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## Key

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Translated from Bengali by  
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The hospital room buzzed with shock and disgust. Waves of disgust bounced to and fro among Krishna's relatives, doctors and nurses, police and their henchmen.

Everyone was flabbergasted. This was in no damn way expected.

That Krishna could belch out such a shameless naked question, at such a terrible moment, was beyond all surmise.

Dr. Mukherjee, who had had a long shot at the world and its ways, dished out an ascetic's smirk at Krishna's crudity, "The world this is"!

The two nurses sneered in silence, 'Huh, such are the fairer sages. Once the husbands die, they put on such airs of detachment... as if they have finished all business with living folks.'

Krishna's brother wondered, "Fie! Fie! This is Krishna! But she seemed..."

Nilabja's brother thought, "*Boudi* IS like this. Still people feel..."

And Krishna?

Did she not sense the nausea that the room overflowed with, the nausea that rode heavy on the ether and drugged and incapacitated every speck of existence at that very moment...!

Had she even dreamt a moment ago, that in such an acute crisis she would ask nothing but this!

Can things be anticipated?

Like every other afternoon, when Krishna was about to unlock the letterbox at her home a few hours back, had she foreseen that the key ring would metamorphose into her ultimate bewilderment?

She had checked every key in that ring. She had counted those keys again and again before she could be certain.

No. The key to the letterbox was not in the ring.

The key was missing. How?

It could not come off the ring just like that.

Someone must have taken it off. Who? Who else would bother with the letter- box?

The old servant Nandalal was out of the question. So was the butler Harinandan. The maidservant was a new entrant. But no one could possibly doubt Subhadra, a tattooed old hag recently imported from the countryside.

Three year old *Khokon* too was an unlikely suspect. And Nilabja? Absurd enough to doubt him. Or was it?

Did he encounter some urgency? Did he not find time to inform her? Was it possible? Could any of his compulsions still be unknown to her?

Curiosity need not always buy for the cat's blood. The key's whereabouts need not be asked about over the phone, to husbands sweating the afternoon at the workplace. The locker's key would have been a different case altogether. This key need not be a pressing matter for Krishna. She was not awaiting any particular missive. Not getting any letter that afternoon was not improbable at all.

Nevertheless... Krishna took the trouble.

Nilabja's was a huge stationery shop set up by his father. Krishna was not an infrequent caller to the place. Yet this afternoon the peon Sadhan had found her tad edgy- "Hello hello, who, Sadhan? ... it's I. Call *Saheb*... not there? Didn't go today? ... left early with the car?... where to? How long? No idea? ... stuck somewhere?... ask him to ring me up on returning."

Krishna had not waited for his call. Upon a whim she had dragged awake the napping men at home.

"Nanda, where's the letterbox key?"

"Letterbox? What box? What key?"

"You sleepyhead, the letter box is kept under lock and key. Isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes it is."

"Where's that key?"

"The key... the key... is knotted in your *aanchal*." Nanda slumped back on his pillow.

"Confound your slumber... Hari- *da*, o Hari- *da*! You people can sleep and sleep the whole day... wonder how to get work done...!"

Harinandan came and stood deferentially. Krishna softened a little, "Do you know where the letter box's key is?"

“No *Bouma*.”

“Do you follow me? That key is always in this ring, but today it’s missing.”

“*Khokon* might have misplaced it.”

“No, no. What would *Khokon* do with it! ...”

*Khokon* could not be blamed in this case. *Khokon* could very much usurp the whole ring. But it was not the whole ring that was gone but only that particular key.

Krishna went to the second floor and was about to make another call to the shop. Then she stopped and decided to wait for her husband to return home.

However, reason proved to be a flash in the pan. Moments later, she again found herself tossing to and fro, thinking of the tiny flat bronze key. She was almost down on the bed when she jerked up again... Right, she should have tried this earlier...!

She unearthed all the keys she could find in the house and tried each one in vain to unlock the letterbox. Who knew that a mundane key could be so stubbornly irreplaceable. Unscrewing the box’s lid was not a far- fetched option, Nanda could do so in a jiffy, but justifying it to Nilabja would surely be an uphill task. How she would explain to him her desperation, her inability to wait for a few hours till he returned...

Krishna tried to think straight. May be Nilabja had taken the key as a replacement for a lost key at his shop, possibly he could not manage to inform her beforehand, perhaps he found nothing askew in letting the letter box remain locked one afternoon. But solace proved to be elusive.

Was it in the day..., cloudy, shadowy, quiet, with just a hint of chill, that the mind refused to be sensible... the mind refused to tread the beaten tracks, it refused to be homeward bound, it refused to overlook the presence of an absence...it willed to stare out at the speck of sky and think of imagined misgivings... sorrow and complaint that were not there yet harrowed the mind... the overcast day overwhelmed Krishna in its own image. She walked deeper into the haze of her own making.

Nilabja had probably begun to suspect Krishna of infidelity. He wanted to keep a tab on where and whom the letters came from so he had taken the key of the letterbox with him... No, she needed musings luxuriant... it was Nilabja who had been unfaithful, it was he who had ugly secrets to keep... he belonged not to her but to some long lost sweetheart, who had lately rekindled the hidden flame through her written word...who knew, the two lovebirds ended up laughing at Krishna. They possibly mocked her for not knowing the gold from the glitter, for mistaking politeness and security for love. Who could vouch that Nilabja had not set out of the shop for an amorous outing? They possibly went on such trips frequently, keeping Krishna in the

dark. Where did they go to? Somewhere in the city? The suburbs or the remote countryside? Somewhere too removed from the reach of Krishna?

But why would Krishna go after them? To witness her humiliating defeat? Why? She might be ignorant but she was certainly not foolish...

Nilabja! Her Nilabja! Like this!

Such a glib liar! She had loved a man like this! Only if she could walk out of her house at that very moment, if she could drive over to all possible shady hideouts, if she could catch the two adulterers redhanded!

Only if she could abase him with all her might, "You, husband to a trusting wife! father to a child!"

Of course, nothing like this could be done. Suddenly Krishna stumbled out of her reverie. She realized how her tears throughout the afternoon had turned the pillows soggy. She was amazed. She had cried her eyes out over something she had never ever known to exist. She tried hard to laugh the matter off but some streams had been let loose inside her. Tears went on dripping away, as if something was really amiss.

Twilight came. Evening followed course. Krishna did not freshen up and remained curled up in bed, with her tears unchecked, hair loosened and the house without lights in the descending darkness. She reverted into her imagined grievances against her husband. She steeled her womanly pride to demand confessions from Nilabja, of whatever weakness she could pry out. Questions were framed, unframed and reframed. But there was no word of Nilabja's return.

After all, who wants to desert a girlfriend ...

"*Bouma*," Harinandan had come up, "what is to be there for dinner? It's evening already, chopping and dicing take a lot of time..."

"I don't know. Do whatever you wish. Can't you manage it all for a day!"

Harinandan went downstairs in silence. Krishna regretted her curtness. "It could have been avoided. No, I should go and have a look at the kitchen." Minutes passed as she readied herself to get up. Suddenly Nandalal came up. "*Bouma*, your brother and *Babu's* brother have been in the living- room for quite some time. I offered them tea but they sent it back!"

Both of them at the same time! What a rarity!

Krishna sat up in a flurry. "Why didn't you call me earlier?"

"They told me not to."

"What? How long have they been sitting?"

“It’s been a while.”

“Let me see. What are they doing?”

“God knows *Bouma*, they have been discussing something... Wonder what’s taking *Babu* so long today to return?”

Krishna had hurried down. “When did you come? *Dada*, why didn’t you call me?”

Krishna’s brother had been soft, really soft.

“I was about to call you. We need to go...”

“Go? Who, *Dada*? I? Where?”

“Yes- we need to go... to the medical college. *Nilabja* had gone towards *Sonarpur*, with his car... an accident- er... was brought to the medical college... come, let’s go there.”

He sighed and stood up.

Krishna uttered one word, “*Sonarpur!*”

“Hmm, they said so! There were documents in pocket, locals got to know the shop’s whereabouts and informed there, the staff took a taxi and...”

Krishna was mum. She did not say anything in the car. The car, then several courtyards and many stairs, none of the places heard anything but her silence.

At the doorstep, *Nilabja*’s brother paused once, spoke in a cold steely voice, “*Boudi*, be strong. Impatience would not benefit you.”

Benefit ? Had he understood that Krishna had been counting her gains and losses all this while?

Krishna gave him a vacant stare. Her brother kept his hand on her shoulders. A touch full of affection, sympathy that would come handy. A kind of preparation as well. If Krishna threw her tear- stained bosom over her husband’s lifeless body, the hand would have to embrace her, assure the desolate widow that she still had the shelter of her maiden years to fall back upon.

Did Krishna make room for all that preparation? Did she tug on to her husband’s hands? Did her bosom heave in utter lament? Did she try to shatter the silence called death?

No. She did not do anything of that sort.

Having stepped inside, she had glanced away from the shrouded corpse. Then she had hurled one question at the doctor. An unclad unforeseen question.

The question that had sent shock and disgust flying in the faces present there, inundating everything imaginable.

Krishna could not contain the anxiety in her question. Without any buildup, she had said, “When you first saw him, did you find a key in his pocket? A tiny flat bronze key?”