which were to be declared in the next month. He had always wanted to be an engineer, like his father. He looked very much like his father too. The same long neck, bushy eyebrows and hollow cheeks. His hair was like Shridhar's but he made no attempt to subdue it. On the contrary, all his efforts seemed to be directed towards making it look untidier. He looked to me very much like a fifteen-year-old boy should. And he had the attitude of a teenager too. He had made a very visible attempt to grow his beard and side-burns. Boys will be boys, teenage boys.

That day, he had a rather grumpy expression on his face. He greeted me but then crossed his arms and sat mute. After a few moments, he started tapping his right foot—which annoyed his grandfather, who gave him a look which made him stop. Some minutes later, he unfolded his hands and started playing the tabla on his knees. Then he ran out of patience and got up and went to the kitchen. Gently touching his mother on the back, he asked her politely if he could help her. He was already taller than her, so she patted him on the shoulder and told him to lay the table and wait. He came back and sat on the sofa again, this time cross-legged. He started rocking back and forth in that position. 'A hungry young man,' I said to myself. I tried to engage him in conversation to

distract him from his hunger. He told me that he had been doing something on the computer. He tried to explain it to me but I felt as though he was speaking in a foreign language. Rahul's generation is the generation of the computer. He was born in 1989. His father being an engineer and a computer enthusiast himself, a computer entered the household in the late 1990s when they became more common and affordable in India. The children were, of course, forbidden from touching the computer. It was placed in Partha and Anita's bedroom. But Rahul and his sister found ways to sneak in and play on the computer anyway. In a few months, Rahul had become more competent in operating the computer than his father. He even helped his father when the latter had problems with the computer. The fact that he had violated the rules was overlooked. The computer was also moved to Rahul's room. Rahul cannot imagine a life without computers, just like those born ten years after him cannot imagine a life without mobile phones. Little did he know that a time would come when he would not be able to even see a computer for months. But that happened later, much later. That day, he told me that before his results were out he and his friends would be going for a rafting trip planned by a travel agency. His only regret was that there would be no TV there and he would miss his favourite football club matches. He was a huge fan of Chelsea. Although he liked to play football with his friends, he had a very poor opinion of the Indian football team. He and his friends had never felt like playing football professionally. They preferred to analyze the games and criticize the players for their indiscipline, but couldn't conceive of themselves playing under the guidance of a coach.

Anyway, what is important is that Rahul was a Chelsea fan and, like many other boys of his age and social class, loved Metallica and Hindi movies. He was also a Hindu and, needless to say, knew nothing about Hinduism. But he was a believer. I had asked him once if he believed in God. He had replied, 'Of course, Ajoba, I believe in God, everybody does.' The majority of the people from his social group 'believe' in God and he believes in believing as the majority believes. It is convenient for him to believe in God; it is convenient for all of them. Tomorrow, if being an atheist becomes convenient, Rahul will accept that as well. Such a transition will leave him unperturbed. He doesn't really think about gods or religion. He hardly even remembers their existence, though he swears by them. I call him a Hindu only because he can't be called 'not-Hindu'. He thinks he is a believer. He also believes that 'there are too many fun things to think about in life, so why think about life?' Rahul did not have to wait too long. All of us went and sat down at the dining table as Anita served us pohe. My favourite breakfast. Shridhar's granddaughter, Janaki, hated pohe, but she had gone out for breakfast with her friends that day so the rest of us could relish the meal without having to look at her annoyed expression. She used to eat pohe in such a way that one felt that she had been asked to eat poison. So her mother avoided serving it as much as possible. How can anyone not like pohe? I still cannot understand it. It's absurd to be born in Maharashtra and not like pohe. Janaki came home when we had just finished breakfast. She said, 'Hi Ajoba' and smiled. She is fair, tall and the only person in the family to have inherited my friend's eyes and, with them, his myopia. Her eyes were enthusiastic in those days. That particular day, she was

surrounded by her family, and her brother was quick to tease her about missing some delightful pohe, for which she rumpled his bushy hair. To her parents' delight, she had not inherited Shridhar's hair. When she was a kid, her mother would plait her long straight hair every day, before she went to school, but the first thing she did when she started to go to college was to cut it short and to get it permed. Till today she still keeps it short, but now she considers it a waste of time to get it permed. At that time, she was just twenty years old, and a student. She is five years older than her brother. Again, unlike her brother, she has chubby cheeks and a stocky neck. She had completed her BA and wanted to take admission for law at a college in Pune, a task she would accomplish in a few months from that day. Both Shridhar and I had wanted her to be a doctor. I have always believed that she would have become an excellent doctor. She has the correct temperament. When you look at some people you feel calm. At the same time you are aware of the enormous energy they radiate. She is one such person. Thus, both of us never really approved of her reading law. Nevertheless, she had made up her mind to enter that despicable profession, and what gave me more pain was that she was looking forward to it. From her childhood, I had treated her as my own granddaughter and tried to monopolize her. That is why I believe she invited me to stay with her in Mumbai. And that is why I accepted.

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