

harem she had heard as a child crowded into her brain. She tried to speak, but no sound emerged from her throat.

The aide, motioning the maids to remain quiet, turned and left.

The royal guest passed a sleepless night, drenched in a cold sweat. The golden moon, large and full, bathed the rooftop gardens in an ethereal glow, but she saw only monstrous shapes and deep shadows.

Next morning, the doctor made his visit. He sat on one side of the curtain hung to protect feminine modesty while the maids by Shethanijee's bed answered his questions and received instructions.

Suitable invalid fare must be given, heard the sick lady, who lay weak with fatigue. She almost cried out to the physician for he was the only link to the outside world, but she could barely lift her head from the pillow. Would he listen, or would he dismiss her fears as the imaginings of an overwrought patient? The women who attended her also tended to the draperies and the callers without. Could she trust any of the servants and plead an audience with the monarch and beg to be sent home? Were there any allies within these luxurious walled precincts? In her heyday as a much-awaited visitor, she had spawned enemies, not friends.

Midday, the maids brought vegetable broth ideal for an invalid's palate, but the aroma merely sickened her, and the bowl remained untouched. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she lay outstretched on the divan; she longed for her misshapen husband's tenderness and the children's laughter.

When evening arrived, female servants lit the oil lamps in the room and the eunuch entered with a tray of herbal tonics.

Shethanijee half rose and clutched at the pillows. "That medicine tastes bitter. I am not going to take it anymore."

The man averted his face and fiddled with the items on the bedside table. "You will get better, my lady. Drink it up. It has been sent to you by His Majesty."

The attendants crowded in. One lifted her up and another pressed the glass to her lips. Afterward, the male aide left the room with the empty container. The patient sank back against the cushions and the women cooled her with long-handled fans.

Confused thoughts screamed inside the prisoner's brain. It had been her ardent wish since childhood to be

invited to the palace and here she lay, at the mercy of the man she had sought to enslave. Was she being punished for not procuring her offspring to whet the maharaja's appetite? Would she be released if she did? The teen lived with her in-laws' extended family, besides, it was better that she alone suffer. The king had a surfeit of women, was he being merely punitive at her defiance? Or perhaps this was mere royal caprice, and he might release her at some future date? He was surrounded by beauties adept in the art of coquetry . . . what if he forgot altogether?

The shadows lengthened on the rooftop gardens and the mynah birds took wing.

Jyotirmoyee Devi Sen was born in 1894 in the kingdom of Jaipur, Rajasthan, where her family worked at the royal court. She wrote in her native language of Bengali under the pen name Jyotirmoyee Devi during her long widowhood. She also spoke Hindi and English. Her stories are based on her personal observations and experiences and deal with the timeless challenges faced by women and men in all walks of life. She won several awards including the prestigious Rabindra Puraskar for Bengali writing in 1973. Her work is part of the Women's Studies curriculum at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She died in 1988.

Apala G. Egan grew up in India and is fluent in Bengali and English and also speaks Hindi. A former community college instructor, she devotes her time to translating and writing. She has visited Rajasthan numerous times to research the backdrop of the author's fiction and memoirs.

SQUEAK CARNWATH

Our Beautiful World, 2011
Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 70 x 70 in



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